

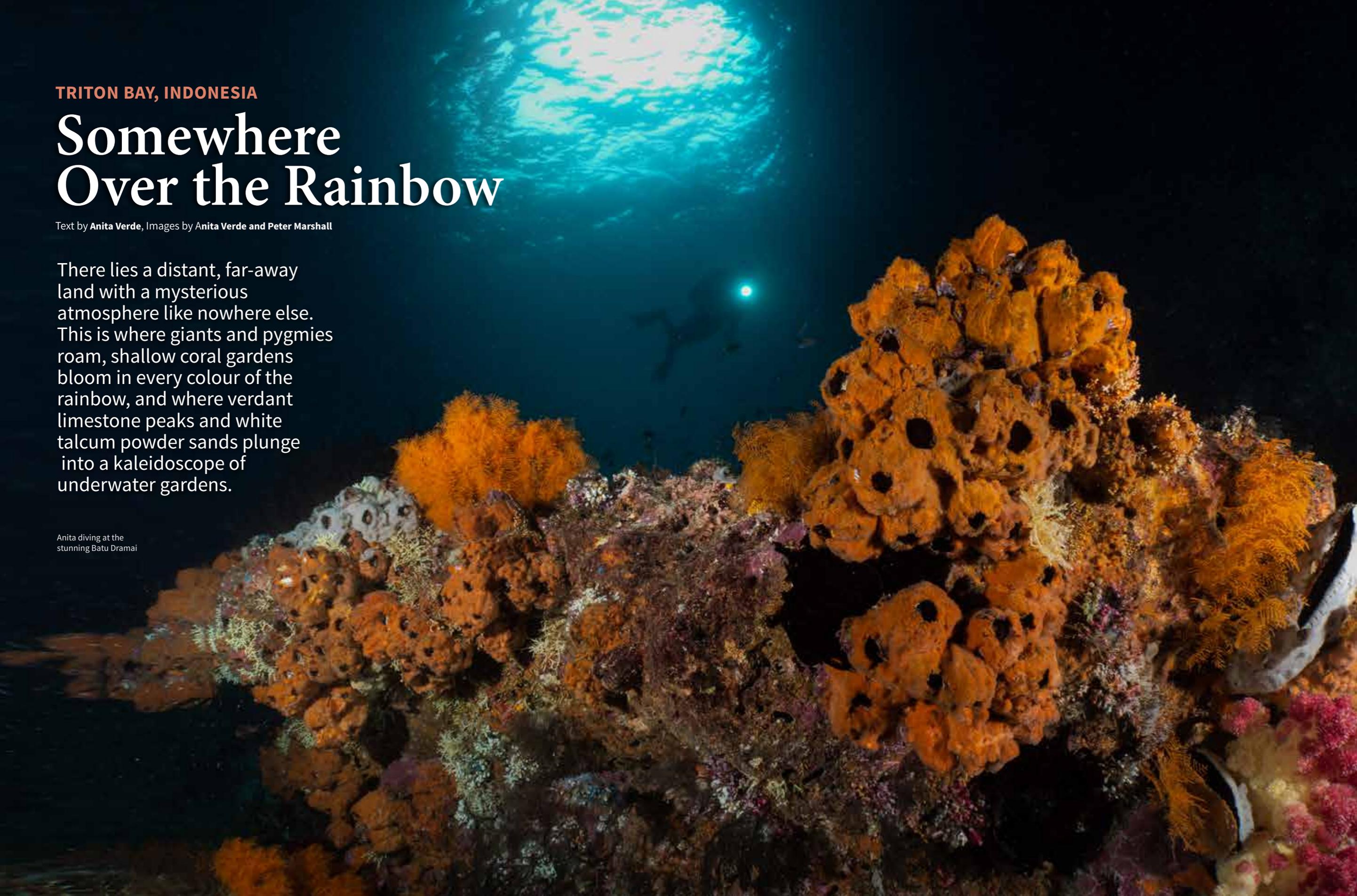
TRITON BAY, INDONESIA

Somewhere Over the Rainbow

Text by Anita Verde, Images by Anita Verde and Peter Marshall

There lies a distant, far-away land with a mysterious atmosphere like nowhere else. This is where giants and pygmies roam, shallow coral gardens bloom in every colour of the rainbow, and where verdant limestone peaks and white talcum powder sands plunge into a kaleidoscope of underwater gardens.

Anita diving at the stunning Batu Dramai



Global Epicentre Of Marine Biodiversity

This is Triton Bay, one of the three regions that make up the incredible Bird's Head Seascape in West Papua, the global epicentre of marine biodiversity. Part of the Kaimana Marine Protected Area that encompasses 6,000 square kilometres, less than 500 people venture each year to this undeniably distant and wondrous part of the world; and diving here instantly feels incomparable to anywhere else in the world.

The First Venture

It was only in 2006 when scientists first ventured beyond Raja Ampat into these wild and mysterious waters, and what they found did not disappoint. Forests of lavish soft corals harbouring clouds of schooling fishes, almost every species of pygmy seahorse, spotty giants in numbers, and peculiar, charismatic endemic fishes formed the seascape here.

“The beautiful *Tubastrea* corals extend their gorgeous sunflower-like polyps when the current is just perfect.”

Coral Eye Candy

The first thing you notice as you descend into the blue is the kaleidoscopic colours akin to a candy store. It is believed that there are more than 471 types of corals in this area, some of which can be found at dive sites like *Little Komodo*, *Pintu Arus*, *Batu Dramai*, and *Bo's Rainbow*. The beautiful *Tubastrea* corals extend their gorgeous sunflower-like polyps when the current is just perfect. At *Little Komodo*, you'll find masses of delicate black coral bushes covered in glassfish, providing shelter for barramundi cod and small schools of sweetlips.

Colours of the Pinjalo Snapper

On many lively dive sites, you'll be dwarfed by great schools of fusiliers, anthias, batfish, and their many friends. Although there are 959 species of coral fish in the area, the most photogenic would have to be the Pinjalo snapper. At Batu Dramai, the Pinjalo snappers swarm back and forth across the reef like bees. At times, their bodies express a deep red colour, but sometimes change to a light pink and even a delicate silver as they pass over different areas of the reef. These speedy colour changes are largely under the control of the fish's internal nervous system, and can even be linked to stress.



▲ Pinjalo snapper display their ever-changing hues of red, pink, and silver at Batu Dramai

◀ *Tubastrea* corals extend their gorgeous polyps at *Pintu Arus*

When to go

The best time for diving in Triton Bay is during the dry season from October to April, with favoured months in December and January.

Getting there

Triton Bay lies approximately 30 nautical miles or two hours by boat from the town of Kaimana in the Indonesian province of West Papua on the western part of the island of New Guinea. Kaimana Airport is serviced domestically from Sorong and Manokwari with ongoing connections to Jakarta.

How to dive Triton Bay

With very few liveaboards visiting the area, the best way to dive here is with the area's first and only dive resort - Triton Bay Divers. Triton Bay Divers caters to 12 divers in six eco-conscious beach-front bungalows and offers easy access to over 30 stunningly diverse dive sites. Visit: www.tritonbaydivers.com for more information.



▲ A yellow variation of *Hippocampus denise*

▼ A 'Santa Claus' variation of *Hippocampus denise*



All Hail the Pygmies

If you are a critter hunter, there is a reason you have come to Triton Bay. While you'll find many special tiny creatures here, few critters are more special here than the pygmy. You'll find almost every species of pygmy seahorse here. The dive sites at Triton Bay harbour many of the *Muricella* gorgonian sea fans, so it is not uncommon to find both pink and yellow colour variations of *Hippocampus bargibanti* – often up to five or sometimes more on a single fan!

Hippocampus denise is also a star here, and can be found in the very special "Santa Claus" red and white, pink, and yellow colour variations finding its home on many different genera of gorgonian corals. If you look closely at the hydroids and *Halimeda* algae, you will even find *Hippocampus pontohi* and *Hippocampus severnsi* and, if you are really lucky, the tiniest and most elusive of all the Pygmies – *Hippocampus satomiae*.

Flashers on the Beach

Triton Bay is also home to many endemic species. The mighty volumes of freshwater that flow from the mainland to the sea have established a low saline environment that spawns a unique and evolutionary species – one of the prettiest and most charismatic endemic fishes, the flasher wrasse (*Paracheilinus nursalim*).

Frantic Flashing

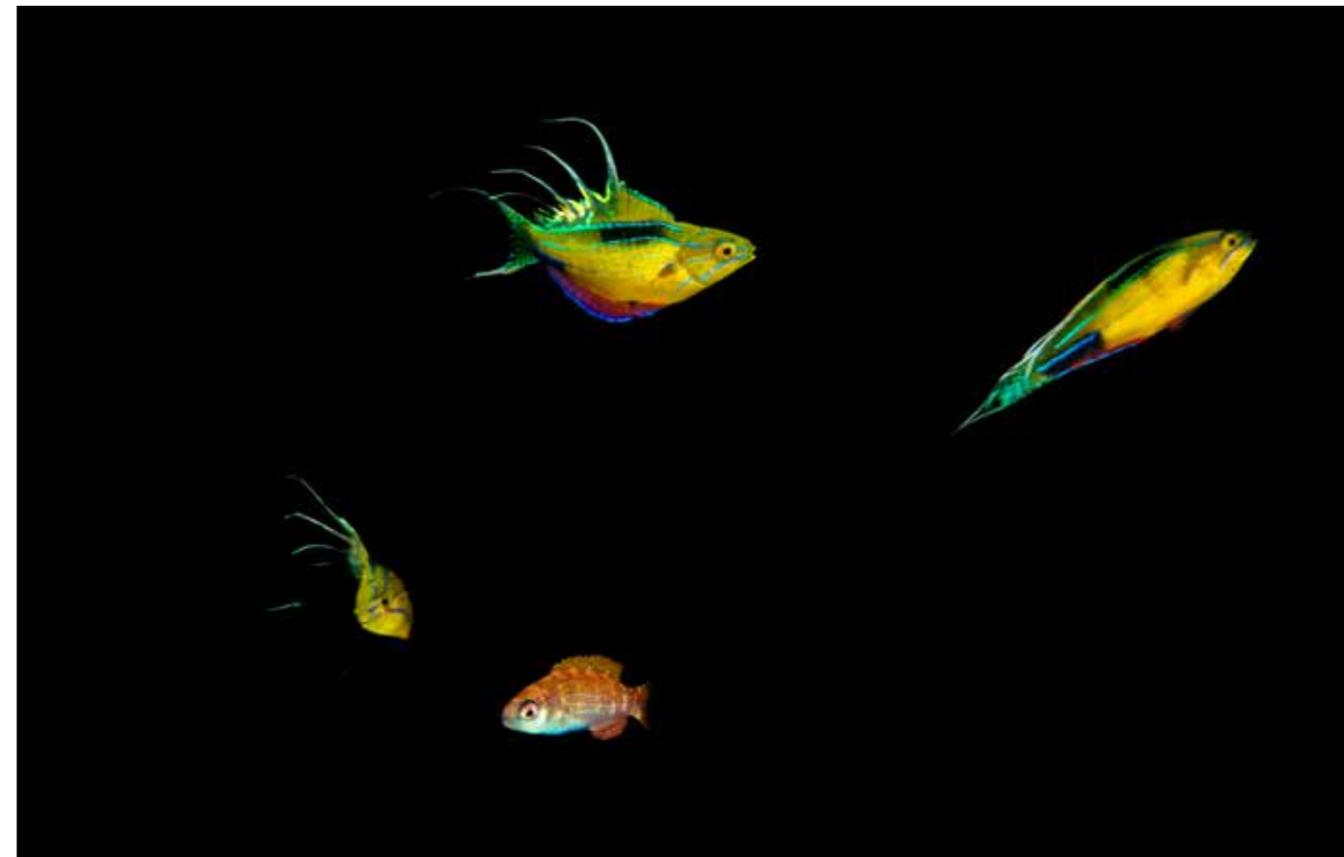
Each day, just before dusk, the stage is set. We settle on the sand by a garden of low profile stag-horn coral and wait. Before long, masses of tiny colourful fish appear, darting back and forth in some obscure mating ritual. At frantic intensity, the males swim into the water column and reward our patience with a "flash" of their magnificent dorsal fin. Seeing so many males flashing their plumage about is quite a sight and an arduous behaviour to capture through the camera lens.



▲ Portrait of the Triton Bay walking shark (*Hemiscyllium henryi*)

“At frantic intensity, the males swim into the water column and reward our patience with a “flash” of their magnificent dorsal fin.”

▼ Three male Flasher wrasse (*Paracheilinus nursalim*) in a courtship display to attract a lone female





Why swim when you can walk?

Another shy but incredibly special endemic species is the Triton Bay walking shark (*Hemiscyllium henryi*). Discovered in 2006, this relatively large epaulette shark is found only in Triton Bay's shallow reef flats and rubble shore areas. Like its sister species found in Raja Ampat, Halmahera, Cenderawasih Bay, Papua New Guinea, and Australia's Great Barrier Reef, these sharks prefer to walk rather than swim by wriggling their body and pushing with their pectoral and pelvic fins.

Titans of the Bay

The area here has been proclaimed by scientists as one of the very few places in the world where whale sharks choose to congregate, and it is here – beneath the *bagan*, a *Bugis* fisherman's wooden fishing platform – that the giant gods of Triton Bay wait for us. It is also one of the very few places in the world where scuba diving with whale sharks is permitted. "Give the whale sharks the respect and space they deserve, and don't lose sight of the *bagan*. If you try to follow the them, you can become disoriented", our guide Indra says.

< A whale shark feeds below the surface in the indigo waters of Triton Bay

Meeting the Giants

As we back roll into the indigo seas, three spotty giants emerge from different directions. Nothing has quite prepared us for the size and scale of these docile yet cumbersome creatures. As one passes, he gently nudges us with his pectoral fin, making us feel that we are simply nothing more than a remora to him! We snap a photograph of his pectoral fin, as it is the unique spotty pattern in this area and directly behind the whale shark's gills that are the best way to identify it.

We spend three hours in the water with the "Titans of the Bay", as they suck in copious amounts of sardines that our generous fisherman has provided for them. Meanwhile, a gorgeous pod of dolphins plays below us, keeping their distance and picking off the odd sardine that escapes the whale shark's enormous, fleshy mouths. **AD**



Anita Verde and Peter Marshall have a passion for the planet's wild places, and through their images and narratives hope to inspire better appreciation and protection of the natural world. Based in Melbourne, Australia, they have professional backgrounds in tourism strategy, environmental sustainability, and government relations. When they are not underwater or on a mountaintop, they also work professionally as strategic consultants, advising governments and industry on sustainable destination planning and development, investment attraction, government relations, brand strategy and marketing. www.summitstoseasphotography.com

*The authors travelled at their own expense

Secluded Sands



It doesn't feel right to talk about Triton Bay without mentioning its wildly beautiful beaches. Around every corner, you will find rugged limestone cliffs adorned with verdant tropical vegetation and postcard-perfect sandy bays and islands.

On land, keep an eye out for terrestrial creatures too; from flocks of Papuan hornbills to the endearing Cuscus, tree kangaroos, and the prized birds-of-paradise, right down to pretty and unusual orchids – Triton Bay's beauty certainly extends beyond its waters!