

RAJA AMPAT

HOW I GOT THE SHOT

PHOTOGRAPHER SIMON URWIN ON THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF CAPTURING RAJA AMPAT'S CORAL REEFS FOR OUR OCTOBER ISSUE



Camera: GoPro HERO11 housed inside a Dome Port underwater case
Settings: ISO 100, f/2.5, 1/2200

Tell us about this image.

This shot was taken on a GoPro in Waisilip Bay, Raja Ampat — a remote archipelago of around 1,500 islands situated off the coast of West Papua in Indonesia. Known as the 'Crown Jewel of the Coral Triangle', Raja Ampat is widely recognised as the world's most biodiverse marine area, home to around 75% of all known coral species. I wanted the image to encompass both the reef and one of the rainforest-covered islands, so spent quite some time in the shallows.

How did you get the shot?

I headed out in a tender boat with Rascal Voyages' head of experience and conservation, Yeray Moreno. He knows Raja Ampat well and is an incredible underwater photographer himself. We scouted the bay, looking for the best location. When we found it, I edged off the side of the boat

face-first and, lying flat, half-submerged myself in the water. I had my mask and snorkel on, along with a rash vest to protect against stingrays.

Yeray was holding on to my feet to give me some balance while also keeping an eye on a crocodile swimming nearby. He had to be sure he could haul me out quickly if it got too close.

What were the challenges at play?

On my first two visits to Waisilip, the swell was too great for the tender to get near the corals without damaging them. The third time, it was far calmer, but I still had to contend with the unpredictable movement of the boat in the water. I wanted a dynamic ripple going across the frame, so resorted to what photographers sometimes call 'spray and pray', where you fire off dozens of shots in quick succession in the hope that one will work. After about an hour,

I got the frame I wanted. Holding your nerve is key, especially when there's a croc in the vicinity.

What did you enjoy most about this particular assignment?

Spending so much time underwater. Home to manta rays, dolphins, whales, some 1,800 species of fish and 550 distinct types of coral, Raja Ampat is a real wonderland. Compared with other parts of the world, its reefs are in good health, but they remain vulnerable to climate change and human activity, so it was particularly exciting to witness the work of The Sea People, an NGO that partners with local communities to restore and protect Raja Ampat's marine ecosystems.

View the full shoot online at:

nationalgeographic.com/travel

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