



TELUK TRITON

TEXT AND IMAGES MARKUS ROTH © 2014

“*Apa kabar, orang asing!* How are you, stranger?” whispers Edison, a baggage handler at Kaimana Airport, as he checks my luggage label. Europeans in Kaimana are indeed ‘strange’, as tourism here is still in its infancy and just a few divers come once or twice a year.

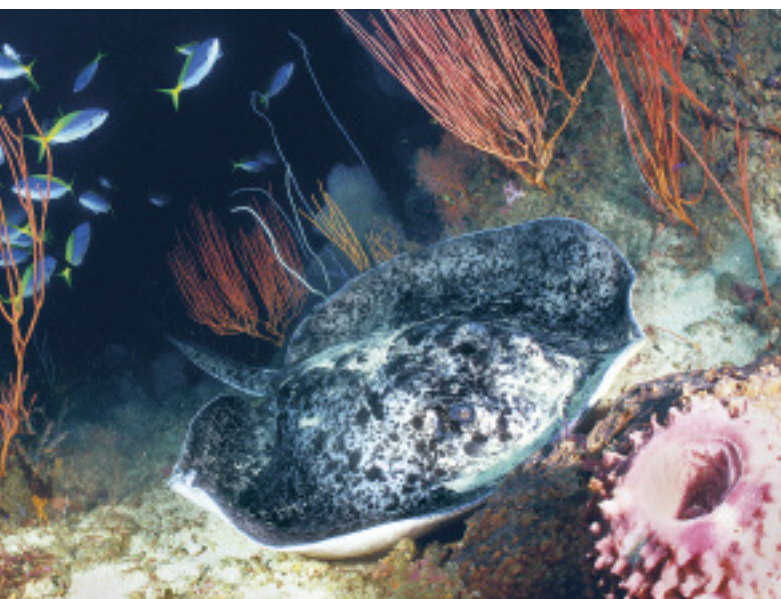
Triton Bay was first explored in 2006 by a group from Conservation International and scientists from the State University of Papua (UNIPA). They expected even greater species diversity and a larger number of endemic species than in Raja Ampat and this was confirmed: Dr Gerry Allen counted 330 different species on a single dive.

Little Komodo

This place is a jewel for Bruno Hopff, cruise director and a co-owner of MSV *Amira*, which visits Triton Bay. “I felt privileged to be able to see this bit of earth and to dive in this biodiversity hotspot”, he says of his first visit to Triton Bay in 2009. “The Little Komodo dive site left me speechless! The unbelievably healthy coral and the huge quantity of fish were overwhelming”.

However, the price to pay for the Bay’s unusually high biomass is low visibility of around 15 metres and some raging currents. When descending, a dense mass of rainbow runners often has to be negotiated and it takes concentration just to remember to breathe. The effort of battling against the current is forgotten when the area where the current splits on the reef is reached, and divers can rest for a while and watch the spectacle of of fusiliers, barracudas and mackerel schools. If you leave the area protected from the current and drift into the 30 metres wide channel, you pass by walls of white-coloured black corals, giant gorgonians and orange-coloured soft corals. At the end of the channel a large group of bumphead parrotfish hangs effortlessly in the current. In the

You can find this decorator shrimp on night dives at Bo’s Rainbow



This page from the top:

Wobbegong sharks are often found hiding in caves

A marbled ray at Excalibur

A solar powered nudibranch at Bo's Rainbow

Opposite page: A whale shark checking out our photographer Reinhard Dirscherl

A couple of headshield slugs *Chelidonura amoena* seen mating at Three Rocks

when the afternoon sun shines into the channel, the jungle-like karst cliffs above are visible from a depth of 10 metres. Neither the paradise above water nor that below goes unobserved.

But this spectacle has been witnessed by very few. Around four years ago safari boats were warned against heading 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, Mohamed Jeia. Shortly after the first headlines described the potential of Triton Bay, the fishing fleets came, caught the big fish and vanished. According to Jeia, the locals were unsure whether the first

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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 deliver an additional source of income which makes it possible to give their children a good education – 10 children from the village of just 70 families have made it to a university in the country.

Tommy Nanguewna, a staff member at the tourist board and a passionate diver, believes the continued existence of the most valuable asset, unspoilt nature and culture has to be protected and preserved to also grant the next generations an income from tourism. The thousand years old wall paintings are found in very few other parts of the Indonesian archipelago. These can be visited on a dive-free afternoon trip on one of *Amira's* three dinghies. The same applies to the caves containing human remains that are several hundred years old; these stem from the time when the Papua people believed they could take on the power of a dead opponent by consuming them after battle.

The ultimate in a land of species diversity

In a top dive site like Batu Jeruk you'll often find a tasty current but also a multitude of fish shoals and a fully intact soft-coral landscape. My Australian dive buddy Tom Ingpen reckoned this was how you'd imagine a very positive LSD trip to be! He's already dived in some remote corners of the world, but thinks Triton Bay has everything in even more lavish proportions and says even night dives here are particular fun. At night in places 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 dives are very demanding, but excursions, for instance to Mauwara Bay, give an opportunity for a break.

Bruno Hopff, who's lived in Indonesia for more than 11 years, believes Mauwara Bay is very special. "This bay is so magical it was immediately clear that I had to return", says the 41-year-old native of Zurich. In around two hours you cross an almost endless labyrinth of branches, and the karst cliffs overgrown with jungle giants and palms filled with tropical birdsong take your breath away. You finally arrive in paradise at a small beach by the exit to the bay. It is hard to think of a more kitschy backdrop for a postcard from the South Seas!

Whale sharks on the hunt for *ikan puri*

The bay's species diversity includes whale sharks which grow up to eight metres

"For as long as I can think, there have been whale sharks in our waters, but the people of Papua have great respect for these creatures..."
Mohamed Jeia.

long. Those in Triton Bay exhibit similar behaviour to those in Cenderawasih Bay. The *bagans* of the fishermen, so-called 'bugies' from South Sulawesi, appear to magically draw the creatures. The bugies fish at night for *ikan puri*, (sardines) and later sell them in the Kaimana market. To keep the fish fresh for as long as possible, they remain in the nets. This wealth of potential food attracts the whale sharks and they suck the nets to get their meal. Watching this in close proximity is an incredible spectacle. Again and again, they swim from the depths towards the

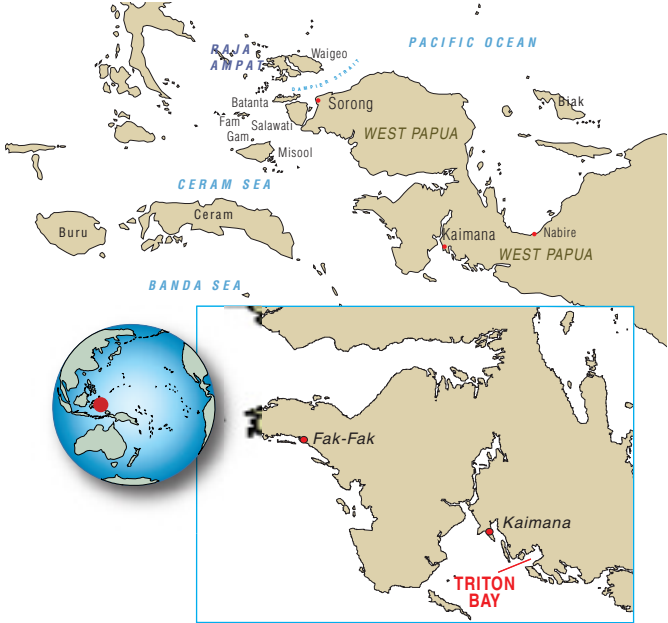




Memorable Messages:

- Triton Bay is “the ultimate in a land known for its extraordinary species diversity”. British photographer Alan Powderham
- “It will probably take me six months to digest these 11 days of overstimulation. It was an overwhelmingly good trip. The experiences I’ve enjoyed above and below water will remain forever in my heart”. American Lee Hartford.
- After exploring Triton Bay Dr Mark Erdmann, senior marine biologist at Conservation International, commented: “If Raja Ampat is paradise, this Bay is the temple of paradise.”

> **LINKS** MSV Amira: www.amira-indonesia.com
www.indonesiatravelingguide.com www.tritonbaydivers.com



From the top:
 SMY Amira waiting for the divers to surface in Selat Iris
 This colourful cave was alive with masses of juvenile sweepers
 During surface intervals you can visit ancient cave graves

surface to reach the nets. On a good day there’s also dolphins, and an Indo-Pacific sailfish helping itself to the easy spoils.

There are now codes of conduct to protect the whale sharks. Diving with a scuba set is forbidden, as is touching or tormenting the sharks. It is difficult not to touch the creatures, as they’re curious about divers and circle them over and over again.

On the final evening of every trip on Amira the guests join the crew at the bow and their band provides entertainment in the form of some Indonesian oldies. Bruno Hopff just grins at the satisfied faces of the divers: “Dr Mark Erdmann was right when he said that Triton Bay is without doubt the temple of paradise.”

GETTING THERE:
 International airline of choice > Jakarta > Ambon > Kaimana.

Entry / Exit Requirements All foreign travelers require a valid passport for at least six months following date of arrival. Tourist passport holders may apply for a 30-day visitor visa on arrival in Jakarta, Bali, and others. Check the rates before traveling.

Departure tax: Check the rates before traveling. Must be paid in Rupiah, cash only. Jakarta tax varies from other international airports; domestic departure tax also varies.

National language Bahasa Indonesia. Though English is understood and commonly spoken in tourist areas, international business or the travel industry, most Indonesian people are often not fluent.

Currency: Indonesian rupiah. Traveller's cheques in euros or US dollars and credit cards are accepted in many places.