

Triton Bay

Lost in the Past

By Carlos Virgili

After a day's navigation in the Moluccas we reached what was formerly known as Irian Jaya and whose name, even today, is still unclear to the locals. Well anyway, in this part of the Indonesian Republic, Papua, or however you want to call it, on the most eastwardly corner of its vast territory, tucked away, is a small but priceless treasure called the Bay of Triton or, just for friends, Triton Bay.

Diving is relatively new to this area, just to give you an idea, since the beginning of this new century only a few cruises have ventured there due to its remoteness and the complexity of stocking up on provisions (in the town of Kaimana). It goes without saying that the Ondina, the King of all Indonesia, is one of the chosen few. Word has it that there is project to convert the area into a National Park, however, at least for the moment, a special permit is still required to be able to dive in the Bay.

On a typical day on 'Odina' everyone wakes up to the clang of the bell at 7am and the deck gradually fills up with divers from every corner of the world, far and beyond, not of course forgetting Spain. It goes

without saying that the Ondina is one of the few diving cruise vessels flying the Spanish flag.

The briefing takes place on the stern where the diving area is located, each diver has a basket for their things, their own shelf for storing torches or strobes, a towel with a number and a BCD with a tank mounted, for the whole trip, etc.

On this particular trip we didn't have the pleasure of the regular cruise director, the well-known Ricard Bux, but with a man named Celso and his charming partner and dive master, Mrs Whan (alias) Obi-Wan-Kenobi. What can I say about them? The truth is they are both very laid-back and their style differs greatly from ... how can

Carlos uses a Nikon D300 in a Subal housing and either dual Inons, a Nikon SB800 in a Sealux housing, Subtronic Nova or Sea & Sea YS 90 strobes.

Diver and coral 12mm lens, 1/80th @ F8, 200 ISO



I put it ... the ‘vigorously dynamic’ Ricard, and this doesn’t mean in any way less efficient. But you do get the impression that before coming on deck in the morning they have already had a session of yoga/tai-chi and Zen relaxation, such is their serenity and control. They literally glide along the deck.

Celso and Whan gives the briefing to the anxious divers. Lazily we all get dressed, while the local crew members (from various different parts of Indonesia, but above all from Sulawesi, where the ‘pinisi’ was built) start lowering the dive gear into the two dinghies. Like a gentleman, one descends the steps to sea-level (watch out if it’s choppy) and with a gracious hop you find yourself in the craft. If you don’t want to lug the bottle down yourself, you’ll find it waiting for you in the dinghy.

The cruise to the dive-site is usually short and the mother-boat either drifts or anchors nearby. On reaching the site, fins and masks on, we all fall backwards on the dive master’s cue. Once beneath the surface only one thing remains to be done: enjoy it like a hog wallowing in mud.

If you are an UW photographer it’s better to go with one of the expert guides on board (yes, yes I agree that the tendency is to flee like mad from any kind of group diving, but they

are the ones who will spot the pigmy seahorse hidden in that dull sea fan that you just passed by without seeing a blooming thing!). Take my advice; if Noldi is on board, he’s an absolute ace at finding whatever you ask him for. Don’t give him the Latin term as he’s not too up in this language, he’s more into Greek, say it in English or if not just show him a photograph from one of the identification books in the ship’s library and he will find it for you!.

When you are out of air (yes, I do know all about the 50 bars and all that stuff) we emerge to the surface where the boatman, who has been skilfully following our little bubbles, is waiting for us. Once dried off, it’s breakfast time. You can choose between either Continental or a traditional one. Breakfast, lunch and dinner are served in the lounge situated on the main deck or, weather permitting; you can eat around the large, glass table at the stern of the ship. In the lounge there is a flat screen TV and a DVD and the best thing of all is... they work!

Breakfast over, the photographers head towards the ship’s stern where the camera rinse tanks are stored. We take the equipment out of the water and place it on a table protected by rubber. Underneath there are shelves with little baskets to store more stuff and a towel for each ‘fanatic’. A great



The head of a ghost pipefish taken with a 105mm lens, 1/125th @ F32, 200 ISO

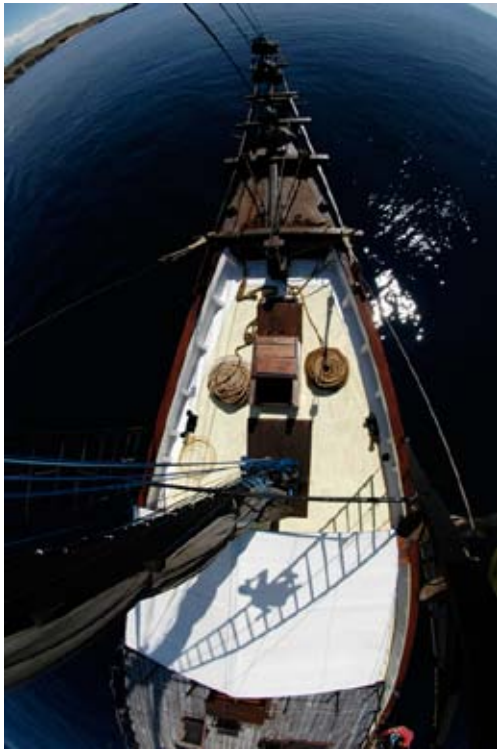
idea! Open up cameras, memory cards out, recharge flashes etc And then when you least expect it, the bell sounds again. Off we go, down again! Ugh, Neptune...my God! What stress!

There are on average three or four dives a day, plus a night dive if we’re not sailing and the maritime conditions are good. Not to mention the land trips which the cruise boss has planned for us and which I strongly recommend you do not miss. In Triton Bay, one afternoon



A small goby in some whip coral 105mm lens, 1/125th @ F25, 200 ISO

we sacrificed one of the dives and in the two dinghies made our way into the enormous and intricate bay. There are enormous islands scattered in the bay as a result of erosion and its worn seabed is totally covered with vegetation. On one of the islands you can even find hanging carnivorous plants. If you have seen pictures of some areas of Vietnam or Thailand, or one of the James Bond films, you will no doubt find certain similarities. In one of the multiple canals we came



*A small spider crab on whip coral. 60mm lens, 1/100th @ F45, ISO 200
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A small crab on soft coral at night. 105mm lens, 1/125th @ F32, 200 ISO

across a family of Papuans who make their living by cultivating Sargasso on board their canoe. Using sign language they explained to us how they did this by hanging cord from one island to another, most probably in the same way as their ancestors had done hundreds of years before. It was like getting into a time machine and going back to the year 1000.

Back to the underwater world and visibility is not generally good especially in comparison to the rest of Indonesia, due to the incredibly nutrient-rich water, but is, at worst,

like the Mediterranean on a normal day. The first thing that strikes you is the sheer amount of life in and around the reef. Never and I repeat, never in my life have I seen such a large quantity of fishes and creatures spread over such a vast area. (In some specific areas I have in fact found a similar range and quantity of biodiversity, but not over an extensive area). The seabed is generally carpeted with incrustive orange coral, whose open polyps are a magnificent spectacle.

The first dive is one of the best: Black Forest owes its name to the

black coral which truly resembles a forest on the slopes at this particular point of the dive-site. In all reality it should be called White Forest given that the polyps of the black coral in this area are really white; it is the skeleton which, once dried, gives it this colour. It's difficult to focus with a wide-angle lens, such is the myriad of crystal fish swarming in the zone that the auto-focus is driven mad. The water is about 25C and with a 3mm or Lycra suit with a fleece lining, is easily bearable. On this dive, good old Noldi found me pygmy seahorses of

two different types while I dedicated time to shooting all the strange little animals that came into range. Sea-snakes (the notorious *laticauda colubrina*), frogfish, nudibranchs which don't figure in any of my guidebooks, etc etc.

Another dive which just cannot be missed is White Falls, a true Paradise for macro shooting and the location of our night dive. On one single dive we found the following: a leopard shark, two kinds of seahorses, ghost pipefish, minute cypraea which live in the soft coral, dwarf cuttlefish,



14mm lens, 1/80th @ F8, ISO 200

thousands of nudibranchs or gobies of different species. It is not at all unusual to find more common fishes but in larger numbers and sizes than usual, like different species of sweetlips, Jacks, big groupers, rays or bat, butterfly or lion fish, and yes, enormous schools of Spanish (of course) fusiliers, swimming madly in all different directions.

It's also quite common to find sleepy Wobegong sharks not too far from the surface and with a bit of luck, on the night dives, the oddly strange walking shark; but in a

place of such biodiversity, don't be surprised if you hit on a new species without even knowing it, lucky diver!

There are about 20 different dives and most probably many more will come to light, it's just a question of time. But don't miss out on Larry's Heaven, Tanjung Aiduma or 7th Heaven for example. (Bear in mind that depending on the cruise and because these are such recent discoveries, they may have different names and that in the majority of diving guides they are not even mentioned).

It goes without saying that on a Spanish ship, something as traditional as the Siesta could not be overlooked. Great invention, yes siree! With the soft humming of the air conditioning you can dribble to your heart's content on your pillow as images slip through your mind, becoming more and more of a blur, of pygmy seahorses, nudibranchs in 3D, enormous sea fans swaying to the rhythm of the waves and some fishes which you still have not been able to find in the numerous marine life books which are in the lounge. Will they really be named after me?

After the soothing Siesta comes the last day-dive and then dinner. The real fanatics review their torches and flashlights for the night dive while a delicious aroma of spices comes lingering from the kitchen. When we get back after the dive, wrapped up in warm blankets which, I swear to God, are handed to you as soon as you step out of your wetsuit, we'll find out what the chef has prepared for us.

Night comes to an end with a good old lively chinwag at the stern or in the lounge, full of 'lies and exaggerations' typical of frogmen and with a video or photography session organised by Whan

(Photo pro).

One night while we were having dinner, we all ran to the bow alerted by one of the crew. (What on earth was causing such a rumpus?) Drawn by the lights of the ship an enormous snake, more than 3 metres long was slinking around the hull raising its head and part of its flank. Undoubtedly it was taking advantage of the fact that the light was attracting small marine creatures which would be its main course. What a monster! Luckily, we didn't come across it on one of our dives and more so, that it is not a known predator of divers - although it is believed to have a weak spot for tasty Spaniards!

Carlos Virgili
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No White Balance



Digital - No Filter
Manual WB



Magic Filter
Manual WB

Digital cameras have opened up new possibilities to underwater photographers. For available light photography manual white balance is an invaluable tool for restoring colours. But when you use it without a filter you are not making the most of the technique. You're doing all the hard work without reaping the full rewards.

These three photos are all taken of the same wreck in the Red Sea. The left hand image was taken on slide film, which rendered the scene completely blue. The middle image is taken with a digital SLR without a filter, using manual white balance. The white balance has brought out some of the colour of the wreck, but it has also sucked all the blue out of the water behind the wreck, making it almost grey. The right hand image is taken with the same digital camera and lens, but this time using an original Magic Filter. The filter attenuates blue light meaning that the colours of the wreck are brought out and it stands out from the background water, which is recorded as an accurate blue.

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