

Holiday makeover

Every year when Christmas is on the doorstep, the last guests of the year leave the Raja4Divers resort on Pulau Pef. The program for the about 20 resort staff and management who remain on the island: renovate, scrub, clean, rejuvenate. This yearly beauty treatment leaves the scuba diving pearl of Raja Ampat in prime shape and ready to welcome the first guests of the coming new year. A peek behind the scenes.

The last farewell song of the Pulau Pef band is over. The last hugs exchanged and, like so often, more than one tear gravitated towards the ocean below the jetty. The transfer boat with the departing guests pulls around for a last cruise past the waving crowd of resort staff on the jetty. As the boat drives past, the resort manager Maya Hadorn and her team surprise the leaving passengers with a leap off the (rather high) jetty and into the water with a big splash, sparking loud cheers and laughter all over. The humming of the boat engines fades as the boat disappears around the corner. Und suddenly, a peculiar silence falls over the island.

Closed to guests, the island opens up for many other activities. „What I really enjoy during these periods is the opportunity to spend more time with my staff, which is often limited during the busy days of regular operations“, says Maya Hadorn, the Swiss founder and managing director of the resort.

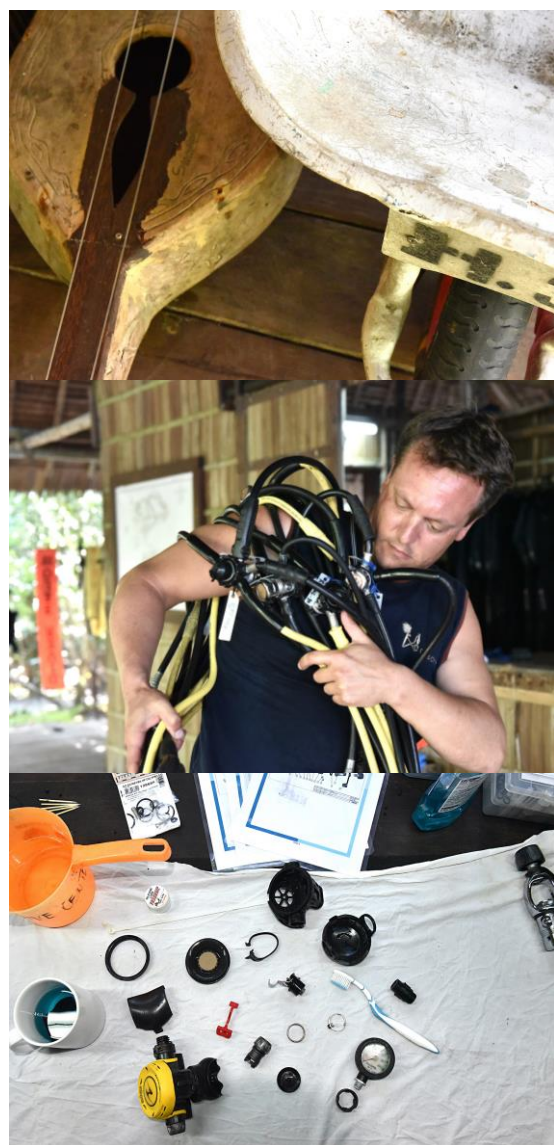
Marine biologist Lorenz Frick, who usually spends his days talking to resort guest about the fascinating sensory systems of sharks and other marvels of the underwater universe, is now on the hunt for a different kind of creatures. Bacteria, for example, that have accumulated in the scuba regulators. The biologist disassembles and inspects the resort's scuba equipment with surgical precision. A regulator comprises almost 40 individual parts. O-rings, springs, hoses, pressure gauges, and membranes, which are an important

Photos from top to bottom:

Work and fun. There's more time for both with no guests on the island.

When the resort is closed, marine biologist and shark expert Lorenz Frick turns into a scuba equipment serviceman.

A scuba regulator is disassembled into its almost 40 individual components for a full service.



component for air flow control in the regulator's second stage. These membranes are one of the bacteria's favourite hiding places. Lorenz cleans and services everything meticulously. The inflator hose of the Buoyancy Control Device also contains about 40 different parts, and the BCDs themselves need to be thoroughly rinsed with fresh water. Servicing scuba equipment is tedious and time-consuming, but of utmost importance. „After all, the life of our guests depends on properly maintained equipment“, says Lorenz Frick. During his PhD research, the biologist found that, depending on species and capture gear type, a significant percentage of sharks that were caught as bycatch during fisheries operations may die hours after they have been released back into the ocean.

Maya Hadorn discovers a major issue as she's checking one of the bungalows. It was probably an earthquake that has rocked this Papuan-style bungalow slightly out of balance. Shelves, wooden poles, roof beams, ceramic bathroom tiles, all shaken up and slanted. The bathroom floor has been lifted up on one side, and the water now drains towards the wall instead of away from it. The tiles need to be ripped out, the floor leveled, and the tiles replaced. Arduous labour. In contrast to a concrete building, the wooden construction of these bungalows is much more flexible, and can tolerate even stronger seismic disruptions. Doors need to be repaired, worn-out palm leaves on the walls replaced (the roofs are covered with Sago palm leaves), the whole building thoroughly dusted and washed down with soap water... The list of beauty treatments for the guest bungalows is long. Whipping the bungalows into shape is the most time-consuming maintenance task, says Maya Hadorn.

Head Technician Marcel Rudolph and his team are facing no lesser task. The floor of „Pef III“, one of the dive boats, is wobbly, and needs to be replaced including all structural elements. The outside of the fibreglass boat hull is polished and a beeswax finishing coat applied, and the wooden benchseats are revarnished. Om Jen, who has been part of the team for many years, services the two 100-HP four-stroke engines, taking them apart and replacing any worn parts. „The great thing about not having guests on the island is that we can focus and work on a task undisturbed. During normal operations I'm always running around taking care of small issues that come up“, says Marcel Rudolph, and car mechanic by training from Berlin. Like everyone else, he appreciates having more time to spend with his team while the resort is closed.

Last, but not least, the housekeeping team. They are mending, stitching, sewing, washing. Worn items are separated out and

Photos from top to bottom:

This is where bacteria often accumulate: the membrane of a regulator.

The regulator parts look like new after the full service.

The drying wetsuits are well guarded.

Radical makeover for the bathroom floor. An earthquake has lifted up the tiles on one side.

Intense renovation work is no reason for Maya Hadorn to lose her good-natured spirit.

Om Jen working hard on renovation of the diving boat „Pef III“.



replaced. Lamps need to be cleaned, power outlets and cables checked, and much more. The same is going on in the kitchen. Every bowl and basket, no matter how small, gets a foam bath, and head chef Muhammad Ali Banggeng and his team carefully and critically inspect every plate, every cup, every glass. Any item that doesn't meet the high standards is eliminated. By the way: in a country where official waste management is almost completely absent, waste disposal often means out of sight, out of mind. For better or worse, there's not much one can do about this. There is a recycling collection for aluminium cans and beer bottles in Sorong, the nearest bigger town, but plastics, batteries and many other materials are not recycled at all, says Maya Hadorn. In that sense, every guests who takes his empty sunscreen bottles and camera batteries back home contributes to the protection and conservation of the environment in this part of the world.

Back to the kitchen. A freezer with a rusty lid and corrosion marks on the outside panels attracts attention. An ancient piece, one would assume. Not at all. This appliance was purchased three years ago. Responsible for its ugly exterior is the local climate, the humid and salty air. Salt catalyses corrosion and causes significant damage. The resort spends about 25'000 Swiss francs on repairs and replacements every year.

Naturally, people are not just toiling away day and night during the Christmas break. When the resort closes its doors to guests, it opens up for social events and interactions on Pulau Pef and the neighbouring islands. About a 40-minute boatride away lies the island Meos Manggara. Like every year before Christmas, the Raja4Divers team drove to this island with presents for the local people. Rice, flour, sugar, coffee, tableware... In return, the resort staff was invited to attend the ceremonial service at the local church on Christmas Eve. Small gifts and gestures tighten friendships, and this is why Maya and her team bring presents not only to Meos Manggara, but also to ten other islands around Pulau Pef. There's time to watch movies together, recreate that festive Christmas season feeling in the tropics by having a Swiss cheese fondue, or explore new dive sites, which, admittedly, is work, but infused with a big portion of fun. By the way, did you know that there are fish that use tools? An insightful consequence of the last movie night of the Christmas break on Pulau Pef. A wrasse that uses his mouth to bang a clam against a rock coral until it cracks open and reveals the soft delicacy inside – and back to work it is. The new guests can arrive.

Photos: Peter Jaeggi and Dominik Feller (1)

Photos from top to bottom:

The housekeeping team checks every item in their stock.

Seeing how the birds on Pulau Pef like the jetty too, it needs to be scrubbed regularly.

Supriadi doing a routine service of the espresso machine.

General overhaul in the kitchen.

This freezer is relatively new, but the humid and salty ocean air has already left its mark.

Christmas ceremonial service on the neighbouring island Meos Manggara.

