IN INDONESIA’S TRITON BAY the most impressive dive sites are located around karstic rocks in the Iris Strait, a passage between Aitutau Island and the mainland of West Papua with its towering mountains.

In this funnel-shaped passage divers are always exposed to strong currents, but on the other hand the sites are often quite sheltered from wind and waves. The calm sea surface may in addition be flattened by the currents, but the impression is misleading, because...
beneath the surface tremendous action takes place!

Dedicate coral reefs are nourished by the currents. What would normally be sparsely populated surf zones are full of life. Every nook is covered with marine life of all colours and shapes, competing for nutrients, space and light. Gigantic schools of anchovies and fusiliers stream over extensive gardens of rainbow-coloured soft corals and black-coral bushes with white polyps. These clouds of fish are under permanent pressure from hunting jack, constantly shifting and blocking the ambient light. This frenetic behaviour seems to be infectious. Groupers, normally shy in the presence of divers, move around in midwater and lurk on top of the black-coral bushes in the hope of catching some fish.

This close to the mainland, the seawater is also affected by nutrient-rich river water descending from the mountains. This leads to reduced visibility and a shift through various cyan colour nuances from a bluish- to greenish-coloured sea.

MEANWHILE, STRONG upwellings channel more nutrient-rich but cooler and clearer water into the strait. Strong seasonal variations in water temperature help to relieve the corals from stress and reduce the chances of them bleaching.

It’s this dynamic combination of the clear upwellings and murky river-run off that creates so many possibilities for underwater photography. Underwater lighting moods cover the spectrum, from subtle, low-contrast pastel colours in the murky in satuated, full colours where the water is clearer. When the gloomier water so frowned upon by some divers combines with sunlight, the rich colours and shapes can create an almost-psychedelic impression, akin to diving into some mythical wonderland.

Those black-coral gardens with the white polyps, and enormous schools of fish, provide Triton Bay’s signature impression, reminding me of the first white frost of a European winter but with swarms of fish rather than birds flying over the snowy forest.

These conditions and the exhilarant underwater life offer a challenge to wide-angle photographurs, but one worth taking up. Usually one would concentrate on a single subject isolated from the background, simplifying the message but losing information in the process.

But in this environment one has to try to transform the infinite chaos, which at first sight looks quite distracting, into a pleasant picture.

This page, clockwise from top:

- Bait fish overgrown with soft and orange tube corals. "Phidoloporus jurubita" is a small, unspotted, batfish that is found throughout the Indo-Paciﬁc.
- A rare sighting in the tropics, but not in Triton Bay. When the silverside activity is at its peak, local fishermen anchor in the Iris Strait with their bogies or fishing platforms, lowering the lifting nets at night to attract the little fish.
- Thew rasse were quite oblivious to the taking of the picture. For the endem ic, endemic "Nursalim flasher wrasse (Paracheilinus nursalim)", showing off its flamboyant courtship behaviour.
- This in turn attracts bigger predators such as whale sharks. The bugs are often positioned inside small passages, and it’s easy enough to visit the fishermen and get attractive images of whale sharks in and out of the water.

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Marine biodiversity in Triton Bay is second to none, and almost all the rare and elusive critters found in other parts of Indonesia can be seen there. The experienced eyes of the dive-guides, who often trained in Lembeh Strait, are well able to spot these cryptic creatures.

During my stay with Triton Bay Divers, we were also able to see recently discovered invertebrates, such as the hairy shrimp and green shrimp.

One highlight occurs at a dive site on the house-reef. The daily late-afternoon show is presented by the endemic "Nuralimus flasher wrasse (Parcheolimus nuralimus)", showing off its flamboyant courtship behaviour.

In trying to attract female attention, the males perform “flashes” with their dorsal and anal fins, giving the impression of bodies glowing in vivid colours.

These flashes last only for a split-second during quick bursts of acceleration to various males harass a female, which make it incredibly hard to photograph this dramatic courtship behaviour.

ONE AFTERNOON, the guide spotted within the courting clouds of male and female flasher wrasse a blue-stingelled octopus. The wasp were quite oblivious to its presence, so focused where they were. It was quite funny to see, and from an underwater photography perspective, certainly a case of species overload!

Triton Bay Divers, the only resort in this remote area, is a partnership between founders Leeza English (from England) and Jimmy Thai and the local Kamasuka family, which owns much of the land around Aiduma island.

The local connection allows guests to dive throughout the area, which is not
Fly to Jakarta and on with Lion Air/Batik Air/Wings Group or Garuda Indonesia to Kaimana (KNG) airport. Some flights transit in Ambon, others in Sorong. Garuda allows extra weight for dive gear.

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION

Triton Bay Divers, tritonbaydivers.com

WHEN TO GO:
Season mid-September to mid-June. The beginning and end are best for critter-divers as visibility falls and waters get cooler. Calm, warm waters from mid-November to late April.

HEALTH:
Nearest chambers in Ambon or Waisai in Raja Ampat.

MONET: Indonesian rupiah. The resort does not have credit-card facilities but accepts euros or dollars.

PRICES:
A seven-night full board, 15-boat-dive package (two sharing) costs from £175 per person. Return flights London-Jakarta from £460-500. Return flights Jakarta-KNG from £280.

VISITOR INFORMATION: Indonesia.travel

FOR PHOTOGRAPHERS there is a table for camera maintenance and sockets for charging batteries in the bungalows. The outdoor bathroom has a hot-water shower – fresh water comes from a spring on the hill.

A chef from Manado spoiled us with plentiful, freshly prepared meals, taking into account everyone’s preferences. The fish in particular was cooked to perfection, and worthy of mention is a delicious liquid chocolate cake, the sort of cuisine I would never have expected in such a remote area.

The combination of extraordinary diving and warm hospitality makes this location well worth a long journey. My thanks to Subal housings (subal.com) for supporting this photo-project.

FACTFILE

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