

French Polynesia - Part 2

by Jean Michel Machefert

In the first part of this article published in the issue 108 of UWP we visited the high islands of Polynesia and especially Moorea. Now this is time to discover the low islands known as atoll.

At 350 km north east of Tahiti and after 1h of flight from the airport of Faa'a, we landed in Rangiroa, in the archipelago of the Tuamotu. The Tuamotu Archipelago with 76 atolls is really the place to go for discovering the flat islands of Polynesia.

The atoll of Rangiroa is the second largest atoll of the world (the first one is Kwajalein in the Marshall archipelago) with a length of 200km (the lagoon has a length of 80 km and a width of 32km) and a width of the coral ring always less than 300m.

The volcano at the origin of Rangiroa is aged from 61 to 65 millions of years and it is now fully eroded and covered by the lagoon with a maximal depth of 35m now. Outside of the atoll the bottom of the sea lies at a depth of 1200m.

The first settlers arrived from the west in Rangiroa around 500 A.D. and they survived by drinking the freshwater coming from the rain and stored in the soil by floating above the denser salt water trapped in the pores

of the coral rocks. The first Europeans in Rangiroa were the Dutch explorers Jacob le Maire and Willem Schouten during their 1615-1616 trip and they called this atoll "Vlieghen Island" (meaning the island of the flies). John Byron, also passed the atoll during his circumnavigation in 1765, named it "the island of the Prince of Wales".

By arriving by plane the light turquoise water of the lagoon surrounded by the dark blue water of the deep ocean and the tiny coral ring in between is really an amazing scenery.

Now this is time for diving and we stay in a "pension de famille" (boarding house) at less than 100m from the Tiputa pass and the Raie Manta diving club owned by Yves Lefevre who arrived in Rangiroa as underwater photographer and diving

The blue lagoon in Rangiroa from the sky. Nikon D2x, Tamron Tamron 18-200mm at 50 mm, 1/750, f11, ISO 200

Shoal of yellow fishes outside of the barrier in Rangiroa. Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica, Nikkor 10,5mm, 1/125, f9, ISO 200, 2 strobes nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, 1/2 and 1/4 power



instructor in 1985 and who worked with JY Cousteau during his trip in 1987, Luc Besson (on Atlantis), National Geographic and many others...

So where are we diving?

Most of the time we will go for a drift dive in the Tiputa pass is located in the northwest part of the Rangiroa lagoon (there is also second pass in Rangiroa named Avatoru pass). It is now supposed by the geologists that the passes have been built by the erosion of the reef barrier at the place of former rivers coming from the volcano at the time it was a mountain over the surface of the sea. After the disappearance of the volcano the flow continued to erode the channel dig in the reef and the coral never succeed to fill the pass.

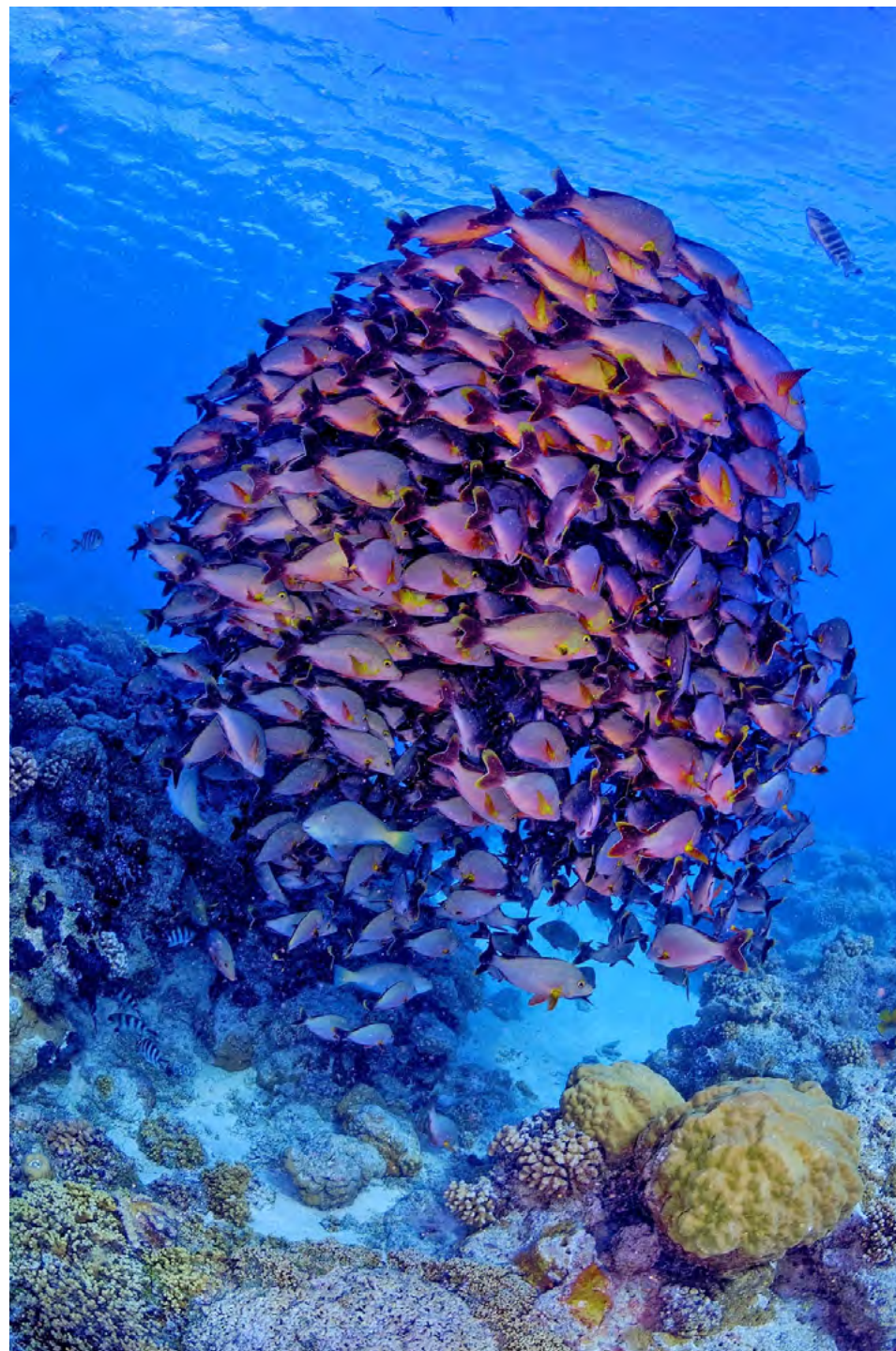
Why in the pass and not close to the reef or in the lagoon as we did in Moorea?

With a width of 300m the pass is always traversed by fast currents and they act as “marine life concentrators” since the pass is the only big communication way between the lagoon and the ocean and the majority of marine species must go through the pass in order to move from one place to the other. Some other small and shallow channels named Hoa also exist between the lagoon and the ocean but they are at the top of the reef, very shallow and not always submerged. The Hoa are



White tip shark in the pass in Tikehau, Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica, Nikkor 10,5mm, 1/160, f9, ISO200, 2 strobes nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, 1/2 and 1/4 power

Shoal of snappers inside the lagoon of Rangiroa. Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica, Nikkor 10,5mm, 1/160, f11, ISO 200, 2 strobes nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, 1/2 and 1/4 power



still important for the circulation of the marine life, but by far less than the passes.

In the Tiputa pass the dives are more demanding than in Moorea since the depth on the step outside of the pass is more than 50m and the current either entering or outgoing is very strong and the diving team need to stay together in order to be safe. Basically the dives begin more or less always at the same location at little bit outside of the reef in front of the pass but then all the dives are every time fully different. The only certainty is that the dives are always amazing!

As soon as we enter into the water the blue is everywhere! The place for dropping the diving team was choose carefully by Yves Lefevre and by Maco (very important, Maco is native from Tiputa and he is the pilot of the boat with an extensive knowledge of the currents in the pass and the habits of the fauna) and all the dive is depending on the right choice of the dropping location.

In case of entering flow, we need to wait a little bit in front of the pass for encountering the big animals. Almost every time hundreds of grey sharks are living on the step just in front of the pass but also this is the perfect place for encountering many dolphins, mantas and eagle rays, shoal of barracudas, white tip shark and even sometimes tiger sharks. In January the great hammerhead shark is also near the Tiputa pass and frequently shown.

After 10 to 20 minutes at depth from surface down to 40-50m we follow then the flow entering into the pass... we are now in a traveling movie over the bare bottom of the pass looking at hunting sharks or rays or humphead wrasse (Napoleon fish). Without many effort for swimming after 10 minutes we are at more than 1000 m from the dropping point (the bottom of the pass is perfectly adapted to the



deco profile!) in the lagoon for the last deco stop in 6 or 3m. We are in the middle of an aquarium with plenty of fishes full of colours, huge moray at cleaning station and shoal of snappers shaped like spherical ball...

In the case of outgoing flow as soon as we enter into water we then swim into the direction of the outer side of the reef and spend the dive along the wall of the pass covered by hard coral and taking the benefit of the back eddy. In such dive



(Top left) Remora in Tikehau Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica, Nikkor 10,5mm, 1/ 125, f14 , ISO 200 , 2 x Nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, 1/2 and 1/4 power
(Above) Friendly Remora. Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica, Nikkor 10,5mm, 1/ 125, f14 , ISO 200 , 2 x Nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, 1/2 and 1/4 power
(Above left) Shoals of fishes on the reef barrier in Tikehau Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica, Nikkor 10,5mm, 1/ 160, f13 , ISO 200 , 2 strobes Nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, 1/2 and 1/4 power



Moray in the lagoon of Rangiroa . Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica, Nikkor 10.5mm, 1/125, f10 , ISO 200, 2 strobes nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, 1/2 and 1/4 power

this is always possible to see some big animals, but more frequently we observe shoal of fishes, turtles, triggerfishes... beautiful!

After Rangiroa a small jump of 20 minutes by plane and we land in Tikehau. Tikehau is an atoll known to be (as J Y Cousteau said) the atoll with the richest marine life in the south pacific. The first European in Tikehau was the german-russian explorer Otto von Kotzebue who landed the 25th April 1816 and named the place Krusenstern island.

Tikehau is much smaller than Rangiroa with a lagoon having a length of 27km and a width of 19km. Tikehau is a really a small

and quiet place, we can visit thanks to the bicycles lent by the “pensions de famille” (boarding houses). No disturbance here with only 2 shops, a post office (without cash machine!) and no restaurant, no bar and not a lot of cars on the only road. The sunset in Tikehau is also beautiful with the sun going down with an orange-pink colour over the blue lagoon and the incredible pink sand covering the beaches in Tikehau (also named the island with the pink sands).

For entering into the lagoon there is only a single pass named Tuheiava and as in Rangiroa we will also dive in the pass and the surroundings with the Raie Manta club also created by



Group of dolphin out side of the reef in Rangiroa. Nikon D2x, housing Aquatica, Nikkor 10.5mm, 1/100, f9 , ISO 200 , 2 strobes nikon Sb 910, Patima housings, 1/2 and 1/4 power

Yves Lefevre and now the diving club is managed by Stéphanie and Robert.

The dives in Tikehau are different from those in Rangiroa since the pass is much smaller and shallower and the flow is also weaker. As soon as we enter into water there are plenty of shoals of fishes (mainly snappers) with every time several hundreds of specimens moving together with a perfect synchronisation. Sometimes it looks like flows of fishes following the slopes on the bottom of the sea. Really amazing and for sure J Y Cousteau was right! Also many turtles and a lot of coloured fishes leave on the bottom covered by bushes of hard coral. One

mention for the remora. In Tikehau they are really friendly and they love to be driven for free by the divers and many times you can see some of them bonded on the tanks and even better directly on the suits.

But this is not the only show. We still are in or just in front of a pass and the sharks are also interested by the fishes and since the space in the pass is narrower and the depth shallower than in Rangiroa. Hence the sharks are coming very close to the divers without feeding and we had the chance to dive close to a big white tip shark and the cherry on the cake a big hammerhead shark came slowly between us at the right

*Detail of the reef in
Tikehau, Nikon D2x,
housing Aquatica, Nikkor
10,5mm, 1/ 160, f11 , ISO
200 , 2 strobes nikon Sb
910, Patima housings, 1/8
and 1/4 power*



distance for a nice observation and of course a picture. Really a unique and unforgettable dive.

What to conclude? all the islands are fully different and almost unique. Each location we visited was beautiful either under the sea and on the land with nice and friendly people always having solutions for the daily problems tourists could have. Here everything seems to be easy and smooth.

So after being in the French Polynesia we have only one question: when will we be back ? and we hope that the answer is: as soon as possible !



***Jean Michel with a Hei Matau hook!
Picture Marie Machefert***

Jean Michel began to dive in caves, lakes and the oceans in 1987. He started underwater photography in 1992 using a Nikonos IV. After many years with a Nikon D70 he now uses a Nikon D2x in an Aquatica housing with 2 Nikon SB910 strobes in Patima housing.

Jean Michel Machefert
www.jmfrog.com



Issue 109/59



Since 1993, Raie Manta Club Tikehau offers the best dives in Tikehau - French Polynesia, Enjoy different dives with experienced guides, photographers and videographers welcome !

FRENCH POLYNESIA - TIKEHAU

www.raiemantaclub.com

Kit for sale

If you're looking for a specific piece of kit, enter a keyword (e.g. flash, housing, Ikelite, etc.) to show only the adverts you want.

Search UWP adverts



FOR SALE – SET of Sea & Sea YS 250 PRO

SET of Sea & Sea YS 250 PRO, incl.diffusers and TCL ball mounts, 2x batteries, 2x chargers (EU and UK). 5-pin Dual Sync cord-1pc, 5-pin Sync Cord N-2pc, 2sets - Double Ball Arm L and M, YS-TTL Converter, spare ... [More >](#)



FOR SALE – Sea Frogs Panasonic GH5 housing, flat and dome port

Brand new and never taken underwater, 40 metre Sea Frogs (formerly Meikon) housing for the Panasonic GH5. Flat port for macro lenses and dome port for wide angle. No zoom or manual focus controls. Prefer sale in the UK and ... [More >](#)



FOR SALE – Aquatica Macro Port & 2 x Sea & Sea YS -120 Duo Strobes

Aquatica Macro Port (Manual & Autofocus) for any DSLR Aquatica housing with the 4 lugs bayonet fitting. £180. Sea & Sea YS -120 Duo Strobes with instructions & one Diffuser they are in good used condition and in full working ... [More >](#)



FOR SALE – Nauticam Na-d800 Housing for Nikon D800

Nauticam Na-d800 Housing for Nikon D800 Excellent condition. Full overall by Nauticam in December 2017, not in the water since. Vacuum check; electronic monitoring circuit installed, no vacuum system. 2000 euros + shipping ... [More >](#)



FOR SALE – Nauticam flat ports and lenses Sony 28mm and 90mm

Nauticam flat port for Sony 28mm + sony lens 28mm +Nauticam flat port for Sony 90mm + sony lens 90mm+Nauticam trigger flash for sony. SOLD Can be sold separately. Total price 1260€ (does not include insurance and shipping) ... [More >](#)



FOR SALE – SEA & SEA MM2 U/W CAMERA WITH ACCESSORIES

SEA & SEA MM2 U/W CAMERA WITH ACCESSORIES: - Yellow SUB 50 TTL strobe / arm extension - SEA & SEA 16mm Wide angle lens MM-2 - SEA & SEA Macro lens ML-2/3T plus attachments - Removable view finder - ... [More >](#)



FOR SALE – Nikon D500 + Hugaft D500 setup

This one year old set of equipment is in excellent working condition and will serve great to a new owner. The reason for sale is a switch to a new equipment. Nikon D500 (19k clicks). Sigma 10mm F2.8 Fish Eye. 128Gb XQD Lexar ... [More >](#)

Please support our advertisers and help keep UWP free.

Magic Filters

BACKSCATTER
UNDERWATER VIDEO & PHOTO

KELDAN
Advanced Lighting Technology

OCEAN LEISURE CAMERAS

Nauticam
臨天海

ULTRA LIGHT
CONTROL SYSTEMS

Ikelite

XLOK
DIVERS

REEF
PHOTO & VIDEO

WETPIXEL.COM
digital imaging for divers

SEA&SEA
THE UNDERWATER IMAGING COMPANY

DivePhotoGuide

wakatobi

ACQUAPAZZA

UW CAMERA STORE

Nauticam
innovation underwater

Magic Filters

Small Ads

Sell your stuff You'll be amazed at just how quickly your unwanted underwater photography kit could be converted into hard cash with a UWP small ad. You can have your own UWP small ad from just £7.50 and it can have one photo as well as up to 100 words.

Check out small ads here

Buy your small ad here