

If you could only dive one site for the rest of your life...

...where would it be?

by Helen Brierley

How often do divers, always in search of exciting new depths to explore, ask each other, “So where’s the best place you’ve ever dived?” The answer might be The Philippines, The Galapagos, Mexico or any number of places with thrilling big animals, great bio-diversity or stunning underwater topography. But is there one site you could see yourself returning to again and again? Somewhere you’d be happy to explore day in, day out? Well I think we just found the place that would fit the bill for us.

Arriving in Papua New Guinea recently, our first stop was Milne Bay. With many different sites to choose from, some nearby and others an hour or two boat ride away, there is plenty to fill a week or two of diving, but once we discovered Lawadi, we were hooked and just wanted to keep going back. It’s no surprise, as we soon discovered, that this was where ‘muck diving’ first began, yet that’s not the only draw, with some beautiful areas of healthy coral serving as seemingly permanent cleaning stations for some of the tamest critters we have ever come across.

The dive sites on the north coast of Milne Bay are accessed by boat as there are few roads and only



Soft Corals and Fans at Deacon’s Reef, 1/125, f11, ISO 320, Tokina 10-17 at 17mm. Nikon D500 in Nauticam Housing with YSD1 strobes

a sparse population. This makes for beautiful views of tree clad slopes right down to the water’s edge. At each end of the black sand beach at Lawadi, there is a small river running down into the sea, bringing nutrients from the forest, but none of the trash that seems to end up in many other well known muck diving destinations. In fact, it was incredible to spend over three weeks diving in a country and find zero man made trash in the waters or on the shore.

Dive boats can pull up very close to shore at Lawadi, making the diving here super easy. From getting into the water, right through to the safety stop, it’s one critter (photo op!) after another here. Stepping off the boat for our first dive, starting in about 5 meters, I turned over a brown leaf and there was a beautiful harlequin shrimp, in no hurry to hide. Lawadi is one of those sites where it is wonderful to have a local guide, especially for the



“Leaf Sheep” Sapsucking Slug, 1/250, f20, ISO 250, 105mm Micro Nikkor. Nikon D500 in Nauticam Housing with YSD1 strobes

tinest finds, but it’s also a fantastic place to take your time, scouring small areas to see what shows up. The first few times diving such a site, I can never resist the urge to discover as many different critters as possible, photographing as I go. And if you are a list keeper, you won’t be disappointed here. We certainly added some new sightings such as Long Nose Rock (or Donald Duck) Shrimp and numerous different nudibranchs.

Lawadi is also the perfect place for the photographer (or videographer) who wants to spend some serious time

with a subject. The water is warm and calm, the depths do not have to be great and the boat is never far away, so it’s easy to use up half the dive on a tiny yawning frogfish or trying to get a shot of a minuscule ‘Leaf Sheep’ sea slug next to an egg cluster as he moves surprisingly quickly across his leaf.

During two dives, I hunted down Melibe, trying to get a shot that showed something more than a brown blob against the dark sand. I even tried waiting for one to make its way across my white dive slate,



Yawning Painted Frogfish 1/160, f22, ISO 250, 105mm Micro Nikkor. Nikon D500 in Nauticam Housing with YSD1 strobes

Halimeda Ghost Pipefish, 1/250, f32, ISO 250, 105mm Micro Nikkor. Nikon D500 in Nauticam Housing with YSD1 strobes





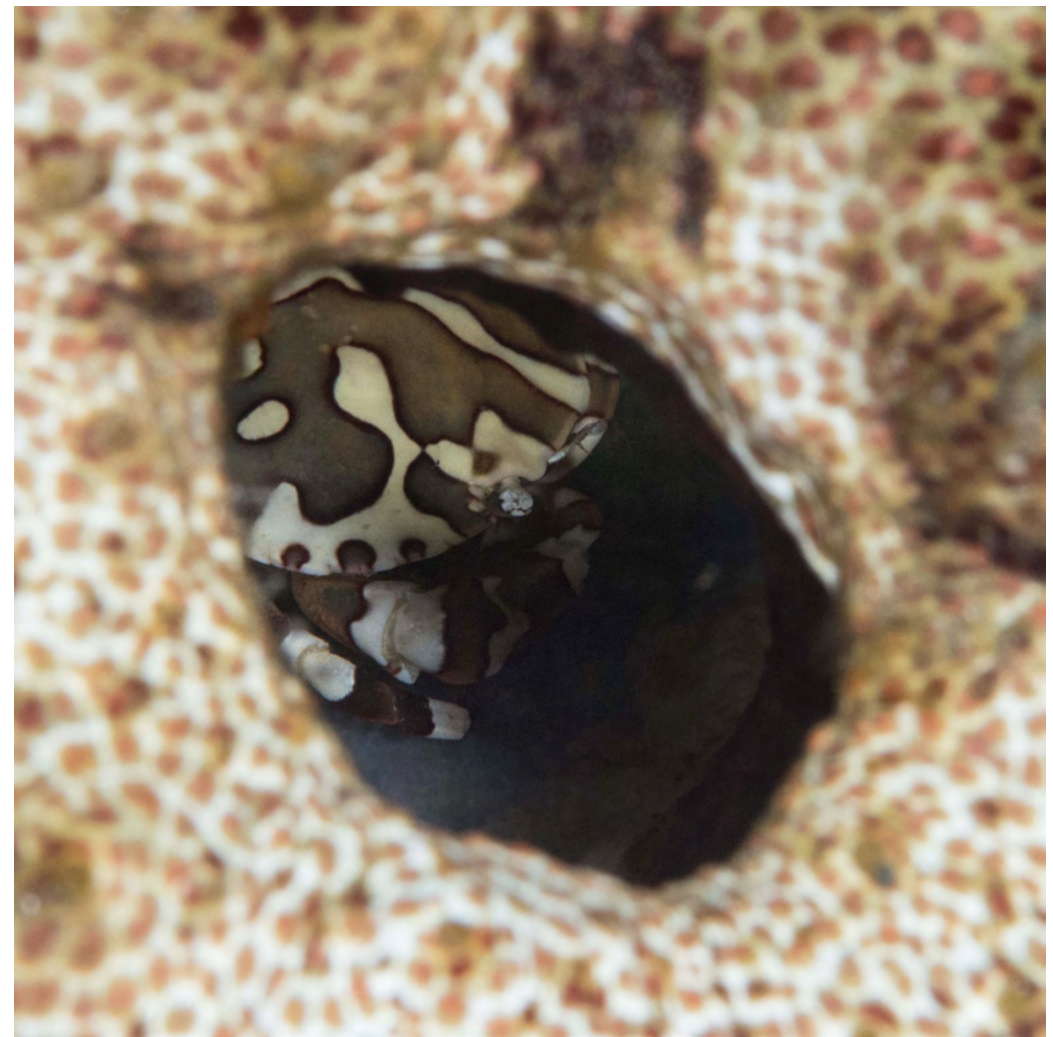
Melibe, 1/200, f22, ISO 320, 105mm Micro Nikkor. Nikon D500 in Nauticam Housing with YSD1 strobes

which kind of worked, but wasn't very natural looking.

I finally came across one on a plant raised slightly off the sand so was able to get below it and shoot at least an identifiable portrait as it spread its mantle for the hunt.

The longest I spent on one subject certainly didn't result in any competition winners, but was a fun challenge. We had been discussing pearl fish, so I was looking rather more closely than usual at the rear end of sea cucumbers. Spotting a rather large specimen, I noticed its

anus was dilating and contracting very obviously, so I moved in for a closer look. I was quite surprised to spot a sea cucumber swimming crab (that looked larger than the opening) hanging out deep inside. I just had to get a photo, but there were a few challenges, not least lighting as well as wondering what the other divers might think of my strange behaviour. In between waiting for each dilation, hoping the crab had moved into a position where the camera could see it, getting the focus right and pressing the shutter, I tried every



Sea Cucumber Swimming Crab inside Sea Cucumber Anus. 1/160, f22, ISO 640, 105mm Micro Nikkor. Nikon D500 in Nauticam Housing with YSD1 strobes

strobe position possible. Next I tried strobes off, flashlight on, but the beam was too wide and over exposed the sea cucumber. But finally, ambient light, new settings and yay, I had a photo worthy of an amateur marine

proctologist as one viewer commented later.

If, however, you or your buddy remain completely unconvinced of the joys of muck diving, this site has another side to it, just a short swim



A shy local watches the divers from the water's edge.

from your boat in the other direction. Incredibly, you will find one of the most beautiful wide angle spots here, at Deacon's Reef. The wall, with huge coral heads and sea fans, is only rivalled by the soft corals nearer to shore. Here the overhanging trees filter the light, especially mid-morning on a sunny day, sending radiating beams to serve as a background for the whips and fans. It's possible to see bigger animals here too, out in the blue off the reef, but we were so spellbound by the light and the corals, that we barely glanced that way.

I know we are not the only divers to be captured by the spell of this magical place, so don't miss it if you

find yourself in Papua New Guinea. But then again, maybe you too have found that one site somewhere else...?

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