Where in the World is Fak Fak?

The word's out: Indonesia's newest hotspot, Triton Bay features walking sharks, soft corals as large as trees, and world-record fish diversity that'll have you coming back for more

By **Burt Jones** and **Maurine Shimlock**

WHERE WERE YOU when you heard the news that marine scientists had found a "walking shark"? Burt and I were in the departure lounge of a remote Indonesian airport sharing a beer and snacking on garlic-infused cashews with Dr. Gerald Allen, an old friend and one of the world's leading ichthyologists.

It was a serendipitous meeting. Gerry was travelling back to Australia, and we were on our way to Bali. But that conversation sent us on an expedition not only to photograph the shark, but also to document the richest reefs yet encountered on our planet.

Gerry directed us to Triton Bay, about 250 km south of Fak Fak on Papua's Bird's Head Peninsula. Along with Dr. Mark Erdmann, Gerry had just surveyed the unexplored reefs of the southern Fak Fak Regency. Their results stunned the world: 52 new species of marine life, including 24 fish species seen by scientists for the first time. On one dive midway between Fak Fak and Triton Bay, Gerry broke his world record for the most fish species recorded on a single site with 330 species.

"This place is a species factory," Gerry said. "It's the marine world's newest hotspot. You two should get out there and photograph it before word gets out." The scientific community's latest hotspot – an area of maximum species diversity, endemism and abundance – often means a new destination for adventurous divers. Armed with Mark and Gerry's GPS coordinates, we set out to explore Fak Fak's undersea wilderness.

SOFT CORALS AS BIG AS TREES

South of Fak Fak, the Papuan coastline undulates, forming a series of channels, inlets and bays. By the time the *Adventure Komodo* reached Triton Bay we'd dived several extraordinary sites shadowed by 1000m-tall cliffs whose peaks disappeared into a low-hanging mist. Nothing prepared us for the seascape we discovered in Selat Iris, east of the mouth of Triton Bay.

Ten metres below the cobalt-mirrored surface, I was surrounded by clouds of silversides and at least four different species of fusiliers. The tide was falling, accompanied by a strong current that pulled the bay's murky water out to sea. Still, I wanted to be in the thick if it, even on the outgoing tide.

above: The west coast of West Papua, including places like Fak Fak and Triton Bay, looks like a land lost in time

opposite page from top: A lone diver hovers over a giant stand of hard corals swarmed by glassy sweepers; fields of tubastrea corals bloom as day turns to night in West Papua's Triton Bay

Within minutes we spotted a red-blotched harlequin shrimp feeding on a red sea star marked with blue spots. The find of the night however was the walking epaulette shark.

Beneath me, Burt photographed a forest of crimson soft coral colonies as tall as rose bushes. Soft coral rules in Triton Bay! We circled our hands around the base of largest colonies; they must have measured at least 40 cm in diameter. At 15m the soft corals gave way to fields of feeding orange tubastrea. As shoals of fish charged past, it seemed as if we were submerged in the last vestige of primeval sea.

Later, under a night sky filled with a full moon so bright it blotted out the stars, we dived beneath a limestone outcrop topped by a lone pandanus tree. Within minutes we spotted a red-blotched harlequin shrimp feeding on a red sea star marked with blue spots. The find of the night however was the walking epaulette shark. Its slender, spotted body blended in so well with the substrate that we didn't even notice the small shark until it propelled itself forward on paddle-shaped pectoral fins and moved slowly away from our beams of light.

BOUND FOR PROTECTION

In the morning we weighed anchor and motored north. Here and there we passed isolated fishing camps where outriggers dropped their blue plastic sails and rested on gaudy cream-coloured beaches.

Changing sea levels and active plate tectonics shaped these islands, bays and reefs. The evolution of species endemic to Papua began over 10 million years ago when the islands we explored were steppingstones across the Melanesian Arc of the Pacific Plate – Indonesia's Ring of Fire. It was this newly formed chain of solid substrate that acted like a sieve and strained incipient life from shifting oceanic currents. When maturing marine larvae swept through, they were caught and deposited within this relatively compact island aggregation.

Languid dolphins led us from one bay to the next, but once we were underwater everything happened at a delirious pace. We worked our way around a series of boulders, one covered in diminutive orange soft corals and sweetlips, the next by waves of anthias and damselfish so large it was almost as if they were hopped up on steroids.

The diving here was as exciting as our 1992 exploratory trip with Gerry around southern Komodo's Horseshoe Bay: The abundance of tunicates, holothurians, and encrusting sponges was reminiscent of those now famous reefs where nutrients borne by cool, turbid water nourish copious species of sessile animals.

Beneath a shelf, tucked away from the current, three lionfish circled through a cloud of sweepers. One was the newest species in the genus Pterois. Found in murky water, it resembles the common lionfish except for the fleshy "flags" flying from the ends of its dorsal spines, which are narrower and lack the distinct banding of the volitans lionfish. The new lionfish will be called *P. steeni* after Gerry Allen's dive buddy and marine life photographer extraordinaire, Roger Steene.

After the dive, *Adventure Komodo* weighed anchor and began the long run back to Sorong. No one wanted to leave, but we knew we had stuck a huge gold star over what was once a blank spot on most divers' maps. During the crossing, the conversation naturally turned to conservation efforts to protect this area.

from top: Rare finds like this red-blotched harlequin shrimp (*H. picta*) aren't normal for east Indonesian waters; a purple-eyed goby (*Bryaninops natans*); a male filamented flasher wrasse (*Paracheilinus filamentosus*) shows off his colourful side

opposite page from top: A pair of sargassum frogfish (*Histrio histrio*) seek refuge in a tangle of floating sargassum; an undescribed epaulette shark "walking" across the sea bed

Five metres below, an intricate web of hard coral covered a seamount begging to be explored. I plunged in and immediately noticed a tiny aberration on a crimson sea fan.

above: Yet another undescribed species found in Fak Fak's prolific waters, this tiny pygmy seahorse mimics the red and white soft coral on which it resides

opposite page: Bushes of soft corals and enormous sea fans compete for space on a Fak Fak wall

Mark told us that Conservation International has delineated an extensive 180,000 sq km network of reefs, islands, and shoreline including Raja Ampat, Cenderawasih Bay, and the Triton/Fak Fak region, as the "Bird's Head Seascape." Combined with Raja Ampat, the area south of Fak Fak to Etna Bay has "the highest coral reef biodiversity yet recorded for an area its size anywhere in the world." Currently a little over 10 percent of the Bird's Head Seascape is protected, but Mark believes "the establishment of a multiple-use network of ecologically connected and resilient marine protected areas" is paramount.

A NEW FIND

Even after multiple trips, Gerry's enthusiasm for Fak Fak remains boundless. "Last January I discovered another new fish species bringing me up to 25 for this region. Usually I'm pleased with one or two. This place has more species per kilometre than anywhere on the planet."

As the ship motored through the night, we looked forward to exploring one last island group. At dawn the *Adventure Komodo* arrived in Pisang, about 100 km east of Fak Fak. A pale sun tinted the sky, illuminating a half dozen deserted beaches in need of a picnic. Male hornbills left their nests to hunt, their broad wings reverberating through the cool morning air like muted helicopters. In the wheelhouse, divemaster Larry Smith and Burt slurped *mee kuah* noodles laced with incendiary sambal, and discussed which section of reef to target.

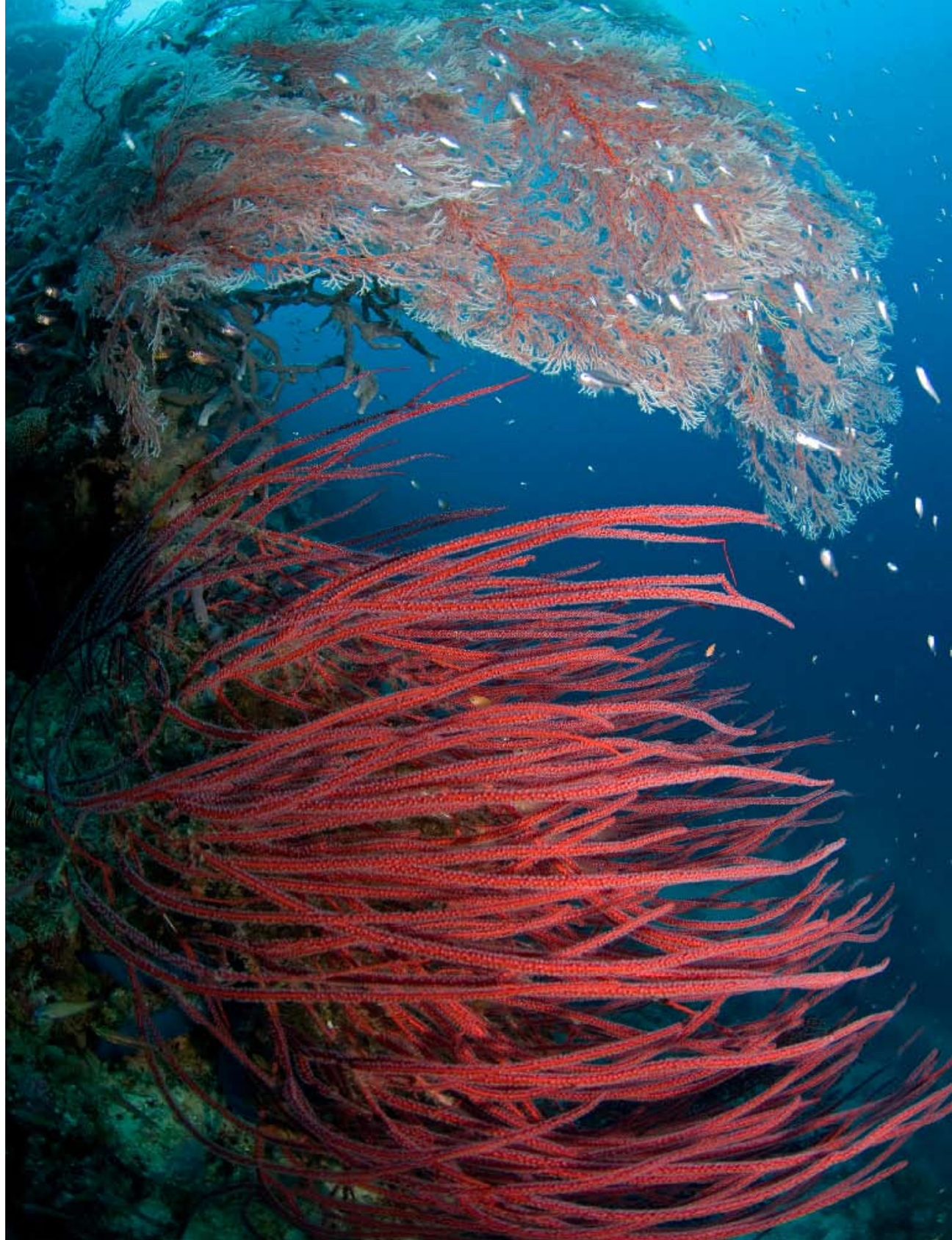
On our way to a point a few hundred metres from the boat, the angle of the sun revealed a dome of shallow corals. We stopped, put our faces in the water and changed the plan. Five metres below, an intricate web of hard coral covered a seamount begging to be explored. I plunged in and immediately noticed a tiny aberration on a crimson sea fan. If the fan had been feeding, fluffy polyps fully extended, I never would've seen the unusual pygmy seahorse wound around one of its branches.

We've been photographing pygmies for over a decade, but we'd never seen one with a wispy body like *Hippocampus denise* but which was covered with contrasting bumps like *H. bargibanti*. According to Gerry, our find is probably a new species. He too, had observed and photographed the seahorse in Raja Ampat, and is only waiting on the "science" before it can officially be called new.

We spent so much time with the pygmy that even breathing nitrox we had to surface before we fully explored this new site. Tender drivers Ali and Made, who normally idled the dinghies close to our bubbles, were 100m away. As soon as they heard our signal, they hauled in a bucket and zipped toward us.

Just as he cut the outboard, Ali tipped the bucket and showed us a wad of tan and gold sargassum entangling two sargassum frogfish. I said a private thank you to the gods of digital photography, because we had ample space remaining on our card and didn't have to return to *Adventure Komodo* to "change film."

Later, Made dropped us above the dome so we could cruise the seamount's perimeter. A mild current hit the north wall where, at 25m, male flasher wrasses displayed over a tangled mass of sea whips. Burt signalled and pointed to a moving patch of white returning and disappearing at the edge of my vision. It was a circling manta ray, its belly a flash of white. The manta approached the dome and passed so close I almost touched it. But I held back, observing as the manta somersaulted before disappearing into the indigo depths. It was our last gift from this extraordinary sea. SD



above: The underwater reefs of Triton Bay and Fak Fak are a riot of patterns and colours. Glassy sweepers form a beautiful sweeping motion around a bomm ie covered in crinoids, hard and soft corals, and sponges

INDONESIA NAVIGATOR

PACK YOUR BAGS: Make your way to Sorong, West Papua, via Manado, Ambon, or Makassar. Live-aboards use this port town as a pick-up and drop off spot, or have guests fly south to Fak Fak. Itineraries can be customised to include Triton Bay or the other fabulous areas around the Bird's Head Peninsula.

ENTRY/VISA REQUIREMENTS: Citizens of Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong, Philippines, Brunei, and a handful of other countries can enter Indonesia without a visa. Most other foreign nationals must purchase a 7- (US$10) or 30-day (US$25), non-extendable visa.

BEST TIME TO DIVE: Year-round

CURRENCY: Indonesian Rupiah (Rp). US$1 = Rp 9,100.

DIVE WITH: Diving 4 Images (**diving4images.com**), Grand Komodo (**komodoalordive.com**), Kararu Dive Voyages (**kararu.com**), SMY *Ondina* (**thebestdivingintheworld.com**), Papua Diving (**papua-diving.com**), *Pindito* (**pinditodiving.com**), MSY *Seahorse* (**indocruises.com**), *Seven Seas* (**thesevenseas.net**)