

Aerial view of Triton Bay Divers resort

# Leeza English

*A Dive Pioneer for the 21st Century*

Text by Simon Pridmore  
Photos courtesy of Simon Pridmore, Thomas Haider, Wolfgang Poelzer, Nurul Yazid, Kat Zhou, Leeza English and Triton Bay Divers

**Founded by dive pioneer Leeza English, Triton Bay Divers is a beautiful and secluded resort offering world-class diving and is the first and only resort in Triton Bay, West Papua, Indonesia. Simon Pridmore tells the story of how Leeza was the driving force behind the resort.**



LEEZA ENGLISH / TRITON BAY DIVERS

TRITON BAY DIVERS

Leeza English, founder of Triton Bay Divers

In the 21st century, is it still possible to build a dive resort at the edge of the world in an area that very few people have heard of, more forgotten than the nearby region known as the Forgotten Islands, where the

nearest airport is hours away, where almost no one has ever dived (and then only from passing boats), where there are no contacts, no facilities of any sort and you have to start from absolute zero?

Do you think you could do it? Would you even want to put yourself through the considerable effort of even attempting it? Well, Leeza English very much wanted to. And as it turned out, she could do it—and

very successfully. This is the short story of how Triton Bay Divers came to be, and it is all about Leeza. Over the decade or so since the idea first entered her mind, other people have been involved,

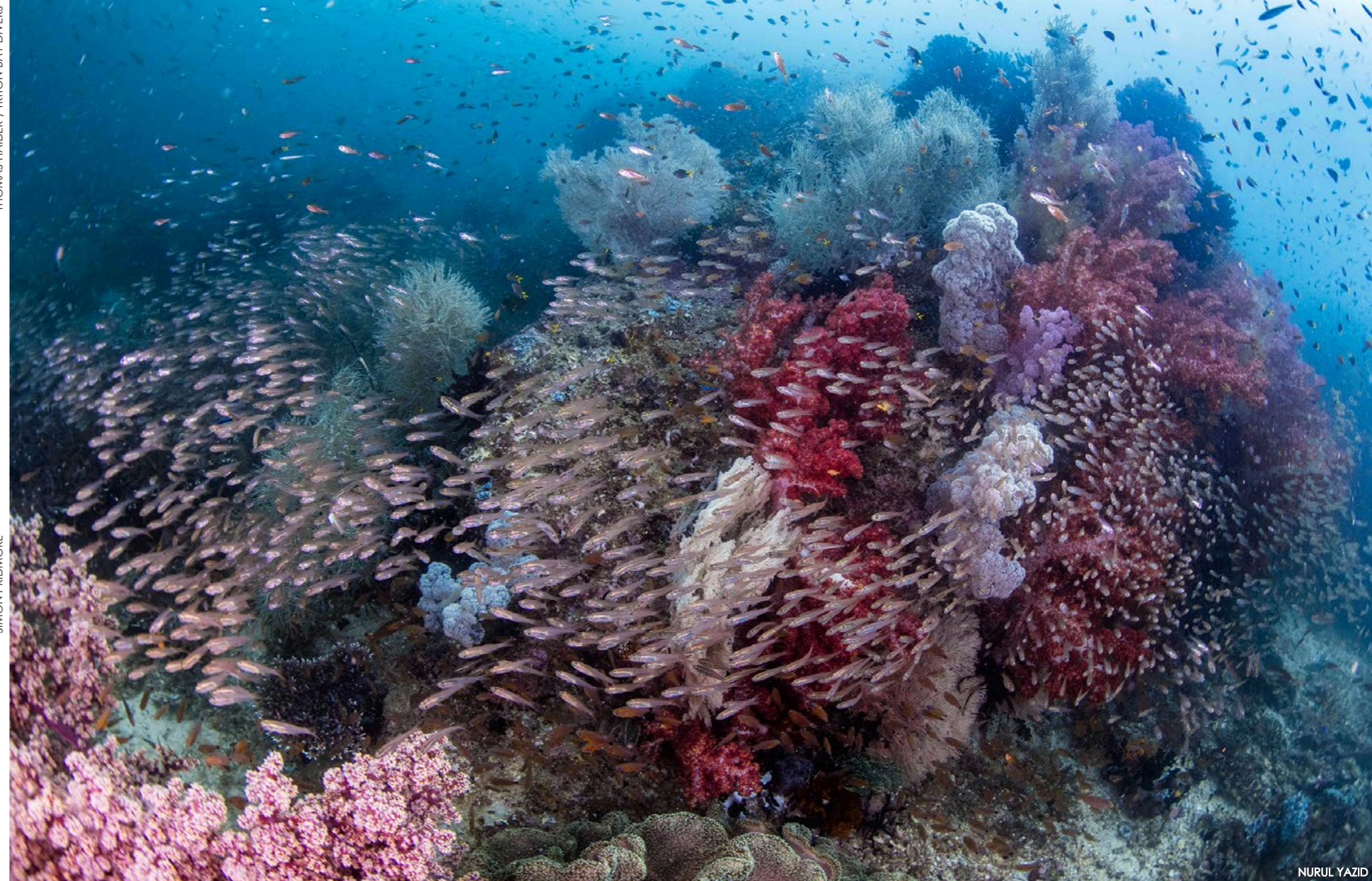




THOMAS HAIDER / TRITON BAY DIVERS



SIMON PRIDMORE



NURUL YAZID

Reef scene at Triton Bay (above); The beach at Triton Bay Divers Resort (top left); Loading the resort's dive boats (left)

coming and going, helping or hindering, but without Leeza, there would be no Triton Bay Divers.

And when you think about it, that is the essence of most pioneering stories. They are always about that one key individual, that one dreamer, that one person who is sufficiently single-minded, brave, fixated, stubborn and creative enough (you can fill in a whole bunch of other adjectives here) to keep the focus on the goal and to continue with an endeavour long past the point where most of us

would have given up. Pioneers cannot do it alone, but they have that gravitational quality that draws others into their orbit. They are the sun around which others revolve.

**Location**

Take a moment to look for Triton Bay Divers on Google Maps. It is there; search, and you will find a red location marker. Then zoom out a little, and you will find that it is in an east-facing bay on the island of Aiduma. Zoom out a little more, and you will

see Kaimana. This is the nearest town and airport. Most days, there is a flight from Kaimana to Sorong.

But where is Sorong? Zoom out a little more. You can now see the whole of Indonesian West Papua. Sorong is there, on the northwestern tip of what people call the Birds Head Peninsula—so named because it is shaped like the extended neck and head of a bird facing left across almost all of Indonesia.

The most convenient international airport for flights to Sorong is Jakarta, two time zones and four hours flying time away. Sorong is known to divers as the jumping-off point to the underwater paradise of Raja Ampat, and it

is also a jump—albeit a longer one—away from Triton Bay, a lesser-known undersea mecca that is becoming better known and more accessible thanks to Leeza.

**From an idea to a dream**

Born in England, raised in Hong Kong and blessed (or cursed) with itchy feet, she went to Miami for work in 2005. It was while diving for fun in Florida that the germ of an idea formed that running a dive resort might be a nice thing to do, and after three and a half years, she flew off to go diving around the world.

Running low on funds, she did a divemaster course at Black Marlin in

the Togean Islands of Sulawesi and began working there. It was at Black Marlin that the idea turned into a dream. Her next stop was Bali to get qualified as a dive instructor, and then she hit the road again, this time diving for work wherever her itchy feet took her—Fiji, Malaysia and the Philippines, before her heart brought her back to Indonesia, this time to work as a cruise director on a dive liveaboard.

Liveaboards are floating dive resorts and the perfect medium for finding out if you have the necessary skills for resort management, including dive skills, people skills, hotel management skills and life-juggling skills.



SIMON PRIDMORE

## A New Dive Book from Simon Pridmore

"Simon Pridmore's new book, *Technically Speaking* is an outstanding tour de force from one of modern diving's most accomplished practitioners and best-selling authors."

— David Strike, Oztek & Tekdive Convenor

"Simon has completed a complex task with consummate skill and has accurately unravelled the when's, the who's and some of the why's, much of which would have been unjustifiably lost in the mists of time if not for this work."

— Kevin Gurr, Technical Diving Inventor & Innovator

"It will take some doing to better this account of tech's first steps... as no matter how much you know or think you know; you will still find many obscure historical gems..."

— Kevin Denlay, Early Adopter & Wreck Finder

*Technically Speaking* is the latest book from best-selling Scuba series author Simon Pridmore. It is a selection of themed talks telling the early history of technical diving—where it came from, how it developed, how it expanded across

the world, who the important movers were and how, in the decade from 1989 to 1999, the efforts of a few determined people changed scuba diving forever.

These ten years saw the greatest shake-up the sport has ever seen but technical diving's road to universal acceptance was anything but smooth, many obstacles had to be overcome and there were times when even viewed in retrospect, it seemed that its advocates might fail in their mission. Ultimately, success came down to perseverance, people power, good timing and more than a little luck.



Available in hardback, paperback and ebook at **Amazon Worldwide, Apple, Kobo, and Tolino.** See **SimonPridmore.com**

THOMAS HAIDER



Surface interval at Triton Bay (above); Hairy shrimp (left) and Pontoh's pygmy seahorse (right) at Triton Bay

### The search for a site

Then, an ear injury gave Leeza some much-needed reflection time and extended topside time. She began to look around Indonesia for a place that had great diving but that very few people knew about and where there were no resorts.

That was in 2012 and 2013. Over the previous 30 years or so, diving pioneers had developed resorts in Bali, then Manado, then Komodo, Lembah, Raja Ampat and elsewhere—all now world-famous dive destinations. Indonesia was huge, but in recent years, Indonesia's development, population growth, construction, fishing activities and other factors have combined to damage reefs

and decimate marine life in many parts of the country.

Was there anywhere left that fulfilled Leeza's criteria? She looked at the islands to the northeast of Manado, the Sangihe archipelago of tiny dots in the ocean—Bangka, Talisei and beyond. She thought this area might be what she was looking for. It seemed to fit the bill, but the islands were super remote, and the logistics would be difficult. Yes, there is much

irony in this thought process, given what Leeza was about to do next.

### Triton Bay

Then, in May 2013, an opportunity arose for her and a potential business partner to visit Triton Bay. She had never been there before. Liveaboard dive boats had visited the area sporadically between 2008 and 2012, but no more than one or two, only for one or two trips a year, and just for ten days at a time. They had discovered some wonderful diving, but by 2013, they had stopped visiting. It was

a long way to come from their usual haunts, as it was difficult to provision a floating hotel for a longer trip, and they were fed up with having to deal with uncomprehending villagers. The diving might be superb, but other areas were easier operationally.

The trip was almost derailed when Leeza fell ill, and her first few days in the region were spent hooked up to an IV in Kaimana Hospital—not the most promising of omens. Her colleague, however, felt fine and headed off to Triton Bay to scout the area and do some diving. By the time



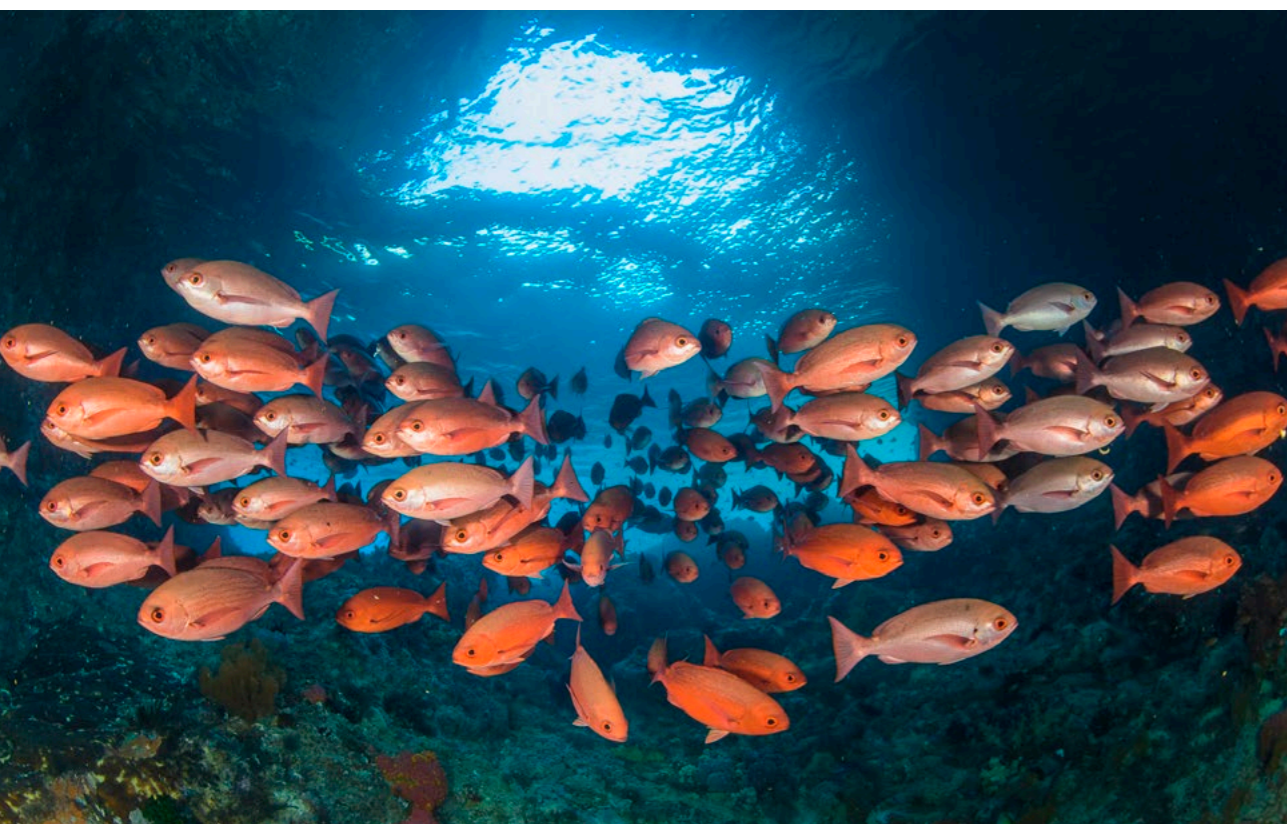
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TRITON BAY DIVERS



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TRITON BAY DIVERS

Leeza reached the point where she could pull herself out of her sick bed, hire a speedboat and head off to join him, she only had time to do one dive and one snorkel.

It would have been nice to get

more underwater time, but it was not essential. Before the trip, she had done plenty of research and canvassed trusted and experienced friends in the business. She knew that Triton Bay had spectacular diving. The

Building the first guest rooms (top left); Leeza English at the beginning of the Triton Bay story (top right); Tent and dining table during the construction phase (above); School of slender pinjalo at Triton Bay (left)

area ticked all her boxes, and there were no dive resorts within hundreds of kilometres.

She realised she had an amazing opportunity here. You have one life, and you have to go with your gut (even though her gut was still feeling quite fragile).

She now viewed the adverse practical and logistical factors that had ruled Sangihe out (all of which also existed here) not as obstacles but

## NEW 4 in 1!

Simon Pridmore has released a new single-volume e-book, bringing together four books in his bestselling Scuba series:

- *Scuba Fundamental – Start Diving the Right Way*
- *Scuba Confidential – An Insider's Guide to Becoming a Better Diver*
- *Scuba Exceptional – Become the Best Diver You Can Be, and*
- *Scuba Professional – Insights into Sport Diver Training & Operations*

As Simon puts it, this is “a remastering and repackaging of the original albums rather than a greatest hits.” Nothing is missing. *Scuba Compendium* gives e-book readers the advantage of being able to access all the knowledge contained in the four books in one place, making this a unique and easily searchable work of reference for divers at every level.

Simon has always promoted the idea of safer diving through the acquisition of knowledge, which is why he has chosen to release this highly accessible version. If you have read his work before, you will know that he provides divers with extremely useful advice and information, much

rather as challenges. They could be handled later. The key had been to find the right place. Everything else would follow. Given the will, all problems could be managed. Her instinct was, “If we build it, they will come.” And she had a good feeling that this was the right place.

### Purchasing the land and beginning construction

She and her business partner met with



of it unavailable elsewhere; his points often illustrated by real life experiences and cautionary tales. He examines familiar issues from new angles, looks at the wider picture and borrows techniques and procedures from other areas of human activity.

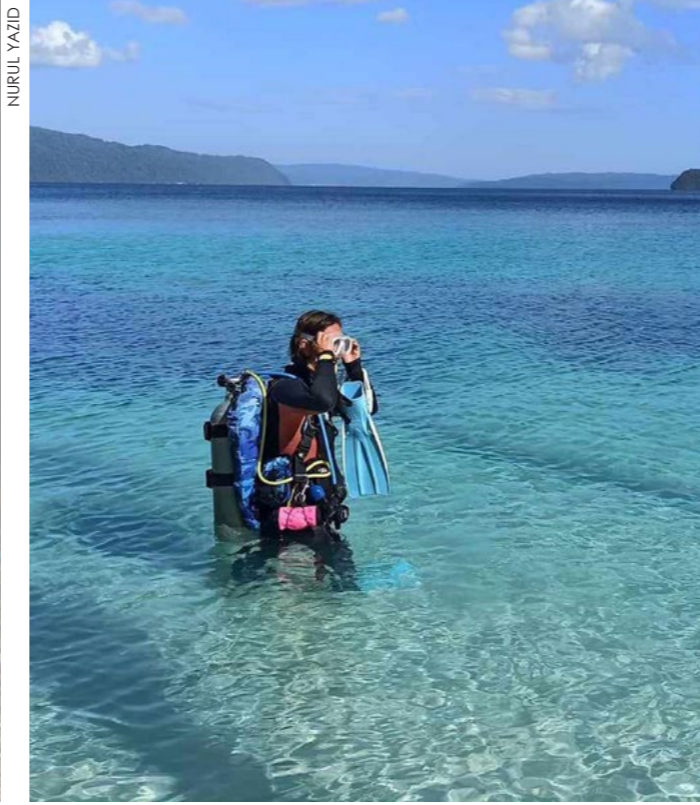
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the West Papuan family, who owned the land right in the middle of the area where the best dive sites had been discovered, to finalise a deal. The land was in a secluded bay with a mountainside behind it and jungle all the way down to the waterline, and it faced the sunrise, which would mean beautiful mornings and cooler afternoons. There was also a source of fresh water.

They felt it would be best to incor-





English with wobbegong shark under a ledge (above), cave with sea fan (top left), shore diver (top right) at Triton Bay; Triton Bay Divers staff with happy guests (right)

porate the family into the business, as this might help things go more smoothly. The deal was done. By September 2014, the family had already cleared some of the land. Leeza returned on a ship with construction materials and fifteen workers, and they set up home in tents on the beach, with no toilet and a burner for pot noodles and tempeh, although the tempeh never lasted

more than a couple of days. Then it was noodles, noodles and more noodles until the next supply boat arrived. At first, the water pouring down the mountain was their shower, but after a few weeks of struggling across the rocks to have a wash, they made life a little easier for themselves by running a water pipe from the waterfall to the beach.

### Resort design and completion

Leeza's original floor plan design, with the structural drawings supplied by an architect in Bali, was for four guest rooms, a restaurant, a kitchen, a dive centre, an office and a staff room. She started with one dive boat called *Pygmy*, which doubled (or tripled) as a passenger transfer and supply vessel to and from Kaimana.

The first guests, Spanish backpackers,

### TRITON BAY DIVERS — *In Their Own Words*

"Triton Bay Divers was originally founded by Jimmy Thai and Leeza English in joint partnership with the Kamakaula family, who are the owners of much of the land around the island of Aiduma and who have been here for many generations. We, the founders, felt that the long-term success of this project depended on having the local community fully behind us, and so the best way to achieve this was to bring them on board as partners. This way, our interests would be aligned, and we would create a win-win situation for each party. The resort was completed in March 2015. We are the first and still the only dive resort in the region.

"Since the end of 2023, with the departure of Jimmy Thai from the company, Triton Bay Divers is very excited to welcome three new members to our team. They are Vincent Chew, the owner of Blue Manta and White Manta Liveboards; Nurul Yazid, an award-winning professional photographer and previous owner of Pom Pom Resort in Malaysia; and Joel (Jack) Sumantry, who brings many years of

arrived in February 2015. They did not care if the building work was not completed. They wanted to come anyway. As it turned out, they managed to get one room finished in time for them, along with the dive centre, staff room and kitchen, but the guests dined on the beach under the stars as the restaurant roof had not yet been installed.

The rest of the bungalows were completed in March. At first, the staff consisted of two cooks—one for guests, one for staff—a housekeeper, a gardener, a handyman and a boat driver, with Leeza as manager, tank filler and sole guide. Then, in October

experience working at resorts and on liveboards. This new line-up injects fresh energy and knowledge into Triton Bay Divers, and we are confident that our guests will benefit."

### Mission statement

"At Triton Bay Divers, we are acutely aware of the issues facing the planet, in particular, the threat of man-made climate change and the impact of ocean acidification and rising water temperatures on coral reefs. It is especially sensitive to us as we see first-hand that economic development often comes at the expense of the ecosystem. Our purpose then, together with our Papuan partners, is to promote eco-tourism as a means of sustainable development for the local community, to educate and spread awareness of the issues facing the planet, to share with the world a little corner of paradise and to preserve it for future generations.

"We have also partnered with a local NGO—Yayasan Kelestarian dan Edukasi Kaimana (KEK)—to help educate future generations in the area by running extracurricular classes on marine ecosystems, waste management and sustainable fishing in the primary schools in the region." ■

2015, she took on a divemaster to share her workload.

Now, in 2024, she has 30 people working for her, most at the resort, but also some admin and logistics staff in Kaimana and Surabaya.

### Building relationships

For over ten years, a lot of her efforts have been directed at developing and building not only the resort's infrastructure and customer base but also relationships with her neighbours. These are perhaps the most important aspects of the whole project and are hugely time-consuming, requiring

NURUL YAZID

SIMON FRIDMORE

WOLFGANG POELZER

TRITON BAY DIVERS



TRITON BAY DIVERS



KAT ZHOU / KAISNAPS



SIMON PRIDMORE



KAT ZHOU / KAISNAPS



THOMAS HAIDER



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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Bougainvillea plants in bloom at the resort; Flasher wrasse; View of the bay from a room at the Triton Bay Divers resort; Mimic octopus; Blue-ringed octopus; Bamboo walking shark

immense patience, understanding and careful management on all sides.

As an outsider—and as a woman—she is breaking new ground in many ways. The people who live in this area have never seen anyone like Leeza, nor, in the beginning, did they have any comprehension of what she was doing or why people might want to travel thousands of miles just to come and look at their fish.

But her presence can be—and has been—beneficial

to the West Papuan people of Triton Bay, many of whom have friends and relatives who now work for Triton Bay Divers. Some have worked for the company for several years now and, through their work, have acquired specialist skills, performed several different jobs and even earned promotions to leadership roles.

The neighbours now have a better understanding of what is going on, although they probably still think that foreign visitors are crazy. Mutual respect

and the maintenance of social stability are key, and the income stream helps. Visiting divers pay Marine Park fees, which are passed on to villages in the area and contribute to children's education and the construction of longboats for inter-village communication.

### Further developments

Triton Bay Divers is open eight months of the year, from the end of September to early June. The remaining four months of the year are a

period of high seas, rain and wind, giving the staff a rest and providing much-needed time for maintenance and expansion. In 2023, two guest rooms—there are now eight—a camera room, a compressor room and a laundry room were added, as well as two new boats, bringing the total to five, one for transfers and four for diving. And the dive centre has been renovated.

In 2017, they planted some bougainvillea bushes near the guest rooms, and in 2023, the

bougainvillea began blooming for the first time. The bushes have remained in flower ever since, thriving just as Triton Bay Divers is thriving. ■

*Simon Pridmore is the author of the international bestsellers Scuba Fundamental: Start Diving the Right Way, Scuba Confidential: An Insider's Guide to Becoming a Better Diver, Scuba Exceptional: Become the Best Diver You Can Be and Scuba Professional: Insights into Sport*

*Diver Training & Operations, now available in a compendium. He is also co-author of the Diving & Snorkeling Guide to Bali and the Diving & Snorkeling Guide to Raja Ampat & Northeast Indonesia. His latest books include The Diver Who Fell from the Sky, Dive into Taiwan, Scuba Physiological: Think You Know All About Scuba Medicine? Think Again! and the Dining with Divers series of cookbooks. For more information, visit his website at: [SimonPridmore.com](http://SimonPridmore.com).*

