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## Raja Ampat Pioneers - Ricard Buxo

**AUSTRALIA** 

SOUTHERN AFRICA

**LOCATION GUIDES** 

HOME

**BIG ANIMALS** 

Raja Ampat Pioneer Ricard Buxo... Undeniably one of the world's extraordinary destinations. Raja Ampat blends breathtaking above-water landscapes with a staggering abundance of marine biodiversity, into a remarkable combination that draws divers from all corners of the globe.

My introduction to this incredible region traces back to 1999. When I stumbled upon a post on an online underwater photography bulletin board (anybody remember them?). The author of which was trying to assemble a group of like-minded divers for a trip to a newly established 'eco beach camp' on Kri Island. Providing an opportunity to explore the recently discovered dive sites in the Dampier Strait.

curiosity. It promised what seemed to be an epic adventure. Albeit with limited logistical details and formidable costs. What truly gave me pause, however, was the realization that the journey from Sydney to Raja Ampat would take three days each way. My chance came

At that point, Raja Ampat was an unknown quantity to me. But the remoteness of the location and the descriptions of the dive sites ignited my

six years later. When the same person let me know she had found a new liveaboard that could take divers around *all* the key areas of Raja Ampat. And, by then it only took two days each way so I decided to go... Which is how came to make my first trip on the SMY Ondina and meet Ricard Buxo!



At that moment in time, Ricard had been residing in Indonesia for more

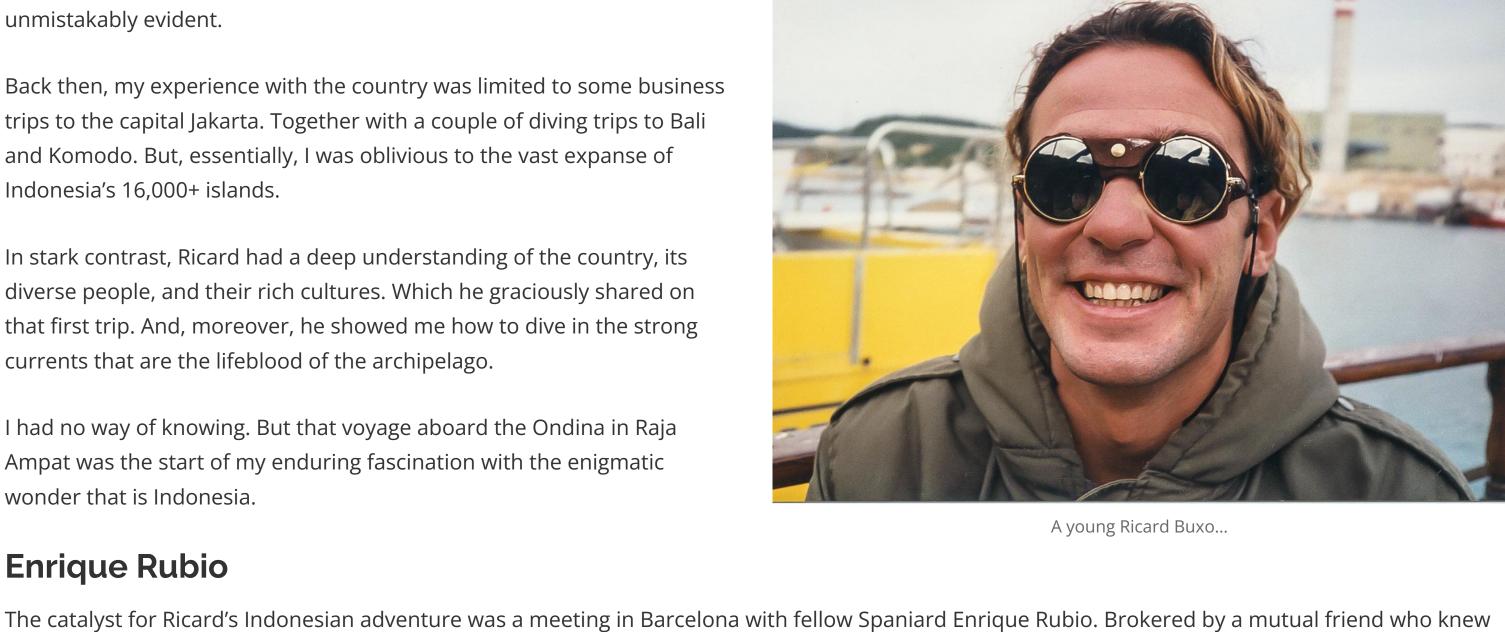
### than five years. Fully immersed in the adventure of a lifetime, and it was unmistakably evident.

Back then, my experience with the country was limited to some business trips to the capital Jakarta. Together with a couple of diving trips to Bali and Komodo. But, essentially, I was oblivious to the vast expanse of

Indonesia's 16,000+ islands. In stark contrast, Ricard had a deep understanding of the country, its diverse people, and their rich cultures. Which he graciously shared on that first trip. And, moreover, he showed me how to dive in the strong currents that are the lifeblood of the archipelago.

I had no way of knowing. But that voyage aboard the Ondina in Raja Ampat was the start of my enduring fascination with the enigmatic wonder that is Indonesia.

**Enrique Rubio** what they were both looking for. For Ricard, that was a new and exhilarating chapter after five years of working on liveaboards in the Egyptian Red Sea.



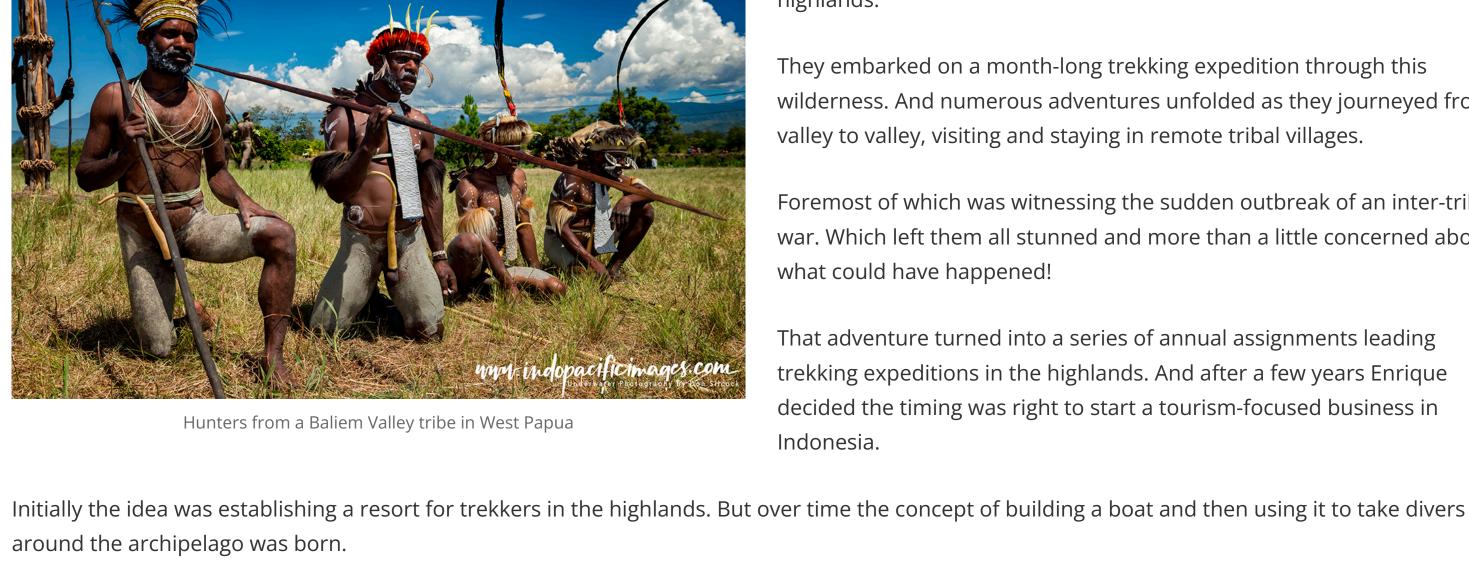
# While Enrique was on a quest to find the ideal individual to transform his vision for a business in Indonesia into a tangible reality.

Enrique had been a regular visitor to Indonesia since 1982. A time when tourism had just begun to establish a foothold in Bali. And yet remained largely absent throughout the rest of the archipelago. But it wasn't surfing and sandy beaches that brought him all the way from Spain. Rather the highlands of what was then referred to as <u>Irian Jaya</u>. The Indonesian western half of the huge island of New Guinea.

largest island in the world. Cradled within those rugged mountains are a multitude of fertile river valleys. Which provide sustenance for a mosaic of agricultural-based tribal communities. Remarkably, it was not until the 1930s that these tribes experienced their 'first contact' with outsiders. **West Papua** 

The highlands are formed by the Central Cordillera Mountain ranges. Which stretch east-west across the vast expanse of New Guinea – the second

Irian Jaya (now known as *West Papua*) was, and continues to be, one of the most remote and untamed parts of Indonesia. And Enrique, together with a small group of fellow adventurers, was determined to explore those highlands.



stars as far as Madagascar to the west, China to the north and the top-

colonized what we now call Indonesia in the late 1700's, they did so in

Over time many of the key features of those European schooners were

incorporated into the sailing ships built by the Bugis. Eventually the

amalgamated design became known as the *Pinisi*.

valley to valley, visiting and staying in remote tribal villages. Foremost of which was witnessing the sudden outbreak of an inter-tribal war. Which left them all stunned and more than a little concerned about what could have happened!

wilderness. And numerous adventures unfolded as they journeyed from

They embarked on a month-long trekking expedition through this

trekking expeditions in the highlands. And after a few years Enrique decided the timing was right to start a tourism-focused business in Indonesia.

That adventure turned into a series of annual assignments leading

But not just any boat... The idea was to take the proven design of the traditional Indonesian sailing ships. And then build a customized version that would enable journeys of discovery to some of the remotest corners of the vast archipelago. So, Enrique went to South Sulawesi, home of the <u>Bugis</u>.

The accomplished seafarers who roamed the seas long before the first Europeans arrived in what was then known as the Malay Archipelago. Equally feared and revered the Bugis are said to have navigated by the

for a Pinisi boat.

boat.

## end of Australia to the south. They carry reputations as adventurers, warriors, slave runners, pirates. They are also said to be source of the

their European style sailing ships.

The Bugis

English saying, "watch out, the bogeyman will get you". Infact they were also astute merchants. Who used their boats and seafaring skills to trade exotica far and wide. The Bugis built their own boats called Padewakangs in South Sulawesi. And when the Dutch

**Building a Pinisi** 

traditions. Which is all discussed at length with the team building the

With each build a function of wants, needs, customs, and

Usually a family clan of shipwrights and carpenters, typically led by a construction manager who is a "haji". A Muslim who has completed his pilgrimage to Mecca and commands great respect.

Pinisi boat building at Tanah Beru in South Sulawesi

Enrique found the boat builders he needed in the village of Tanah Beru,

near the town of Bira. And while negotiating realized there is no standard

was discussed! Finally, a deposit was paid, and the need for someone to supervise it all became rather urgent...

But even when the final concept is agreed, no formal plans drawn up or

budgetary estimates are provided – the boat just evolves around what

Imagine if you will moving to a remote part of what was then a third-world country. To live among local boat-builders in basic conditions, to supervise

Ricard Buxo – Living With the Bugis

the construction of a traditional wooden boat.

Keel Laying Ceremony for the Ondina

that was what Ricard did in June 2000. Just as the keel of the yet unnamed boat was being laid.

All without an agreed final plan or budget Without speaking a word of the local language and with zero knowledge of local customs and traditions. But

## make up its almost 270m people combine their version of Islam with historical myths and beliefs. Which in many ways makes the country so But the Bugis are amongst the most fascinating of those groupings. Combining a deeply superstitious nature with animistic traditions, rituals

how to communicate with them and ensuring the pivotal details that make Ondina such a great diving platform were implemented.

Enrique Rubio and Ricard Buxo on the Ondina in Tanah Beru

Some 13 months later the boat was launched and christened Sailing Motor Yacht (SMY) Ondina. The Nymph of the Deep Sea! Ondina was not the first

Pinisi boat built for foreigners. But it was the first to be crafted as a dedicated liveaboard. And Ricard describes those 13 months as the most intense,

His five years in Egypt had given him the strong foundation he needed for the total "cultural immersion" he went through living with the Bugis. Learning

Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world. And is known for its secular brand of Islam and religious tolerance. Many of the racial groups that

challenging, but deeply satisfying period of his life as the boat took shape on the beach at Tanah Beru.

Everything has its place with the overall process guided by the haji. Who has complete responsibility for the integrity of the construction. Ensuring that all the traditions are followed properly and thoroughly. From a western perspective it would be easy to simply dismiss the

younger members of the clan, who in turn pass them on to the next generation.

But consider it from the Bugis point of view. The boats take their people

far and wide in the monsoonal seas of the archipelago. And even out in

and legends which are intertwined with how they build their Pinisi boats.

spiritual element of building a boat as irrational and irrelevant.

**A Mystical Process** 

interesting.

way using the stars.

the open oceans – sailing at the whim of the elements and finding their No detailed plans for the boat were ever made, or ever will be... There is no manual, the skills and methodology are transmitted orally. And taught to

Ondina ready to be launched at Tanah Beru in 2001

After Ondina was launched the priority was fitting out the boat in preparation for the customers booked on the first trip. Ricard was kept exceptionally

busy supervising the fit-out. While also hiring and training the first crew, dealing with the considerable paperwork and working out the routes Ondina

Then just 30 days before the first trip was to depart the devastating 9/11 terrorist attacks occurred in New York. Effectively shutting down all air travel

globally. If you had to pick a worst date to launch a business in a Muslim country that requires tourists to fly long distances to get on board. October

But most who had booked made it to Indonesia. Ondina left on that first voyage, and so maybe there is something to those rituals and ceremonies the

Indonesia is a vast archipelago of 16,000+ islands. And in 2001, when scuba diving was in its infancy, there was virtually no public domain information

## The only people to ask were the pioneers who had come before Ricard – Edi Frommenwiler, the late Larry Smith and Mark Heighes, all of whom generously shared their knowledge. But it was his time with the Bugis that inspired Ricard to follow in their footsteps and sail with the monsoonal winds around the archipelago.

He started with the Lesser Sunda Islands, along the south-east rim of the

archipelago. Concentrating on the areas around Komodo and Alor. With

The area became Ricard's favourite part of the archipelago. So much so

<u>Underwater Paradise – A Diving Guide to Raja Ampat</u>. Which has become the

standard for all guides operating in the area because of its excellent maps

Ricard Buxo - An Adventurous Life, Well Lived

that he was one of the first people to write a book about the area:

and descriptions of the sites covered.

provided.

those first passengers discovering some of the very best spots – plus, they

available on where to dive. Or what the associated hazards might be.

Ricard Buxo - And Then the Hard Part!

2001 would probably meet all the selection criteria...

haji orchestrated as Ondina was built!

would follow around the archipelago. Not to mention where to dive!

Exploring the Indonesian Archipelago – Follow the Bugis!

were the only boat in the area! Then after two years diving in the south, in October 2003 Ricard took Ondina north across the huge expanse of the Banda Sea for the first time. A journey of some 1000 kms to Sorong, in Raja Ampat. Joining the small

Ricard Buxo stepped back from Ondina in 2015 and is now based in Bali, with his wife Paulina, from where he runs its overall operation, together with those of its sister ship MV Oceanic. I catch up with him regularly to find out what is happening underwater across the archipelago, because the regular updates from both boats plus his extensive contacts across the liveaboard industry in Indonesia, keep him very well informed! Every liveaboard trip I have done in Indonesia since 2005 has been on the Ondina – why you may wonder, when there are now over 100 to choose from?

For me it's the perfect, proven platform to experience the many delights of underwater Indonesia! Ricard Buxo - X-Ray Mag Article

The highly respected global diving magazine X-Ray recently published a six-page article of mine on <u>Ricard Buxo</u> and you can download it on the link

# number of boats based there through to March each year.

- Two basic reasons... first, I have been on board in horrendous weather in the Banda Sea. The sort where you know exactly where your lifejacket is! But we made it through and I trust the boat. Secondly, everything about Ondina, from the way the diving is run to the way the meals are prepared and served just works as it should. Essentially Ricard may not be on board that often. But the system he established continues to function as he intended it to do.

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About Don Silcock

The Ultimate Milne Bay Adventure

Don is an Australian underwater photographer based on the Indonesian island of Bali. For more information about him check out the "About IPI" link on the Footer below. You can also follow Don on Facebook @ don.silcock or on Instagram @ donsilcock\_underwater

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