

Trouble lurks for Indonesia's 'last paradise'

November 18 2011, by Loic Vennin



A tourist snorkels over a coral reef in Raja Ampat's Mansuar Island located in Indonesia's Papua region. The archipelago is referred to by some as the "last paradise on Earth".

Huts on stilts perch above the coral of the turquoise lagoon, hammocks awaiting a lazy siesta and sunset cocktails. The Indonesian archipelago of Raja Ampat is a modern-day garden of Eden. But for how long?

This remote pearl of Asia between the Pacific and Indian oceans in Indonesia's Papua province has remained a closely guarded secret and

one of the last frontiers of tourism, known only to intrepid travellers and avid divers.

Raja Ampat's palm-fringed islands, surrounded by an underwater kaleidoscope of coral and fish, are described by the regional tourism office as "the last paradise on earth".

A 2002 report by US-based Conservation International (CI) classed the waters as "potentially the world's richest in terms of [marine biodiversity](#)," with nearly 1,400 varieties of fish and 603 species of coral.

The 610 rocky islets of Raja Ampat -- meaning Four Kings in Indonesian -- are scattered over an area of 4.5 million hectares (11 million acres) and boast 750 kilometres (450 miles) of pristine sandy beaches.

"It's the best diving in the world," said Pam Roth, an enthusiast for 33 years. "I like the remoteness of the place. You don't see a lot of people here," the 78-year-old retired Londoner said.

But trouble is lurking.



Papuan tribesmen in traditional costume perform aboard a ceremonial boat during a festival in the Raja Ampat Islands in Indonesia.

In the Papua mainland, a thousand kilometres southeast of Raja Ampat, calls for independence by Papua's indigenous Melanesian population that began decades ago have become more vocal in recent years, after Indonesia's turn toward democracy in 1998.

Tribal and local leaders accuse the government of pillaging rich forests and mines, polluting local water and land, and putting little back into one of the country's poorest areas.

The Papua region is off-limits to foreign journalists.

Last month, eight people were killed in ambushes and clashes with police after an ongoing workers' strike at a gold and copper mine operated by US company Freeport McMoRan turned ugly near Timika, a

city in Papua's mainland.

Because of the distance from the mainland, the sparsely populated Raja Ampat islands remain largely untouched by the troubles for now.

The small number of adventurers arriving each year to the idyllic isles remain focused on diving and nature, largely unaware of the problems in the wider region.

The islands have also been untouched by another potential scourge: mass tourism.

At present, there are only seven "resorts" (with three under construction), each with no more than a dozen villas. In addition, 39 "liveaboards" with a maximum of 20 people per vessel, ply the waters around the islands.

Last year Raja Ampat welcomed a total of just 4,515 visitors -- one for every 1,000 hectares -- each of whom paid up to \$5,000 a week for a villa nestled in the mangroves or a cabin in a traditional wooden boat.



The small island of Koh in the Raja Ampat archipelago in Indonesia's Papua province. Regional tourism authorities are moving ahead with plans to open up the area, despite concerns raised by non-governmental organisations.

But that could change, as the islands gear up to attract and welcome more tourists.

The islands' remote location has been the main bulwark against mass tourism. With no air link, the most practical route is to land in Sorong, the closest town, and take a three- or four-hour ride on a ferry that began operating last year.

But signs of change are visible in a runway being hacked out of the forest, where chainsaws clearing the way for an airport due to open next year drown out the sounds of exotic bird calls.

A road connecting the future airport runs beside a stunning, translucent

bay rich with coral that was once completely isolated but now is threatened by upswings in construction and tourism.

"We hope it (the airport) will bring many tourists from many countries," enthused Yusdi Lamatenggo, the regional tourism minister.

But Jimmy Praet, manager of a company that pioneered tourism in Raja Ampat, feared that "an airport will make this place too accessible: it's so remote and unique now".

Praet's "Papua Diving," which opened the first resort in the mid 1990s, rents a dozen villas nestled between jungle and sandy beach or perched above the lagoon on the island of Kri, for to up to 34 privileged guests.



The remote Raja Ampat archipelago in Indonesia's Papua region is under threat from mass tourism with the building of a new runway and "ill-conceived" construction projects. Duration: 00:59

"If they want this to be another Bali, the tourists will leave," Praet warned, referring to the popular Indonesian island which is often seen as a victim of mass tourism.

"We do not want to compete with Bali, we do not want to develop big resorts like in Bali," insisted Hari Untoro Dradjat, senior adviser at the National Tourism Ministry.

"Quality, not quantity, is the goal," he added. "We believe in the protection of the uniqueness of this area."

The number of tourists arriving in Raja Ampat is "actually still very low compared to other tourism destinations, nonetheless there are already signs of overcrowding on specific popular dive sites," said Mark Erdmann, senior advisor for CI in Indonesia.

"The important thing will be to carefully manage tourism development to spread the pressure over a greater area of Raja Ampat and avoid crowding on popular sites," he said.

He welcomed a new regulation adopted in July restricting the number of resorts to 20, about three times the present number.

In May 2007, the government imposed an entrance fee of 500,000 Indonesian rupiah (\$56) for foreign visitors and 250,000 for Indonesians, with 30 percent of the proceeds going to the regional tourism ministry, and the rest earmarked for conservation, education and health.

"Raja Ampat is eco tourism not mass tourism like Bali," insisted Lamatenggo, citing as proof the recent creation of seven marine parks covering a total of 1.2 million hectares, or 45 percent of the region's reefs and mangroves.

But the government has refused to yield on development, despite repeated objections by non-governmental organisations in Indonesian Papua.

Erdmann said that construction was beginning to take its toll on the fragile ecosystem.

"Raja Ampat right now is already suffering from a number of ill-conceived government infrastructure development projects, especially from 'ring road' development around many of the bigger islands," he said.

"There is in fact no real justification for these roads, as the people of Raja Ampat do not have any cars or motorbikes but rely on sea transportation," Erdmann stressed, adding that the work is smothering precious reefs.

He complained that the government had turned a deaf ear to calls for a system of public ferries to transport people and goods, in large part because crooked contractors and corrupt officials were pushing road projects, which were being built haphazardly and with little regard for the ecosystem.

Devastating assaults on the archipelago are also coming from dynamite fishing -- which is officially banned but "still exists" according to Lamatenggo -- and from coastal mining projects.

"I'd expect they'll ruin the place," joked Helmut Hochstetter, a 60-year-old German, as he prepared for a dive in the company of manta rays.

"Better then to enjoy it while we still can," he said.

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