

## KAYAKING EAST INDONESIA



In January this year I took an Advanced Elements Expedition kayak to Indonesia. The idea came about after three successive journeys in East Indonesia through Sulawesi, and then the Moluccas the fabled Spice islands, first North Maluku with its string of volcanoes and myriad of coral rimmed islands, and then Central Maluku Ambon and Seram. In East Indonesia I found a paradise for an inquisitive traveller and satisfyingly devoid

of many other westerners, tropical forests and coral reefs to explore, volcanoes to climb and everywhere people very happy to welcome a stranger and using the lingua franca of Bahasa Indonesia which is relatively easy to learn. Sea travel is a central part of travel through islands and I had considered acquiring a small locally made canoe. I had tried locally made boats during previous journeys. The standard style used all over East Indonesia is the dugout, a tree trunk carved out and shaped tree trunk. The problem is that they are extremely heavy and need more than one person to pull up onto a beach, which is fine if you live in a village with a large extended family on hand. They are also very unstable and easily flooded in any rough sea. For longer trips these craft are equipped with bamboo outriggers strapped on with rope or wire, and for the more prosperous an outboard motor. Sadly sails have largely gone out of use. Altogether I reckoned them impractical for any long solo paddling journeys. I evolved the idea of bringing something much more manageable for the sort of wandering I envisaged. In Wales I use an Avon inflatable which I've had for over 30 years as a tender for various boats



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and latterly for rowing around the coast and islands here and navigating Welsh rivers. However it is a little too heavy and hard to pack away neatly so I sought out something I could take on a plane more easily but would serve a similar function of short to medium journeys. I plumped for Advanced Elements expedition kayak. It packs neatly away with paddle and pump in a 25kg bag and with weight allowance at 30kg on some airlines the project looked doable.



After last year's journeys in Maluku, the Spice Islands, I wanted to look further east, and the islands of Raja Ampat off the very north west coast of New Guinea looked perfect for the venture. With some of the very best coral in the world these islands have become the focus of divers. With the growth of interest in the last few years resorts and homestays have started springing up and I reckoned these would be ideal starting points for journeys around still untouched coral, and rainforest filled with wildlife.



I left Wales with some trepidation at the prospect of being accompanied by a 25kg bag to the other side of the world. But in the end I found the worst trial was travelling to and through London and on and off trains, where people regarded me as a nuisance. In total contrast arriving in Manado in Sulawesi I was surrounded by smiling helpful people and after a trial paddle on Bonaken, a coral island off the coast I left the kayak in Manado and made a



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two week journey through North Maluku with a friend. While away Manado suffered a disaster as savage storms flooded the city, tragically killing dozens of people, but the kayak survived and I arrived in Sorong in New Guinea after an internal flight on which I only had to be around £15 extra baggage costs. Travel to the islands was again remarkably easy and entailed taxis to the harbour, a ferry to Waisai on Waigeo and a local dugout to Mansuar. This is

a small island with a few diving homestays, charging £10 a day full board living in huts, and which I reckoned would be ideal as a base to start. I spent a few days exploring the coral snorkelling with the divers. The reefs anywhere off shore are spectacular, thousands of fish species of all shapes and sizes, sharks, turtles sighted on every swim and sometimes manta rays as well. I made several kayak trips, before circumnavigating Mansuar. As a means of travel the kayak was superb with much of the coast uninhabited and endless untouched pristine beaches to rest on backed by virgin rainforest teeming with wildlife. Floating over the coral is magical, and stopping at the few villages great fun with people who are always friendly and pleased to talk to a traveller and especially an eccentric one with his own pirau.

Paddling around a larger island was my next project. Looking across the 10km wide strait the island of Gam looked the right size for the time I had. I judged it should take around a week. With more youth and energy it would be possible to paddle straight across but I was deterred by the strong tides that ebb and flood between Mansuar and Gam, and the regularly strengthening afternoon winds. I opted



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for taking the homestay shopping pirau back to Waisai on Waigeo and getting to Gam across a 3km stretch of water. From a home-stay at the village of Sapokren on the shore opposite I paddled north stopping off at Pulau Uray and reached Gam in the early afternoon. From there I headed north through a spectacular archipelago of little islets and by evening passed a transmigrant fishing village of stilted houses, Kampong Tanjungbesi. Paddling



over coral round a point I had trouble finding a spot to camp. The tides here in Teluk Kabui are 2m and at low tide the inhabited jungle was inaccessible and impenetrable right down to the shore and devoid of beaches. Just as night descend I headed for an islet with two coconut trees a sign of human activity. With a muddy bay to land on, I found a spot under the coconut trees, luckily without coconuts, with just enough clearing to put out a sleeping mat. Waking with a cacophony of jungle bird song I carried on west towards the narrow passage separating Gam from the parent Raja Ampat island. Fresh water was becoming my main problem. Gam is composed of limestone and lacks surface water but research in Mansuar and Sapokren I knew there was a hut somewhere

on the uninhabited coast with a spring. I spotted it and the water was glorious. I was soon joined by villagers from Tanjungbesi as this was their only water source as well. Navigating a labyrinth of jungle topped islets I passed through the strait no wider than a large river. Luckily the tide was moving in my direction and I emerged into the wide Teluk Warparim with Waigeo in stretching away to the northwest. With fresh water my main problem I



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paddled 4km to Kabui the only village on this side of Gam. The people of this remote place were very welcoming and curious and I filled every container I had with boiled water. It was then a hard paddle against a freshening west wind to the far side of the bay and rounded the NW corner of Gam. The island of Pef opened out and the coast presented a plentiful supply of beaches to camp. The next day I headed south passed a pearl fishery,

coral fringed headlands and mangroves, a glorious paddle with the open sea and a myriad of distant islands to the west and a plentiful supply of beaches to stop and then camp for the night. The next day I carried on south and through a passage between the islands off Tanjung Ngan and Gam itself. This would be where I rounded the South Western corner of Gam and went east .

Fresh water was becoming a worry again and food as well. I had relied on whatever I could find in Waisai, mostly cans sardines, biscuits, eggs bananas and mangos. Sardines and biscuits were running low and the rest deteriorating. As I rounded the passage at Ngan there was a diver's ship at anchor. Until recently these live aboards had been the main method foreign divers were using to explore the wonderful coral reefs, but there are still plenty around though many divers now use new resorts springing up about Raja Ampat. I thought I'd be cheeky and ask for a bit of water. The crew were overwhelmingly friendly, invited me on board, gave me an enormous feed, filled all my containers and gave me an extra one. While some of the Western guests looked a bit askance, the French dive master was very



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friendly and intrigued by my venture. Rounding the point Mansuar opened out again to the South East and with plentiful beaches on this shore I camped and enjoyed a feast. Cockatoos and other bird calls greeted me from the jungle behind in the morning and I paddled east, stopping frequently to snorkel in the wonderful coral with a kaleidoscope of fish, and turtles swimming amongst them. I crossed the large bay which takes a bite out of the Gam coastline, and where I'd heard crocodiles lurk in the mangroves, and finished the day at the village of Kapisawar. Here I found a homestay, again without other guests, and the family fed me like a prince by a hut overlooking the sea I had just travelled. The next day the strong tides between Mansuar and Gam effected progress. Moving east was slow at first but at midday the tide turned and I rounded the southeast corner of Gam with little effort. That evening I opted to set out my sleeping mat on the island of Freewinbonda, opposite Yenbesir, Gam's "capital" village. From the west the island seemed a classic Robinson Crusoe scene, but exploring the far side on foot revealed a sizeable village with friendly people and even a shop to buy a luxurious coca cola. My journey around Gam was completed the next day, by a paddle north and crossing the channel of 5km back to Saporkren and Waigeo. I was welcomed at the homestay by Heri and his large family, and taken the following morning by family friend Frank to find the dawn meeting of Wilson's Bird of Paradise.

A few days later I got a plane back from Sorong to Manado and having a further spare week contacted an old friend Ateng, who lives and works as a bird guide at the forest reserve of Tangkoko on the Sulawesi coast south of Manado, home of the tiny primates the tarsiers, and one of the few populations of the Black Macaque. From here I made a couple of kayak trips, one north towards Banka Island, and a longer two day journey south, crossing to the island of Lembeh. Sea and weather conditions are very different here to those on Raja Ampat. Large waves make beach landing more problematic and the kayak went through a good test when I was emerging from the Lembeh Strait. Here I was hit by a sudden mini storm, and I had to battle against winds picking up to a force 5 or 6, big swells and hour a zero visibility with a classic lee shore danger. Kayak and man stood this little test and I finished my paddle back to Batu Pituh village and Tangkoko.

All in all the concept of taking a kayak to Indonesia works and I shall be returning next January/February for more ambitious exploration of Raja Ampat!

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