

An underwater photograph showing a large school of silver fish, identified as rainbow runners, swimming in a clear blue ocean. In the foreground, there is a large, intricate structure of soft coral in shades of orange and red. To the right, a rocky reef is visible with some white shells. In the top left corner, there is a small white map of New Ireland with a red dot indicating the location of Albatross Passage.

Three For The Bucket List

Don Silcock

Above: Schooling rainbow runners pour down the wall at Albatross Passage; Right: (Top) Late afternoon at Lissenung Island; (Bottom) Early morning over Kavieng; Beautiful soft corals at Albatross Passage.

The early morning flight out of Kavieng kind of puts it all into perspective...

As the sun rises out of the vast Pacific Ocean to the east, it paints a beautiful light over the dozens of small islands

and mangroves that fill the gap between the tip of New Ireland and nearby New Hanover. The rich tropical vegetation on the islands seems to glow in that special "golden hour" light and the myriad of channels that run between them offer

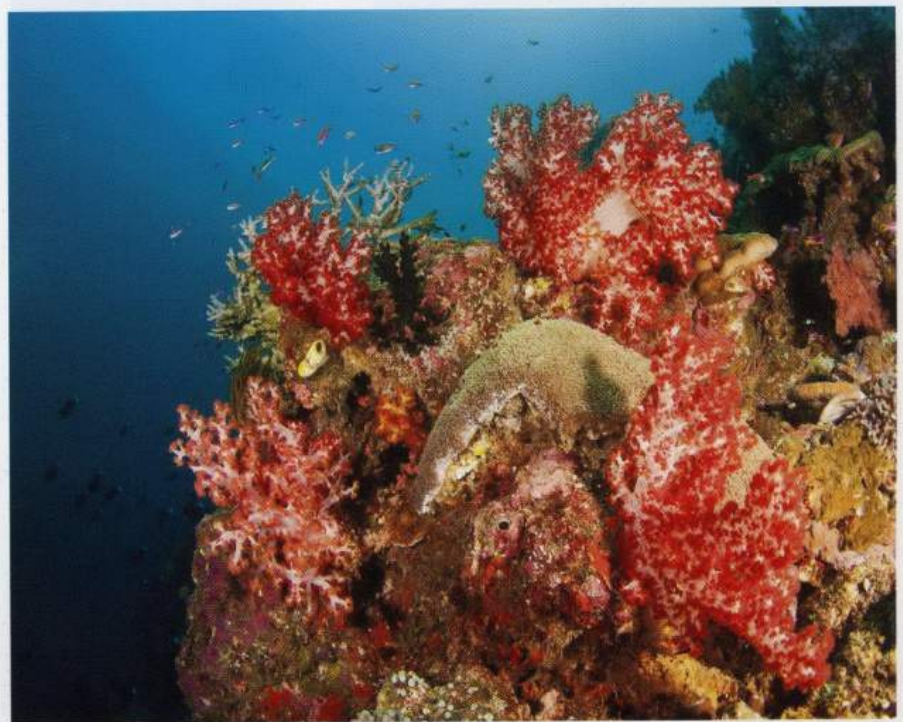
a tantalising insight into what lies underwater here in New Ireland. For it is really only from the air that you can take in this beautiful sight and truly appreciate the experience you have just had over the days or weeks you have



spent in this remote and wonderful part of Papua New Guinea. For me, it was a chance to reflect on the three new ticks on my diving "bucket list".... Mention Kavieng among any group of experienced scuba divers and you will quickly discern three key themes – big currents, schooling pelagics and clear blue water. A quick look at the map, combined with a very basic awareness of oceanography, will tell you why... For New Ireland is located along the eastern rim of the Bismarck Archipelago and its long, thin shape forms a natural barrier between the rich deep waters of the Pacific Ocean to the east, and those of the Bismarck Sea to the west. Because of this location, the island's

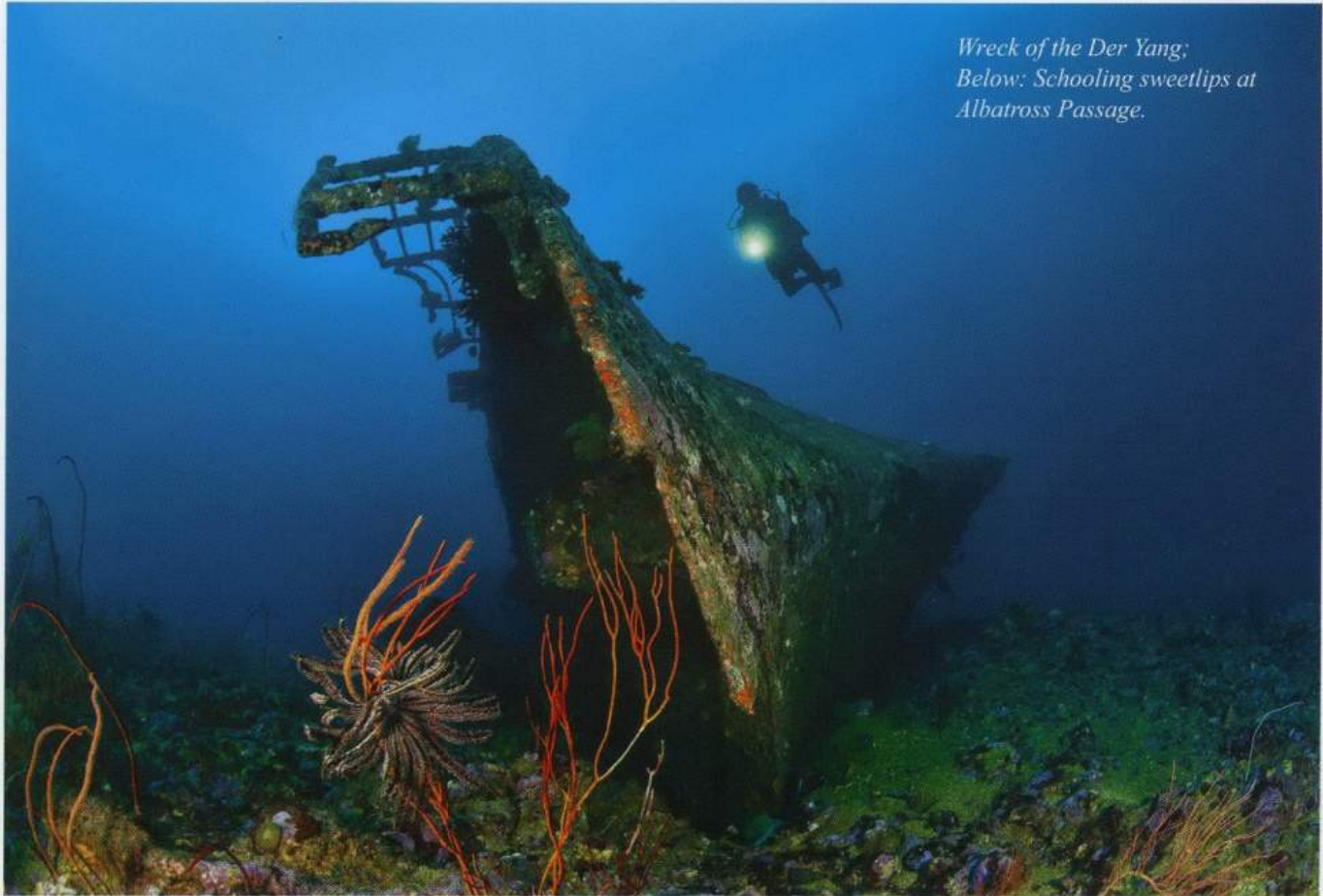
coastline is exposed to a complex mix of oceanic, equatorial and regional currents, and Kavieng sits on the very nexus of these powerful water flows as they pass back and forth between New

Ireland and nearby New Hanover. The diving around Kavieng can basically be separated into two main areas; those sites on the Pacific Ocean side of New Ireland around Kavieng itself, and those





THREE FOR THE BUCKET LIST
Story & Photos: Don Silcock



*Wreck of the Der Yang;
Below: Schooling sweetlips at
Albatross Passage.*



“...As the strong currents flow, they flush out the detritus from around the islands and in the mangroves..”

there are a lot of good dive sites in the Kavieng area but, like all locations, certain ones stand out as exceptional. Of the numerous dives I did, three would make it on to my personal “bucket list”.

1. Wreck of the Der Yang

My personal favourite on the Pacific Ocean side is the wreck of the *Der Yang*, a Taiwanese long-line fishing boat that sits serenely on its side in 30m of water. Seized in the early 1980s by the Fisheries Division of PNG’s Ministry of Primary Industry because of suspected “illegal activities” – code for falsifying

to the south on the Bismarck Sea side of the island. However, just to keep life interesting... when one side is at its best, the other is probably not because, as the strong currents flow between New Ireland and New Hanover, they flush out the detritus from around the islands and in the mangroves. So, the clear waters

from one side are significantly less so when they emerge on the other side! Add to this complexity the fact there are up to six tides per day and it is easy to understand the need for good local knowledge of the actual dive sites and, most importantly, when to dive them safely at their best. Simply stated,



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Above: Diver entering one of the many shallow caves in Baudisson Bay; Below: Superb fan in Albatross Passage.

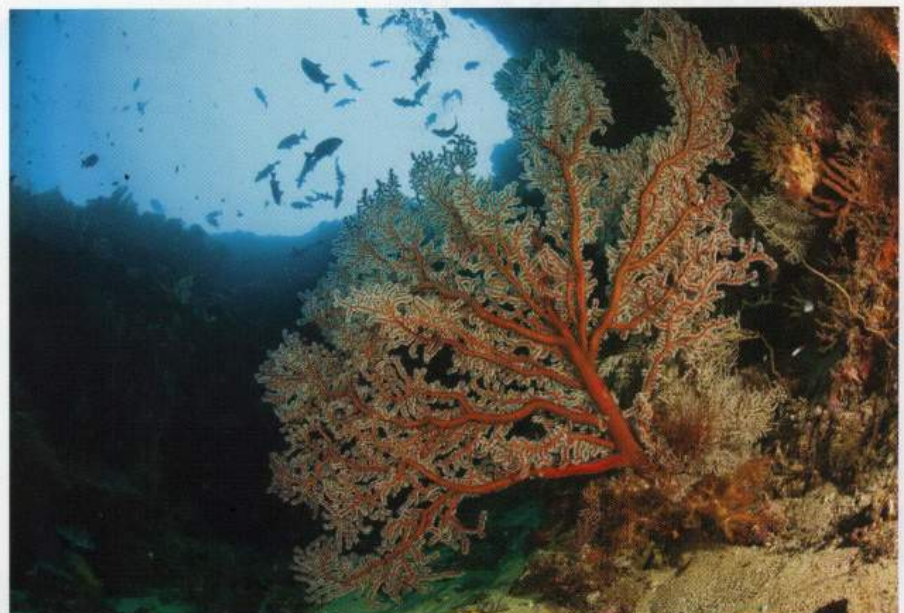
the size of its catches - the confiscated *Der Yang* became exactly one-half of the division's maritime resources. Interestingly, the *Der Yang* was initially deployed as a decoy to lure other

into the Pacific Ocean. However, in what can only be described as a perfect touch of irony, the Fisheries Division eventually decided to scuttle the *Der Yang* as a strong signal to other potential miscreants. So it was that in 1988 the ship settled

on its starboard side on the edge of the Echuca Patch reef, just offshore from the main entrance into Kavieng Harbour and the principal passages between New Ireland and New Hanover into the Bismarck Sea. The *Der Yang's* location mean it is

“...The Fisheries Division eventually decided to scuttle the *Der Yang* as a strong signal to other potential miscreants...”

suspicious vessels in the New Ireland area into a sting-type operation. Unfortunately for all concerned, this attempt at “Maxwell Smart meets the high seas intrigue” failed to snare any of the boats it encountered as they somehow managed to see through the cunning disguise and promptly head off





bathed by the rich currents from the Pacific, which over the years have turned it into a beacon for the very species for which it once used to fish. Although a relatively small wreck it is remarkably intact and, lying on its side as it does, makes it a very photogenic subject – so much so that its image has graced many magazine covers. My challenge was to somehow get a distinctive shot and, with that in mind, I went straight down to the bow area in about 34m of water. There I found a bright red sea whip nicely decorated with a colourful crinoid to give a fine sense of perspective. Frantic signaling to my Lissenung Resort dive guide Angmai Dong got him perfectly positioned and I fired off several shots before my computer began beeping madly at me to tell me to get out of there... Great wreck, fantastic dive!



2. Albatross Passage

Over on the Bismarck Sea side is a site often described as Kavieng's "signature dive" and, I have to say, the more I dived it, the better it became. Named after the German gunship that helped subdue the local population and establish colonial rule in New Ireland in the late 1800s, Albatross Passage is a channel between the tip of New Ireland and Baudisson Island; one of



Top: Devil scorpionfish on the Lissenung house reef; Above: Fire goby at Kavin II dive site.


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“...A site often described as Kavieng's "signature dive"...”

several large islands that partially fill the 22km gap between New Ireland and New Hanover. Albatross and the nearby main shipping channel Steffen Strait are the main passageways through the gap. This means they feel the full force of the tidal and current flows that are the reason why the diving can be so prolific in Kavieng and it has such a reputation for "big currents". Dive Albatross Passage on an outgoing tide and you will



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Top: Pipefish on an Albatross Passage fan; Bottom: Sponge garden at Kavin II.

you will wonder why you bothered, but return on an incoming tide as the clear waters from the Bismarck Sea sweep the site clean of the detritus from the islands and mangroves and you will quickly understand why it rates so highly. It's a big site and reminds me of a large semi-

circular amphitheatre that faces out into the Bismarck Sea with its walls sloping down in terraces into the depths. The upper terrace, below the ledge that forms the actual passage into the islands, descends to a sandy plateau at 30m and is where most of the

action is. Whichever direction you look, there always seems to be something happening. The terrace wall is richly coated in a superb mixture of hard and soft corals, black coral trees and huge gorgonian fans which host a tremendous variety of reef fish and creatures. In the central area there is a large school of very photogenic yellow-tailed snappers, which, if you approach slowly and very carefully, will let you get close and take a group photo! Cruising in the blue water, you will see numerous reef sharks on almost every dive and very often there will be large dog-tooth tuna, schooling barracuda plus mobular and eagle rays. You would literally need dozens of dives to fully explore and appreciate Albatross. It truly is a very special site.

3. Cathy's eels

The third site is actually not a dive site at all – well, unless you class being partially submerged in a shallow stream





Feeding the eels at Cathy's

as a dive. But it certainly is something quite special, and a place you will not forget quickly, particularly if you are taking underwater photographs.

“Cathy” is Cathy Hiob, a former Air Niugini air hostess who has retired back to her village of Laraibina, some 90km down the east coast of New Ireland from Kavieng. Flying with the national airline for 22 years has given Cathy a

string of one-liners she seems to really enjoy using, in what seems a very well-rehearsed routine, as you sit chatting in the shade of one of the many trees in the village. Amusing as they are, coming from the feisty lady with the shock of white hair, the one-liners are not what you have come down the coast for; it's Cathy's friendly neighbourhood family of freshwater eels that are the

star attraction. Some 10-12 large eels inhabit the local stream and Cathy, with her trusty assistant, has trained them on a diet of Besta-brand tinned mackerel to appear on demand when they hear the feeding pot being rattled.

The training has worked so well that when the last tin of Besta was gone the eels disappeared as quickly as they had appeared – just as I was getting the hang

“...They appear on demand when they hear the feeding pot being rattled...”

of being surrounded by large slithering eels, each equipped with an impressive set of teeth. The usual routine is to stand in the stream and let the eels swim around your feet as Cathy's assistant doles out the Besta, but I needed a close-up underwater shot of the eels feeding so total immersion therapy seemed to be the way to go. In all the ensuing excitement, Cathy's assistant exhausted our supplies of Besta before

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THE WORLD IS TOUGH, BUT WE'RE EVEN TOUGHER



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Where to stay:

Lissening Island Resort sits on a small island about 25 mins by boat from Kavieng, making it almost perfectly located to adapt to the prevailing weather and tides, and provide quick access to dive sites on either the Pacific or Bismarck Sea sides.

Owned and operated by Dietmar and Angie Amon, with a team of locals recruited from nearby Eruk Island, and the delightful Japanese dive instructor/chef/all-round organiser Nozaki san, the resort has seven oceanfront rooms in four thatched and woven bamboo traditional-style duplex bungalows, each with hardwood floors and large verandahs. The main lodge, or "haus win", is where all meals are served, while the dive facility and office are nearby.

Dietmar came to Kavieng from his native Austria in 1995 looking for an adventure, and he certainly got one, as you will quickly realise if you spend any time talking to him about the early days living rough on the island, building the first accommodation. Those days are long gone and the resort is now well established - but it's easy to spot all the nice touches that Angie has introduced since she came to Lissening in 2006.

The diving day begins at 8.30am when the boats leave for a two-tank morning, returning for lunch back on the island about 1pm. They go out again for a third dive in the afternoon, if required, but most people seem to opt for the unlimited diving on the large house reef.



I had become acclimatised to the cold waters of the stream, and comfortable with my slippery companions. We tried all sorts of things to bring them back, even offering our lunch of fresh tuna to tempt them back for their photo shoot, to no avail. The Besta appears to be the only thing that will do it for them. Hey, it's Papua New Guinea – expect the unexpected. ■

Don Silcock

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Top: Hand feeding time for the eels;

Middle: Lissening hosts Dietmar and Ange Amon;

Bottom: The main lodge at Lissening.

