

# TRITON BAY

## Temple of Paradise

Markus Roth

**“If Raja Ampat is paradise, Triton Bay is the temple of paradise.” So said Dr Mark Erdmann, senior marine biologist at Conservation International after exploring what is considered to be the next frontier of diving – and it’s right on PNG’s northwestern doorstep.**

“A pa 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 the small West Papuan (Irian Jayan) port town of Kaimana are indeed “strange” as tourism here is still in its infancy. This is confirmed by Tommy Nanggunewna, who works at the local tourist board.

“There are just a few divers who come once or twice a year,” Tommy says. The marine wonderland that is Triton Bay was explored for the first time in 2006 by a group from non-profit American environmental organisation, Conservation International, as well as scientists from the State University of Papua. They expected to find an even greater species diversity and a

larger number of endemic species than in the islands of Raja Ampat to the north, and they were not disappointed. Conservation International’s world-renowned reef fish expert Dr Gerry Allen counted 330 different species on one single dive! Bruno Hopff, cruise director and one of the owners of the liveaboard MSV *Amira*, which calls in at Triton Bay,

recalled the “privilege” he felt on his first visit to the area in 2009 “to be able to see this bit of earth and to be able to dive in this biodiversity hotspot”. He marvelled at the “unbelievably healthy stock of coral and the huge quantity of fish”, while the Little Komodo dive site left him speechless, he says. But the price to pay for the unusually

high biomass in Triton Bay is low visibility of around 15m and some raging currents. As I dive down I pass through a dense shoal of rainbow runners. A degree of concentration is required here so as not to forget about breathing. But the effort involved with the battle against the current is forgotten by the time you have reached the split, the area where

the current splits on the reef, and where you can rest for a while and watch the spectacle offered by the schools of fusiliers, barracudas and mackerel. If you leave the area protected from the current and drift into the channel, which is 30m wide at most, you will pass by walls of white-coloured black corals, giant gorgonians and orange soft corals. At the end of the channel, a large school of bumphead parrotfish awaits, seeming to hang effortlessly in the current. In the afternoon, when the sun shines into the channel, an additional spectacle is

“...There are only a few divers who come once or twice a year...”

*The beauty of a West Papuan sunset*



*It is always worthwhile to inspect sea cucumbers. Here a small crab takes a ride*

TRITON BAY  
Story & Photos: Markus Roth





*A ray rests on the plateau of the dive site Excalibur*

visible, as it is possible to see the jungle-like karst cliffs even from a depth of 10m.

Neither the paradise above the water nor the one below it goes unobserved. But this spectacle has only been admired by a few. About four years ago, safari boats were warned against heading out

“...I think it’s how you’d imagine a very positive LSD trip!...”



*Triton Bay has some very scenic hidden bays*

into this remote area of the Bird’s Head Peninsula as trouble with the locals erupted time and again.

“We were worried about our natural resources and our basic foodstuff, fish,” explains Mohamed Jeia, the mayor of the fishing village of Sisir.

After all, shortly after the first headlines about the tourism potential of Triton Bay, the fishing fleets came, caught the big fish in the water and vanished again. According to Mohamed, 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!”

Triton Bay is now a protected area, and locals have recognised that tourism can represent an additional source of income for them and that this money makes it possible to give their children a good education. So far 10 children from the 70 families who live in the village have been able to go on to university.

“We know the score when it comes to the continued existence of our most valuable asset, unspoilt nature and



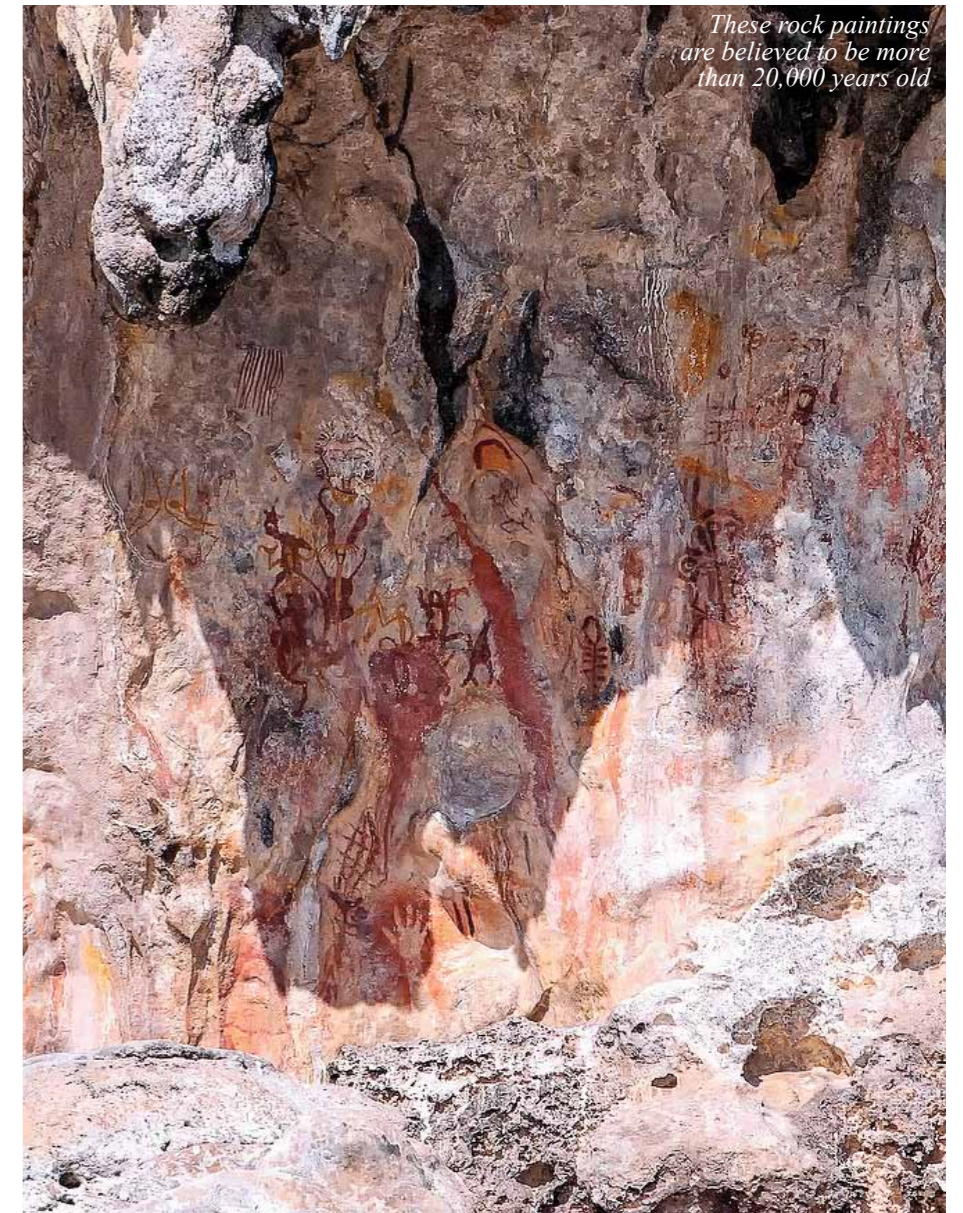
*The children of Sisir enjoy the visitors*

culture,” says tourism board staffer Tommy, himself a passionate diver. “We have to protect and preserve them in order to grant the next generations an income from tourism as well. Just consider the wall paintings that are thousands of years old! Very few other parts of the Indonesian archipelago have something similar to offer.”

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 for the caves that contain human remains that are several hundred years old. These stem from the time when the people of Papua believed that they could take on the power of a dead opponent by consuming their bodies after battle.

In a top dive site like Batu Jeruk, you’ll find a multitude of fish shoals and a fully intact soft-coral landscape. “I think it’s how you’d imagine a very positive LSD trip!” comments my Australian diving buddy, Tom Ingpen.

Tom has already dived in some of the world’s most remote corners but he thinks Triton Bay “has everything in even more lavish proportions – even night dives here are particularly fun!”. During night dives at spots 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.



*These rock paintings are believed to be more than 20,000 years old*



*Skulls in a small cave are relics of past rituals*





Every cave is packed with small fish

Some of the dives are very demanding, because of the strong current, but excursions, for instance to Mauwara Bay, provide an opportunity to recover. For skipper Bruno, Mauwara Bay is something very special. “This bay had such a magical effect on me that it was clear to me immediately that I had to return,” says the 41-year-old Swiss native, who has already lived in Indonesia for more than 11 years. In about two hours, you cross an almost endless labyrinth of branches, and the karst cliffs overgrown with jungle giants and palms combine with the song of tropical birds to take your breath away. You finally arrive in paradise at a small

beach by the exit to the bay. It is hardly possible to think of a more kitschy backdrop for a postcard from the South Seas!

For British photographer Alan Powderham, who is accompanying us on his research trip for his new book, Triton Bay is “the ultimate best place in a land that is known for its extraordinary species diversity”.

This includes whale sharks. Says mayor Mohamed: “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 and a dreadful fear of being eaten by them!” The whale sharks in Triton Bay



A juvenile filefish

exhibit similar behaviour to those in Cenderawasih Bay – another emerging dive destination in West Papua. The platforms or “bagans” of the fishermen from South Sulawesi – who are called “bugies” – appear to attract the creatures magically. The bugies fish during the night for “ikan puri”, Indonesian for sardines, and later sell these in the market in Kaimana. To keep the fish fresh for as long as possible, the fishers keep them immersed in the nets, a wealth of potential food that attracts the whale sharks, which suck the nets to get their meal.

Watching the creatures, which grow up to 8m long, from this close is an

incredible experience. Again and again, they emerge from deep below and swim towards the surface to get at the nets. On a particularly good day, you can also see dolphins, and maybe an Indo-Pacific sailfish will stop by and help themselves to the easy spoils.

There are now codes of conduct to protect the whale sharks. Diving with a scuba set is forbidden, and you are not allowed to touch or torment the sharks. It is, however, difficult not to touch the creatures, as they 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 the guests to gather with the crew on the bow, and be serenaded by old-fashioned Indonesian songs by the crew band.

American visitor Lee Hartford remarks that it will probably take her six months to digest her trip and its “11 days of overstimulation!”.

“It was an overwhelmingly good trip,” she says. “The experiences I’ve enjoyed above and below the water will remain forever in my heart.”

As Lee dreamily focuses her attention on the sunset and the crew’s sing-sing, skipper Bruno takes in the idyllic scene that few in the world will ever experience: “Dr Mark Erdmann was right. Triton Bay is the temple of paradise.”

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A whale shark feeds on sardines trapped in a net



The good ship *Amira* in the Selat Iris



A decorator spider crab



On the top right of this aerial view is the popular dive site Little Komodo



A turtle at the dive site Batu Jeruk

