

New Frontiers
By Jeanne Liebetrau and Peter Pinnock



Papua New Guinea is just waiting to be explored. In 1930 villages were discovered in the highlands whose inhabitants had never seen civilization and had never even heard of the invention of the wheel. There are few roads, no railways and limited air travel. Transport between the 1400 or more islands is by boat, the only affordable ones being hand carved wooden outriggers. It's this lack of development that allows the true beauty of Mother Nature to shine in the many of the coral reefs.



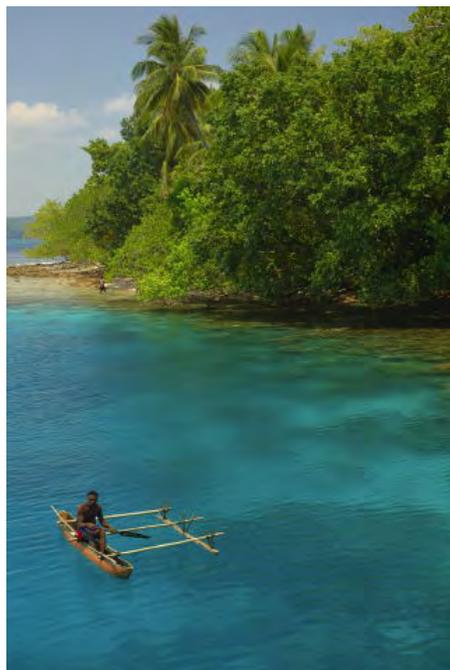
The north of New Britain Island is well known for its outstanding dive sites, however from January to March monsoons bring wind and rains that affect the diving conditions. The south of the island is remote, undeveloped, uncharted and protected from these monsoons by huge mountain ranges. Recently the liveaboard dive vessel, Stardancer, made a few trips along the south coast finding some virgin reefs, exotic fish, Bohemian critters, World War II wreckages, extreme walls and challenging channels. Yet there is still more to be discovered.

The 10 day trip aboard Stardancer departs from Rabaul, a town considered the 'Pearl of the Pacific' until 1994, when the 2 volcanoes on the perimeter of Simpson harbour erupted simultaneously smothering her in 5m of ash. Even as we depart from Rabaul volcano Tuvurvur blasts a cloud of ash and rocks into the atmosphere. First stop along the south coast is Waterfall Bay. As the crew set up the mooring lines outrigger canoes gather to watch, yielding the same fascination that we would have if a spaceship landed in





our back yard. They soon become known as the 'staring committee' welcoming us at each new dive site.



The ocean is an unbelievable seductive azure blue that one only reads about. For the dive brief we all peer over the side of the boat as the distinctive features on the bommie below are described. In the shallows stony hard corals grow with confidence. Anemones thrive nestled between coral boulders. There's a variety of anemone fish including the vivaciously coloured clown; the post-box red spine-cheek and even the ambiguous bonnet anemone fish – is it a hybrid or not? Heading into deeper water the classical Pacific Ocean beauty unravels– large gorgonian seafans, huge barrel and leather sponges, colourful crinoids and tunicates, long whip corals and delicate soft corals. The sea is so calm I can hear my bubbles explode as they break on the surface. The fish are skittishly wary of our alien presence. Oscar, the dive-guide, tugs on my fins to get my

attention. Right in front of me is a brilliant green black rhinopias frondosa more commonly known as lacy scorpionfish. This is not a common fish. In fact the second specimen ever was discovered in PNG in 1980. Here I was seeing one on my first dive in PNG. Despite it's striking colours it is well camouflaged resembling reef debris or algae. Only the mirror-like eyes are a dead giveaway.

Later we explore a boring looking sandy slope inhabited by an astonishing amount of critters. Dozens of shrimp and goby combos are performing earthworks refashioning the slope for community living. Goby heads pop up all over the slope as they survey the landscape while their blind shrimp companions shovel sand and debris from their tunnels. A rotting log forms home for some scribbled pipefish. Nearby, an aesthetically compromised Caledonian devilfish walks on talons instead of fins. His hostile looking spines and fins send me in search of something friendlier but instead I





find an aggressive panda anemone fish chasing anything that comes within 5m. I never saw the school of eagle rays that supposedly glided overhead.

Further down the coast is Gasmata Bay, a huge natural bay protected by a fringing reef. Beyond the reef wall lies the Solomon Sea and the Solomon Trench, one of the worlds deepest trenches. Upwellings from the trench bring nutrient rich waters to the coastline and consequently good fish life. Stardancer spends a few days in Gasmata exploring the area. The general dive plan is for 2



outside reef or channel dives in the morning optimizing the good lighting for photographers and then muck dives in the afternoon and night dives inside the bay. Channel dives on an incoming tide are very exciting. There is plenty of fish action as the fusiliers and anthias planktivores feed in the current and in turn are fed upon by the carnivorous kingfish and jacks. The entrances are patrolled by schools of barracuda, mackerel and tuna. Occasionally a shy reef shark swims by. I can never understand why creatures at the top of the food chain are so wary. A series of bommies in the middle of the channels provides shelter from the currents. In the sand gullies shy garden eels retreat into the sands as soon as divers approach while the sand anemones, sea cucumbers and seastars can't escape closer scrutiny. One exceptionally large green seapen catches my eye. The stem is the size of my wrist. The central column forms the foundation of an



apartment building. Every level is occupied by tiny porcelain crabs while a many-host goby plays caretaker using the main stem as an elevator to all levels. This is communal living at its best.





The water temperature is a balmy 28 degrees. Wonderful, I thought. Alan Raabe, one of the owners, was not so enthusiastic about the temperature. "We need the cold water to bring back the critters". Alan swears that Harlequin Ghost pipefish move on if warm water prevails and this seemed to be true – they were conspicuously absent from their known sites. The frog fish too, were absent from their usual hideouts but there was still an endless supply of unusual critters. For example in Gasmata Bay there are quite a few mandarin lairs. It's only at dusk when the mandarins begin their mating rituals that they

can be clearly seen. The male and female rise in unison above their coral rubble home to spawn, their dorsal fins erect and colours blazing. Even though the sexual encounter is over in an instant, the lucky male may mate with more than one female per night, but for the females one male a night is enough. This gives photographers a second chance. As night descends upon the reef it's time to search for other critters. A bobtail squid smaller than a ping pong ball curls up in a hole; a sand octopus chases after a likely meal; goat fish forage using their chin barbels churning up the sand and leaf rot. I spot a sudden movement - a juvenile lizard fish has taken advantage of my torchlight and grabs a fish momentarily blinded by the light. It looks like the voracious predator has bitten off more than he could chew; the hapless victim is half his size. But he persevered and slowly the still wriggling fish is engulfed.



During WW2 Gasmata Bay was occupied by the Japanese as a seaplane base. The many rivers running into the bay and the dense vegetation created natural hiding places for



the planes. One sea plane didn't make it back to base safely and is lying upside down in 22m water. One wing is missing but the two bombs are still intact in the bomb bays. Little is known about its history. Almost underneath the wing tip some tiny pygmy seahorses are entwined in a muricella seafan. These days Lindenhafen Fishing Retreat is the only civilization in the area. Operators John and Sharyn Scallan welcome guests ashore for a traditional Papua New Guinean sing-sing. Locals spend days weaving



leaves and flowers together to create exotic outfits. The sing-sing is led by men carrying the chief in a sedan chair. They are surrounded by warriors bearing painted wooden swords and spears, some beating kundus drums and women and children dressed in nature's finery. It's a colourful spectacle.

The ambience on board Stardancer belies an energetic diving holiday. There is no limit to dive times. The dive tender 'Magic Bus' is always nearby to pick up divers. The dive guides know their sites well and their trained eyes find critters easily. Chef Andrew has a passion for creating gourmet meals despite the difficulty obtaining supplies. Service is outstanding. Alan refers to Stardancer as a 'floating hotel - sailing only on calm seas'



On calm seas Stardancer heads back up the coast stopping at the Duke of York Islands in the channel between New Britain and New Ireland. The diving here is also superb with rich seamounts rising to a few meters below the surface. The mounds are interspersed by valleys of fans and barrel sponges. Close to an island are 2 Japanese Chi-ha tanks. There is much speculation as to how these came to



rest parallel to a cliff face in 4m of water. Word has it that the Japanese were bombed whilst towing them aboard a barge, but the gun turrets are missing and it's more likely they were dumped after the war. The final dive is on the wreck Atune, a fishing wreck purposefully sunk in 1998. A school of batfish have taken up position as the new crew operating from the wheelhouse as they observe the new growth taking place on the wreck.

PNG land right customs are complicated and Alan isn't having an easy time negotiating with locals for dive rites. Luckily he has lived in PNG long enough to know not to give up. Stardancer will continue to find new frontiers in PNG. Perhaps after more exploration the unimaginatively named sites could be renamed. 'Pygmy paradise' sounds better

than 'the reef'; 'gold rush' instead of 'the channel' or 'the wall' could become 'way out wall'. I leave that for intrepid new explorers to decide.



Info

Location: NE from Australia 0 -14 ° south of equator

Language: English is widely spoken or Pidgin English

Visas: a 30 day visitor's visa is required

Currency: Kina

Water temp: 24-30 degrees

Web sites:- http://www.peterhughes.com/star/Star_dancerindex.shtml

For more underwater images and stories visit <http://www.PeterPinnock.com>