

Loloata Lacy's and more

by Nigel Marsh

I am sure every underwater photographer has their wish list of subjects. One of those subjects on my list was a lacy scorpionfish - the amazing Rhinopias. On a recent trip to Loloata Island Resort in Papua New Guinea I got my lacy on the first day, but on the last day of our trip I got something much higher up my wish list that was entirely unexpected.

You don't generally associate the capital city of most countries with great diving, but the Papua New Guinea capital of Port Moresby is ringed by coral reefs and offers some of the best diving to be found in the country. Diving Port Moresby is centred around Bootless Bay, where the wonderful Loloata Island Resort is located. The resort is only thirty minutes from the airport and was established over thirty years ago by one of the pioneers of diving Papua New Guinea, Dik Knight. Dik still manages the resort, with the assistance of fifty staff, and is a wealth of knowledge about local diving. The resort is a little piece of paradise off Port Moresby and features 23 cabins, a conference centre, bar, shop, large dining area and dive centre.

The dive centre on Loloata Island

is managed by Franco Tolewa, with the able assistance of Roy, Kity and Henry. From the minute you arrive on the island the dive team look after you and your gear, you only touch your dive gear to put it on for a dive. They operate two 10m long Reefmaster dive boats, each catering for ten divers, and with padded room for cameras, and have over thirty dive sites for divers to explore around Bootless Bay. Diving is possible year round in Bootless Bay, during our stay we enjoyed 15m to 30m visibility and the water was a lovely 29°C.

I was very impressed by the diving around Bootless Bay from the very first dive at Suzie's Bommie, the main problem I had each day was deciding on which lens to use. This wonderful dive site is a tower of coral, rising from 40m to 12m and

Loloata Island in Bootless Bay, Nikon D90, 18-55mm lens, 1/400, f10, ISO 200.

Colourful soft corals decorate the reefs off Loloata Island, Nikon D90, Ikelite Housing, 10-17mm lens, 1/100, f9, ISO 400 and single Inon Z240 strobe.





A yawning lacy scorpionfish at Baldwin's Bommie, Nikon D90, Ikelite Housing, 60mm lens, 1/125, f13, ISO 200 and single Inon Z240 strobe.

covered in colourful gorgonians, soft corals and sponges. I went with the macro lens on the first day as I was after my lacy scorpionfish, which meant I missed out on photographing the Maori wrasse, groppers, white tip reef sharks and schools of trevally, fusiliers and diagonal-banded sweetlips. But the macro lens was perfect to photograph leaf scorpionfish, porcelain crabs, anemonefish and clingfish sitting in featherstars.

After photographing olive sea

snakes, long-nose hawkfish and a snowflake moray eel at The Big Drop we had an afternoon dive at Baldwin's Bommie. Franco had promised me a lacy scorpionfish at this site, so I couldn't wait to get into the water. This bommie, like all the sites we dived in Bootless Bay, was covered in wonderful corals and reef fish. The top of the bommie is at 14m and this is where I spent most of my time as here were anemonefish, nudibranchs, octopus, gobies, blennies, hawkfish and two very colourful stonefish. But



A long-nose hawkfish at The Big Drop, Nikon D90, Ikelite Housing, 60mm lens, 1/125, f13, ISO 200 and single Inon Z240 strobe.

the highlight was the spectacular lacy scorpionfish. Our guide Kity had to point the lacy scorpionfish out to us or we would never have seen it with its very cryptic camouflage. I was even lucky enough to capture a yawn only a minute after I started photographing this amazing fish.

The next day it was time to bring out the wide angle lens for a dive on the Pacific Gas wreck. This 65m long ship was scuttled in 1986 and varies in depth from 45m under the stern to 15m at the bow. I did three

dives to explore the ship and was amazed by the corals and fish life on the ship. But of the three dives the night dive was the best. Descending on the bow we turned off our torches for a very special experience that no camera could record. Gathered around a hatch, where an unearthly glow could be seen, I peered inside to see countless flickering lights ñ flashlight fish! For the next five minutes I was mesmerised as the fish slowly emerged from the hatch and spread across the ship lighting it up like a



Olive sea snakes are common on the reefs off Loloata Island, Nikon D90, Ikelite Housing, 60mm lens, 1/80, f13, ISO 200 and single Inon Z240 strobe.



A snowflake moray eel at The Big Drop, Nikon D90, Ikelite Housing, 60mm lens, 1/100, f14, ISO 200 and single Inon Z240 strobe.



Exploring the stern of the Pacific Gas wreck, Nikon D90, Ikelite Housing, 10-17mm lens, 1/50, f8, ISO 800 and single Inon Z240 strobe.

Christmas tree. A truly amazing experience that I will never forget.

During the week I was at Loloata Island Resort I dived a wonderful variety of dive sites. At End Bommie there were white tip reef sharks and a huge collection of anemones and anemonefish. Another impressive site was Di's Delight where row upon row of spectacular gorgonians are found, at this site I also saw a pygmy sea horse and a leopard shark.

One of my favourite reef dives was Lillian's Patch, which had coral gardens and masses of sea whips. Kity found three pygmy sea horses here, but I also photographed nudibranchs, octopus, a crocodilefish and a pair of parrotfish having a fight. I enjoyed this reef so much that I returned at night to see its nocturnal critters. Crabs, shrimps, moray eels, cuttlefish, slipper crabs, leaf scorpionfish and epaulette sharks were the highlights of a very memorable night dive.

For a bit of muck diving I did a few dives

around Lion Island. At a site appropriately called Lion Island Muck, we searched the sand and sea grass beds and found mantis shrimps, bobbit worms, razorfish, sea pens, shrimp gobies, snake eels, upside down sea jellies, sea stars and numerous anemones home to anemonefish and shrimps. Lion Island also has two wonderful wrecks, the former tug boat MV Tuart and former trawler MV New Marine 6. Both these ships are now covered in corals and home to a range of critters; including pipefish, nudibranchs, flatworms, moray eels, shrimps and numerous reef fish. On the sand around this wrecks were also crocodilefish, gobies and even a cockatoo waspfish.

Another favourite site was the MV Pai II wreck, a prawn trawler that now rests in 27m. There is plenty of structure to explore on the ship, but the colourful corals and marine life are its most memorable features. I landed on the stern of the ship to find a fat tasselled wobbegong shark

lazing on the deck, then ducking under the stern to encounter a large estuary groper and a Maori wrasse. Throughout the rest of the dive on the wreck I saw batfish, mangrove jacks, fusiliers, lionfish and numerous long-nose hawfish.

I had hoped to see another lacy scorpionfish before my week was over, so on the last day had put on my macro lens once again. We then headed to a site called The Finger and just before we entered the water Franco informed me that this was a sharky spot, but also prone to currents. He was right on both counts.

For ten minutes we struggled against the current trying to reach a string of bommies at the end of The Finger, but eventually had to turn back and retreat to the mooring. We were just about to abort the dive when Franco indicated for us to head over to the other side of the reef. This we did to find little current and a very pretty wall. In only a few minutes gliding along this wall we had seen a white



Numerous lionfish are found on the MV Pai II wreck, Nikon D90, Ikelite Housing, 10-17mm lens, 1/100, f8, ISO 320 and single Inon Z240 strobe.

tip reef shark, a spotted eagle ray, trevally, mackerel and a Maori wrasse. A curious grey reef shark also buzzed us for several minutes.

Then the unexpected happened, up ahead we could see a shape cruising along the wall. At first I thought it was a hammerhead, then I suddenly realized it was something much rarer, a shark ray or bowmouth guitarfish! I was stunned, this ray was top of my wish list, very few divers have ever seen one and only a handful of pictures exist of one photographed

in the wild.

The ray was around 2m long and looked very primitive with its round head and thorny ridges, and it was heading straight for us! It was at this point I almost cried, why had I put my macro lens on today. Damn! But I wasn't going to let this creature just swim by, I quickly dropped my f-stop and shot two quick images as it glided by and disappeared into the blue.

We all surfaced from that dive on a high, none of us had ever seen a shark ray before and we had some 10,000 dives between us. I also



A cleaned up image of the shark ray we encountered at The Finger, Nikon D90, Ikelite Housing, 60mm lens, 1/100, f7.1, ISO 200 and single Inon Z240 strobe.

discovered that I had missed seeing the two great hammerheads that buzzed Franco, but I didn't care as I had seen a much rarer shark ray. The two images are not the best, lots of backscatter and poor composition, but they bring back memories of a wonderful week of encounters at Loloata Island.

Nigel Marsh

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