



THE RHINOPIAS CULT

By Jeanne Liebetrau and Peter Pinnock

As Greg surfaced he yelled excitedly, "Wow that was absolutely awesome!" Franco, the dread-locked dive master asks, "Did you find one?" "No! Not one - three!" I look at Greg skeptically. Divers are like fishermen - always bragging about what they can't prove. "What colours?" "Brown, black and green" he answers with a grin. Gazing at him I think, 'how can a grown man get so excited about finding a fish?'



Dive Pacific

Loloata I island, Papua New Guinea, is home to many unusual underwater creatures that are rare elsewhere in the world. Dik Knight has been managing a successful resort and dive operation on the island for more than 25 years. Just as game parks have information boards showing the locality and nature of great sightings, so too does



Loloata. Only these sightings are not of the big five, but of diminutive sized creatures. Rhinopias species, pygmy sea horses, harlequin ghost pipefish and long-nose hawkfish are but a few of the extraordinary fish frequently sighted. This has created a cult following of diving enthusiasts -

Greg being one such person.

Rhinopias species, otherwise known as the leafy scorpionfish, are covered with lacy appendages, extra skin flaps and bedraggled tassels. They exhibit mottled colour variations from a dark green (almost black) through a range of browns and oranges to soft pinks. Rhinopias are extreme masters of camouflage resembling



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a patch of seaweed or a clump of debris. By exploiting their disguise they are able to get within a gobble distance of their prey. One big suck and in goes the unsuspecting fish. They are rather lazy - choosing not to swim but rather lurch themselves along the reef.

Even when armed with the known facts, finding the Rhinopias has been likened to

finding the Holy Grail. Rhinopias can be found between 5 and 30 meters depth and anywhere from NE Australia to Japan - that is a lot of ocean!

Loloata Island lies in the heart of Bootless Bay, 20 minutes from Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea. Early explorers referred to the bay as bootless (or useless) as it was too shallow for their boats to anchor. Little did they know of the major ecosystems a few meters below. The bay abounds with spectacular reef systems.

Loloata offers a variety of dives from diving in sea grass meadows looking for critters such as seahorses and ghost pipefish to diving on sandbanks where upside-down-jellyfish, squid, shrimp and goby combos and sand anemones reside. Gentle sloping reefs, rocky reefs and coral reefs are pristine with soft and hard



corals and sea life. Offshore pinnacles buzz with big pelagic fish action and sharks are aplenty. Wrecks have been purposefully sunken in sheltered areas creating new dive opportunities. Even whales and mantas are found in the big blue beyond the reefs. There is no visible diver or anchor damage as all sites have underwater moorings. The diversity is remarkable.

On the dive boat not only are state-of-



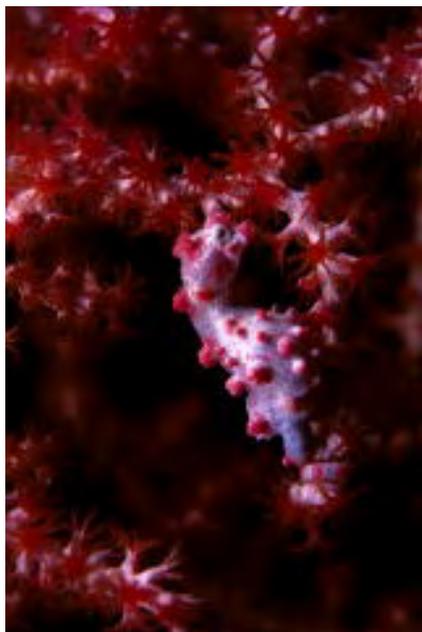
the-art cameras lying around but also pointers, torches and magnifying glasses. These divers are well equipped for their quest to find the unusual or undiscovered. The secret lies in knowing where to look and to have endless patience. Even though Franco knows these sites intimately, some creatures remain near impossible to find. Franco indicates that its time for the cult followers to gear up for the next hunt.



Pygmy Seahorses are next on the list. Theoretically these should be slightly easier to find as the playing fields have been narrowed down to the *Muricella* species of gorgonian fan but unfortunately not every *Muricella* fan has a resident pygmy. Armed with magnifying glasses, pointers and torches, it is possible to find pygmies, the only problem is that the maximum size an adult attains is only 2cm, (imagine the size of the young).

Franco's dreadlocks bob in the water as he pans over a fan with his torch. He points to something. I squint hard but can only see the bumpy fronds of the fan. Then one frond changes position! It's a pygmy sea horse. I gesticulate wildly to my dive buddy. Armed with camera he swims over. I point to the frond. He looks. I look. I get a hand

signal that is vaguely interpreted as "you must be marked". Frustrating minutes pass. Then I find the pygmy again a little further along the fan. I proudly point him out to my buddy. Seconds later the tiny seahorse jolts as my buddies' finger squeezes his camera shutter and blasts the fan with artificial light from his strobes.



Loloata serves Melanesian lunches at the resort after the 2 morning dives. Seated around a communal table conversations automatically steer towards the sightings of the day. Oblivious to the discussions a *Maganis* (species of tree kangaroo) and blue pigeons, the world's largest pigeon, scratch around for crumbs. On Friday nights a sing-sing is performed by the children of the local fishing village. A sing-sing is a celebratory festival. Traditional costumes of grass skirts, elaborate headdresses and painted bodies are

part of the enchanting attire. Kina shells, once used as currency, are proudly worn as



jewelry. Flamboyant headdresses adorned with brilliantly coloured feathers are shown off in the simple dance numbers. After the performance I head to my stilt cabin above the mangroves. The rhythm of the ocean lapping below lulls me to sleep dreaming of Rhinopias and pygmy seahorses.



The next morning Franco gives the dive briefing. Pacific Gas is a wreck scuttled in 1986 in the lee of Horseshoe reef. The depth stretches from 9 to 45 meters. Franco adds that it is home to harlequin ghost pipefish – the quest for the day. But as I descend I find the kaleidoscope of colours and fish action so distracting that it's difficult to focus on finding something only 5cm big. Bouquets of soft corals cascade from the intact mast. Purple and orange anthias swarm around the corals. Giant ignoblis (kingfish) patrol the decks for easy prey.

Schools of fusiliers and jack fish congregate in mass around the wheelhouse. I notice a cameraman flashing madly at a small crinoid. What could be so interesting? In amongst the fronds of the crinoid a harlequin ghost pipefish moves gently, mimicking the crinoid's every movement. The dive ends with a decompression stop accompanied by a school of playful batfish.

'Quales Reef' also has resident Rhinopias and harlequin ghost pipefish but I am so overwhelmed by the astounding beauty of this reef that I leave the painstaking macro searching for Greg and his mates. Suzie's is named after a German who took too long in descending for a dive and drifted on to a different reef. The reef is a plethora of corals. Schools of brilliant yellow oriental sweetlips and bright red snappers hover above the reef. Large lionfish congregate near schools of glassies. Enormous gorgonian sea-fans brace the gentle current filtering for plankton. A feather star perches on the end of a brilliant red sea whip gaining the best vantage for passing food.





The nearby Lion I island is the preferred site for night dives. It's a well protected sandy slope ranging from 3 to 25 meters. Visibility is seldom good, but that is immaterial on night dives. I follow Franco across a sea-grass meadow stopping to play with some clownfish living in a sand anemone. From underneath the

anemone folds porcelain crabs scoop passing plankton with their fine net traps. Further on two robust pipefish waft in unison with the sea-grass. Franco continues towards the wreck of an old fishing barge. Inside the wreck hundreds of hinge-beaked shrimps and glass shrimps flit around. Arrow crabs emerge from the sanctity of the soft corals while a juvenile harlequin ghost pipefish takes refuge on the rusting bow. The decrepit barge is charged with activity. Returning to the mooring I hesitantly swim over a stonefish. I remind myself that good visibility is not necessarily a prerequisite for a good dive.



We return to 'End Bommie', notoriously the best site for Rhinopias. A white paperfish, also a member of the scorpionfish family, rocks gently on a fans edge. I search under a rocky outcrop for Rhinopias. Instead I find a juvenile white tip reef shark resting. Suddenly I see a clump of weed tumble down the reef. It's a Rhinopias!



As I surface I yell to Franco "I found one, a big orange one!"
"You are lucky, the orange ones are rare". I look at the jealous faces on the boat and realize I have unwittingly joined the Rhinopias cult.



Info

What is unique to this dive site?

Unsurpassed marine life biodiversity. Rhinopias.

How to get there

Fly via Singapore to Port Moresby.

Currency - Kina

What to look out for:

Exotic creature diving

Marine Life on sites

Rhinopias, anemone fish, lionfish, octopus, shrimp, gobies, kingfish, mantis shrimps, Trumpetfish, Barracuda, tuna, turtles, seahorse, squid.



Depths on dive sites

10-30M

Water temperature

25-28 Degrees

What can Non Divers do

Tour to highlands, fishing, cultural tours

Accommodation

Chalets

Best time to dive this site: Diveable all year round

Language: English is widely spoken or Pidgin English

Travel contact: www.loloata.com

More underwater images and stories : PeterPinnock.com