

# New Britain

## Papua New Guinea



LEFT TO RIGHT: Clownfish in sea anemone; Portrait of a local villager; Mandarin fish; Local villagers in canoes navigate the Isis River

Text and photos by Don Silcock

**The island of New Guinea, the second largest in the world, is located just south of the equator and to the northeast of the continent of Australia. It is a remote and mysterious place, believed to have been populated for 45,000 years by the Papuan Melanesian people, roughly the same time as the Aboriginal people have lived in Australia.**

In 1848 the island was divided up between Germany, Holland and Britain despite the fact that none of these countries had actually established a presence on the island at the time. The eastern part of the island was subsequently colonized by Germany in the north and Britain in the south, whilst the western half was

taken by Holland in 1898 as an expansion of their presence in the Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia.

The Dutch reluctantly agreed to Indonesian independence in 1949 but remained in control of West Papua until 1962 when it was ceded to the United Nations and ultimately to Indonesia in 1969 in what can probably only be described as "an act of Cold War sacrifice".

The eastern half of the island, British New Guinea in the south and German New Guinea in the north, became the Territory of Papua and New Guinea after WWI when it was taken over and administered by Australia. In September 1975, it became the independent country of Papua New Guinea.

### The People

The Papuan Melanesian people are an intriguing and diverse ethnic group and comprise of nearly a thousand

distinct tribal cultures and languages.

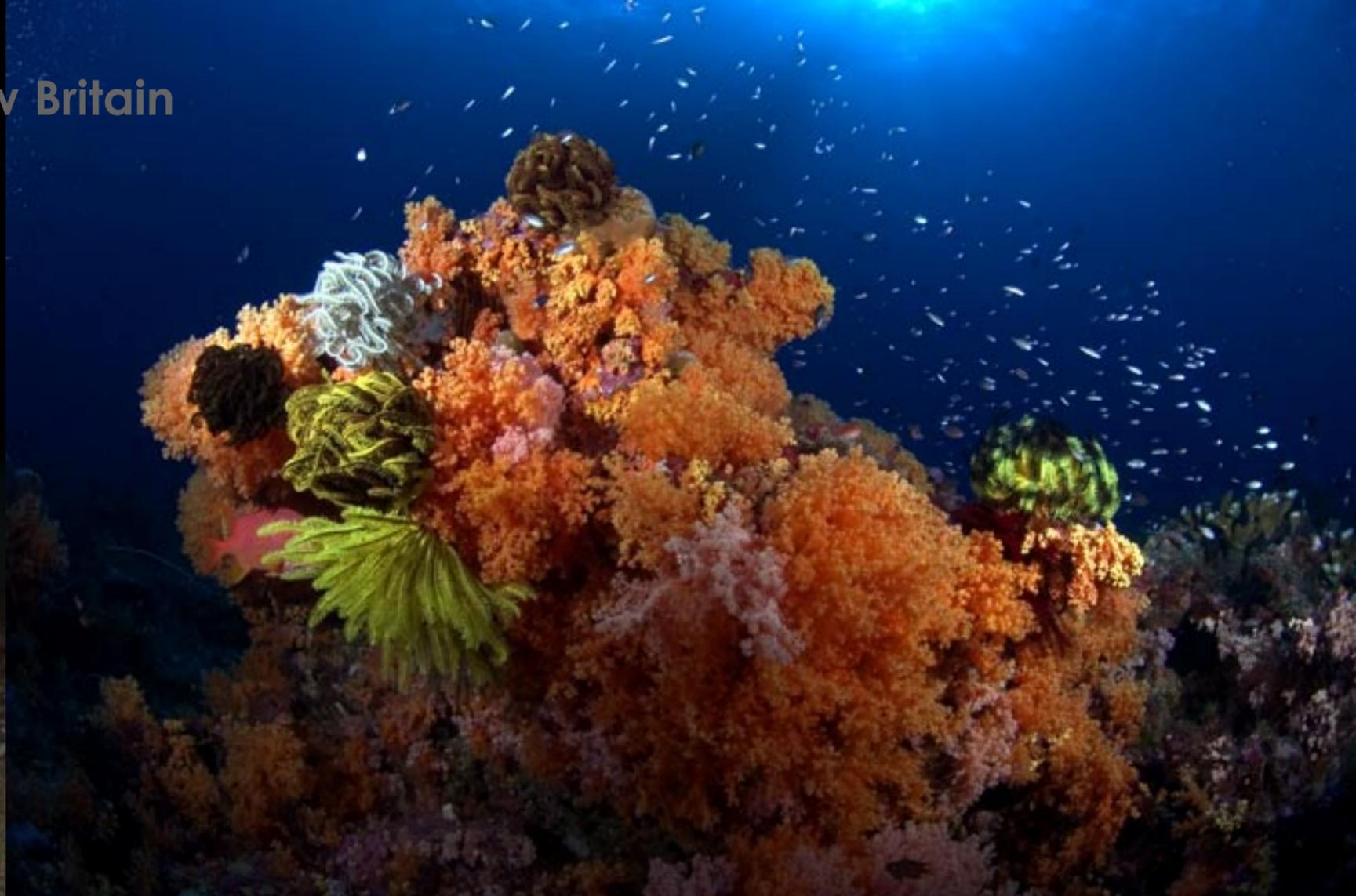
One of these tribes, the Dani was only discovered less than 50 years ago in 1938 when the US explorer Richard Archibold flew over the remote Baliem Valley in West Papua and saw their compounds and sweet potato fields. The Dani had lived in complete isolation from all outsiders for over 10,000 years. Today, they are West Papua's most famous ethnic group. Their numbers have grown to around 70,000 and Wamenda, the main town in the Baliem Valley, receives several hundred visitors a month who come to see these unique people.

### The Diving

Scuba diving is very well established in many locations in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and becoming so in the Raja Ampat area of West Papua. The Milne Bay areas at the southeastern tip of the main island and Kimbe Bay in the centre of the island of New Britain

Red coral and sponges on reef at Kimbe Bay





Alan Raabe

LEFT TO RIGHT: Alan Raabe's pontoon boat transports divers up the Isis River; Sunset over Papua New Guinea; Fire Dancer; Coral reef at the west entrance of Lindenhaven

are probably the two most popular locations in PNG. Milne Bay is

best dived from a liveaboard and offers a tremendous variety of diving from the weird and wonderful critters found muck diving at Dinah's Beach to the superb corals at Deacon's Reef and Manta's at the cleaning station just off the beach at Gonu Gonu Bara Bara Island. The area is served by three liveaboards all of whom have a great, and thoroughly deserved reputation: Chertan ([www.chertan.com](http://www.chertan.com)), Golden Dawn ([www.mvgoldendawn.com](http://www.mvgoldendawn.com)),

[www.telitacruises.com](http://www.telitacruises.com)) and Telita ([www.telitacruises.com](http://www.telitacruises.com)) In Kimbe Bay, it is possible to do both resort based diving from Walindi Plantation ([www.walindi.com](http://www.walindi.com)) and liveaboard diving with either *Febrina* ([www.febrina.com](http://www.febrina.com)) or *StarDancer* ([www.peter-hughes.com](http://www.peter-hughes.com)) both of which operate in conjunction with Walindi Plantation.

I have done four trips to Milne Bay in recent years and thoroughly enjoyed the diving there, but in April 2004 I decided to see what Kimbe Bay had to offer and spent several days diving from Walindi Plantation on the local sites in the bay and then seven days aboard *StarDancer* diving the dive sites out of the outer bay and Witu Islands. The diving was excellent and whetted my appetite for further adventure in this part of the world.

### New Britain

New Britain is the largest of the islands of PNG and covers an area of 35,500 square kilometers—roughly half the size of Tasmania. Whilst diving on the north coast of the island has been well established for many years, the south coast of the island has remained basically unexplored.

Alan Raabe the owner and skipper of *Febrina*, and now co-owner of *StarDancer*, has periodically explored the south coast during the 20 years he has lived and worked in PNG. During my trip on *StarDancer*, I learned about the south coast and decided to come back to New Britain the following January to join one of the first commercial trips there.

### The Journey

Our trip commenced in Rabaul, the capital of East New Britain, and reached on a two-hour flight from the PNG capital Port Moresby. One of the great things about diving PNG from Australia is that it is possible to leave Sydney in the morning, arrive in Port Moresby in mid afternoon, transfer onto your domestic flight and be on the liveaboard that night. Although I have to say, the transfer in Moresby is never without it's worries.

From Rabaul, it is an overnight journey to the south via the St Georges Channel that separates the islands of New Britain and New Ireland. The currents in this area are very strong and treacherous, but Alan Raabe is an experienced skipper, and we slept peacefully in our bunks

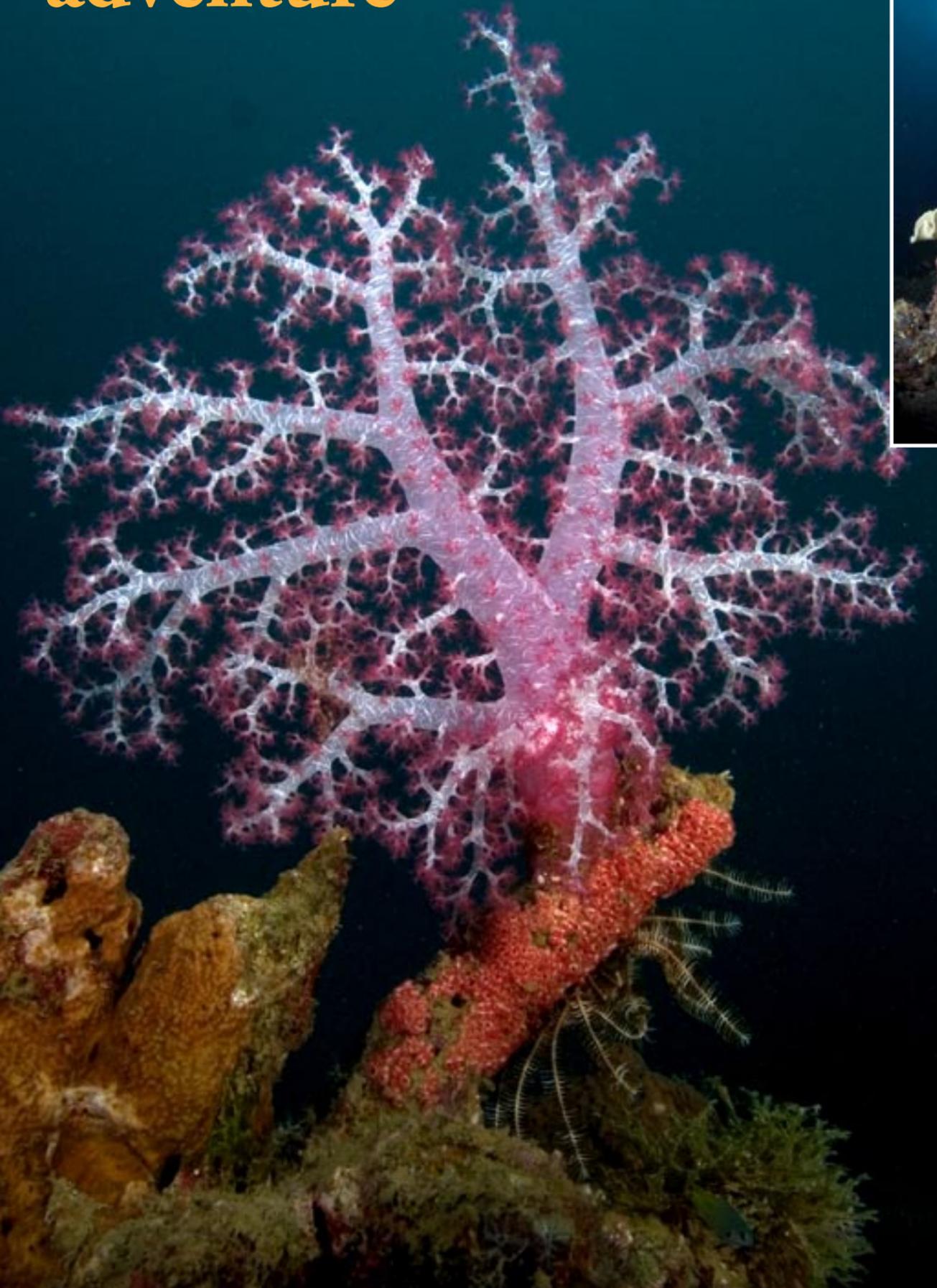
whilst he piloted the boat to our destination for the first day's diving.

Over the next 10 days, we dived a variety of locations in the Lindenhaven and Waterfall Bay areas. I saw WWII wrecks, reefs in pristine condition and a great variety of critters and pelagic fish.

### The South Coast

What makes the south coast special is a fairly unique combination of circumstances.

Firstly, the very deep waters of the Solomon's Trench lie close to the coastline and the strong coastal currents mix with the up-swells of cool water from the Trench to produce an optimum blending mechanism that helps feed the ecosystem and nourish the reefs.



LEFT TO RIGHT: Soft coral; The hull of a wreck silhouettes large sponges and sea lily; Lacy Scorpion fish, *Rhinopias*; Octopus

Secondly, the south coast of New Britain is the second wettest place on earth, which means that in the rainy season the numerous rivers provide another rich source of nutrients.

Thirdly, the south coast is a very remote and sparsely populated location and there is only one unpaved logging road that penetrates the dense mountainous rain forest that separates the north coast from the south. Basically, the only access to the area is by sea, which means that the reefs are virtually untouched and in some areas can only be described as pristine.

Another interesting facet of the south coast is that its wet and dry seasons are the reverse of the north coast—when it's raining on the north, it's dry on the south and visa versa! The reason for this is that the northwest trade winds, which bring in the low pressure troughs and resultant heavy rain on the north coast, do not make it over the mountainous spine of the island. Similarly, the southeast trade winds that bring heavy rain to the south coast are isolated from the north coast by the mountains.

The result of all this is some incredible diving that combines most of the weird and wonderful critters normally only

found in Milne Bay with superb reefs and pelagic action usually associated with the Witu Islands.

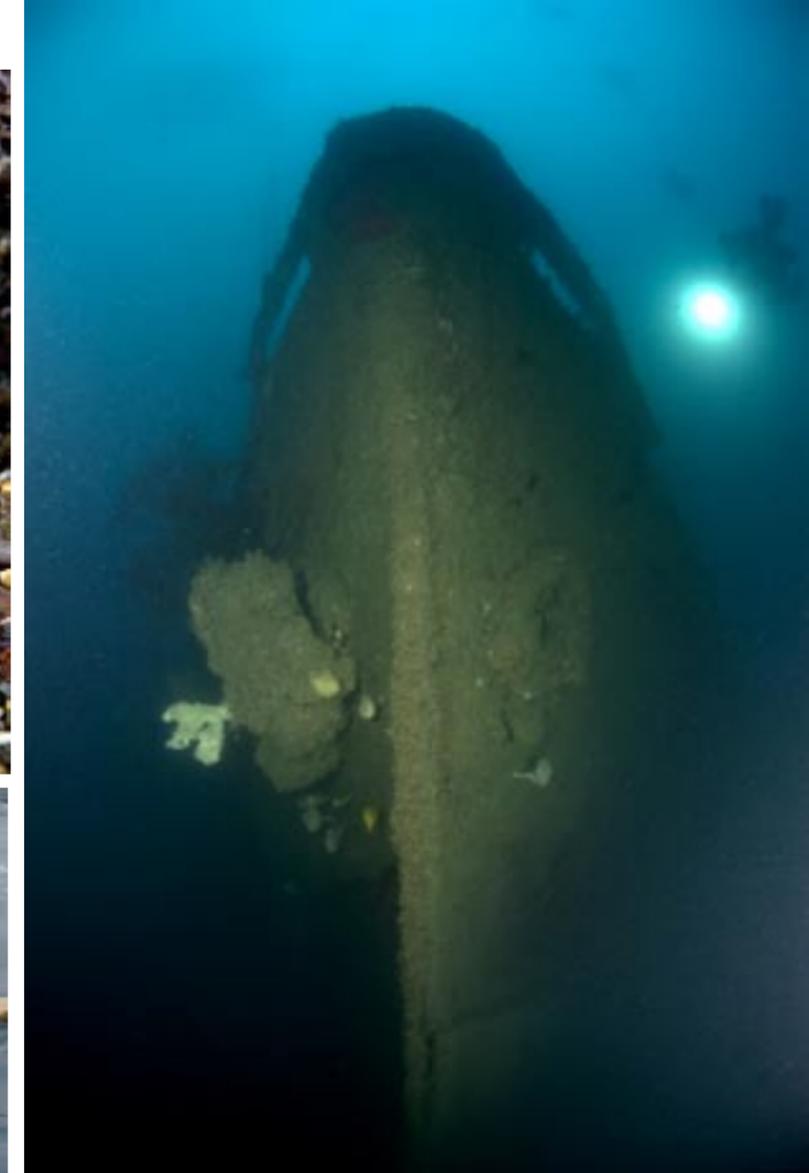
### Dive site development

The south coast really is virgin territory and dive sites are still being identified, which can lead to some disappointing exploratory dives. But once a good site has been located, regular access needs to be secured. This means nego-

tiating with the head of the local village, known locally as the "big fella", to dive in his territory. I was impressed by Alan Raabe's approach to this, as it was clear that he has a genuine interest in improving the lot of the village. A lesser person would take the easy route, so common in PNG, and grease the palm of the big fella to secure diving access, but Alan appears determined to avoid this.



Villagers along the Isis River help to clear thick reeds blocking the way to the Blue Hole



LEFT TO RIGHT: Coral gardens of the South Coast; Stonefish under camouflage; Bough of a sunken wreck; Grey Reef shark patrols its territory. INSET: Children wear masquerade masks given to them by the kind wife of one of the divers

His view is that, if properly managed, there should be three beneficial effects of opening up diving on the south coast.

Firstly, there is the direct payment, proportional to the number of divers who use the site, made to a community account opened up in the village's name—not the big fella's. Secondly, the villages have an opportunity to trade both with the boat for fresh vegetables and with the diving tourists for locally produced artifacts and carvings. Finally, there is the net positive effect of introducing a new dynamic of tourism, albeit on a small scale initially, to an area that has previously been largely closed to foreigners.

Once regular access is secured, a permanent mooring buoy is installed to minimize future environmental impact of boats diving

the sites.

When I look back at the trip there were several high points that stand out:

### West Entrance at Lindenhaven

Lindenhaven is a small village in the Gasmata area and as its name suggests the dive site is on the west entrance to the village. The corals and fish life were both prolific and pristine and are fed by the very strong currents that course through the entrance.

This was probably one of the best reef dives I have ever done, and I can still remember the burst of adrenalin as we descended on the reef from the dive tender. There was a time when most reefs would have been as rich as this, and I felt truly privileged to be there.

The strength of the currents mean that it can only really be dived around slack water, but it was the site I enjoyed most of all the ones we did in the 10 days on the south coast.

What made the site completely memorable was the end of the dive when we surfaced and found ourselves surrounded by about 20 local kids, some as young as 5 or 6, in their canoes. They were all highly excited by what we were doing and it was very clear they had never seen anything like it before.



## New Britain



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Divers armed with cameras explore Blue Hole; The Isis River cuts deep into the rain-forest; Curious villagers appear on the river banks to watch the divers' activities

INSET: Children from a nearby village help clear a path for the dive boat by using machetes

block the cooling water inlets to our boat's out-board engines. The only way through is with the help of the local villagers who literally have to dive down and cut a

path through with their machetes. It's quite a site to see young village boys as young as 10 or 12 swimming against the fast running river with a huge machete held between their teeth and then diving down to cut the reeds.

It is not possible to motor all the way to the Blue Hole, the closest you can get is about 250m to it, and then it is time to carry your dive gear and cameras through the jungle and wade through the river. Suddenly, the source of the Isis River appears around the corner. This part of the journey was made much easier by the appearance from

nowhere of a large number of village children with huge smiles who were very eager to assist us.

The dive itself is rather surreal—imagine quite cool blue water in a deep pool that seems to go down forever and where the main features are large tree trunks that have fallen in over the years. In fact, the bottom is at 48m, and what you get for going there is a look at a small fissure with fresh water gushing out like a fire hose. A truly adventurous day!

### Grey Reef Sharks

On several dives we saw numerous grey reef sharks coming up from the deep in response to our special shark



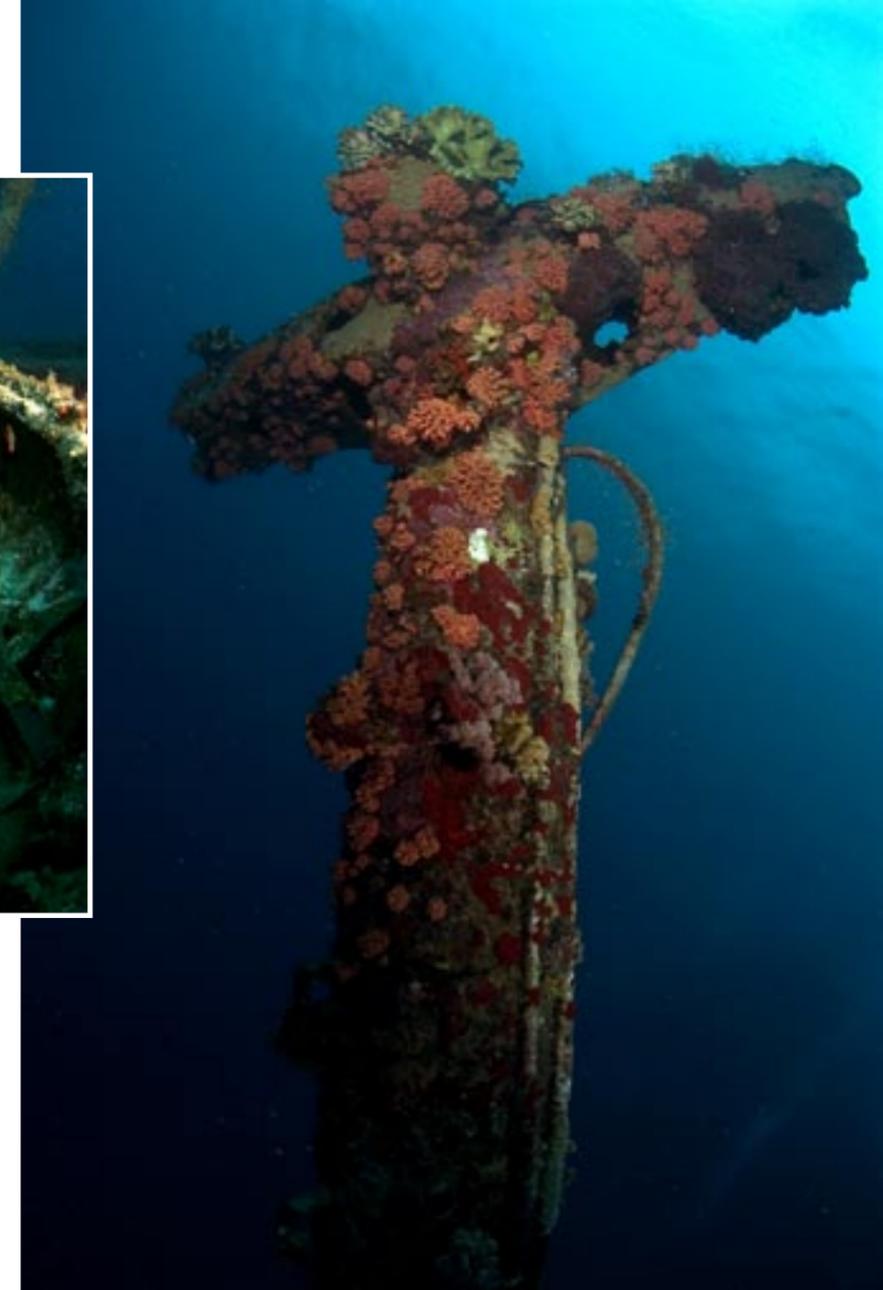
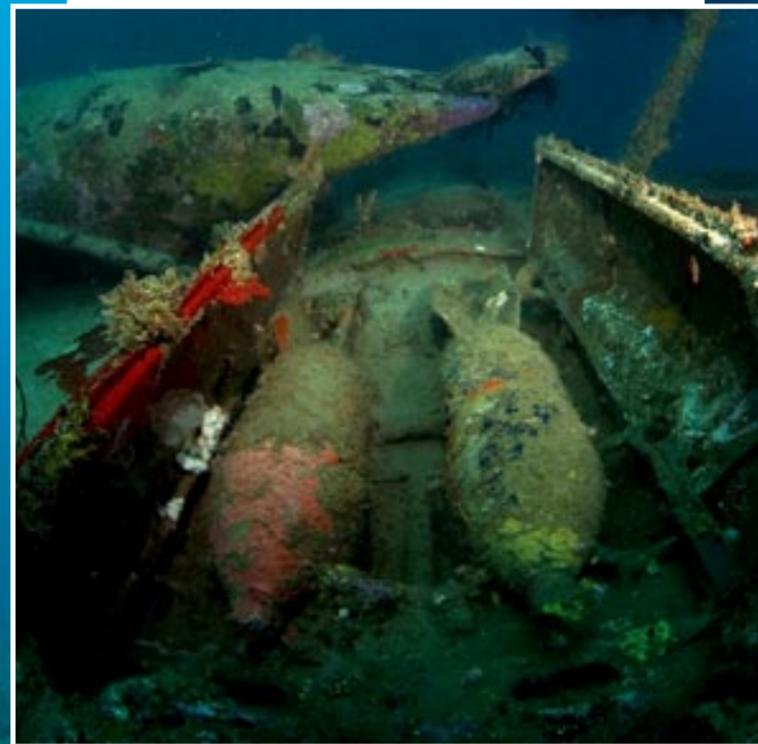
### The Blue Hole

The Blue Hole is the source of the Isis River in Waterfall Bay, and to dive it means a two-hour trip up the river taking everything you need with you. The trip is spectacular because you go deep into the rain forest that covers New Britain and pass through small villages perched on the riverbanks. The locals appeared fascinated by our presence and gathered to watch us pass through on our way upstream.

The further you go up the Isis River the harder it is to reach its source because the river becomes choked with thick reeds that



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CLOCKWISE FROM LOWER LEFT  
Propeller of wrecked WW2 Japanese sea plane; Submerged tank; Bombs lie exposed in the sea plane's open cargo hold; Iconic forms of a sunken wreck



attracting device—a half full water bottle rubbed vigorously between two hands—and aggressively buzzing us.

They are significant creatures. Although always wary, they seemed in complete control and appeared to try and tempt us to go deeper as we strived for that perfect photograph. There was never a point where our excitement turned to fear. But then again, there was no food in the water that would have encouraged the sharks to overcome their natural caution.

I always reassure myself that we must look pretty intimidating to these medium sized sharks as we are about the same size, or bigger, than they are and make a lot of noise. We also don't emit the kind of signals that attract them unless we use tricks like the water bottle, so why would they come close?

### Mitsubishi Sea Plane

Lying on its back in 15m of water, with one pontoon sticking up into the water and the other broken in the silt, its bomb doors open to expose the two live bombs still in their mountings. This WW2 Japanese sea plane is a great

dive.

It is located in a river close to one of the villages and some fairly intense negotiations were required on the day we visited because it appeared the “big fella” of the village was determined to extract additional payments from us. The situation was eventually resolved by Alan Raabe and his crew, and we were allowed to explore the wreck.

Visibility is not that great due to all the sediment on the wreck, but on the day we dived it, we could see the full extent of the wreck and the bombs were like magnets that drew us closer. ■

For more information or to order images directly from Don Silcock, please visit: [www.indopacificimages.com](http://www.indopacificimages.com)

# fact file



## New Britain, Papua New Guinea



WWW.CIA.GOV

**History** Papua New Guinea is a developing country in the Southwest Pacific. The eastern half of the island is the second largest in the world. In 1885, it was divided between the UK (south) and Germany (north). In 1902, UK transferred its half to Australia, which occupied the northern portion during World War I and continued to administer the combined areas until independence in 1975. After claiming some 20,000 lives, a nine-year secessionist revolt on the island of Bougainville ended in 1997. Today, PNG relies on the assistance of Australia to keep out illegal cross-border activities from Indonesia primarily, including illegal narcotics trafficking, goods smuggling, squatters and secessionists; Government: constitutional monarchy with parliamentary democracy

**Geography** Oceania, PNG is a group of islands east of Indonesia including the eastern half of the island of New Guinea between the Coral Sea and the South Pacific Ocean; Along its southwestern coasts, it has one of the world's largest swamps; Coastline: 5,152 km; Terrain: mostly mountainous with rolling foothills and coastal lowlands; Lowest point: Pacific Ocean 0m; Highest point: Mount Wilhelm 4,509m; Natural resources: gold, copper, silver, natural gas, timber, oil, fisheries; Natural hazards: active volcanism situated along the Pacific "Ring of Fire". The country is subject to frequent and sometimes severe earthquakes, mud slides and tsunamis; Environmental issues: Growing commercial demand for tropical timber is causing deforestation of the PNG rain forest. It also suffers pollution from mining projects and severe drought; Agriculture: coffee, cocoa, coconuts, palm kernels, tea, rubber, sweet potatoes, fruit, vegetables, poultry, pork; Industries: copra crushing, palm oil processing, plywood production, wood chip production; mining of gold, silver, and copper; crude oil production; construction, tourism

**Capital** Port Moresby

**Climate** Tropical climate with slight seasonal temperature variation; northwest monsoon (December to March); southeast monsoon (May to October)

**Population** 5,545,268 (July 2005 est.); 37% below poverty line (2002 est.); Ethnic groups: Melanesian, Papuan, Negrito, Micronesian, Polynesian; Religions: Roman Catholic 22%, Lutheran 16%, Presbyterian/Methodist/London Missionary Society 8%, Anglican 5%, Evangelical Alliance 4%, Seventh-Day Adventist 1%, other Protestant 10%, indigenous beliefs 34%

**Currency** Kina (PGK); Exchange rates: 1 USD = 3.11 PGK; 1 Euro = 3.75 PGK

**Language** Melanesian Pidgin serves as the lingua franca, English is spoken by 1%-2%, Motu is spoken in the Papua region; there are 715 indigenous languages—many unrelated

**Health & Safety** Papua New Guinea has a high crime rate. Please check state advisory consular information before travelling to PNG. The degree of risk is very high for major infectious diseases; food or waterborne diseases include bacterial and protozoal diarrhea, hepatitis A and typhoid fever; vectorborne diseases including dengue fever and malaria are high risks in some locations (2004)

Source: [www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov)

### Decompression Chamber

Melanesian Hyperbaric Services  
Jacksons Airport, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea  
Tel: +675 693 0305 or +675 693 1202

Port Moresby Medical Service  
Tel: +675 325 6633 or +675 693 4444

EVACUATION INSURANCE is compulsory for some PNG dive operators, liveaboards and resorts. See DAN for information and travellers insurance:  
Divers Alert Network  
[www.diversalertnetwork.org](http://www.diversalertnetwork.org)

### Dive Resources

Papua New Guinea Divers Association  
Code of Ethics [www.pngbd.com](http://www.pngbd.com)  
Tel. +675 320 0211

The Dive Centre - Port Moresby  
Sales, Service, Rentals, Air and Nitrox  
Tel: +675 320 1200  
[divecentre@datec.com.pg](mailto:divecentre@datec.com.pg)



PAPUA NEW GUINEA  
EXPERIENCE

## PNG DIVE DIRECTORY

TOUR OPERATORS & SERVICES  
Ecotourism Melanesia Ltd  
[www.em.com.pg](http://www.em.com.pg)  
Melanesian Tourist Services  
[www.mtspng.com](http://www.mtspng.com)  
New Guinea Expeditions  
[www.newguineaexpeditions.com](http://www.newguineaexpeditions.com)  
PNG Tourism  
[www.pngtourism.org.pg](http://www.pngtourism.org.pg)  
Sepik Adventure Tours  
[www.ambunilodge-sepiktour.com.pg](http://www.ambunilodge-sepiktour.com.pg)  
Trans Niugini Tours  
[www.pngtours.com](http://www.pngtours.com)

LIVEABOARDS  
Blue Sea Charters / MV Moonlighting  
[www.blueseacharters.com](http://www.blueseacharters.com)  
Mike Ball Dive Expeditions  
[www.mikeball.com](http://www.mikeball.com)  
MV Barbarian II  
[niuginidive@global.net.pg](mailto:niuginidive@global.net.pg)  
MV Chertan  
[www.chertan.com](http://www.chertan.com)  
MV FeBrina  
[www.febrina.com](http://www.febrina.com)  
MV Golden Dawn  
[www.mvgoldendawn.com](http://www.mvgoldendawn.com)  
MV Melanesian Discoverer  
[www.mtspng.com](http://www.mtspng.com)  
MV Telita  
[www.telitacruises.com](http://www.telitacruises.com)  
MV Tiata (UWP specialists, E-6 Processing)  
[tiata@global.net.pg](mailto:tiata@global.net.pg)  
Peter Hughes Diving / MV StarDancer  
[www.peterhughes.com](http://www.peterhughes.com)

RESORTS & DIVE OPERATORS  
Dive PNG - Manus Island  
[www.divepngmanus.com](http://www.divepngmanus.com)  
Jais Aben Resort / Aquaventures Diving  
[www.aquaventures-png.com.pg](http://www.aquaventures-png.com.pg)  
Kabaira Dive - Raboul  
[www.kabairadive.com.pg](http://www.kabairadive.com.pg)  
Lissenung Island Resort  
[www.lissenung.com](http://www.lissenung.com)  
Loloata Island Resort  
[www.loloata.com](http://www.loloata.com)  
Niugini Diving  
[www.niuginidiving.com](http://www.niuginidiving.com)  
Nusa Island Retreat  
[www.nusaislandretreat.com.pg](http://www.nusaislandretreat.com.pg)  
Scuba Ventures Kavieng - New Ireland  
[www.scubakavieng.com](http://www.scubakavieng.com)  
Tawali Resort  
[www.tawali.com](http://www.tawali.com)  
Tufi Resort  
[www.tufidive.com](http://www.tufidive.com)  
Walindi Plantation  
[www.walindi.com](http://www.walindi.com)

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