

RAJA AMPAT PADDLING NIRVANA

By Alexander Vogel

It was my dream to paddle in an exotic location with no crowds. I have to be honest, my search for that original, untouched and pristine (the most overused word in travel literature and brochures) destination ended the day I paddled into that remote little village in the Solomon Islands. Some of the local kids had never seen a white face before, but everyone knew David Beckham and half the population wore a Manchester United shirt instead of the once-common grass skirt (the other half where obviously Deutschland supporters). You can only marvel at the antics of people like Oskar Speck, who paddled from Germany to Australia in his folding kayak in the 1930s and who encountered the ‘real’ stuff while passing through exotic waters (especially in Indonesia and Papua New Guinea) on his 7-year-long journey. Those were the days when washing up onto the shores of Papua New Guinea meant either breakfast, lunch or dinner for the locals (you being the main ingredient), or else friendships for life. Those days are over.

I am under no illusion that there is anything pristine left out there (except maybe in some Antarctic crevasse) but there are still places that come damn close to this illusion and Raja Ampat is such a place. However, my dream did not involve Raja Ampat – I hadn’t even heard of the place until about two months ago. My dream was to paddle the Mentawai Islands off the southern shores of Sumatra, Indonesia. Ever since my brother had come back from one of the first surfing safaris to those mystical islands in the 1990s I had wanted to go there. In my pre-sea kayaking days I just wanted to island hop by whichever means available; once the kayaking bug had infected me the urge to go there became even greater.

After the Solomon Islands trip in 2010 my new job had taken me to the city of Singapore (population 6 million). Accepting the offer to work in Singapore had nothing to do with any perks of the job; the reason was location. Singapore is located smack bang in the middle of, well, everywhere. Fancy a quick jaunt down the coast of Thailand? Vietnam? Borneo? The Mentawais? All within easy reach with a dizzying array of budget air carriers to choose from. Getting to the Mentawais was going to be easy; however, the unresolved issue upon my arrival in the city state was still which kayak to use? Previous trips had taken me down the sit-inside and sit-on-top route and I found merit in both types. In Singapore the deciding factor was going to be space and mobility. Living in Singapore is insanely expensive, and storage space for a kayak was a luxury.

Which kayak?

About 9 years ago I picked up a copy of a book by Hannes Lindemann (another crazy German) who paddled the Atlantic in a Klepper folding kayak. The trip fascinated me although I made the (incorrect) assumption that folding kayaks were of another era and no longer available. Just before my trip to the Solomons the folding kayak issue resurfaced; after lots of research, I concluded that a Feathercraft K1 Expedition might even suit my needs. The price tag (a small king’s ransom) initially put me off, however. The other fact was that I had never seen or sat inside one of these craft, nor did I know anyone who had any experience in this regard. At 5000 Euro, it was too great a risk.

While trying to find a solution to my ‘which kayak’ problem here in Singapore, the folding kayak idea popped right back into my head. As luck would have it, Feathercraft has an agent right here in Singapore. The rest was easy: phone Huey, talk to Huey, make date to see kayak, sit inside kayak, buy kayak. The other options were very limited. There was no way that I would be able to store a 5.3m hard-shell kayak in a 80sqm apartment, and trying to get close to any kind of navigable water with such a weapon using public transport was probably going to provide me with a one-way ticket to the infamous Changi prison and a paddle in it’s moat. A folding kayak was the way to go and after the initial IKEA-like experience while assembling it for the first time (and almost holding a lit match to it in frustration) I became more proficient and started to rediscover the logic behind my purchase. The huge bonus was that I would be able to take it along with me to Thailand, Vietnam, Borneo etc. with a certain degree of ease. With all the restrictions on carry-on and checked luggage that airlines impose these days, it was going to be easier to take along a large bag resembling a slightly oversized gap-year backpack than a 5.3m long Scud-missile-like object.

Expert George

Huey did not only sell me a kayak for a price usually reserved for oil tankers in the hands of Somali pirates, he had also given me a contact number for THE expert on kayaking the Mentawais. This ‘expert’ (another German) was the guy to talk to regarding these islands. George has lived in Indonesia for 18 years and the Mentawais are his ‘hood. George’s reply to my initial query was prompt and to the point: forget the Mentawais, go to Raja Ampat! He had included a link to a blog that he kept on some obscure kayaking website and the first picture made me an instant believer. My 3 weeks of leave were less than a month away and I was going to change plans on the spot.

“Located off the northwest tip of Bird’s Head Peninsula on the island of New Guinea (Indonesia’s West Papua province), Raja Ampat or the ‘Four Kings’ is an archipelago comprising over 1500 small islands, cays and shoals surrounding the four main islands of Misool, Salawati, Batanta and Waigeo and the smaller island of Kofiau.” (Wikipedia).

Who wouldn’t go weak at the knees reading a description like that? Well, my girlfriend for one, so I was once again condemned to go it alone. But rather on my own than not at all!

Expert George had some vital contact information in his blog and, a nanosecond after reading about his adventures, an email was zipping down the fibre-optic cables of Singapore’s cyber infrastructure heading towards Sorido Bay Resort, Kri Island, to the home of Max Ammer. Max is a Dutch national whose search for WW2 relics had taken him to this remote part of Indonesia. Twenty years later he is still there, still looking for the same relics, but running two very successful dive resorts on the side. The marine biodiversity around Raja Ampat is said to be the highest recorded on Earth; it is the epicentre of the Coral Triangle. This and the fact that Max was trying to establish the first sea kayaking operation in the area made him the perfect choice as a first contact. Luck was once again on my side, as Max

responded very enthusiastically to my initial query (which remained the tone of all further contact that we had).

Indonesian air travel

The next challenge was booking the flights. Logging on to the internet, searching via Google and punching in the credit card details is a routine that most people are well acquainted with nowadays. Air travel in Indonesia is different however, so booking a flight is different as well. Using the usual flight-booking websites proved to be a fruitless exercise, there seemed to be no flights to Sorong (the gateway to Raja Ampat) from anywhere this side of the planet. A little reverse psychology saved the day and eventually I found some flights, chose the best connection and then excitedly plugged in the credit card details. I was then told that bookings can be only made with Indonesian-issued credit cards; I felt like I had been transported back to the Stone Age. Finally, 6 hours later, I had all the flights organised, booked and paid for.

This trip was going to be a bundle of firsts: my first time in Indonesia, my first trip in a folding kayak and my first flight with an EU-blacklisted airline. Sriwijaya Airlines had been placed on the EU airline blacklist in 2007 and, according to the EU, I was risking severe injury or even death by travelling with them. (Fortunately, as an active airline pilot myself, I take the EU warnings with a pinch of salt.)

My favourite topic had started to rear it’s head again: saltwater crocodiles. They were a genuine concern of mine while paddling in the Solomon Islands. Raja Ampat is within their natural range and I was going to ask Max some pointed questions about my scaly ‘friends’. His answer was reassuring: there are crocodiles in the area, but not many and fatal attacks are unheard of. Max owns an experimental sea plane with which he conducts regular surveys of the marine life so his answer did carry quite a bit of weight. Contrast this to the Solomons, where an unofficial estimate put the annual death toll from crocodile attacks at between 30 and 40 (I wasn’t quite convinced of the accuracy of these figures, but every village had a story to tell).

Since the kayaking operation that Max was trying to set up was still in its foetal stage, we agreed that I’d make my way to Kri Island, meet with him for a day or two to load up on all the necessary info and then set off on my own for a 14-day paddle. Max was training local Papuans to act as guides on kayaking trips and I was hoping to take one of these guides along with me. Unfortunately, the training wasn’t completed so no guide would be available for me. The language barrier was the biggest issue since English is not the first, second or even seventh language spoken in Papua. None of the guides spoke any English so we decided that I’d stock up on good maps and enjoy a thorough briefing from Max before setting off on my own.

Not only was I looking forward to the physical paddling but also to the travels with my new folding kayak. Neatly tucked away in its carry bag, it weighed 25kg. With my additional 15kg of gear I was 20kg above the maximum checked baggage weight that airlines now impose with religious zeal. I knew that I was going to be hit hard with ►

excess baggage fees, but not by how much. Expert George had recommended NOT phoning the airline ahead of time but rather to just hope for the best as miracles do seem to happen. Well, the first miracle happened right here at Singapore airport when my brand-new (hard-fought-for) local credit card actually worked when the check-in agent hit me for 210 Singapore Dollars (about 120 Euros) in fees. That didn’t seem too bad, but this was sector number 1 of a total of 4. As I was going to change airlines and not just flights in Makassar to connect to Sorong, I knew that the credit card would probably have to perform to a similar standard another 3 times. Amazingly there seemed to be an almost linear decrease in the amounts charged as my travels progressed: Makassar was enriched by 40 Euros an, on the return, I only paid 20 in Sorong and a big fat ZERO for the sector from Makassar back to Singapore. Throwing in a couple of choice words about the check-in lady’s Amy Winehouse-like beehive in between the eyelid batting routine certainly seemed to pay off!

Making an entrance
My landing in Sorong resembled an explosion; the whole town probably woke up due to our 7am impact. Within minutes I had all my gear and three new friends: two were backpackers who also wanted to go to Raja Ampat and the third lady was the manager/owner of a sparkling new dive lodge on an island called Pulau Pef. They would all play an important roll in making my trip a success. The backpackers were first in performing their good deed. In order to travel around Papua province the local authorities require all foreign travellers to register with the police and obtain a free travel permit (surat jalan). Dealing with male bureaucrats becomes easy when accompanied by two young ladies. Rene, the Belgian girl, spoke some Indonesian as well so things happened at warp speed and we were hugging our shiny new permits within an hour instead of hours. An essential ingredient for success (in addition to a sprinkling of pretty ladies) is to have bagful of passport photos and passport copies, including of the visa page, when arriving at the police station.

Food was next on my agenda and a local supermarket was plundered. I was hoping to purchase some food as I was progressing along my route but both Max and Expert George warned me that I’d turn into a stick insect if I relied too much on local food. The problem wasn’t quality but rather availability, as there are very few villages in Raja Ampat. Be warned when buying food in Sorong as monosodium glutamate and tartrazine are unavoidable!

Next on the agenda was a 3-hour ferry ride to Waisai, the largest town in the archipelago situated on the island of Waigeo. The ride was surprisingly pleasant: despite being packed in like sardines, the seats were comfortable and air conditioning ensured that the odour of humanity usually prevalent under such conditions was barely noticeable.

Koh Island
Max had a boat waiting for me at Waisai and, after a quick transfer from the ferry, I was on the final 30-minute leg of the arrival journey to Kri Island. My ‘home’ for the first two nights was not going to be on Kri itself; I was going to get a first taste of a local ‘homestay’ located on Koh Island. The size of a postage stamp, Koh Island is separated from Kri by a deep channel and offers pure tranquility and an unbeatable view of, well, water. It does NOT

offer: satellite TV, internet, room service, a bed, a toilet, a shower, a door, a window, or anything that you would expect when hearing the term ‘homestay’. This little wooden hut on stilts, with it’s banana leaf roof and dry access only during spring low tides, was one of the most spectacular and relaxing places I have ever stayed at however, and I was tempted to spend my whole leave there.

The initial desire to do nothing for more than two weeks vaporised within minutes of my first meeting with Max, thanks to pictures of Raja Ampat taken from his sea plane and shown on his 27” iMac. The National Geographic-like shots left me breathless. Max told me about amazing places and showed me the pictures to back up those stories. Where was I going to paddle? To be honest, I was just as clueless after seeing all the pictures as I was when I first heard about Raja Ampat those 3 weeks earlier. There was just so much to see and I wouldn’t be able to see even 0.1%. Eventually, while paddling back to Koh Island after sunset with a full moon to guide me, I made the decision that I would circumnavigate Gam Island clockwise and include a 24km open-water crossing to Fam Island. This would be a 14 day trip of about 180–200km, while taking a couple of 2–3 day breaks along the way to soak up Raja Ampat. Trying to cover as many miles in the time available was not part of my plan; leisure and pleasure was.

Water was going to be my biggest headache. The limestone formations that dominate Raja Ampat lack rivers, streams or any other freshwater feature that would aid me in restocking my supplies. I have a very bad habit of not drinking enough water, but even I manage to drink up to 5 litres of water a day in tropical conditions. Carrying water for 14 days was just not practical, and Max pointed out a couple of wells on the maps that I was going to take along with me.

The adventure begins
Day 1 of the paddle trip found me packing my K1 for a multi-week trip for the first time. Apprehension gave way to joy when I found that I had judged the available space just perfectly. The K1 has 2 hatches: a small one on the bow and a larger one on the stern. These hatches are not intended to be used for packing but rather as access points. The actual packing is done via the cockpit, with dry bags being inserted into the cockpit and then shifted into their respective positions by sliding them towards the bow or the stern. This design didn’t really appeal to me in the beginning (it requires a bit more pre-planning to pack than a conventional hard-shell kayak) but, as the trip progressed, I become very comfortable with it.

The royal blue water in the 6km wide channel between Kri and Gam islands was mesmerizing. I stopped paddling every 10 minutes or so and just did nothing except drift and look down into the water, trying to imagine what could possibly be staring back up at me from those depths. My first goal was to locate a lagoon that Max had pointed out to me, the home of thousands of non-stinging jellyfish. The entrance I found was tucked away in the finger-like protrusion that formed the eastern corner of Gam Bay, exceptionally well camouflaged by opulent mangrove growth. (Although thinking back, I doubt that this was the entrance that Max meant as it was extremely shallow even on a pushing spring tide.) Intended entrance or not, it was still to be my gateway to the wonders of Gam Bay. These were some of the best mangrove channels that I’d been in! Twisting and

turning my way through the channels I was riding on the incoming tide and literally going with the flow. Time seemed to slow down together with the water as we entered the first of a series of lakes.

Protected from the wind and the waves by the mangroves and limestone formations, the gurgling of the water as it flowed through the mangrove channels could be heard until it faded away the further I drifted into the lake. A paddle stroke sounded like a clap of thunder when I tried to move things on a bit. The jellyfish were exactly where Max had said they would be, pulsing along as jellyfish do in a basketball-court-sized lagoon in the jade-coloured water; they took no notice of me in my green kayak. However, the wind had no say in this cauldron formed by the limestone embankments and the tropical vegetation growing on top of it: I needed to get out of there to cool down.

The exit from the lakes was probably the entrance that I had been looking for earlier as it was much wider and deeper than what I had paddled through earlier, but it was still tiny and well hidden. I was paddling towards another wall of mangroves, but the changing water colour and the appearance of knobbly sea stars (a species which I have only noticed in such numbers in mangrove channels that lead directly to the open ocean) highlighted the presence of the ocean behind that wall of branches and leaves. It was getting late and I needed to find a place to camp.

Raja Ampat camping
Camping in Raja Ampat can be a hit-or-miss affair. Not all of the islands are endowed with sandy beaches, a problem that I also encountered on the Solomon Islands. As a consequence I tended to finish my sightseeing activities by 3pm and would then concentrate on the search for a suitable campsite. Even while enjoying the sights, I would make a mental note of areas that I thought suitable for camping just in case I couldn’t find anything later on. If it meant a 10km backtrack, at least I’d know I was heading for a suitable site rather than continuing into the unknown until dark and maybe even sleeping in the kayak. A hammock tent was my portable mansion on this trip and was perfect for the conditions that I encountered. A good night’s sleep was guaranteed while the creepy crawlies fought it out 30cm below my bum to see who could climb my dry bags the fastest.

Gam Bay
Gam Bay is worth more than just a perfunctory glance. Scattered along the eastern edge of the bay are dozens of little islands, exposure to hundreds of thousands of years of erosion giving them a mushroom like appearance. These ‘mushrooms’ come in many different sizes and all of them are topped with dense tropical growth. This vegetation seemed to be like a bird park with no cages; the variety of feathered creatures was beyond anything that I had ever encountered. New Guinea is a bucket-list destination for birders and even I (a non-birder) could see why. Had I been paddling in Gam Bay as a blind person I would still have noticed the variety. The shrieks, squawks, cackles, hoots and other noise, especially early in the morning and late afternoon, was loud enough to dislodge any old timer’s ear wax. The parrots were my favourite: they’d approach a little island in their inebriated flying style, appearing to be veering off course at every hasty flap of their wings only to tumble back onto course. They’d then dive-bomb onto some unlucky piece of vegetation, where they’d seem to take ►



I DRAGGED MY KAYAK THROUGH THE 30M LONG AND ABOUT 1M HIGH TUNNEL AND POPPED OUT ON THE OTHER SIDE INTO MY OWN LITTLE JURASSIC PARK (OR THAT’S WHAT IT FELT LIKE). GONE WERE THE MANGROVES AND GONE WAS ANYTHING THAT COULD REMIND ME I WAS AN OCEAN KAYAKER – THIS WAS A FRESHWATER ENVIRONMENT WITHIN A DENSE PAPUAN FOREST.



Right (Clockwise from top): Caption required... Caption required... Caption required...



Above: Caption required... Caption required... Caption required...

out their disgust at their own lack of flying skills on the poor branch they just landed on with some violent gnawing and squawking at ear-drum-splitting volume. I’d take a couple of strokes and then drift towards them, sometimes managing to get right underneath their perch. Being incredibly inquisitive creatures, they’d fall silent while giving me the beady eye for quite some time. However, any kind of movement on my part would seem to re-awaken that flight instinct and they’d take off in a whirl of feathers and shrieks.

There is a little river that flows into the bay at its eastern end; normally I wouldn’t have gone near such an area for reptilian reasons, but local advice overruled my common sense and I actively sought the river planning to paddle up it. An ever-so-slight change in the water colour was the clue that I needed to locate the river mouth. It was no more than 10m wide and flowing slowly through a mangrove forest. Once inside the forest the sounds were very different to those encountered on open waters; trying to work out who or what was making them (so that I could put myself at ease) made my head jerk around constantly. Tree-climbing crabs splashed back into the water from their woody perches, surprised feral pigs crashed back into the dark depths of the bush and skittish flathead mullet would launch themselves out of the peaty (but clear) water in their attempts to escape from me.

The river continued to twist its way towards higher ground, becoming shallower and less salty with every paddle stroke. At a distance of about 1km from its mouth, I was in completely fresh water and mud had given way to pebbles. I eventually found what I was looking for when a high ridge loomed up ahead and the river seemed to vanish underneath it. I dragged my kayak through the 30m long and about 1m high tunnel and popped out on the other side into my own

little Jurassic Park (or that’s what it felt like). Gone were the mangroves and gone was anything that could remind me I was an ocean kayaker – this was a freshwater environment within a dense Papuan forest. The water was deep enough to paddle and I tried to continue as far as possible.

My little inland expedition came to an abrupt halt however when numerous fallen trees blocked my path. I was keen to continue, but it was getting late and I needed to return to the salty environment before it got too late to set up camp. I had already decided that I was going to use the previous night’s site, but that was 2 hours of paddling at full steam away.

Over the next 2 days I continued around Gam, aiming for the western-most point of Pulau Pef which was going to be my launching pad for the 24km crossing to Fam Island. At Pef I was able to fill up on water again (courtesy of Maya Hadorn, the third lady that I had met at Sorong airport). After a shower and an excellent meal at her brand-spanking-new dive resort, I was all set for the crossing.

To Fam Island

Setting off at 8am in the morning I was expecting to be on the water for at least 5 hours before reaching Fam. If I were to run into any kind of trouble, especially due to the ever-lurking thunderstorms that usually arrived with a bang between 12 noon and 1pm, there was a diversion island about halfway across. To reach it would require a little diversion, but at least there was some shelter if needed. The morning started out overcast with a fair bit of rain around but no lightning (my other pet fear, beside the crocodiles). This made paddling extremely pleasant as the temperatures were in the low 20s instead of 30s. Progress was good, the expected strong currents didn’t materialise and

entertainment was provided by bottle-nosed dolphins and a very keen striped marlin.

The weather was always on my mind, however. It didn’t clear up as expected but continued to grow more ominous as the day progressed. After a couple of thunder claps I decided to call it a day and diverted to Eben Island. Due to the overcast conditions it was difficult to see where the good weather ended and the bad weather started. The thunderstorms were embedded within that mass and I didn’t want to be surprised by a sudden flash of lightning looking to discharge itself on my kayak’s aluminium tubing.

Nightmare Island

Eben is a picturesque little tropical island offering the cliched white sand, palm trees and fringing coral reefs – and sandflies! I nicknamed it ‘nightmare’ island after my feet started looking like they had been hit by shotgun pellets and I spent my whole time there either standing in the water or zipped up in my hammock. Relaxing on the beach was strictly for masochists. The weather cleared a day later and I was on the water at sunrise, eager to put some distance between me and the island’s flesh-eating monsters. Nowhere else did I have a similar experience; why Eben was so ‘special’ is still a mystery to me.

The picture that is most often associated with Raja Ampat in books, brochures or on the internet is an aerial view of Waiag Island. The multitude of limestone ‘beehives’ sprinkled amongst its coral-laden shallow turquoise waters are what make it so picture perfect. I wasn’t going to reach it on this trip however, as it was too far north for the time that I had available. Fam is a smaller version of Waiag and the reason why I had included it on my route. The island certainly delivered – there were so many little bays hidden within other hidden bays, all with the most translucent



Above: Caption required... Caption required... Caption required...

water imaginable and the trademark beehives towering over me as I drifted past them in silence. Mangroves fringed the shores and added another shade of green to this wonderland’s aquamarine colour scheme. The pictures I took while paddling this Shangri-La are only good enough to prove that I was there; none of them come close to what my eyes saw.

The return to Pulau Pef took place on a perfect tropical day: blue water, blue skies, no wind and melting temperatures. An early 7am start gave me some reprieve, but a paddle through the midday heat was still going to be unavoidable. Sitting out the midday heat on Eben would only have guaranteed an encounter with a thunderstorm while on open water later on during the day, and taking a leg stretch there was not on my agenda due to its carnivorous inhabitants. Instead, I made a very brief pit-stop at Eben to collect some green coconuts and up my energy levels by downing their battery-charging content. My arrival at Pef after 5 hours of paddling was well timed as lunch was being served; I was asked to join after taking a shower. (As water was such a precious commodity on my trip, personal hygiene had been limited to brushing my teeth.) I took the next day off from paddling and recharged my camera and satellite phone batteries.

Gam/Waigeo Channel

Northern Gam is very protected and is not blessed with many sandy beaches. Setting off from Pef in a perfect 5 knot headwind, I had an idea of where I was hoping to camp that night: the channel that separates Gam Island from Waigeo seemed like a good spot. Being only about 9km from Pef I expected to get there in less than 2 hours, but ended up making extremely heavy weather of this minor sector. The route took me past a pearl farm and through its maze of buoys that marked the spots where new high-end earrings and necklaces

were starting their life. The buoys also showed me that I was being slowed down by a current that seemed to be coming from the direction of the passage. It took me 3 hours to cover the 9km.

Everybody knew about the passage, yet no locals or dive operators could tell me in which direction the current flowed and at which stage of the tide. I crossed my fingers that luck would be on my side and that the current would carry me through the 1.5km long channel while I snapped award-winning pictures. With a width of 20–50m and of unknown (to me) depth, I was not surprised to find a current moving at approximately 6 knots when I finally arrived at its western entrance. As luck would have it, it was not going to be my friend.

The area that Max had suggested as a camping site was on a steep rocky bank and, after surveying it for some time from the water, I opted to take on the channel there and then and look for a camp site on its eastern side. I chose the northern side for my attempt to pass through this liquid jet-stream, hoping to use counter-currents formed by the numerous eddies to propel me along its thickly forested shores. The paddling up until then had been easy – I hadn’t encountered any winds in excess of 10 knots and the currents (despite the full moon) were no factor at all. The channel was going to be the first real challenge of the trip.

Unfortunately, it was not just a straight track between the two islands; it was S-shaped and that called for some strategic crossings as the main current would change its position after every curve. I’d sneak up on the protected side until I encountered such a curve and would then thrust myself into the saltwater rapids, the kayak jerking this way and that way as we transitioned from the placid waters into the torrent. River kayakers would have felt at home in these conditions; I don’t paddle rivers however so this was quite a new

experience for me. Progress was slow but at least I was making progress. From time to time I’d take in the sights and was astounded by the array of hard and soft coral within the channel, the rapid flow of water obviously encouraging them to grow there. A large school of bumphead parrotfish was feasting on this opulence, their fleshy foreheads bobbing up and down at the surface as they snacked their way through the channel.

The eastern entrance was also unsuitable for camping. The high limestone walls that guarded the local mushroom islands were not inviting me to stay the night so I had to continue. There was a small river that Max had pointed out on the map that was a possible source of water and had camping potential. Getting there meant paddling past a multitude of bays, all thickly wooded and all begging to be explored. Finding the camping site was my priority, so I ignored the magnetic pull of the bays to my right and the feeding shoals of tuna and the diving terns to my left and set out to find my bedroom for the night.

Again it was the change in water colour which betrayed the presence of the little river, a tiny beach with chocolate-tinted sand being another clue to its presence. I waded ashore and was engulfed by a cloud of mosquitoes – obviously I was their manna from heaven. It wasn’t the blood suckers which discouraged me from camping there; it was the muddy terrain did. The squishing and squelching underfoot as I scouted for a hammock hanging location was so off-putting that I made the decision to continue paddling.

Hidden homestay

From my map I knew that there was another ‘homestay’ at the eastern end of Gam, probably another 3 hours paddling away. I was planning to stay there for at least 3 days but hadn’t expected to arrive there until the next day. With this ►



change of plan, I'd be arriving at the homestay at around 6pm (about half an hour before sunset). With threatening thunderstorms around there was a good chance of a later arrival. Luckily the limestone overhangs of the mushrooms offer some excellent protection from bad weather and I used one in anger when a storm was too close for comfort. Even when it was pouring so hard that it was hard to distinguish the sea from the rain, I was bone-dry underneath my overhang. The little islands might not have been my friends in terms of camping, but they looked after me well when the weather was a real danger.

The homestay was tucked away in a little bay within a bay, within another bay (which I almost missed because it was so well hidden). I spent the next three days watching a myriad of fish, from the drab to the esoteric, as they went about their fishy business. My morning alarm clock was the birds. The noise, which I loved, was loud enough to wake the dead. The 'whoosh' of the giant hornbill's flapping wings as they skilfully navigated their way through the almost impenetrable forest canopy like a Formula 1 driver was one of the characteristic sounds of the Gam bush. As the sun was setting, the noise levels would pick up again as parrots would return to their roosting areas from their feeding grounds, their haphazard flight path suggesting that they'd been out drinking rather than eating. On occasions a green turtle would drift past the little reef in front of my home. Dugongs are apparently common in this area, but they weren't interested in making their presence known to me. A pair of wagtails was nesting just 10m away from my hut, a non-stop source of entertainment (even when the rest of the natural world around me came to a complete halt during the scorching midday hours).

Final days

Three days later, I reluctantly packed up and paddled on; my departure date back to the rat race was just around the corner and I was running out of food anyway. One more night was going to be spent in the 'bush' on Gam before making the crossing back to Koh Island. A stop-over in one of the few villages to stock up on some snacks

was a linguistic disaster. My non-command of Indonesian only managed to secure me a supply of coconuts (and only because I was able to point to them rather than by using the correct word). I had written down a few basic words and phrases before setting off, but these simply resulted in blank stares or loud laughter. Fortunately I had enough supplies for another three days but I was getting sick of canned tuna with mayonnaise, canned tuna in brine and canned tuna with chilli.

Just south of this village I found an area covered in mangroves with a strong current flowing into it. My map did not indicate any kind of channel in this area, so I decided to have a quick peek. Another wonderland greeted me: knobbly sea stars littered the entrance and rainbow-coloured coral formed the gateway to this enchanted garden. The current was on my side and I let myself drift, not knowing where I was going to be spat out and not really caring either. Apart from the odd paddle stroke to keep myself from ramming a mangrove root I sat motionless, watching the snow-white sand, the psychedelic starfish and multi-coloured coral pass just centimetres below me.

The current became wider and fed into a lake of about 1.5km long and 400m wide. This lake was just one of a series of lakes, all connected by a narrow channel. About an hour after entering this new world the water started clearing up again and the current had turned against me. Within minutes I found myself back on the ocean side of the mangroves with Koh Island clearly in sight.

It took me a while to find a suitable camping site as the southern side of Gam is dominated by a 100m high ridge which runs straight into the sea with beaches no wider than a toothpick. I found a beach the width of two toothpicks after a long search and looked forward to my last 'wild' night. I wasn't going to be disappointed. The biggest storm of the past 14 days decided to make an appearance that night and brighten up my life with endless lightning displays and torrents of rain. My hammock and I had encountered similar storms before, but this time I had made an error in

the rigging and ended up having a little stream of water enter my sleeping area due to my oversight. What joy to have to get up at 2am to solve a problem, but after a couple of minutes all was back to normal and I returned to my bed.

Not the end

Koh was my endpoint: after 14 days and about 180km I stepped back onto its pinprick-sized beach. I spent two more nights there before starting the petrol and jet-fuel-powered trip back to Singapore. Those two nights were a relaxing end to a trip which, although not as long as my previous trips and lacking the excitement that is inevitably encountered on a 3-5 month long journey, nevertheless introduced me to a true paddling nirvana. Angola and the Solomon Islands had been bigger challenges and had provided greater variety, but all this came at a much greater physical cost. Raja Ampat is the closest that I have ever come to a fantasy world. Fam Island was a taste of what treasures the area holds. My mind is already working overtime; I only visited one of the four kings and I only paddled around his baby toe. ■

About the author

Genetically German, Alexander Vogel grew up in Cape Town, South Africa, thus spending most of his early years either on or close to the sea. Alex then moved to Europe permanently in 1999 (though his soul has never really left the southern hemisphere) to work as an airline pilot in Vienna, Austria. Kayaking only became a part of his life 10 years ago when he woke up one morning in Vienna and decided that he'd love to see the whole Angolan coastline in the most pleasurable way possible. After about 10 minutes of deep thought(!) he concluded that kayaking would be the perfect way to do it. So, in 2003/4 he paddled 1000km up the Angolan coast. He still ranks this huge undertaking as the best thing he has ever done. Angola was only the beginning; trips to Oman, the Solomon Islands, Australia and most recently Raja Ampat followed. Alex tells me that he doesn't know what the future holds, but he's sure his kayak will continue to play a big role, and that another multi-month trip will happen and that it will be sooner rather than later...