



The giant's playground

IN A REMOTE BAY IN WEST PAPUA WHALE SHARKS JOSTLE LIKE PUPPIES TO BE FED BY HAND BY LOCAL FISHERMAN. *Belinda Wilkinson* SAILED NORTH ONBOARD LUXURY YACHT TRUE NORTH TO SWIM WITH THEM. IMAGES BY TRUE NORTH MARK.





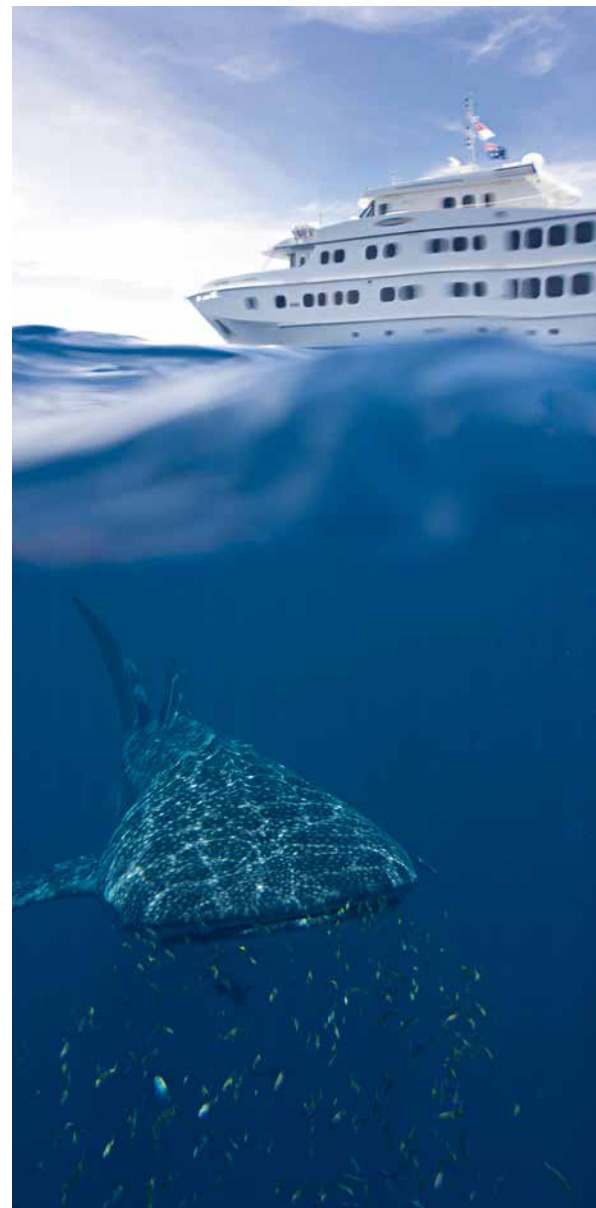
GRAB A MAP, BECAUSE I CAN ASSURE YOU, this is a place most of you won't be familiar with. From the tip of Darwin, focus your eyes 1,500 kilometres northeast and you'll hit Raja Ampat and Cenderawasih Bay in West Papua, the Indonesian province of the island of New Guinea. This is one of the most remote and undiscovered locations in the world. Yet it's so close to Australia.

Few charter boats have ventured here because of the distance, dangers of the seas and political hurdles. Tourist visas aren't handed out easily. It took staff from Australia's North Star Cruises more than two years to set up an itinerary for their only ship, the 34-metre luxury yacht True North, and obtain permission from the Indonesian government to allow them to take visitors into these waters. It was granted on condition of a very short timeframe to be in and out.

True North's owners Craig Howson and Mark Stothard heard whale sharks in this region were behaving in the most peculiar way and, while the ship normally cruises Australia, this was something they couldn't resist – to go where few have gone before. Their guests would experience a trip of a lifetime.

From our hotels in Darwin, 35 Australian passengers are escorted onto North Star Cruises' private jet where we're served a champagne breakfast. In just over an hour we make a quick stop in the island town of Ambon where our visas are stamped. Two hours later we touch down in Sorong, West Papua. It's an airport built for a logistics hub. Tourists are clearly a spectacle and rather amusing.

Enthusiastic chauffeurs take us in four wheel drives to a port where True North waits patiently after her three-day journey from Australia. As we approach the jetty dilapidated wooden boats surround this lavish, state of the art yacht. It looks completely out of place. Nonetheless, we're all secretly hoping the big white one is ours – especially those who



IN SEARCH OF GIANTS
Above: A huge whale shark feeds on a school of tiny fish beneath the True North.
Opposite page: The uninhabited beehive-shaped atolls of Wayag Island, West Papua.

haven't read their travel pamphlets. Thankfully, the termite-ridden pride and joys are left with the locals as we're driven out in tenders toward True North, stepping onboard to a waiting cocktail and air-conditioned comfort. The service from the 24 all-Australian crew onboard is outstanding – friendly, professional and fun. We all know constant smiles go a long way and the vibe on board is just plain old school happy. Everyone is

thrilled to be here and there's never a feeling of being crowded anywhere on the boat.

Breakfast, lunch and dinner are served in the fine dining room and the two onboard chefs give a run down of every meal of the day to individual tables. Delightful crews clean the rooms daily and turn the beds in the evening. The bedrooms are roomy and modern and the ensuites are fresh. Beds are comfortable for a good night's sleep, to be able to do it all again tomorrow.

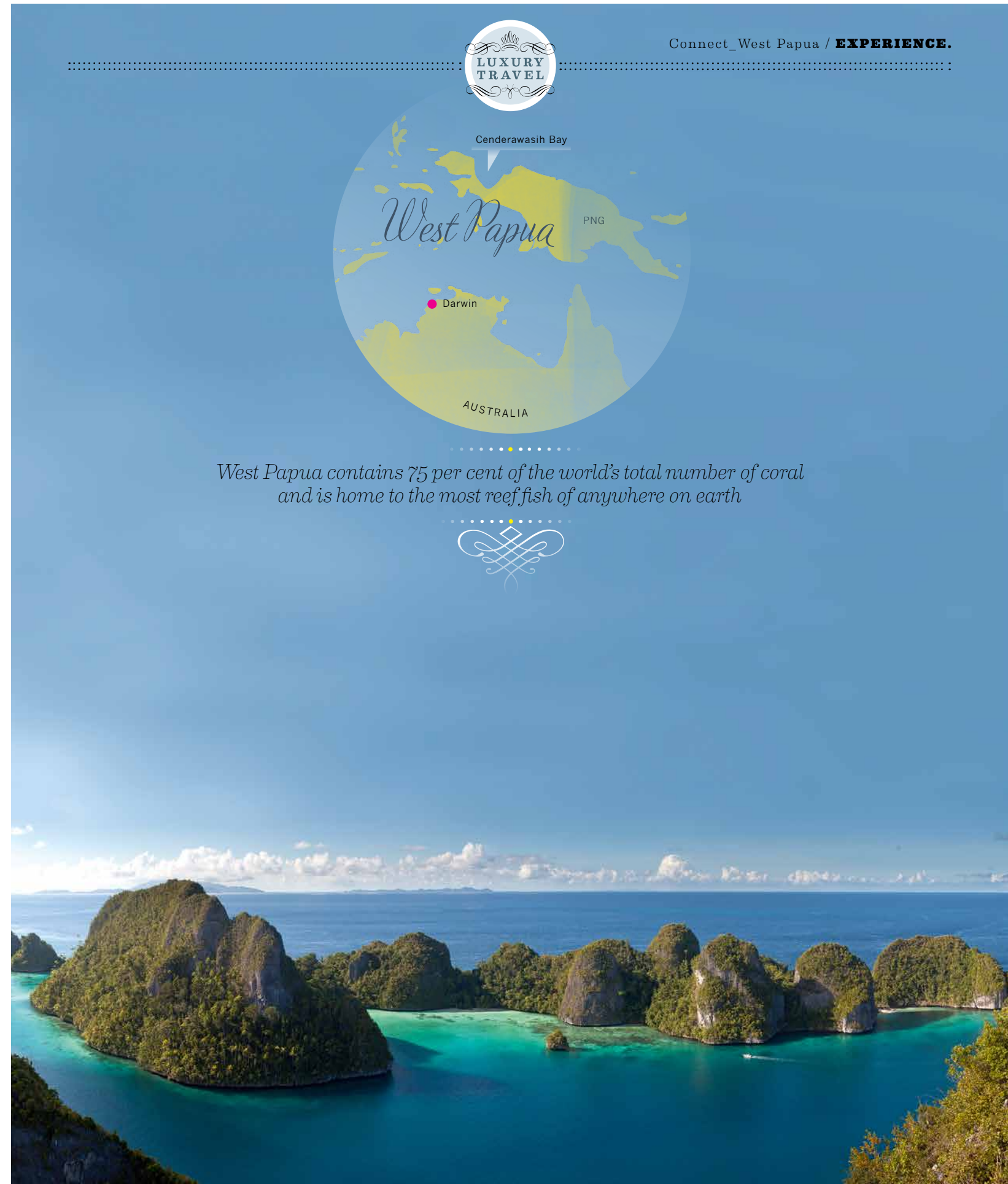
Over the next few days the basic itinerary is; get up at 6:30am, eat, adventure, eat, adventure, eat, adventure, eat, drink and sleep. After breakfast is the first dive/snorkel on the reef or a wreck, paradise island/rainforest hike, village visit, fishing trip, boat cruise, helicopter ride or island swim. It goes on like that throughout the day, every day. This is a discovery adventure – chances are no other tourist has set foot on this powdery white beach surrounded by coconuts palms and turquoise waters, snorkelled at this spot or hiked up this mountain. We're taken into a village where tourists are seldom seen. Children are the first to spot our boats approach and run from the huts to greet us with shy but friendly smiles. This place is untouched.

The onboard helicopter is under very strict conditions not to land on any soil in West Papua. Having a chopper in this region is a big deal. So it isn't a huge surprise when Pilot Rob spots three World War II American Bomber planes in pristine condition. They rest in two and a half metres of crystal clear water just off the shore of a beautiful island. The tenders are launched, the crew jump in for a quick safety inspection, and soon the passengers are snorkelling on undocumented historical wrecks.

The coral and fish life in this region is some of the best I have ever seen. And it's little wonder. This area is a cauldron of evolution – West Papua contains 75 per cent of the world's total number of »



West Papua contains 75 per cent of the world's total number of coral and is home to the most reef fish of anywhere on earth





A WORLD AWAY: Above from left: The author has a pristine beach all to herself; A playful clownfish peeps from the seaweed.

coral and is home to the most reef fish of anywhere on earth (1,672 species). Over the past 15 million years it's been completely cut off from the rest of the ocean and more than 100 species of marine life are found nowhere else in the world. Onboard marine biologist Mark Erdmann discovers new species of fish every time he visits.

On day seven, Mark gives the guests a presentation on what we've all been anxiously awaiting – the whale sharks of Cenderwasih Bay.

Every evening local fishermen light kerosene lamps on their temporary wooden barges, called *bagans*. They lower nets into the 80-metre deep water and small baitfish called Ikan Puri are attracted to the light and trapped in the nets.

But back in 2004, something extraordinary occurred. One or two whale sharks realised that these trapped baitfish are an easy feed. Why go search for plankton when you can feast on a tasty, convenient meal like this? They began sucking on the net until they found a hole. And if that didn't work they'd blow then suck until the net ripped apart

spilling the little fish right into their mouths. Quite cheeky, but rather clever.

The fishermen weren't impressed. So they started to throw some of their catch over the side to keep the whale sharks away from their nets. Soon the whale sharks were swimming vertically up to the bagans with their mouths breaching the water, begging like puppies. The fishermen started to jump in the water with them and treat them like pets. The whale sharks couldn't care less about these bizarre humans. They know there's no danger. They just want food.

In 2012, Mark Erdmann and his team tagged 30 whale sharks, between three and nine metres long. It's believed there could be up to 100 who've learnt this behaviour and remain in the bay all

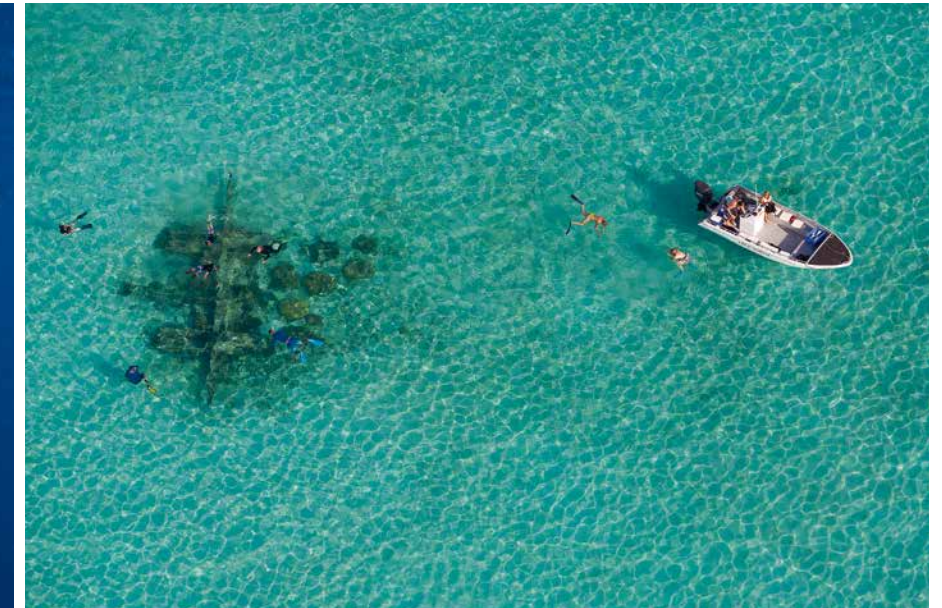
year round.

Early the next morning the sun begins to rise and sends a golden orange and pink light that floods the horizon. The warmth burns away tropical grey clouds to reveal a blue sky. The colour spectacle creates a mirror image against the milky water. To the right, mountain silhouettes shape the border of the bay.

We idle up to the platform and catch a glimpse of our first whale shark. This one is about five metres long and, as it gracefully swims past, it completely dwarfs our boat. Our mouths are open but we're speechless. The whale sharks splash around as the fishermen pet them with their feet and throw bait right into their mouths.

After a quick brief to remind us not to get too close, we are given the thumbs up to go and make friends with these magnificent animals. A few over arm strokes toward the bagan and an eight-metre whale shark cruises up from underneath and overtakes me. I freeze and let him pass, shaking my head in disbelief.

As I float on the surface, I turn my



UNDERWATER MARVELS: Above from left: Face to face with the world's largest fish; Snorkelling on the wreck of a World War II bomber.

head to watch another three whale sharks circle the bagan, check the nets and assume an upright position to feed from the fishermen. They watch the men intently and rotate between each other to share. There are times up to five whale sharks feed at once. I take a deep breath through my snorkel and dive to the next whale shark that's rising vertically toward me. I swim down as he swims up just inches away. It's normally the other way around.

I have swum with whale sharks off Exmouth in Western Australia, but it's a fleeting experience. Spotter planes direct charter boats toward them, tourists quickly jump over and try to keep up with them on the surface for a minute or two before the fish dive down to escape.

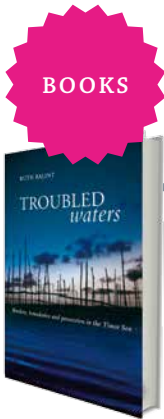
But these whale sharks will hang around for hours on end, undeterred by anyone in the water. We grab baitfish and let it go right into their mouths. A whale shark uses its head to push a snorkeller out of his way and she laughs mid-ride, "I'm in whale shark soup!" At one stage I float vertically as though I am standing with a whale shark as it feeds just inches

from my face.

After an incredible day with the world's largest fish we're back onboard True North, sipping champagne and sharing unbelievable photos and footage. And the best part is we get to do it all again tomorrow, but this time some of us are going in before the sun is up. The tenders set off early for the night dive and there is an eerie feeling in the dark water. The only light is cast from the bagan or our underwater camera that only gives limited visibility into 80 metres of water.

Giant shadows suddenly appear. But panic is rapidly replaced with marvel once again, as the whale sharks go about their modern dining. I feel safe in their presence reassured by a child-like confidence they'll somehow protect me from any nasties I can't see. Mind you, I didn't venture too far from the bagan this time.

As the sun begins to beam into the sea, the water becomes a familiar deep blue. As the morning light strikes the back of the whale sharks their characteristic white specks sparkle like stars. We were part of the beginning of something very special.



RECOMMENDED READING

Troubled Waters by Ruth Balint
Allen & Unwin

A powerful account of Australia's relationship with the Timor Sea, the country's most militarised region, and its people.

