

Papua New Guinea

-The Perfect Location?

by Don Silcock

A friend of mine once defined the perfect dive trip location as a place you could get to in a day or less, and once there dive on world-class sites from a first-class live-aboard boat. For most Australians, and come to think of it other most residents of SE Asia, Papua New Guinea has to be a prime contender for the title of the “perfect location”.

There are so many places to dive in PNG, and so much to see, that it pays to do your research and decide what kind of diving you really want to do, as each location offers so many different opportunities.

Milne Bay, at the southeastern tip of the main island of PNG is probably the best known of the diving areas and was pioneered by Bob Halstead, and his wife Dinah, on their boat MV Telita in the mid 1980's. Since then other areas such as Kimbe Bay and Rabaul on the island of New Britain, and Kavieng on New Ireland, have been pioneered by people like Max Benjamin at Walindi Plantation and Alan Raabe on MV FeBrina.

For me (a wannabee underwater photographer) on my third trip to PNG in as many years, I was looking for wide-angle reef scenes, World War II wrecks, large marine creatures and a liberal sprinkling of “macro critters”. Milne Bay seemed to offer all this and more....

In theory you can leave Sydney in the morning, transit through Port Moresby, arrive onboard that evening and wake up to diving in Milne Bay the next morning. However flight connections always seem to work against me and the thought of arriving at Gurney Airport, Milne Bay's airport at the town of Alotao, eager and ready to dive but minus camera gear & dive equipment does not really appeal.

So for this trip I decided that the best option would be to split my diving between Loloata Island just outside of PNG's capital Port Moresby and Milne Bay onboard MV Chertan for 10 days.



Deacon's Reef, Milne Bay. Named by Bob Halstead after one of his guests in the early days of the Telita expeditions, Deacon's is a superb example of the reefs that Milne Bay has to offer. The guest was Kev Deacon the very accomplished Australian underwater photographer who owns Dive 2000 in Sydney and who has been coming to PNG for nearly 20 years. Kev is also the guy who helped me more than anybody else to use a camera underwater and therefore responsible for my current overdraft...

Nikon 801s & 20mm lens in Subal housing - manual. Twin Ikelite 225 strobes on manual. Provia 100 film - 1/60 @ f8

Loloata was a great opportunity to get my diving & photographic skills back in shape before hitting the exceptional diving in Milne Bay. It would also allow me to ensure that when I got on board Chertan I was doing so with all of my gear intact and ready to go...

Loloata

Loloata is an island resort run by Australian expatriates Dik Knight and Dave McDonald, located 10 minutes by boat from Bootless Bay just outside Port Moresby. Originally set up as a weekend retreat, to cater for the large expatriate community in Moresby, Loloata now caters mainly for divers like me transiting through the capital on their way to other parts of PNG.

Trust me on this - Port Moresby is not the sort of place for a quiet evening stroll to find a nice bar for a few quiet beers. Personal security is an issue, but not something to get paranoid about, it just means staying within the grounds of one of the two airport hotels, the Airways or Gateway and catching the first flight the next day. Loloata offers a great alternative to this, as you can literally be relaxing with a cold drink on the island about 45 minutes after clearing customs & immigration at the airport and waking up to an early morning dive the next day.

Onward flights to Milne Bay are generally in the afternoon, so spending a few days at Loloata combined with some careful flight & dive planning allows you to really maximize your dive time.

The diving at Loloata can be exceptional when the conditions are right, and vary



Nikon 801s & 20mm lens in Subal housing - manual. Twin Ikelite 225 strobes on manual. Provia 100 film - 1/60 @ f8



Nikon 801s & 105mm lens in Subal housing - manual. Sea & Sea 90 & 30 strobes on TTL. Velvia 50 film - 1/60 @ f16

from superb reefs – my favorites are Suzie’s Bommy & Di’s Delight, to wrecks like the 65m long tanker Pacific Gas & an A20 WW2 Havoc bomber to muck diving at Lion Island. All the diving is done from two purpose built 9m aluminium dive boats and is scheduled around two dives in the morning when the conditions are generally at their best, with a single dive available in the afternoon depending on the weather followed by a night dive on one of the more sheltered locations.

The whole operation is well run and the dive staff go out of their way to find those special critters, such as the Rhinopias (Lacy Scorpion Fish) that have made Loloata the PNG epicenter for this spectacular and very photogenic fish.



Giants @ Home cleaning station. In just 10m of water, 100m off the shore is the best dive I have ever done - if you like mantas (and I love them) this is the place for you. Not only can you dive with them on scuba, but they are not intimidated by either you or your bubbles and will come in so close that you wish you had invested in the full frame fish-eye....

Nikon 801s & 20mm lens in Subal housing - manual. Twin Ikelite 225 strobes on manual (1/4 power). Provia 100 film - 1/60 @ f11

Chertan

There is a framed photograph of Chertan displayed in the boat’s dining area, it features a rainbow, which forms a magnificent backdrop to the boat at anchor in Milne Bay. Tom Campbell, the famous video producer, took the photograph and signed the words

“To MV Chertan, the best diving and dive operation – anywhere”.

I wish I had the experience to agree or disagree with Tom Campbell, but I can tell you that I thoroughly enjoyed my 10 days on Chertan. I have been on bigger and more luxurious boats but I have never been on a boat where I felt so much at home. This is a real “diver’s boat”, or to be more accurate it is a real underwater photographer’s boat and what makes it that way is the skipper & owner Rob

Vanderloos, his wife Peo and the crew.

In a nutshell they go out of their way to show you the superb reefs & wonderful critters that make Milne Bay so special. Whether you want to dive with the manta rays at their cleaning station mantas@home or the myriad of wonderful macro critters that PNG “muck diving” is so well known for - Chertan’s the boat for you!

Rob is an accomplished stills & video photographer, the author of Living Reefs Of The Indo-Pacific and has 17 years of experience diving in Milne Bay. He is also a true gentleman with a great sense of humor and an intuitive understanding of customer satisfaction.

On my to do list for this trip was to actually see, and then photograph, the holy grail of macro underwater photography -

the pygmy seahorse. I explained to Rob how much time I had spent hypnotizing gorgonian fans vainly trying to capture these tiny but incredibly photogenic creatures. Rob’s response was to make sure that I was able to put a “done” tick next to the pygmies, even though it took three different locations to track them down. But it wasn’t a case of here they are – see you back on the boat, he showed me how to get them in position and photograph them. No easy task at 20m with a strong current running and the pygmies seem to be able to move to the other side of the fan 2 nanoseconds before you press the shutter!

Onboard Chertan during my trip were Roger Steene & Scott Michael, two very accomplished underwater photographers. Roger, in particular, seems to have been everywhere at least



once and all the “hot-spots” many times over in his 40+ years of underwater photography. I asked Roger why he liked Milne Bay so much as he was doing two back-to-back trips that time and had done the same thing four months previously! His answer was that Milne Bay has almost everything you would want to see and that man (pointing to Rob Vanderloos) makes sure you get to see it!

I couldn't agree more....

Don Silcock

Located in 50m of water off the romantically named Boga Boga village, the wreck of the WW2 B17 Flying Fortress bomber is a great, if fairly short dive. There are many wrecks in Milne Bay but this has to be one of the best as it is in pretty good condition considering it was crashed landed in the sea over 50 years ago. For more background information check out the following link:

<http://www.divetheworld.com/Stories/BlackJack/INDEX.htm>

Nikon 801s & 20mm lens in Subal housing - manual. Provia 100 film pushed to 400 ASA - 1/60 @ f4

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