

INDONESIA

2014: TRITON BAY

Still a temple of paradise text and photos Markus Roth

Love is in the air: Two nudibranchs perform their mating dance





» **KEEPING ITS LEGEND INTACT, SUCH MAGNIFICENT MANIFESTATION IS STILL ONE ONLY A FEW HAVE WITNESSED.** «

another spectacle is visible, as the jungle-like karst cliffs are presented even from a depth of 10 metres. Neither the paradise above water nor that below goes unobserved.

Keeping its legend intact, such magnificent manifestation is still one only a few have witnessed. About four years ago, safari boats were warned against heading out into this remote area of Bird's Head Peninsula, as trouble with the locals erupted time and again.

“We were worried about our natural resources and our basic fish supply,” explains the mayor of the fishing village of Sisir, 45-year-old Mohamed Jeia. After all, shortly after news of Triton Bay being the next fishing paradise, the fishing fleets came in droves, caught all the big fish and vanished. According to Jeia, the locals were unsure whether the first liveaboards to arrive were also fishing fleets. “We feared for our existence and didn’t know any other way to help ourselves than by making threats!”

TOURISM ENSURES EDUCATION

Triton Bay is now a protected area, and locals have recognised that tourism can present an additional source of income for them. Money made from tourism has allowed the fishermen to give their children a good education. Today,

▼
A firework of colours is typical for bommies at dive site Little Komodo



▲
Sunsets in magical places like Triton Bay are daily highlights

▲
This soft coral crab is a master in playing peek-a-boo

» **“APA KABAR, ORANG asing!** How are you, stranger?” whispers Edison, a baggage handler at Kaimana Airport, as he takes a look at my luggage label. Europeans in Kaimana are indeed “strange”, as tourism here is still in its infancy. “There are just a few divers who come once or twice a year,” reports Tommy Nanggunewna, a member of staff at the tourist board.

The marine wonderland that is Triton Bay was explored for the first time in 2006 by a group of employees from Conservation International and scientists from the State University of Papua (UNIPA). It was expected to be home to even greater species diversity and number of endemic species than Raja Ampat. This was confirmed, as Dr Gerry Allen counted 330 different species on a single dive.

This place is a jewel for Bruno Hopff, cruise director and one of the owners of the liveaboard MSV *Amira*, which calls at Triton Bay. “I felt privileged to be able to see this bit of Earth and to be able to dive in this biodiversity hotspot,” he says, remembering his first visit to Triton Bay in 2009.

LITTLE KOMODO – A SUPERLATIVE DIVE SITE

“The Little Komodo dive site quite simply left me speechless! The unbelievably healthy stock of coral and the huge quantity of fish were overwhelming,” says Hopff.

However, the price to pay for the unusually high biomass in Triton Bay is low visibility – about 15 metres – and some raging currents. When diving down, you’d probably pass through a dense shoal of rainbow runners. It requires concentration just to remember to breathe.



10 children from the village comprising just 70 families have made it to a university.

“We know the score when it comes to the continued existence of our most valuable asset, unspoilt Nature and culture. We have to protect and preserve them in order to grant future generations an income from tourism as well,” says Tommy Nanguewna, who is himself a passionate diver. “Just consider, for example, the wall paintings that are several thousand of years old. What Triton Bay offers is rare; almost no other area in the Indonesian Archipelago offers the exact same thing.”

These paintings can be visited on a dive-free afternoon during a trip with one of the three dinghies of the MSV *Amira*. The same applies to the several-hundred-year-old caves that contain human remains. These stem from the time when the people of Papua believed that they could take on the power of a dead opponent by consuming them after battle.

THE ULTIMATE IN SPECIES DIVERSITY

In a top dive site like Batu Jeruk, you'll often find a tempting current, as well as a multitude of fish shoals and a fully intact soft-coral landscape.

[◀ ▲]

It was such an amazing experience to see this gentle giant cruising by

[▼]

It is always nice to see moving glassfish: If you have enough patience, a predator might show up, giving you a show of the survival of the fittest in full force

[◀ ▼]

Wobbegong sharks typically hide in overhangs or small caves and are surrounded by glassfish

“I think it's how you'd imagine a very positive LSD trip,” jokes my diving buddy, Tom Ingpen. The Australian has already dived in some remote corners of the world, but he thinks “Triton Bay has everything in even more lavish proportions”. “Night dives here,” he reveals, “are particularly fun.”

While night diving at sites like Disney Land and Macro Rock, you can find the denise, bargibanti and pontohi species of pygmy seahorses, as well as rare creatures like solar-powered nudibranchs, decorator crabs and waspfish. Some of the dives are very demanding,





◀ Triton Bay is described as the quintessential heart of diversity, where divers can look forward to encountering giant groupers, Napoleon wrasse, eagle rays, sharks as well as schooling barracuda

» **WATCHING THE CREATURES – WHICH GROW UP TO EIGHT METRES IN LENGTH – FROM THIS PROXIMITY IS AN INCREDIBLE SIGHT.** ◀



but excursions, for instance to Mauwara Bay, provide an opportunity to recover.

For ship-owner Bruno Hopff, Mauwara Bay is something very special. “This bay had such a magical effect on me that it was immediately clear to me that I had to return,” says the 41-year-old Zurich native, who has already been living in Indonesia for more than 11 years. In about two hours, you’d cross an almost endless labyrinth of branches. The karst cliffs overgrown with jungle giants and palms combined with the song of tropical birds will take your breath away. You finally arrive in paradise at a small beach by the exit of the bay. It is hardly possible to think of a kitschier backdrop for a postcard from the South Seas!

For Alan Powderham, a British photographer who accompanied us for his own research for his new book, Triton Bay is “the ultimate best place in a land that is known for its extraordinary species diversity”. And when we speak of “species diversity”, it includes whale sharks.

WHALE SHARKS: ON THE HUNT FOR IKAN PURI

“For as long as I can remember, there have been whale sharks in our waters, but the people of

Papua have great respect for these creatures and a dreadful fear of being eaten by them,” says Jeia.

The whale sharks in Triton Bay exhibit similar behaviour to those in Cenderawasih Bay. The *bagan* (bait-fishing platform) of the fishermen from South Sulawesi, who are also called Bugis, appear to attract the creatures magically. The Bugis fish during the night for *ikan puri* (sardines) and sell the catch in Kaimana market. To keep the fish fresh for as long as possible, they leave them submerged in the nets.

This wealth of potential food attracts the whale sharks. They suck the nets to get their meal. Watching the creatures – which grow up to eight metres in length – from this proximity is an incredible sight. Again and again, they swim from the depths towards the surface of the water to get at the nets. On a particularly good day, you can also see dolphins and even an Indo-Pacific sailfish stop by to help itself to the easy spoils.

There are now codes of conduct to protect these whale sharks. Diving with a scuba set is forbidden, and you are not allowed to touch or to torment the animals. It is, however, difficult not

▶ The beautiful Amira waiting for the divers at Selat Iris

to touch the sharks, as these beautiful beasts seek to get close to divers and circle them curiously over and over again.

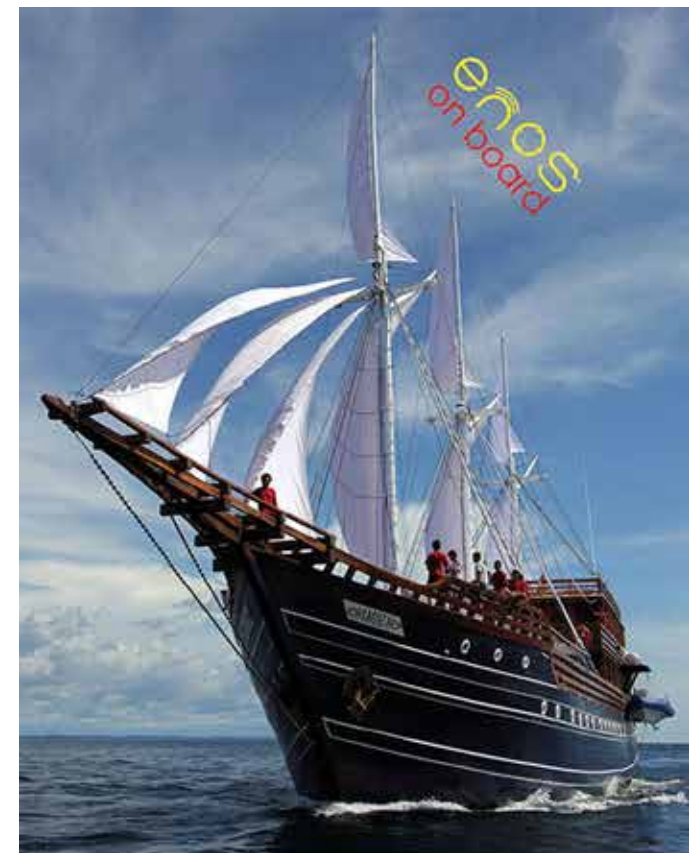
On the final evening of every trip on the MSV *Amira*, it is customary for guests to gather at the bow of the ship and be entertained by the crew, accompanied by some Indonesian oldies. “It will probably take me six months to digest these 11 days of over-stimulation. It was an overwhelmingly good trip. The experiences I’ve enjoyed above and below the water will remain in my heart forever,” sums up American Lee Hartford, while she dreamily focuses her attention on the sunset and the singing.

Bruno Hopff could only offer a satisfied grin at the fulfilled faces of the divers. “Dr Mark Erdmann was right when he said that this is without doubt the temple of paradise.” **AD**



GETTING THERE

Fly KLM to Jakarta and from there, with Lion Air to Ambon. You can also fly with SilkAir to Makassar and from there, take Garuda or Sriwijaya Air to Ambon. In Ambon, take Wings Air to Kaimana via Fak Fak. The *Amira* crew will pick you up at the airport and organise the transfer to the boat.



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