

FORGET FROGFISH

By Jeanne Liebetrau and Peter Pinnock



Frogfish have a certain appeal. Maybe it's their lumpy cellulite appearance and their awkwardness that I identify with. Maybe its admiration for their ingenuous and effective yet lazy feeding technique. Or perhaps even jealousy of their ability to adapt their looks to match their surroundings? Whatever the reason, I have this fascination to find them. I was informed by reliable sources that Milne Bay, Papua New Guinea, is one of the best places to see them. But I found that Milne Bay has so much more to offer - both big and small, that I soon forget about frogfish.



Situated north east of Australia, Papua New Guinea is well known for its excellent dive sites. Milne Bay in particular, is renowned for muck diving, cryptic critters and weird sea creatures. Milne Bay is flushed with nutrient rich water from the Coral Sea and the Solomon Seas. It boasts more islands than any other province in Papua New Guinea. Typical of the country though, it is remote and only accessible by sea or air. The only way to explore the area is by boat. Mike Ball's 'Paradise Sport' liveaboard departs regularly for 6 or 9 day trips from Alotau, the administrative capital of Milne Bay. In Alotau's small harbour, ferries (the main transport to outer islands) and small fishing boats interspersed with wooden outriggers are the only form of local transport. Paradise Sport dwarfs these vessels as she moors alongside, creating quite a stir for the local population.

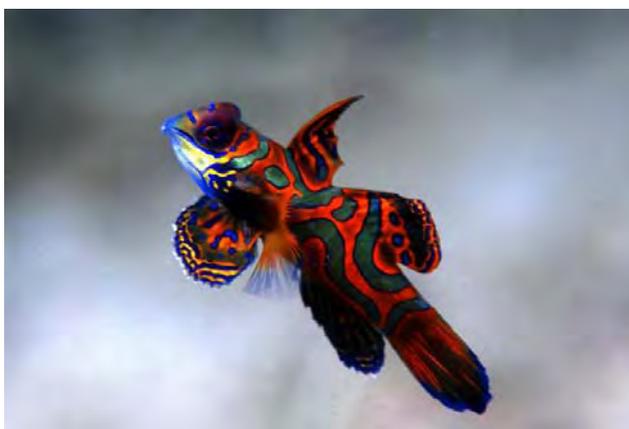


I listen carefully to the first dive briefing. The Muscoota is a 4 mast sailing clipper that broke sailing records in her heyday. During the war she was converted to a coal supply ship. Whilst refueling alongside another ship, both the ships surged together in heavy seas damaging the Muscoota. To enable repairs in the shelter of Discovery Bay the Muscoota was moored to the beach. However the gantry wasn't properly secured and slipped backwards unbalancing the boat further.



She sank right there - still moored to the shore. "In the deeper part of the wreck lives a resident wobbegong shark. We have seen numerous demon stingers and look out for frogfish" cites the dive director. On that word of advice we plunge in. The almost sheer steel sides of the wreck bear little coral growth but are covered in encrusting sponges. A school of juvenile razor fish zigzags amongst the fronds of a gorgonian fan on the

bow, forming an optical illusion as they flash in and out of sight. Pipefish and gobies traverse the sponges in search of food while the voracious predator, lizardfish, wait for an error in their judgement. The decks are a mass of twisted metal. Broken pylons are carpeted with soft corals and anemones. Spine cheek anemone fish vie for accommodation. I find no frogfish but admittedly spend ages watching exquisite mandarin fish who have adopted the coal bunkers as their sanctuary. The dullness of the coal emphasizes the brilliance of their colouration. Mandarins are arguably the world's most beautiful fish, yet they are seldom seen to be appreciated.



Samurai Island is the old administrative capital. Freighters and liners once berthed at Samurai wharf. Today the rusting pylons are a haven for critters and a myriad of fish, including frogfish. I scan the pylons finding pipefish - scribbled, double ended, gilded and the imposing red ringed pipefish. I search the rubble and find lionfish, octopus, shrimp goby combos and hundreds of lizardfish. Out the corner of my eye I notice a nudibranch that is behaving as if it's on speed. In fact it's a juvenile pinnate batfish only 5cm big. The mimicry is amazing but this tiny fish doesn't stop wriggling for a second, making photography a challenge. Once again I am



distracted by the plethora of life but don't find any frogfish.



Nearby Samurai Island is the dive site "Giants at Home" - a manta cleaning station. A host of extraordinarily robust cleaner wrasse inhabits two ordinary coral outcrops on a sandy slope. "Up to 12 mantas have been seen on a dive", the crew assures us. This message goes through my mind numerous times as I sit on the sand waiting patiently for these gentle giants. Just as I

was beginning to feel rather silly just sitting there, a manta passes briefly overhead. This is enough to convince me that this could well be a manta hang-out. For the next hour nothing happens. The other divers surface. Another 30 minutes pass. A robust pipefish wafts amongst some reeds. I have a camera lens for big fish so I ignore it. The light dims abruptly. I look up. Above me is a manta with a wingspan of at least 5m. The cleaner fish race into action as customers for their beauty salon arrive. Two more mantas arrive, one is the Darth Vader type with all black underneath and the other is white with black paw print markings. The mantas swoop and soar for 20 minutes. The personal hygienists flit about the gills and briskly inside the voluminous mouths. Then as suddenly as the mantas appeared they disappear into the distance. I check my gauge and do a double take when I realize 125 minutes have passed - the cleaning station is in only 9 m of water.

Mantas aren't the only winged giants to be seen in Milne Bay. The wreck of the B17 Flying Fortress Bomber is just as impressive. Nick-named "Black Jack" as her serial number ended in 21, she now lies in 45 m of water. Black Jack is almost intact, only the nose cone is damaged from the impact on the sand. Reputedly the pilot, Ralph de Loach, experienced engine problems on route to Rabaul on a bombing mission. He managed to drop the bombs on target but laboured home





running out of fuel, getting lost in bad weather and finally crash landing off Boga



Boga village. All passengers survived and were rescued by villagers. Paradise Sport crew are very safety conscious on this deep dive. Backup divers and reserve tanks are on hand. From 20m the wreck takes shape as the 32m wingspan stretches out across the sand. Driven by 4 engines and carrying 10 crewmembers plus a heavy cargo of bombs, this is understandably a huge plane. The rear gun turret is still mobile and

the 4 props are intact although some blades are embedded in the sand. It is possible, but not encouraged, to enter the cockpit (trapped air will expedite the rusting process). It takes precious minutes to swim the 22m length of the plane. Dive computers shriek indicating time to ascend for staged safety stops. At each stage we continue to look back at this vessel of destruction that is now being corroded by time and nature.

Back on my mission to find frogfish we head to Dinahs Beach, a muck dive site. The family of Dinah Halstead, a pioneer of diving in Papua New Guinea, own Laudi village where Dinah's is located. As Paradise Sport tethers to palm trees on the beach the dive brief continues. To the one side is Deacon's Reef and on the other is Dinah's Beach. It is possible to dive both in one dive but not if you stop to take in the beauty. Since Dinah's is good for a night dive we head for



Deacons. The splendour of this reef blows me away. Pillars of reef lavishly decorated with soft corals shelter mini lagoons where giant ignoblis kingfish chill out. Pink and red gorgonian fans bar the entrances to these lagoons. Smaller iridescent yellow kingfish feed frenetically on schooling glassies on the outside of the reef and striking orange clown fish nestle inside delicate pink tipped anemones. It's a magnificent kaleidoscope of colour.

Finally the night dive on Dinah's Beach arrives. Heading across the black sand slope I find a large, perfectly symmetrical hole. Turning my torch light away I wait to see who the architect is. Moments later a huge



mantis shrimp peeps out. The mantis scrutinizes me, one eye constantly surveying the slope like a chameleon. Deciding I am not a threat, it leaves its home and scuttles to a nearby reef to forage. Adjacent to a rocky outcrop 2 lionfish are behaving strangely. I can't fathom whether it is a territorial fight or a sexual encounter. The lionfish face each other as if in a fencing match. As their jaws open to full extent and the pectoral fins are spread out, the lionfish charge at each other. A mock bite is made. They turn and resume their starting positions for another lunge. Another lionfish displays its pectoral fins and nips under a ledge. Its 'fu manchu' -alias twinspace lionfish, a predator that is almost as shy as the mandarin fish. These fish seem to have an identity crisis.



Black and Silver reef is another quintessential reef. On one side of this seamount is a plantation of silver or orange coloured black coral trees. Glassies swarm around the coral bushes. Trumpetfish hide amongst the fronds where they carefully select and grab an unsuspecting glassie. Kingfish and jacks plough through the swarm creating havoc as they stun their prey. Barracuda and tuna patrol in the distance. Colours splash across the reef as anthias cast oranges and purples, fusiliers flash blues and greens and sweetlips radiate yellows. On the other side of the seamount 2 hawksbill turtles are unperturbed by the hive of activity. All they are interested in is a rest and some delicious sponges to munch on.



My last chance for frogfish is Observation Point on Normandy Island. This is another sandy slope bordered by reefs with sea-grass bed in the shallows. An ugly demon stinger staggers slowly across the sand disturbing a peacock flounder. A clump of sea-grass reveals a cleverly camouflaged filefish in pure green. Nearby a snake eel keeps dead still, only its head sticks out of the sand. I head towards the sea-grass bed. A school of razor fish is moving through the grasses. A cockatoo waspfish resembling a dead leaf sways with the tide. A rust coloured seahorse moves slowly in 80cm of water curling his tail around small sticks. I can feel eyes at the back of my head. I swing around. 2 squid have me in their view. Luminescence flickers across their bodies as they contemplate my



presence. Do they know what I am looking for? Do they know where the frogfish are? Their alien eyes glimmer and flicker but tell me nothing. I finally give up the frogfish quest.

Info

Travel contact: <http://www.mikeball.com>

For more underwater images and stories visit PeterPinnock.com

