

First Impressions of PNG – Loloata Island

By Andy & Angela Heath

I don't know about you, but all conversations with fellow divers eventually get around to the locations you've dived. As soon as it's mentioned you're a keen photographer the response is "so you've dived PNG then?", to which I normally, rather sheepishly, mumble something along the lines of "no, not yet". Then tactfully change the subject. OK, maybe all this diver peer pressure is in my mind. But we've wanted to visit New Guinea for such a long time now, only the small (small??) matters of time and money preventing us.

However, having had a hard time working in Australia for close to a year, we decided to throw caution, and our finances, to the wind. After all, we'd probably never live nearer to this supposed dive Mecca. A little research later and we'd booked a liveaboard to Milne bay and, what will be the focus of this article, a preceding week at Loloata island resort in Port Moresby.

Only once we reached the waters edge in Port Moresby could we appreciate the beauty of the landscape in Bootless bay, where Loloata is one of a number of islands. Looking back toward the mainland we were surrounded by a rolling landscape of hills with a mountainous backdrop, clouds draped over much of it obscuring any idea of the true height. Quite stunning.

The adverts for Loloata emphasise the proximity to the



Dwarf Lionfish were literally everywhere. This is one of the dozen or so that insisted getting in the way as we were trying to photograph the Harlequin shrimp.

Nikon F90X in Nexus housing, 105mm, twin YS30 strobes on TTL, Velvia. Manual mode, 1/125th @ f16.

airport and the short transfer. And we can vouch that's quite true. The boat transfer took ten minutes across a calm afternoon sea. By the time we arrived it was late afternoon and we were quite content to check into our room and take a wander around the resort checking out the

resident wildlife. Our diving would start the next day. We did get a chance to introduce ourselves to the couple who had only recently taken over the running of the dive centre, Sharon & Carl. A list of the critters they'd seen in the last few days got my shutter finger

Exiting one of the gullies at Di's Delight. Nikon F90X in Nexus housing, 16mm fisheye, twin YS120 strobes on Manual, Velvia.
Manual mode, 1/30th @ f8.



Pygmy seahorse. OK, so it's not a unique picture but it was the first time we'd seen a pygmy seahorse. We found three in total on two fans but the depth and amount of photographers were the limiting factors here! Nikon F90X in Nexus housing, 105mm + external diopter, twin YS30 on TTL, Velvia. Manual mode, 1/250th @ f16.

twitching almost immediately.

Loloata's owner, Dik Knight, joined us at the dinner table that night and together with a mix of guests and ex-pat's, we sat down to a hearty dinner and a few (surprisingly good) local beers. Just enough time after that to prep the camera ready for the next day and grab an early night.

After an early breakfast we wandered to the dive centre and unpacked our dive gear. An unexpected calm morning called for a last minute change in dive plan. From a perhaps more suitable check out dive to that of a deeper outer reef dive on the wreck of a fishing trawler, the MV Pai. This didn't bode well for either Angela or myself – no time to change to wide-angle for me - though as it turned out, not that it would matter. Typical of the outer reef divesites, the transfer took around forty-five minutes. Once we entered and descended to the bow of the Pai at 90' Angela signaled me that something wasn't right with her ears. A quick glimpse at the coral encrusted bow and deck was all we afforded before heading over to the adjacent sloping reef and commenced a slow ascent. The ear problem abated around 60', so we spent the remainder of the dive bumbling around the reef. We were fortunate that the conditions of negligible current and visibility of 60' hadn't made the situation worse. But the reef that we now found ourselves investigating was none too impressive. We found a general scene of dead coral interspersed with large algae patches. Ironically, it was only when we got shallower that fish life and coral improved. To put it into perspective, it took some hunting to find suitable subjects for my 60mm lens and it was only a family of false clown anemone fish and a huge sand anemone that saved



Nikon F90X in Nexus housing, 16mm fisheye, twin YS120 strobes on Manual, Velvia. Manual mode, 1/60th @ f5.6.

the day. We finished the dive after an hour and I'd be understating it if I said we were disappointed!

As with the typical routine at Loloata, a second dive takes place before returning to the resort for lunch. After the Pai, we headed and moored up at Lillians reef for our surface interval and a light snack. An obligatory sixty minutes later we were descending onto Lillians, a small patch reef that had been known to harbor one of PNG's signature fish (and one that we were looking forward to finding), Marletts scorpionfish, otherwise known as Rhinopias. Expecting to encounter some current we were as disconcerted as the marine life to find there was none at all. The reef, though pretty enough with patches of whip corals and some large mushroom corals hosting interesting shrimp, was too quiet. It seemed as though everything was waiting for the tide to change to come alive. Our search for a Rhinopias proved fruitless as well. Although we stayed relatively shallow, skirting the small reef at 55' or so, we should have hit the top of the reef sooner. Although there were extensive patches of dead staghorn coral, there were a number of scorpionfish hiding amongst it along with pairs of flitting fire gobies. A curious cuttlefish also allowed quite a close approach though as it was, our air dictated that we were to watch the little guy hunt amongst the reef top from our safety stop, some 10' above.

Heading back to the resort for lunch we reflected on an unimpressive couple of dives. Angela still had ear problems so headed straight to our room for a rest while I rinsed the camera and hit the lunch table. As it turned out, we skipped the diving for the rest of the day. Angela recuperating whilst I continued to explore the island a little



Coral tyre. Nikon F90X in Nexus housing, 16mm fisheye, twin YS120 strobes on Manual, Velvia. Manual mode, 1/60th @ f8

more.

Obviously, this trip hadn't gotten off to a good start. It wasn't looking to improve too quickly either with the next morning's announcement of another relatively deep wreck for the first dive. Although Angela felt better, we had hoped for a potentially easier start to the day. However, the diving gods were starting to smile upon us. At least this time I'd had enough notice to put my fisheye lens on.

The Pacific Gas is a 60 meter long vessel that was sunk in the mid 80's for divers. Also lying on the outer reefs it took around the same time to reach as the Pai. Conditions were fine once more with minimal chop on the surface. After starting our descent we were immediately struck by the good visibility. Approaching 100', it was more than enough to appreciate both the size of the ship and the prolific coral growth. A school of batfish swam up to greet us midwater, following us all the way



Arrow crab. Night dives were alive with crabs and other crustacea. This rather large arrow crab seemed to think we couldn't see him. Nikon F90X in Nexus housing, 60mm, twin YS30 strobes on TTL, Velvia. Manual mode, 1/250th @ f11.



This was one of the pair of giant pigeons that wandered around the resort. If you got too close they had a habit of cracking your shins with their wings. Apparently it hurt too!



One of the pair of Harlequin shrimp that were resident at Lion Island. They tended to be quite shy, staying at the back of a cluster of coral and closely guarding the starfish that was their food source.

Nikon F90X in Nexus housing, 105mm, twin YS30 strobes on TTL, Velvia. Manual mode, 1/250th @ f16.

back down. Angela appeared to be doing fine this time so we headed directly to the Tubastrea covered bow to capture some shots of the rest of the groups descent. Whilst they headed toward the deeper stern end, we poked around the upper deck areas. The mooring line was attached to a tyre that was just covered in brightly coloured sponges and bryozoans. In fact there didn't appear to be any areas that weren't covered in

growth of one sort or another. Hiding amongst a particularly concentrated patch of corals sat a small brown leaf fish, secure in the knowledge that with a fisheye lens on I posed no threat! Hawkfish, anthias, predatory grouper and lionfish abounded around the decks. Swimming across the open hold and looking in I could see a few dense schools of baitfish milling around. But by this time my camera had run out of film and

our computers showed no more bottom time. Ascending up the coral encrusted mast I realised why I should have saved some film. Looking down the mast with swarms of anthias swirling around was memorably beautiful. I hoped we'd get a chance to revisit this site before the end of the week.

Our second dive was spent at Di's Delight. A well known site and home to an absolutely huge sea fan that must have

reached 20' across! On the way to the fan we passed a small patrolling white tip and dogtooth puffer nearly as big! The huge bommie that made up the reef had two or three large cracks running through the middle, which made for dramatic swim throughs. Each were crammed with gorgonians and fans, many with resident long nosed hawkfish. As we headed back along one of them, making toward the top of the reef, we startled a large Napoleon wrasse. Back on the reef top at 35', Carl gestured wildly at us. There in the middle of a large plate coral sat a black Rhinopias! Whilst we took turns to have a close look, the Rhinopias stood his ground the way most of his scorpionfish cousins do. Meanwhile, Carl had found another one, this time a juvenile grey individual sitting amongst a patch of staghorn. I continued to lament my fisheye lens choice, at least happy in the fact that we'd seen them.

Our day just got better after that. As we were to find that week, the weather deteriorated a little in the afternoons so third and fourth dives tended to take place at nearby, and sheltered, Lion island. Three small wrecks had been purposely scuttled for divers there, each attracting a fair amount of small marine life. We heard that a mimic octopus had been spotted recently so our hopes were high for something special. Visibility was somewhat worse due to the mainly sandy substrate but that didn't really matter. We were led almost at once to a pair of Harlequin shrimp content on munching away on a starfish arm whilst posing for photographers. All around them, dwarf lionfish were so thick on the ground that they



This pair of anemone shrimp were quite at home in the mushroom coral. Nikon F90X in Nexus housing, 105mm, twin YS30 strobes on TTL, Velvia. Manual mode, 1/125th @ f16.

We were lucky enough to find four Rhinopias during our dives at loloata. Unfortunately they were mostly very darkly coloured and difficult to photograph well. But our quest to see them paid off handsomely. Nikon F90X in Nexus housing, 60mm, twin YS30 strobes on TTL, Velvia. Manual mode, 1/125th @ f16.



persistently got in the way of the shrimp! I've never had to shoo away so many fish before - we were rapt! – Rhinopias and Harlequin shrimp on the same day! Excited fins in the group kicked up the sand a little too much so we headed off a little deeper to the small wreck of the Godfrey, sitting on the sandy

slope at 70'. This wreck concentrated the marine life to a dramatic extent. The deck was covered with more ringed and double-ended pipefish, cleaner shrimp and hinge beak shrimp than I've ever seen in one place. In the middle of all this had been built a veritable castle by a mantis shrimp with big ideas.



*A silhouette of the huge sea fan found at Di's delight.
Nikon F90X in Nexus housing, 16mm fisheye, ambient light, Velvia.
Manual mode, 1/30th @ f8.*

This large squat lobster was sitting amidst his feather star every time we dived the Lady Jules wreck at Lion Island. Unfortunately of all the shots I took I never managed to get both his pincers and eyes in focus! Nikon F90X in Nexus housing, 105mm, twin YS30 strobes on TTL, Velvia. Manual mode, 1/250th @ f16.



However, his caution in peaking out of this huge burrow outlasted our air and, antennae twitching, he watched us head back up the reef to the mooring line.

Due to the favourable conditions, most night dives also take place at Lion Island. So once the sun had set that evening, that's where we headed

once again. Proceeding straight to the harlequin shrimp, our task was hindered by the 'soup' of plankton and other animals that swarmed in front of our torches and focus lights. We soon moved on, this time further along to the shallower and smaller, wreck of the Lady Jules. Another concentration of life flourished

here. We spotted a number of nudibranchs both in the sand around the hull and on the hull itself as well as a large brown hexabranche moving quite fast, shying away from all the lights. The boats' railings were covered in colourful dendronephthya bushes, one of which on closer inspection concealed a pair of soft coral cowries. In the midst of one of the many feeding feather stars a large squat lobster sat ignorant to our fascination. Heading back to the mooring line a green seasnake, some five foot long, swam quickly past us and away into the night. Just as we neared the mooring line I spotted a small squid. Shining my light on him he immediately changed colour, but apart from fleeing, seemed to follow the light beam around staying right in the middle of it. Whether that was wishful thinking I don't know. As I struggled to focus on him whilst pointing the torch, a fruitless task, the other divers left the water. I soon gave up and bid my little cephalopod friend goodbye lest the other divers should commandeer the boat and head back for dinner without me!

What a difference a day makes! The remainder of the trip continued in the same vein. Apart from some unsettled weather causing the visibility to drop, we never had so disappointing dives as those on the first day. We managed to find more Rhinopias as well as find our other signature species for the area, pygmy seahorses! Our first ones made the trip all the more worthwhile. Even more so after our ten-days in Milne bay would fail to turn up any! We never did get to see the mimic octopus at Lion Island, even though we returned there a



From the top of Loloata Island, looking out across Bootless bay.

number of times. Neither did we get good enough conditions to return to the Pacific Gas. We did manage to squeeze a few dives in on Loloatas' small house reef though. The shallow aspect and sandy substrate didn't make for ideal conditions and visibility was down to 10' at times, but the marine life there was interesting enough. Indeed, directly under the jetty we found a number of dwarf and zebra lionfish, pipefish and a rotten tree stump that housed a family of fang tooth blennys. What had started out as a somewhat dubious experience had turned into one of our favourite trips! What more could we ask than that?

Info. and general advice

Though popular with photographers, we were disappointed to find no real set up for cameras. Even rinsing was a somewhat dubious affair. However, we were informed that special rinse tanks were soon to be built. Otherwise camera maintenance was a strictly back to the room affair - not always easy at night due to the poor lighting in the rooms. A limited number of sockets were available in the rooms so bring an extension block. Power is 240v with Australian style sockets.

The boats provided no special rinse or storage facilities. A small space was available in the cabin for changing films but was only big enough for one at a time.

Even though mosquitoes didn't bother us whilst we were there, anti-malarials are recommended. Rooms had adequate mesh over windows and openings but no nets were provided as standard. Both aircon and fan only rooms were available.

The resort could also arrange short land based trips to Port Moresby's Botanical gardens, Parliament building and PNG artifacts (a warehouse full of PNG souvenirs). We spent a half-day doing this, including a side trip to the yacht club for lunch, enjoying it immensely. Make sure you take adequate bug precautions if you visit the gardens though!

Diving is considered year round at Loloata though there are a number of seasons. Generally there's reckoned to always be sheltered spots available though transfers may be more difficult and outer reef sites not diveable at these times.

Andy & Angela Heath



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