



Triton Bay

Indonesian Diving in West Papua

Text and photos by Claudia Weber-Gebert



Triton Bay. Untouched, remote, overwhelming... it is an underwater world that enchants. Claudia Weber-Gebert shares her liveaboard adventure there.

Raja Ampat is known and beloved by many divers. But a one-hour flight south from Sorong will take you to another gem in Kaimana—Triton Bay. My liveaboard adventure began here. However, the diving area in Triton Bay, south of Raja Ampat, was only explored in more detail just a few years ago. Only a handful of liveaboard boats go to these dive sites, and there is currently only one resort. Apart from a few local small fishing villages, there is no civilisation to speak of.

Old traces of civilisation can be seen here in the form of prehistoric wall paintings, dating back over 10,000 years. Our captain skilfully steered the *Gaia Love* liveaboard close to the spots where petroglyphs could be found, so that the guests could photograph these special works of art.

Rich biodiversity

On the coast of West Papua, an upwelling current brings nutrient-rich water to the surface. The resulting abundance of fish and biodiversity is indescribable. There are so many fish that you can no longer see the reef.



Enormously large and colourful soft corals are the hallmarks of these dive sites, even at a depth of just 5m. But beautiful hard corals can also be found, completely intact, as well as

Brilliant red whip coral on wall at Triton Bay in West Papua, Indonesia (above); Leather and soft corals on reef (top right); Petroglyphs dating back over 10,000 years (left); Bargibant's seahorse on gorgonian coral (previous page)

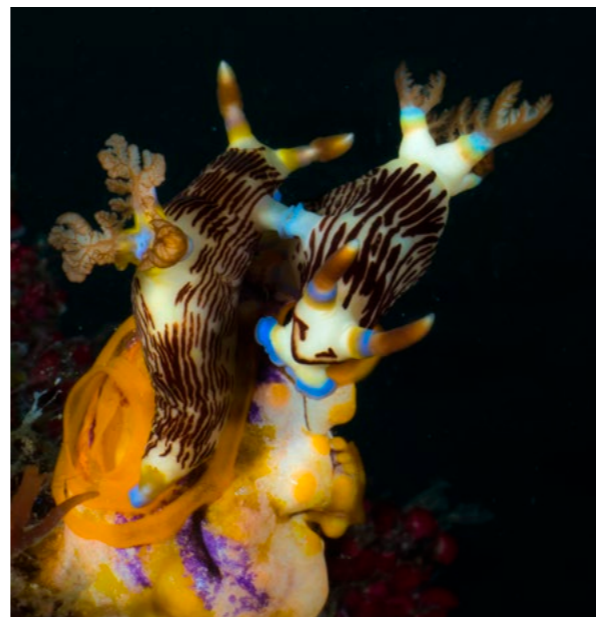


Soft corals and silversides (top left); Manta ray with remora (top right); *Nembrotha lineolata* pair with ribbon of eggs (right)

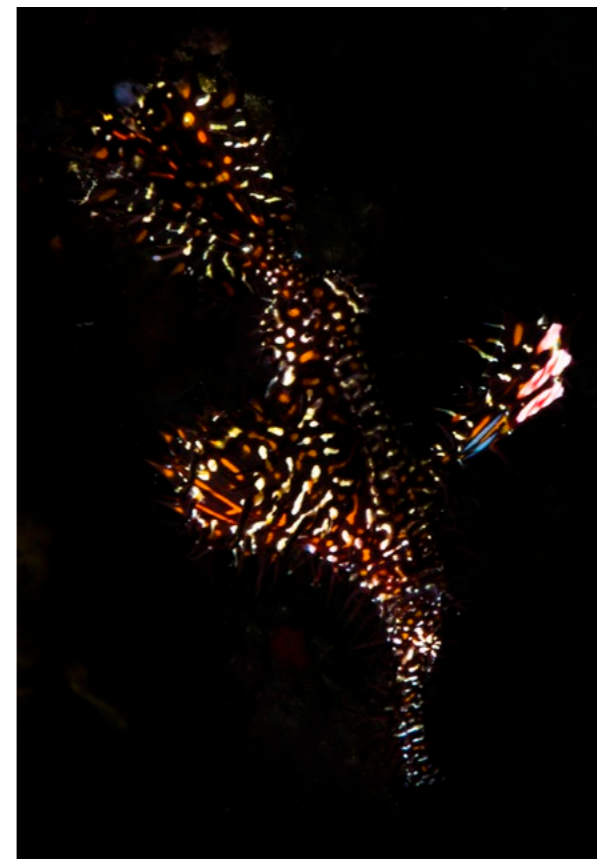
densely populated reefs, which can rarely be found elsewhere. There are large table corals under which various fish hide, barrel sponges standing like huge planters between the corals, and coral gardens with large colonies of black corals. The sight is overwhelming.

Diving

Although the water was slightly greenish, visibility was good. Underwater photographers would definitely consider this place an El Dorado, for both macro and wide-angle shots. The underwater landscapes were breathtakingly beautiful and varied, colourful and full of life. Dive sites like Little Komodo were reminiscent of



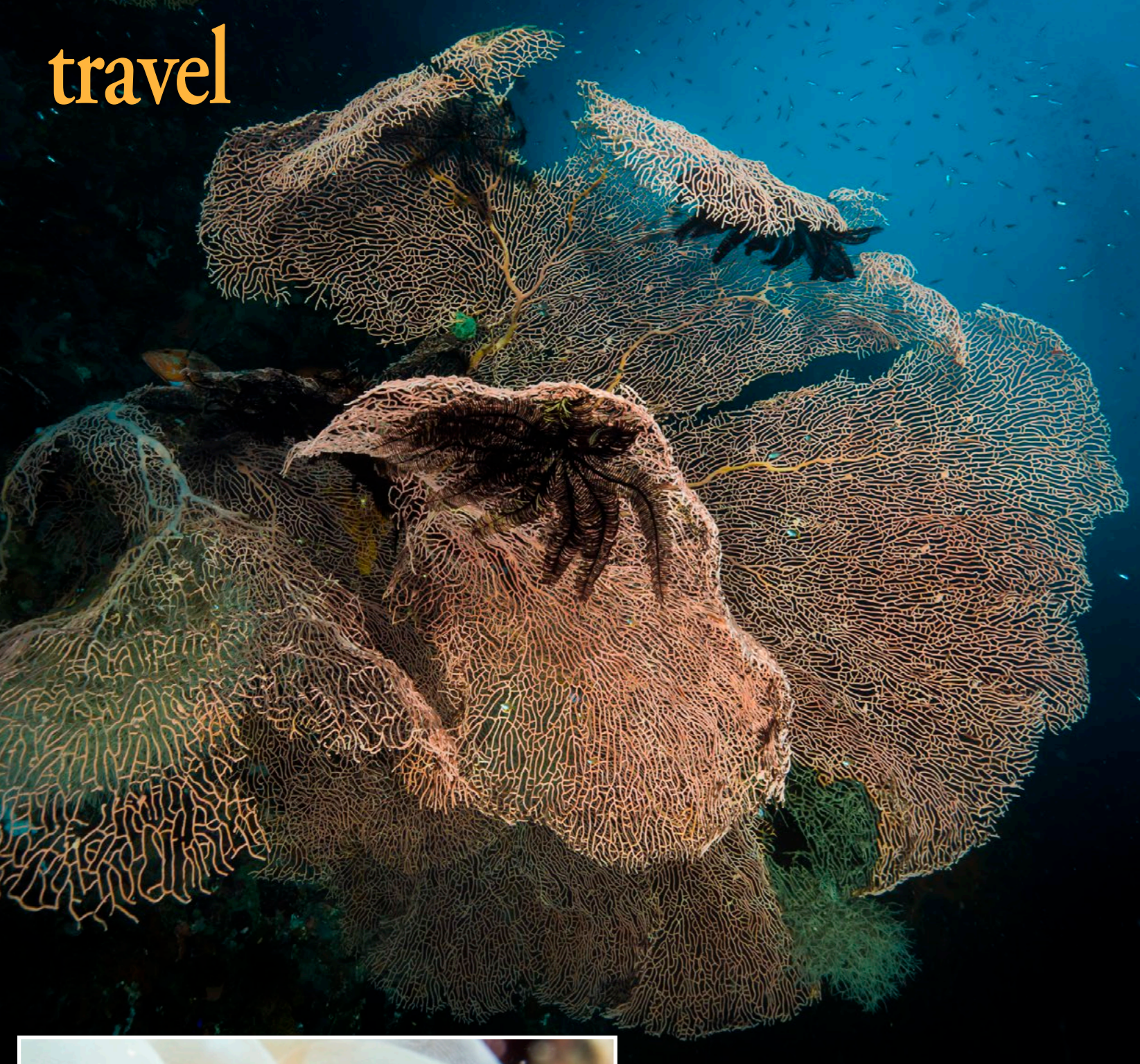
the underwater world of Komodo; and just around the corner, the underwater scene looked like Palau—so everything was very interesting to see. Where the currents passed the



Denise's pygmy seahorse (above); Ornate ghost pipefish (left)

Anemonefish in magnificent anemone, with school of blueshripe snapper





Sea fans up to 3m high populated the walls (top left); Schools of tang moved through the waters like endless ribbons (above); *Goniobranchus coi* nudibranch pair with ribbon of eggs (left); Seahorses like the Denise's pygmy seahorse (below) were popular with underwater photographers; Orang-utan crab in bubble coral (bottom left)



steep walls, one could see large sea fans, up to 3m high, in all colours and variations.

The most sought-after photo subjects were pygmy seahorses, and one could find them even at a depth of just 15m. Usually, these small seahorses can only be found at 25 to 30m.

Schools of fish moved through the water like endless ribbons; there were silversides, snappers, fusi-

liers, bumphead parrotfish, batfish and barracudas. Manta rays and mobula rays also circled above cleaning stations. And, of course, small macro subjects could also be found everywhere, including many different colourful nudibranchs, crabs or ghost pipefish, and blue-ringed octopus or wonderpus.

Underwater life was raging everywhere. Silversides formed tight schools, "flying" in formation and

moving along in an artful way to escape their predators. The fish were so densely packed that they blocked the sunlight.

The spectacle continued above the surface of the water where predators such as dolphins and sailfish jumped out of the water to hunt for smaller fish. This action could even be observed from the boat.

In this case, all one can really say is that pictures speak louder than



Triton Bay

Divers with whale shark with remoras attached to its underside (far left); Whale sharks gather to feed under a *bagang*, or lift net, which is used by local fishermen to catch small bait fish (left); There was a good chance of seeing whale sharks, sometimes up to five at a time, ranging from smaller juveniles to huge giants (below and bottom left)

words! Indeed, this legendary underwater world can hardly be described in words.

And then, there was a very special highlight. Whale sharks would gather at a *bagang* (lift net) where local fishermen captured small baitfish. The whale sharks got there on their own. They would be fed fish, but only when liveboards were at the site, which occurred one to two times per week. So, the liveboards stayed in the local area and offered the fishermen an additional source of income, namely through permissions from the village elder to allow divers to dive under the *bagang* for a fee. There was a high probability of encountering whale sharks here—sometimes up to five at a time, from smaller juveniles to huge giants.

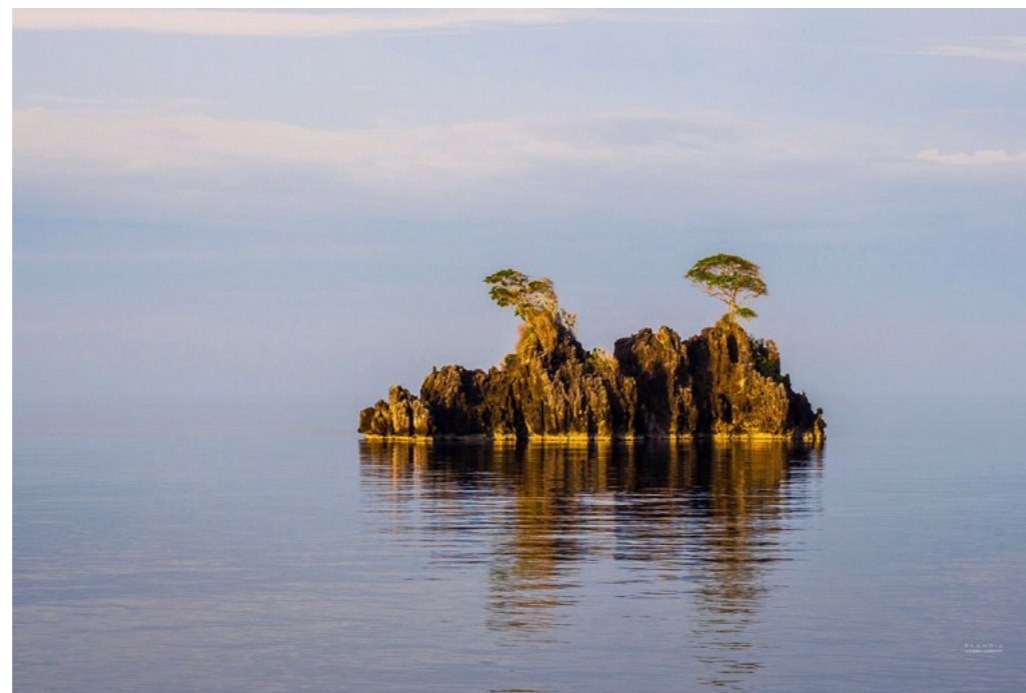




Scenic islands

It was not just the underwater landscapes that were exciting, but also the many small floating islands and rocks that protruded out of the water everywhere, covered with lush vegetation. Birds had brought seeds from the mainland to these limestone rocks, giving rise to the rich vegetation. Undercut by the water's edge, these rocks seemed to float above the sea at low tide, just like the famous rocks in the James Bond movies, filmed in Thailand or Palau.

And, of course, the coastal landscape of Papua also had the same beautiful charms. Colourful birds could be seen



Beautiful waterfalls cascade into the sea from the jungle landscape (top left); Rocky islets like this one seem to float above the water (above)



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Anthias and basslets among colourful soft corals (above); Coral grouper with elephant ear sponge, sea fans and sea squirts (top right); Hard corals and feather stars (right)

in the trees. Frigate birds and other seabirds circled over the sea, and at night, moths and butterflies came to the ship, attracted by the light. They were the prey of the bats which fluttered around the liveaboard at night. Ospreys could also be seen in the distance, but they were shy and did not come close.

The route is the goal

Even in this day and age, if divers want to visit remote places, some may have to travel long distances. From Singapore or Jakarta, one can get to Sorong in West Papua, and from there, to Kaimana. Some livea-

board tours start and end in Sorong, depending on the duration and route, but most of the time, the tour starts in Kaimana.

It is recommended to make a stopover in Singapore or Jakarta. Otherwise, the journey will be extremely long. A stopover helps with acclimatisation, so you will arrive at your destination rested and can enjoy your time on the liveaboard. Domestic flights from Singapore or Jakarta are operated by the Indonesian airlines Batik Air, Lion Air and Garuda Air.










The long journey is rewarded with the spectacular landscape, both above and below water. The running



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Lush soft corals decorate a wall (left); Large barrel sponge, feather stars and soft corals on reef with school of silver-sides, basslets and cardinalfish (above); A grouping of leopard anemones (bottom left)



joke on our tour in Triton Bay was: *It's not the end of the world—but you can see it from here!*

In Triton Bay, we only encountered one other liveaboard boat during the seven days of our tour. This meant that one had all the dive sites to oneself. No pack diving, no mass tourism. And it seemed that this area had so far been spared from the problems of modern civilisation. There was no plastic to be seen anywhere in the water.

Apparently, nothing is transported there by the currents. Or everything is kept away from the area by the upward current. So far, there is no further information about it. But

it is a very pleasing sight and nice to know that there are still places on our planet that are not polluted, at least not obviously.

With gentle tourism and boats that focus on sustainability, it will hopefully stay that way.

A paradise like this shows what our oceans and reefs once looked like everywhere: intact and densely populated reefs, with an abundance of fish, high biodiversity, clean waters and functioning ecosystems. It is a model for what other dive destinations should strive to become again. This can only happen if everyone does their part, by supporting sustainable fish-

ing practices worldwide, avoiding plastic waste, choosing travel destinations carefully and supporting those who are thinking about it. □

Claudia Weber-Gebert is an advanced diver, underwater photographer and dive writer based in Germany. Her latest book, Maare, Quellen, Wasserfälle: Die faszinierende Unterwasserwelt der Vulkanneifel (Maars, Springs, Waterfalls: The Fascinating Underwater World of the Volcanic Eifel), is available at eifelbildverlag.de. For more information, please visit: designbuero.org/Unterwasser-Fotografie.



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Wobbegong shark resting on reef, with cardinalfish, anthias and a dense school of silversides.

ABOUT GAIA LOVE: INTERVIEW WITH HARRY TAN

I had the opportunity to interview Harry Tan, one of the four owners of the *Gaia Love* liveaboard and the director of Dive Gaia. Here is an excerpt from our discussion:

Claudia: I heard that one of the owners did some dive training to gain insight into how to adapt the design of the ship to the needs of divers and underwater photographers. Is that correct?

Harry: The owners put a lot of thought into building *Gaia Love* to create an experience for divers and photographers.

Claudia: Can you give some examples?

Harry: There are too many to list, but here are a few:

1. The main structure was built on a wider frame to create a square space with volume enough to create an open and spacious feeling.
2. Custom-made furniture and furnishings for optimal comfort.
3. The height and depth of the table in the camera room are adjusted to the optimal size for photographers.
4. Personalized towels for all divers to ensure the highest level of hygiene.
5. Carefully tailored spaces for diving equipment with personal wet and dry areas, rinse tanks with plenty of personal space and ideal seating height.
6. Rinse tanks are designed to fit the largest camera models available today.
7. Custom mattresses and pillows, and high thread count sheets and linens for all rooms.
8. Individual storage space for storing luggage in the rooms.

9. Designed and built custom dinghies to facilitate boarding and disembarking.

10. Strategically placed power access throughout the boat for guest comfort.

Claudia: How did you come up with the name *Gaia Love*?

Harry: The word "gaia" in Greek mythology is "earth or land." It shows the love for our Mother Earth.

Claudia: The *Gaia Love* concept includes sustainability. Why?

Harry: It is important to recognize that we are causing damage to our earth and our environment. Denial is often the excuse. We hope to inspire people to make changes and preserve our beautiful underwater landscape, which we could lose if we continue to damage our earth and environment.

Claudia: Do you think this concept gives you an advantage in the market?

Harry: In the dive travel market, more and more divers are looking for a special experience when booking a dive trip. We offer a tailor-made experience that makes guests feel more comfortable.

Claudia: What is your main concern for guests booking a trip on the *Gaia Love* liveaboard?

Harry: That they have a good impression of the high operating standards we have set. Our crew should provide every guest with the highest possible service.

Claudia: Do you have any special training for crew members, or did you just select the best?

Harry: A lot of time and money is spent training our crew to provide a higher level of service to our guests. □

For more information visit: divegaia.com