

A place so remote only 600 divers per year visit, but it will blow your mind!

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY
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It's all a blur, green to the side and blue below. The lush, jungled coastline is unbroken by habitation and the sea below us is full of promise. Three days into our travel marathon to far eastern Indonesia—a journey that began six flights ago and ends with this two hour boat ride—I remind myself of the diver's maxim: "A marine ecosystem's

health is often directly proportional to the distance off the beaten path." The t-shirt across from me pithily concurs: "Triton Bay: Remote, and worth it!"

For geographical reference, if Raja Ampat is the head and beak of Bird's Head Peninsula, think of Triton Bay as the neck wattle, and Iris Strait as the jugular vein through which the lifeblood of the Kaimana Regency flows. And that pulse is strong. This remote and remarkable region of West Papua has been proclaimed a "species factory" by marine scientists. That was all it took to convince a roving fish geek like me to travel 10,564 miles (17,001km), give or take.

Tired eyes open wide upon submersion at a dive site called Little Komodo. Hundreds of fusiliers are flowing around us, a river of quicksilver refracting bright sunlight. Like a wave they crest, then descend to blanket a forest of black coral bushes glowing green-white. I've never seen so much of the stuff, and so shallow. We're barely 33 feet (10m) below. We poke into the thicket to find bannerfish standing at attention and brassy cardinalfish sheltering amongst the tangles of fine branches that appear to be coated in hoar frost. Jack, one of the lead guides for Triton Bay Divers, beckons us onward, a hint that there's even better ahead. When the current's just right, divers can swim around the point to the flip side of Saruenus Island.

KINGDOM OF THE FISHES TRITON BAY, INDONESIA

Fisherman lower nets at night to catch anchovies and other baitfish. Whale sharks are attracted to the vessels and wait—with their remora counterparts—for fisherman to throw some fish their way



We do just that, moving reef left to Aquarium, where the shallows are choked with swarming fishes —damsels, baitfish, and different species of fusilier—and nicely plumped yellow and red soft corals sprout from large boulders. There are also lumps of pink-orange cup coral, like big wads of chewing gum stuck to this sweet reef by the sea gods. Meandering about monolithic rocks are coral groupers, oversized blue-ringed angelfish, and a polka-dotted, slope-headed barramundi cod. Rather than retreating like most of its shy kind, it glides nonchalantly past me while I gaze upward through dancing light beams and the sea's ceiling to the shimmering emerald mirage of overhanging jungle. I'm mesmerized. My depth gauge reads only 13 feet (4m), so narcosis is not the culprit. This is simply a beautiful little pocket of ocean paradise.

These spots are only two of many. Over a lunch of tasty *bihun goreng* noodles to which I've added a bit too much fiery sambal, Lisa English, co-founder of Triton Bay Divers, tells us they have more than 30 dive sites in Iris Strait and Triton Bay, showcasing

pinnacles, coral gardens, walls, drift dives, sand slopes, and mucky critter sites. All of which see less than 600 visiting divers per year.

Using my own brand of fuzzy math, I plug that number into an equation that produces billions of fish in residence. Quick calculation: the odds of fish-rich dives like we enjoyed this morning are all but guaranteed. Sea slugs, too. The gentleman seated next to me, a hardcore "brancher" who travels the world diving for nudibranchs, has already seen 65 different species here this week.

Blow my mind

Tucked into an idyllic bay on Aiduma Island's northeast flank, the beachfront resort is ideally located to facilitate exploration of the entirety of Iris Strait. We head north again today, and after just five minutes we're alongside Saruenus

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Healthy shallow corals, crinoids, and branching cup corals. Rarely-visited reefs make this corner of Indonesia a gem amongst gems

Island. I'd happily repeat either of yesterday's submersions, or try a new spot on the west side where the soft corals are rumoured to be beyond breathtaking. But that's not going to happen right now. "Pintu Arus. Means door to the current," Jack explains solemnly, pointing at the surface slop and mini-whirlpools. The current is cranking, pushing our boat sideways one moment and then bucking us up and down the next. We'll come back and try again later in the week, when the door isn't wide open.

Across the strait we turn into a narrow waterway with dead calm water. The walls of the passage are limestone islets eroded at the base and topped with palm trees somehow making a go of it on the jagged karst. Think tropical fjord from the Jurassic period. We gear up, roll back, and slip down to explore Froggies, one of the premiere muck dives in the region. Vis is a hazy 20 feet (6m). Jack goes to work immediately, finding things I never could on my own: a pygmy cuttlefish masquerading as a bit of algal scuzz; a *tozeuma*

shrimp cunningly camouflaged on a sprig of black coral; and a butterfly nudibranch so small and transparent I just dumbly nod, dutifully smile, and quickly snap a photo without even trying to focus. We bottom out at 66 feet (20m), and then slowly work our way back up the slope where crab-eyed gobies and decorator crabs await, flatworms squirm, tiger shrimp hide, and upsidedown jellyfish pulse against the fine, tan-coloured sediment. Nearby Jack's Spot, named for you-know-who, proves another productive critter hunt.

Our third dive of the day, an afternoon splash at Tangga, brilliantly concludes the macro trifecta. South of the resort on the Aiduma side of Iris Strait, Tangga, which translates into "ladder" for the shelving steps of the reef slope, carries another name, Pygmy Point. Purple, pink, and yellow sea fans in 33 to 66 feet (10 to 20m) host a multitude of diminutive *sygnathid* superstars to challenge your powers of observation and strain your skills of underwater photography. You (or in our case, our guide) will

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find different colour morphs of Bargibant's and Denise's pygmy seahorses, including the charming "Santa Claus" variety so named for its red suit with bumpy white accents. For those possessed of the second sight so commonplace among Indonesia divemasters, search for the even smaller Pontoh's and Satomi's pygmy seahorses. (Good luck, we're talking less than 0.4 inches (1cm) in length and cryptic to boot.) They're both here, waiting patiently to be discovered in the algal turf. Without a doubt, Triton Bay's species factory works overtime in the pygmy department.

I also delight in the site's larger macro creatures—a white frogfish actively luring, white leaf scorpionfish, solar powered nudibranchs feeding on leather coral to recharge their internal batteries, and neon purple dottybacks flitting under ledges—and uncover

symbionts galore, including spindle cowries living on gorgonians, emperor shrimps riding shotgun on both sea cucumber and sea slug, and clownfish luxuriating in the stinging embrace of their anemone life partner.

Strategic symbiosis

There's another form of symbiosis on display. As a bonus, the players are bigger and correspondingly easier to spot. We're up north near Namatote Island, 16.5 feet (5m) below the surface, hovering next to a whale shark of about the same size. It is pointed skyward, with cavernous mouth agape. Dozens of remoras are stuck to its milk white belly. Baitfish rain down from the heavens. The shark takes a series of mighty, sucking gulps, and then glides off into the gloom, only to return for more a moment later.

We swim alongside the majestic creature, stare into cartoonish eyes way too small for its bus-sized body, and fill a 32GB memory card with pictures to preserve the memory of this special meeting.

We found this gentle giant not

Denise's pygmy seahorse is less than one inch long and is often well camouflaged amongst its home turf of gorgonian coral



by random happenstance, but thanks to the traditional bagan fishing platform looming above and the helpful fishermen onboard the strange contraption—a bamboo scaffolding extending out from both sides of the boat sandwiched in between. A clever, mutually beneficial partnership between man, shark, and dive tourist has been forged over the last few years. Surefooted fishermen clamber about the rickety structure to deploy their nets at night, lowering them down into the inky black. The nets are hauled up early in the morning, bulging with “ikan puri”—anchovies and other small fish destined for sale as bait to different Indonesian fisheries and also shipped overseas for various uses. Hungry whale sharks are attracted to the oily, smelly, scaly goodness. The fishermen share a portion of their bounty with the sharks, and are in kind compensated with a small stipend paid by the resort. Divers reap the real rewards, ending up with a much better than average chance to see the biggest fish in the sea. Science is also capitalizing on this symbiotic relationship. Conservational International (CI) has a monitoring and tagging program in place to study the sharks and

thereby learn more about their numbers and movement patterns, as well as assess any effects burgeoning elasmobranch eco-tourism may be having on the whale sharks. Citizen scientists can aid in the ongoing conservation efforts. The resort encourages guests to share pictures and video to help build CI’s database of identification imagery. Our ninety minutes in the presence of Mr. Big beneath the bagan certainly ranks as one of the many highlights of this off the grid expedition to Triton Bay.

Centre of the bioverse

Unless you’ve been living under a rock far, far away from the big blue whence all life came and into which members of the dive tribe must needs return, you’re undoubtedly aware of the many accolades heaped on Indonesian reefs. The nation of more than 17,000 islands owns the choicest underwater real estate in the celebrated Coral Triangle. This is the hottest of the marine biodiversity hotspots. There

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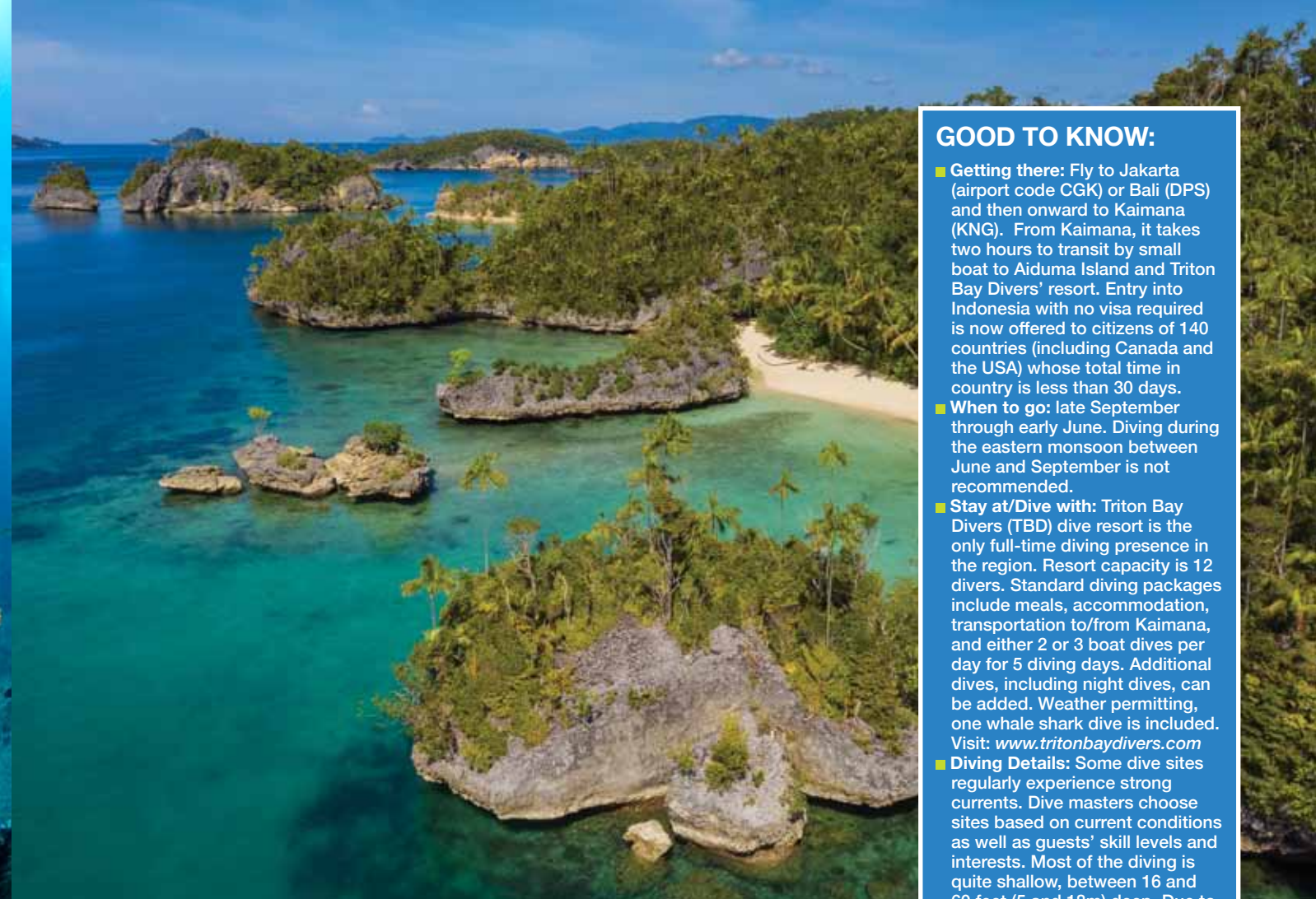
A whale shark feeding on anchovies under a bagan, a specialized fishing platform. Whale sharks are attracted to the boats and often suck on the full nets attached to the vessels. Fisherman often throw fish back in for the whale sharks, sharing their bounty with the locals

are more species of fishes and invertebrates in Indonesia than anywhere else on Planet Ocean. The corner in which we currently find ourselves is a microcosm of outsized proportions, biologically speaking. Preeminent ichthyologist Dr. Gerry Allen counted a mind-boggling 330 different fish species on a single dive at Tanjung Papisoi during an exploratory survey of the Triton Bay aquatic frontier in 2006. Twenty species of marine life were seen for the first time ever by scientists on that expedition.

I met two of West Papua’s finest right in front of the Triton Bay Divers resort, a pair of charismatic critters with undeniable star power in my book. On a late afternoon tank just outside of the house reef, I joined battle with a certain flasher wrasse. The fading ambient light must have kindled some kind of pheromone fire, because suddenly the three inch (7cm) male, overtaken by a desire to impress the local ladies, energetically advertised its splendid colours and spikey plumage. All this while darting about at dizzying speed in 360 degrees. Let me tell you, it’s no small feat to create a decent picture of this rakish beauty. This species was only recently described by science and is thought



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GOOD TO KNOW:

- **Getting there:** Fly to Jakarta (airport code CGK) or Bali (DPS) and then onward to Kaimana (KNG). From Kaimana, it takes two hours to transit by small boat to Aiduma Island and Triton Bay Divers' resort. Entry into Indonesia with no visa required is now offered to citizens of 140 countries (including Canada and the USA) whose total time in country is less than 30 days.
- **When to go:** late September through early June. Diving during the eastern monsoon between June and September is not recommended.
- **Stay at/Dive with:** Triton Bay Divers (TBD) dive resort is the only full-time diving presence in the region. Resort capacity is 12 divers. Standard diving packages include meals, accommodation, transportation to/from Kaimana, and either 2 or 3 boat dives per day for 5 diving days. Additional dives, including night dives, can be added. Weather permitting, one whale shark dive is included. Visit: www.tritonbaydivers.com
- **Diving Details:** Some dive sites regularly experience strong currents. Dive masters choose sites based on current conditions as well as guests' skill levels and interests. Most of the diving is quite shallow, between 16 and 60 feet (5 and 18m) deep. Due to the extreme remoteness of the location, all TBD guests must have dive insurance. Rental dive gear is limited so enquire directly with the resort in advance for any gear requirements you may have. TBD uses 12 litre aluminum DIN valve tanks with yoke adapters.
- **Hyperbaric chamber location:** The nearest chambers are in Manado and Ambon – both a long way away. No decompression diving is allowed.
- **Water temp:** Water temps hover around 79-84°F (26-29°C). Air temperatures, around 86°F (30°C). Expect rain at some point during your visit.
- **Water visibility:** Varies from 16 to 66 feet (5 to 20m) depending on weather, runoff from the rivers on the mainland, and presence (or absence) of localized upwelling. The average water clarity is 33-40 feet (10-12m).
- **Top Tip:** Use an ATM in Jakarta (or Bali) to withdraw local currency (Indonesian Rupiah IDR). Cash is required for domestic flight excess baggage fees in KNG. Cash is also required to pay the 500,000 IDR (about CAD 50 / USD 35) marine park fee upon arrival at TDR.

to live only in Triton Bay, nearby Misool, and Ambon.

Another spectacular showpiece emerging from the prolific West Papuan species factory is an endemic epaulette shark, which has an even more restricted geographic range than the aforementioned flasher wrasse. So far it has been recorded only in the Triton Bay area and Raja Ampat. Gracing t-shirts and drybags as the cute logo of Triton Bay Divers, this famous "walking shark" favours shallow rubble and reef habitat such as the house reef, where it can be seen at night walking on its lobed fins along the bottom in 6.6 to 16.5 feet (2 to 5m). Lisa tells us there are three sharks in residence at present. I find one of the little leopard patterned beauties, about two feet (60cm) in length, by walking myself from our bungalow a short distance down the moonlit beach and into a 82°F (28°C) warm, dark sea, then meandering around the staghorn and leather coral patch to the left.

Each dive enchants, each day overwhelms. Under Bo's Rainbow we become one with a gregarious

gang of spadefish. Flying high above Aiduma Island my drone grants me sight through the eyes of the sea eagles and hornbills we admire from below. Little Komodo's ruby red soft corals and shoals of fish are visible from hundreds of feet up. We pass surface intervals on secluded beaches with untracked perfect sand. At Engine Point I lose myself in my camera's viewfinder while imaging soft coral trees blushing rose tangerine, until the unmistakable sound of a metal muck stick excitedly banging against a scuba tank calls me up the slope. Jack has worked his magic yet again, finding a juvenile pinnate batfish swooshing about elegantly as a flamenco dancer, black outlined in orange. We explore Dr. Seuss seascapes with purple-grey leather corals in concentric squiggly shapes, where spiraling whips are highways for horned shrimps and

Regularly swept by swift currents, it's not always possible to dive here, but I'd return a hundred times if I could

A giant barrel sponge, soft corals, sea fans, black coral, and a table coral on top of the bommie - a veritable smorgasbord of underwater beauties

translucent scooting gobies and scraggly fans are weighed down with crinoids clusters more colourful than fireworks explosions. Donald Duck shrimp waddle through high quality rubble at Kira Kira. Cuttlefish give us tentacled salutes that can only mean "take us to your leader." A clever octopus uses its built-in tentacled web parachute to catch a crab dinner and a banded seasnake methodically investigates coral crevices until a lightning fast lunge and victorious writhing signal the end of some hapless prey. I struggle to process it all.

Kingdom of the fishes

All week we've been overhearing dinnertime dialogue among the other guests concerning two spots that have been "very, very fishy busy" of late. With our trip winding down, Melissa and I have to see for ourselves before we're forced to return to civilization. Batu Dramai, a rock (batu) off the corner of Dramai Island at the southern end of Iris Strait, is a stellar site discovered by Triton Bay Divers, which gives us a whole new appreciation for

fish. We drop into a choreographed chaos of surgeonfish, rabbitfish, bumphead parrotfish, and the uber ubiquitous fusiliers. Schools swim overtop and through each another. Hundreds of pinjalo snapper—silver one moment, brick red the next—thread between the seething, scaled biomasses. Predatory bluefin jacks harry the perimeter picking off anchovies, while three-foot (1m)-long brutish giant trevallies suck up larger prey. If you can pry your eyes away from the spectacle to actually look downward, you'll be treated to a terraced garden of table corals festooned with cotton-candy tufts of soft corals around which sweetlips, angels, and groupers gather to be cleaned. Wobbeong sharks have also been known to lurk hereabouts under the ledges. Open to the elements and regularly swept by swift currents, it's not always possible to dive here, but I'd return a hundred times in a row if I could.

Or maybe fifty times, saving half for nearby Christmas Rock. Lisa takes us on a whirlwind tour starting at the islet's northeastern corner, in the lee of the building

current. We compose ourselves for a few moments in the calm, then begin to drift reef left against the flow of traffic. A never-ending parade of goatfish and golden snappers stream past us along a slope overgrown with black corals wreathed in clouds of glassfish. Picture making is easy enough at first, but steadily ramps up in difficulty as waterflow and fish freneticism increase. Anthias fly past us, or—more accurately—we past them. Boulders smothered with a kaleidoscope of soft corals whiz by. Then baitfish, then more snappers, two true stonefish, five species of angelfish, and a family of humbugs hovering above their plate coral home. Surely all the world's fishes must be here, so completely are we enveloped and pulled a tornado of life. The reef has become a pleasing blur, an abstract tableau of messy perfection. Reaching terminal velocity, a strange euphoria grips me. This is living, giving oneself over to the breathing, churning sea. To be in Ocean's very cauldron of creation, wild and adrift in the Kingdom of the Fishes. []

Jungle-covered islets and secluded beaches in Iris Strait, West Papua. Be one of the chosen few to visit this quiet corner of a diver's paradise