



Triton Bay in West Papua is one of those places spoken of with awe by whale-shark divers, but for **ALAN POWDERHAM** it's also memorable for his own discovery of a much smaller but also cherished fish

# The final frontier?

**O**N OUR GLOBALLY CONNECTED planet, Triton Bay stands out as remote, idyllic and relatively untouched. It is breathtakingly beautiful above and below the surface.

In 2008, the Kaimana Regency declared a Marine Protected Area of 2300sq miles around the waters of Kaimana and Triton Bay. Described as “the next frontier of Indonesian diving” and the “last best place”, this location in the south of West Papua offers something for everyone – which is why it's becoming increasingly well-known.

I have dived Triton Bay twice now, both times from the *Amira* liveboard, and both times involving close and extended encounters with whale sharks. Even when you think you appreciate how huge and majestic these creatures are, the thrill of meeting them under water never dissipates.

The whale sharks in Triton Bay, like the similar well-known aggregations in Cenderawasih Bay in the north of West Papua, are attracted to fishing platforms known as *bagans*.

These impressive floating structures

are operated overnight by local fishermen to catch baitfish, known locally as *ikan puri*, or white fish. The catches are stored in huge nets suspended from the *bagans* to keep them as fresh as possible before they go market, and the captive *ikan puri* prove irresistible to the whale sharks, which rise to suck on the nets and feast.

These feeding forays are encouraged by the fishermen, because they consider such visitations as good omens that will bring more luck to their fishing. And, of course, the arrangement now provides



Above: A whale shark glides up from the depths.

Pictured and below: Whale shark feasts on the baitfish.



an additional source of income for the fishermen in fees from visiting groups of divers.

A code of conduct dictates that these encounters should involve snorkels rather than scuba equipment, at least for significantly large groups. Touching the whale sharks is also prohibited.

On my first visit in 2014 there were no other dive-operators around and so, with the rest of my group, I was able to enjoy snorkelling among the whale sharks for several hours.

This is an involving experience that's intense, yet at the same time so peaceful that time seems to stop.

The whale sharks glide up from the depths from all directions to feast. A sense of calm and gentleness pervades,

even while they are feeding. Whale sharks, unlike other species of shark, do not do "frenzy".

**THE CONNECTION ONE FEELS** is enhanced by the obvious curiosity the whale sharks have about humans. As they pass they peer directly at us.

Even in such close proximity, these powerful fish move with slow deliberation and seem able to avoid any physical contact with effortless ease.

The experience provides us with an other-worldly sensation – the sense of being a fleeting part of the whale shark's world.

It's also engaging to see other large piscivores enjoying some of the spoils of the baitfish feast. Diving towards my

depth-limits while snorkelling, I have watched dolphins and even a sailfish grabbing an opportunist meal from the scraps that float down from the *bagan* nets.

However, these sharers in the bounty maintain a healthy distance from the *bagans*, instinctively aware that they would not be treated with the same generosity that the fishermen extend to the whale sharks.

The whale sharks encountered on my first trip were young males up to around 9m long, and while a 9m fish is an awe-inspiring sight, this is half the length that whale sharks can reach.

Those found in Triton Bay are invariably juvenile to young adult males, ranging from 3-9m.

The same gender and size distribution has been noted in Cenderawasih Bay and, in fact, in most aggregations studied around the world.

Females of any size, or indeed any large adults, are rarely seen by divers, and the reason for this remains a mystery.

**THIS YEAR'S VISIT TO TRITON BAY** provided one particularly thrilling encounter with a young male whale shark that took on a deeper dimension, because this time I was able to use a rebreather. Full immersion!

While most of my group peered down from the surface, I quietly descended and, neutrally buoyant, awaited the arrival of the whale shark. And arrive it did, although not in quite the way

Below: Whale shark at a *bagan*.





I had been expecting.

It had clearly not read the “no-touching” code of conduct, and my first awareness of its arrival was through a firm but very gentle nudge in my back.

I turned to find myself eye to eye with this curious leviathan. It was in perfect condition, with none of the scarring or calcification typical of more mature individuals, and host to only one very small remora.

This juvenile male calmly conveyed a very active but innocent fascination – it seemed far more interested in me than in the ready meal of baitfish available at the surface.

Visibility was relatively low at around 5m, and the 6m shark would slowly glide from view, only to return and surprise me from another unexpected direction.

These antics greatly amused the snorkellers above, and there was a sense that it also amused the shark to stage these unpredictable arrivals.

This sense of engagement was even more strongly conveyed by the comments of the other guests, who proclaimed that the whale shark had clearly “fallen in love” with me. If so, the feeling was mutual.

However wonderful the

**Above:** *Hippocampus pontoi*, one of the many species of pygmy seahorse found in Triton Bay.

**Above right:** First recorded *Rhinopias* in Triton Bay?



**Above:** Prehistoric rock art at Kaimana.

**Below:** Squid at night.

whale-shark encounters, Triton Bay has much more to offer the visiting diver. It has become recognised as a hotspot of marine biodiversity even in a region already known for its wide variety of species – and particularly striking are the

number of big reef fish such as grouper, sweetlips and snapper, and the big shoals of surgeonfish and fusiliers.

New discoveries are constantly being made, and I was lucky enough to be part of one of these on a

night-dive. I spotted a *Rhinopias frondosa* (or weedy scorpionfish), so-called because of its rhinoceros-like profile.

At first Triton Bay Divers manager Jimmy Thai was incredulous, putting my claim down to a quirky English sense of humour.

Jimmy’s dive-guides had been on a mission to find this elusive fish, one of these holy grails of underwater photography [though not so elusive in certain other parts of Indonesia – see the feature on Alor]. For a visiting diver to encounter one on his first night-dive of the trip seemed beyond belief.

Jimmy’s doubts dispersed when I showed him the original photos on my camera. To the best of his knowledge this was the first sighting of a *Rhinopias* in Triton Bay.

But for me, the wonders on that night-dive did not cease with that dramatic discovery. Apart from Spanish dancers and other nocturnal exotica, the dive concluded with one of my favourite encounters – a free-swimming squid.

At night these display a full rainbow palette of vibrant yet subtly changing colours that mesmerise in a glorious light show. Triton Bay has it all. 



## FACTFILE

**GETTING THERE** ▶ Fly via Jakarta and Ambon to Kaimana, West Papua. Domestic routes are serviced by Lion-Air.

**DIVING & ACCOMMODATION** ▶ *Amira*, [www.amira-indonesia.com](http://www.amira-indonesia.com). For land-based holidays there is only one dive-resort, Triton Bay Divers, [www.tritonbaydivers.com](http://www.tritonbaydivers.com)

**WHEN TO GO** ▶ The region has two main seasons and it is best to visit during the dryer months from September to early June.

**CURRENCY** ▶ Indonesian rupiah.

**PRICES** ▶ Return flights from the UK around £1200. A 13-night trip to Triton Bay and East Banda on the *Amira* next year would cost from 5590 Swiss Francs (£4300). Seven nights’ full-board stay at Triton Bay Divers with a 10-dive package from 1775 euros pp (two sharing).

**VISITOR INFORMATION** ▶ [www.indonesia.travel/en](http://www.indonesia.travel/en)