

Exploring Uncharted FakFak

With Tim Rock and Miyuki Konda

The last best place. Natural Wonder. Heart of Diversity. The new Mecca for divers. So many superlatives have been heaped upon Indonesia's Raja Ampat region that I was a bit skeptical. But when The Seahorse's cruise director Alberto Reija called me and told me about an exploratory cruise to Triton Bay and other Raja regions I told him I was in. I had to see this place for myself. And you know what? It's really good diving. It is all that it's cracked up to be. It's a pretty special place.

But what was even more special was the area we explored at the start of the trip. This was Triton Bay and FakFak. And it's simply amazing. Reefs in this oddly named "coral triangle" include tracts off the coasts of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and East Timor. They are the ocean's more diverse and are home to roughly 600 species of reef-building coral.

I was happy to get there. It took a couple of days to do it. Triton Bay has yet to be dived regularly by recreational divers. There are some local planes that fly into Kaimana and FakFak but nothing on the order of those that service places like Manado. They're just local flights in rather small planes. But the place has so much promise that you put up with a few overnights in Bali and Balikpapan and a few more stops along the way.

This is where scientists keep on breaking the record of diversity and new species. This Bird's Head region in Western Papua, which is part of Indonesia, may be the most biologically diverse in all the oceans according to scientists from

Conservation International. One survey revealed 20 corals, 24 fish and eight mantis shrimp believed to be new to science and they find more every time they go. Even lowly sport divers come up with new or very odd critters on a typical trip.

The most famous may be the odd epaulette shark that has adapted to the bottom. It's called a "walking" sharks. There are also drab wrasse that make colorful male courting displays. This is commonly called a flasher wrasse. MSY Seahorse is the first dive live aboard to start operating FakFak route in 2006. Since then the crew has been discovering new dive sites on every voyage in the FakFak-Triton Bay area.

So we embarked one evening for the hidden coves and scenic backdrops that would be the ship's home ports for the next two weeks. The Seahorse is a roomy ship that was built under watchful eyes. Special attention was paid to the shape of the bow and keel weight and other nautical aspects. So even though it looks like a traditional phinisi, it is much more stable and knifes through the seas more like a modern yacht. The ship has a cruising speed of 9-12 knots to ensure swift travel. But the natural wood still creaks a bit and gives it a warm and rustic

(Top) The Seahorse rests in the straits at Triton Bay. Nearby are ancient cave paintings.

(Right) Corals, crinoids and a gazillion fusiliers punctuate the dive at David's Rock in the Iris Strait. (Tokina 10-17, Nikon D200, Aquatica Housing and Ikelite DS125 Strobes)





The Windows at Misool offers a great spot for the use of creative lighting. (Tokina 10-17, Nikon D200, Aquaitica Housing and Ikelite DS125 Strobes)

feel. It made a superb dive platform for this kind of adventure.

The fish and soft corals just in the shallows around Saruenus Island were abundant. Most of the islands are limestone uplifts and outcrops. Even in the very shallow water only 3 feet deep, brilliant soft corals abound. They were visible from the dive boat as we entered the water. The beauty of a great deal of the diving here is that many of these bays and passes aren't deep. 60 feet was about as deep as we went on many dives and a lot were in the 20-40 foot area.

The next day we moved to Aiduma Island. As we sat at anchor sipping coffee and preparing for the first dive of the day, a tiger shark was seen cruising near the surface right by the ship. Not far off the ship's bow an interesting looking rock island jutted from the sea. We decided to explore it and it was truly awesome. Huge black coral forests

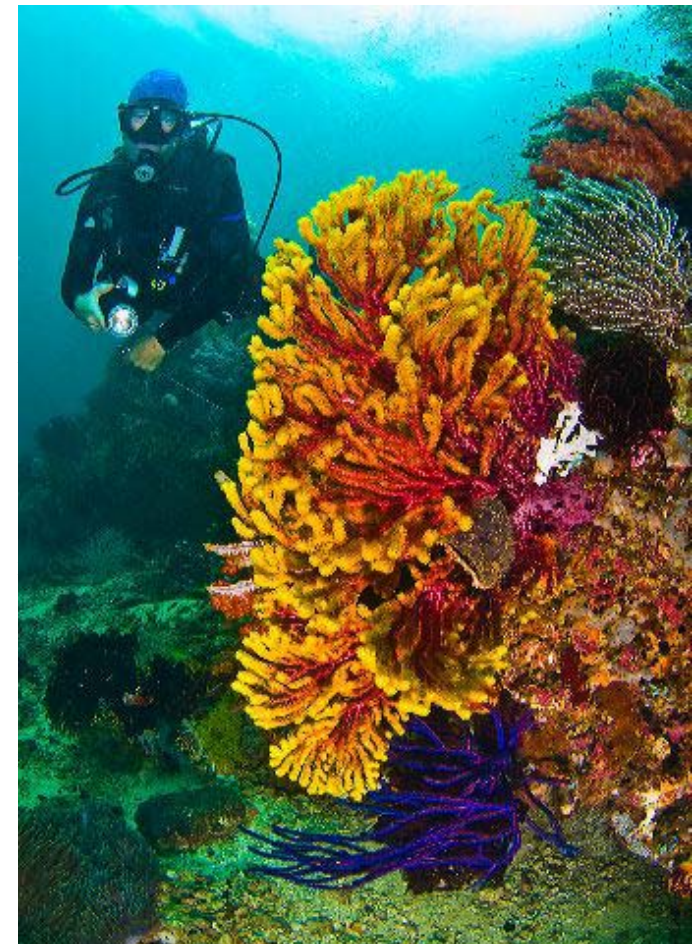


Coral reef runs right up to the mangroves at Blue Water Mangrove. (Tokina 10-17, Nikon D200, Aquaitica Housing and Ikelite DS125 Strobes) (Top right) Moving through the islands near Barunusu. (Sigma 10-20, Nikon D200 at 1/15 shutter speed)

(Right) A brilliant yellow fan opens its polyps to feed at David's Rock. (Tokina 10-17, Nikon D200, Aquaitica Housing and Ikelite DS125 Strobes)

harboring shoals of sweepers and hungry lionfish covered some of the bottom. Other boulders had big stands soft corals, sea fans and walls of tubastrea corals. The brilliant reds of the soft corals and the hot salmon of the tube corals gave the place a kaleidoscopic effect. Currents brought out the fish. It was a great dive. When I told the crew I always wanted a dive site, the promptly named it Tim's Rock. Sweet. We went back for more and found sweetlips, big jellies and lots more. What a great surprise.

There appears to be a lot of discoveries like this place just waiting to be found. Bird's Head Peninsula along the western tip is the focus of a lot





The back of a sea cucumber carries this commensal shrimp at Little Komodo in Triton Bay. (Sigma Macro 50mm, Nikon D200, Aquaitica Housing and Ikelite DS125 Strobes)



A sea snake heads out of the arch at Triton Bay. Tokina 10-17, Nikon D200, Aquaitica Housing and Ikelite DS125 Strobes

boulders. Looking like something out of Sesame Street, these sharks were ubiquitous under the many ledges in the bays. Again shoals of fusiliers roamed the reefs and anthias played in the currents. Sea snakes were also plentiful here.

At Momon there's one of the most awe-inspiring natural sites anyone could wish for. A big river runs down through the cloud-covered forest. This are looks like Thailand's Phi-Phi or Palau's Rock Islands on

steroids. Everything is big, full and natural. This river falls directly into the sea making a fantastic waterfall right at the ocean's edge. Snorkelers can actually push through it and look back out to sea from behind the falls. Its cool and refreshing and a sensory overload experience. One of the crew hiked up the river a bit and saw a rare tree kangaroo in the jungle as well.

The instances of rarely seen fish and the abundance of more common fish life is one of the main attractions.

Outstanding corals, especially the multi-hued and oversized soft corals, are also a big draw for the sport diver. Current fed channels and inner passes keep the coral blooming and growing at a spectacular rate. Some soft corals grow just below the surface and attach to everything from mangrove roots to rock islands.

Triton Bay also offers an ancient history that can be seen in ancient cave paintings. These uplifted drawings sit in a board channel.

Exposed stalactites and stalagmites give way to odd drawings. At the mouth of this channel we spotted a resident pod of pilot whales.

As we headed back toward a bit more of civilization, famed Misool made the macro buffs happy. On each dive we regularly found critters. Pygmy seahorses came in more than one species, nudibranchs, devil scorpionfish, wonderpuss, frogfish, leaf fish, ornate ghost pipefish and some rarities including



Snorkeler Miyuki Konda glides past the Momon falls on snorkel. (Tokina 10-17, Nikon D200, Aquatica Housing and Ikelite DS125 Strobes)

The future for this odd and new region is bright as it has caught the attention of environmentalists. Many conservation partners are now working with the Indonesian government to protect the special areas of the Bird's Head peninsula and Raja Ampat. It is the goal to see the area managed in a sustainable way. With inevitable development and increased fisheries, fishing using explosives and cyanide will surface as it has in other parts of Indo, and will have a negative impact.

We anchored in a secluded bay. Islands fell into the ocean and dotted the seascape. Small, idyllic beaches with a handful of coconut palms were bathed in the warm glow of the sun. After two weeks of diving this rich new venue, we actually wanted more. Flying out the next day, we cruised high over the West Papuan Bird's Head. Its beauty and isolation will keep it special for quite a while as it slowly gains its popularity. Maybe the smitten authors are correct. It may be the last best place.

a sea fan pipefish were all snapped by eager photogs. Archerfish in the in Nampele's Blue Water Mangrove came in schools. We also found the very photogenic juvenile batfish. And floating along in perfect camouflage was a juvenile tripletail, a fish that comprises but a single species.

The diving here offers so much varied topography that there really was never a dull moment. We explored caves, caverns, swim-throughs, walls, current-fed points, islands, channels, passes, rock falls and lots more. We didn't dive any wrecks but I bet there's one or two of those as well.

Tim Rock
www.doubleblue.com

www.uwpmag.com

"It is always a joy to return. Hard to improve on perfection!"



Heather & Bud Sellick, USA, September 2007 (4th visit)



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