

A place beyond paradise

Triton Bay is the latest of Papua's secret spots to be opened up to commercial trips – and it may be the best yet

Story and photography by Markus Roth



IMAGINE SEEING 330 FISH SPECIES ON A SINGLE DIVE. FEW DIVERS would even be able to identify so many species but that's what renowned marine biologist Dr Gerry Allen found when he dived Triton Bay, a remote area on the Bird's Head Peninsula in far eastern Indonesia.

The Bird's Head is a peninsula that juts out of the end of the island of New Guinea, making up the bulk of the Indonesian province of West Papua. In recent years it has become famous among divers, with the areas of Raja Ampat and Cenderawasih becoming hallmarks for diversity and whale shark experiences respectively. Now a third area of the Bird's Head is coming to the fore and it may be the best of the lot.

The bay was surveyed for the first time in 2006 by a group of scientists from Conservation International and the State University of Papua (UNIPA). It was expected that there would be even greater species diversity and a larger number of endemic species than in Raja Ampat and this was duly confirmed.

Dr Allen and his colleague, Dr Mark Erdman, Senior Marine Biologist at Conservation International, have described the area as a "species factory". This is no doubt due to the heavy nutrient load of its waters, as well as its remoteness and lack of sizeable population in a country where subsistence-level fishing is often a major initial stressor on fish populations.

This place is a jewel as far as Bruno Hopff, cruise director and one of the owners of the liveboard MSV *Amira* that regularly sails these waters, is concerned.

GREEN SHORES, GREEN SEA
One of the critical factors keeping Triton Bay so intact is the lack of settlements.





"I felt privileged to be able to see this bit of Earth," he says, remembering his first visit to Triton Bay in 2009.

"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.

Whale sharks are also resident, showing similar behaviour to those in Cenderawasih Bay, tracking the bagans, the floating platforms of the Bugis fishermen. Originally from south Sulawesi, these nomads of the sea now fish Triton Bay during the night for ikan puri, sardines, which they sell in the market in Kaimana. To keep the fish fresh for as long as possible, the Bugis keep bulging nets full of fish under their platforms and this attracts the whale sharks. They suck at the nets to bag an easy meal of smaller fry, behaviour which is tolerated by the Bugis as the sharks offer another revenue stream: fees paid by divers hungry for the chance to get up close to these placid giants of the sea.

The only drawback to the unusually high biomass in Triton Bay is the visibility. At 15 metres or sometimes even less, it is far worse than at some of Asia's other must-dive locations, and there are some raging currents too. This makes some of the dives very demanding, but succor is at hand: in such a sparsely populated spot, secluded coves and postcard-perfect beaches are never far away for when you need to simply lie and soak in the stillness of a place beyond paradise. **AA**

HEAD TO HEAD

A pair of male red cheeked anthias face off in a territorial fight.

PRACTICALITIES

When to go

The best time to visit Triton Bay is mid-September to early June.

How to get there

There are flights from Jakarta to Ambon with Garuda or Lion Air and from there to Kaimana via Fakfak on Wings Air. There are also ferries to Kaimana though the sailings can be irregular and weather-affected. Some liveboards access Triton Bay from Sorong.

What to bring

Depending on your tolerance, a 3mm shorty should be okay for most people in the 29°C water. Most operators have several sets of rental gear available.

Contact

Liveboards visiting these waters include:

MSV Amira, www.amira-indonesia.com

Water Adventure Ocean Wide, www.waowcharters.com

There's also now a dive resort:

Triton Bay Divers, www.tritonbaydivers.com

TRITON'S JEWELS

Clockwise from above: a wobbegong shark slides out of its hiding place; a decorator shrimp; a soft coral crab.

