

# TATLER®

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**INTRODUCING THE**

# **SPENCER TWINNS**

**MEET EARL SPENCER'S DAUGHTERS  
LADY ELIZA & LADY AMELIA**

# travel

By DELILAH KHOMO

## SPLENDID ISOLATION

*Indonesia's most untouched islands lie far to the east. Now luxury travellers and seekers of solitude can explore them on a glamorous yacht cruise. Turn the page...*

# Solitary refinement

*Never heard of Raja Ampat? These idyllic Indonesian islands are gloriously remote – which makes exploring them on a luxury yacht the ultimate isolation vacation.* By KATE CROCKETT



*The voyages are convivial and fun, with sunset cruises and visits to secluded beaches*



**RAJA AMPAT IS APPEALINGLY** remote. From London, it takes three flights and more than 24 hours' travelling just to reach the gateway to these islands – the city of Sorong in West Papua, where I stand on a ramshackle quayside watching fishermen come and go.

Within minutes, an immaculate tender pulls up with two crisp-shirted crew members in Ray-Bans. I'm ushered aboard and in no time we are racing out into the Seram Sea towards the sleekest profile in the bay: *Aqua Blu*, a 60-metre Navy

ship transformed into a luxurious yacht, complete with spa, Jacuzzi and sophisticated dive operation.

I step aboard, handing over my shoes as I'm welcomed with a cool towel and fresh juice, and soon we are away, travelling north to Raja Ampat – the 'Four Kings' islands – on a week-long voyage deep into the Coral Triangle, an area of ocean with more biodiversity than anywhere else on the planet.

Launched in November 2019 by Aqua Expeditions – whose other boats sail along the Mekong and

Amazon rivers – *Aqua Blu* is slick and smart, sailing all year round along the remote shores of eastern Indonesia, with one crew member for every guest. Voyages of seven or 12 nights can be booked by the cabin, or better still, as an exclusive charter for friends and family in the ultimate travel bubble. There are 15 suites, with king-size beds, rain showers, espresso machines, deep-pile carpets and fine linens in creams and taupes – just the right amount of cool elegance to avoid distracting you from the sea views outside the

windows. Travelling further, faster and more comfortably than is possible on local schooners, *Aqua Blu* has opened up the remote islands of eastern Indonesia to luxury travellers and seekers of solitude like never before. Reassuringly in these times, there are no crew changes during the voyage, and negative Covid-19 tests are required of crew and passengers before embarkation.

Life on *Aqua Blu* revolves around the water. My journey is a destination deep-dive in every sense. On a seven-day trip, you can do as much



**SUNSET FEAST**  
*Outdoor dining on deck*



*The Raja Ampat archipelago*

The food – a cornucopia of Indonesian and international cuisine created by Australian chef Benjamin Cross – sparks the same excitement. Gazpacho, followed by grilled barramundi, with Vietnamese slaw and fiery sambals, is typical, with mango sorbet, green pandan crêpes or tapioca confections to follow.

Evenings on board are equally well catered, convivial and sometimes riotous. One day, we decamp into tenders for a slow sunset cruise off Yanggeffo Island. Sulphur-crested cockatoos flit in and out of the trees while canapés are passed around, and gin and tonics liberally poured; inevitably, someone ends up in the water.

The highlight of the week comes off Dayang Island, where, on a dive, we witness white and black reef manta rays. My buddy and I gurgle in awe as they glide silently through the water, skimming over our heads and blocking out the sunlight with their huge, billowing wings.

As with all of our adventures during this glamorous, life-affirming journey, the manta dive is made possible by the meticulous planning and local knowledge of *Aqua Blu's* mainly Indonesian crew, who are highly professional but also great fun. They are, without doubt, the heart of this unrivalled yacht.

As I await disembarkation in the elegant salon, my eyes are drawn from the marine encyclopaedias and old maps of the East India Sea to objects from the archipelago, including carved nautilus shells, Papuan tribal headdresses and a seated gold Buddha, a picture of serenity.

Serene is how one leaves *Aqua Blu*. It's the perfect antidote to these challenging times and I, for one, will be hoping for more isolation this year – of the *Aqua Blu* kind. □ *Audley Travel can tailor-make trips to Indonesia. A 14-day itinerary, with a seven-night Raja Ampat cruise on Aqua Blu, plus stays in Hong Kong and Amankila, costs from £10,850 per person, including flights and transfers; audleytravel.com. A seven-night private charter for 30 on Aqua Blu costs from £215,759; aquaexpeditions.com*



**ISLAND TREASURE**

*Suitcase, £1,785, by Globe-Trotter. Scarf, £150, by Issimo x Les Belles Heures. Pearl necklace, £19,845, by Marlo Laz at Net-a-Porter. Black Orchid EDP, £138, by Tom Ford*



*Aqua Blu's elegant salon*

or as little as you like. Most days, a group of us don tanks and dive the coral gardens, while others snorkel or swim from the beach. No less blissful, however, are afternoons spent on the sun deck with a drink and a pair of binoculars, spying solitary huts and waterside villages hemmed in by limestone cliffs.

There's a visit to a remote pearl farm in Alyui Bay, where I see flawless South Sea specimens plucked straight from pulsing oysters and destined for the showrooms of Tiffany and Mikimoto. We cross

the equator to Pulau Wayag to hike to the summit, Mount Pindito, for the breathtaking panorama of islets and lagoons. On Birie Island, we watch children dance and sing about the mantas that frequent the local waters. One morning in Mayalibit Bay, we hike with descendants of Raja Ampat's first settlers, in search of the elusive red bird of paradise, before jumping into the Kali Biru, a sacred turquoise river deep in the forest.

One afternoon, *Aqua Blu's* crew conjure up a castaway 'beach club' on

Wofoh Island, transporting chairs, parasols and a bar onto a shell-strewn slip of sand. In Pulau Wayag, the crew deploys paddle boards and kayaks – I borrow a board to explore the outcrops and mangroves, where silvery shoals dart about.

At lunchtimes, everyone regroups, buzzing with stories of new experiences and wonder. Our shared exhilaration gives an intimacy to conversations with my fellow guests – Dutch entrepreneurs, chic New York retirees and a catwalk model – who would otherwise be strangers.