

MIKE I'ANSON, BOSUN ABOARD THE 62M  
SCHOONER ATHOS REPORTS FROM THE  
REMOTE ISLANDS OF RAJA AMPAT IN INDONESIA

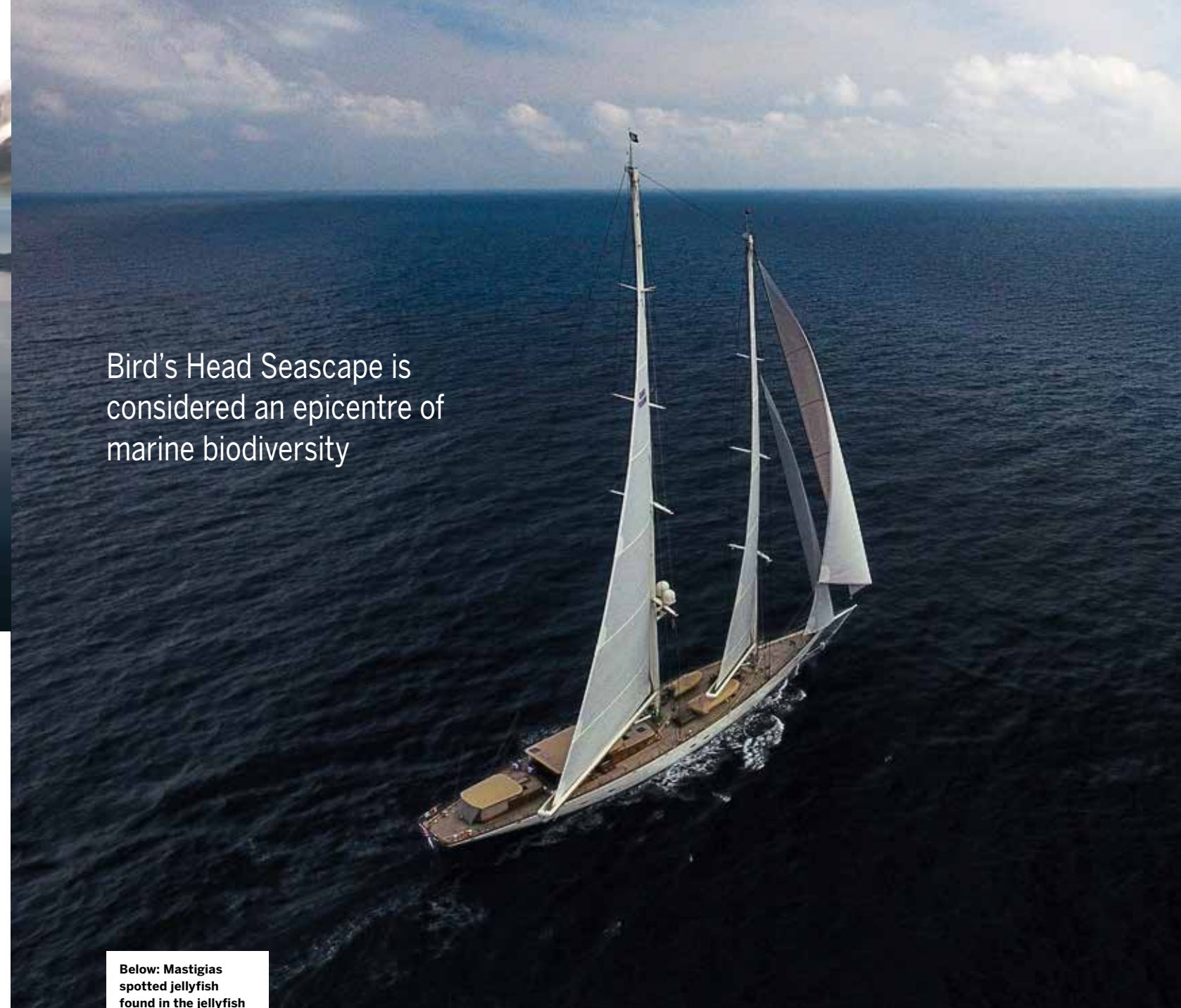
# SIMPLE PLEASURES







**Athos moored stern-to at Misool island in the Raja Ampat archipelago**



Bird's Head Seascape is considered an epicentre of marine biodiversity

**W**e are in our third year voyaging in the Pacific and the Far East with *Athos* and our time in West Papua, Indonesia has been some of the most interesting so far. Our five-week cruise took us round the little known, and even less travelled, Bird's Head Seascape peninsula. Overlooked by many sailors due to light and fluky equatorial winds, these waters are home to more than 1,600 fish species and three-quarters of the world's known corals.

Bird's Head Seascape is considered an epicentre of marine biodiversity and, were it not for its remoteness, it would undoubtedly be one of the world's premier dive destinations. A yacht is the perfect vehicle to access the myriad islands, reefs and bays, allowing unique opportunities to explore the shallow waters all around the coast.

Launched in 2010, the Andre Hoek-designed *Athos* has

proved herself to be an ideal vessel for cruising these waters. Despite being 62m in length, she is able to get into many interesting places. Her owner was eager to avoid the pitfall of large yachts restricted to only deep-water anchorages. As a result of intelligent design she is highly manoeuvrable and draws a very modest 3.65m, allowing her into havens off-limits to many yachts half her size.

Setting out from the port of Biak, *Athos* and her ten guests initially headed south to Cenderawasih Bay before following the coast west into the islands and marine reserves of Raja Ampat, stopping at Waigeo, Bantata, Salawati, and Misool.

We were joined on board for the entire trip by Mathieu Malerba, an expert guide originally from Reunion Island in the Indian Ocean, but who has been splitting his time between Indonesia and Japan for the last ten years. He is passionate about managing the impact visiting yachtsmen have on these delicate ecosystems and about preserving the traditional ways of local life for future generations.

Sailing 300 miles to the west brought us to the breathtaking Raja Ampat archipelago of islands where rocky towers draped in greenery sit atop floral-coloured coral shelves – all perfectly visible several metres beneath the surface. Fine white sand beaches lure you into the shore line, where the rapidly shelving waters allow you to go stern-to in some of the most secluded bays imaginable, creating the impression of perfect isolation and serenity.

The biodiversity is incredible. When you jump into these tropical waters they explode with colour – they are teeming with life. Schools of little fish pass by while you float among magnificent fans swaying in the current. No dive is the same, but often you find yourself wanting to dive everything twice as it's just impossible to take it all in first time round.

Raja Ampat also lays claim to one of the few jellyfish lakes in the Pacific. Malerba took us there and explained that the almost completely cut-off saltwater lake on this one island is home to three different species of non-stinging jelly fish (and a single barracuda, which was put there by the locals). It is a



**Crew member Isaac Gray swimming with a whale shark**



**Below: Mastigias spotted jellyfish found in the jellyfish lake. Below right: the verdant rocky towers of Raja Ampat**







Above: a whale shark coming in for a closer look. Below: local men collecting tree trunks for their new dock



It was 17m long, hand-carved out of a single tree, and served as the village boat. Its owner must have been in his seventies



Above: the owner of the dug-out canoe doing some finishing touches. Below: local children fishing and playing on the end of the village dock



surreal and slightly alien experience to swim among them.

Without doubt, however, the biggest draw for yachtsmen visiting Cenderawasih Bay are the whale sharks. This bay has become a hub for adolescent whale sharks due to the presence of Bagans – floating fishing platforms inhabited by groups of up to ten Indonesian fishermen who use bright halogen lamps and nets to catch small fish at night. These are the same fish that the sharks feed on.

Despite their size and power, the sharks' presence around the platforms is encouraged locally as the fishermen believe they will bring them good fortune. For a small donation, the more enterprising of the fishermen will throw a bucket or two of their catch back into the water to keep the whale sharks slowly circling for you. As you dive into the glassy, deep, clear water, where visibility extends almost 50m to the bottom, you are treated to an unforgettable experience.

Even as 8m-long adolescents (fully grown they can reach 12m), these sharks were the biggest thing I have ever swum with and feel enormous when you are in the water with them. They swim right at you, gently but forcefully bumping you out of the way with their big mouths to get at the little fish that are being thrown in.

The beautiful clear water gives you incredible visibility, and it is amazing to see the white-dotted patterns on their backs catch the light as they emerge from the depths. Whale sharks have a natural grace in the water, which belies their size, and it makes them appear relaxed, as though they are in total harmony in the environment.

However, we were very saddened to hear that there are poachers who catch these sharks for their skin, fins and oil. These slow-growing creatures take 30 years to reach sexual maturity, yet most sharks are illegally caught long before reaching that age. Their fins are removed before the rest of the body is discarded back into the ocean to rot.

It is illegal to hunt whale sharks in Indonesia but enforcing this law is very difficult due to poor funding compounded by the remoteness of the region. Unfortunately poaching has resulted in declining numbers putting them on the World Wildlife Fund's list of vulnerable to endangered species.

Swimming with these amazing creatures and other natural beauties like sharks, manta rays and corals have really opened my eyes to the diversity that our oceans have to offer, but it also served as a poignant reminder of the fragility of some of its largest inhabitants.

Even in these beautiful waters, when it feels like you are in the middle of nowhere, there is, in certain places, a depressing amount of rubbish floating around. Plastic bottled water and single-use bags are one of the greatest ecological disasters of our time and the statistics make for very sobering reading. If we don't take action, scientists estimate that the total weight of discarded plastic in the ocean will be greater than the mass of all the fish in the sea by 2050.

The developing nations suffer worst, and it is apparent throughout Indonesia that small changes would make a big difference. Plastic is used widely for food packaging in areas where generations have used throwaway biodegradable material such as banana leaves. Providing people with these kinds of products and not properly educating them on the lifespan of such materials is a major challenge.

The beauty of West Papua is mirrored in its people. From



## Turning up to places like this on a superyacht is quite surreal. The comparison of wealth to their way of life is stark

those living in the rainforests by the water's edge, to those who live on the Bagans, we were welcomed everywhere by people who wanted to share the splendour of their surroundings with us.

One morning while at anchor, some people passed us by, smiling and waving, in a huge dug-out boat with an outboard motor on the back. We saw them again later that day en route to the local village, and only once alongside were we really able to comprehend just how big this dug-out was.

It was 17m long, hand-carved out of a single tree, and served as the village boat. Its owner must have been in his seventies, and he had the face and hands of someone who had worked hard and never taken a day off in his life. Nevertheless, he seemed to radiate a rare contentedness and happiness with life.

The crew were on their way to collect a few trees that they had felled earlier to be turned into pylons for the new dock in build, so naturally we asked if we could follow and observe the construction. The cut-down trunks had been chosen specifically for their resistance to rot once driven into the seabed. The crew rolled them into the water where they immediately sank. Diving down, two men lifted an end each and ran the logs across the seafloor and into position beneath

the dug-out. The pylons were then tied to the bottom of the boat like submerged pontoons before the men made their way slowly back to the village. These men work from sunrise to sunset, seven days a week. In these remote villages everyone gets on with what needs to be done, all working together and, as far as we could tell, smiling about it.

Turning up to places like this on a superyacht is quite surreal; there is a gaping chasm between our respective standards of living. Yet it is comforting to see the happiness on the local people's faces and we are reminded that a good life is achieved by appreciating what you have; contentment comes from within.

There is a big problem, however, with malnutrition. Fish are a big part of these small communities' staple diets and the dwindling stock, caused by over-fishing offshore, is straining an ancient way of life. The traditional fishing techniques of line and hook can't begin to compete with fishing vessels that put out miles and miles of nets with buoys attached every 100m. The nets, which hang 5m below the surface, catch anything that swims into them, including turtles, dolphins and sharks. The local fishing communities are in dire straits and are struggling to bring home the produce that they need to feed the village.

augusto schlieper



**Top: Athos at night in the anchorage pictured bottom left. Below right: Local men riding off into the sunset after a hard day's work**



The modern world has had a significant influence on these places: the consumption of sugary soda drinks is huge, for example. Beautiful organic fruits and vegetables grow plentifully all around, but cheap sodas and refined sugars have replaced them as a big part of people's diet.

This increases the potential for future health problems such as diabetes, heart disease, gum disease, and so on. In the West, we take our modern healthcare systems for granted, but in these isolated areas so far from medical help, even something as simple as tooth decay is serious.

As a professional sailor, I love the ocean and don't want to see it disappear. I find it unimaginably sad to think that my unborn children may not be able to experience its wonders first-hand like I have. By photographing the oceans as we sail across them I want to try and inspire us all to protect them. I feel a responsibility to do something, otherwise the photographs and stories will soon be all we have left.

*Mike l'Anson, 25, is from the UK and has been the bosun onboard SY Athos since 2013. For more photos, take a look at his Instagram account: @7highseas.*