



Deacon's Reef and Dinah's Beach

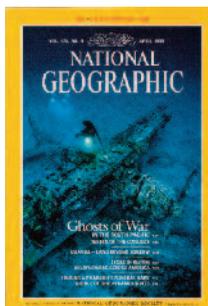
TALES OF PNG WITH DON SILCOCK

The North Coast of Milne Bay

A PERSONAL JOURNEY

“I am often asked why I like Papua New Guinea so much and the honest answer, as they say in the movies, is it’s complicated...”

First of all, PNG is a wild and adventurous place which has amazing topography and its location on the Pacific Ring of Fire and near the epicenter of the Coral Triangle bless it with incredible biodiversity both above and below the water.



Plus, it has a very special and almost unique tribal system that is the social glue that holds it all together and yet is one of the main impediments for it to achieve its full potential.

And, it is Australia’s closest neighbor (just 6km at the closest point) but is so completely different to our great brown land down-under.

My Journey...

My personal journey to PNG started a long time ago and I can still remember the catalytic moment in late April 1988.

I was living with my young family on the island of

Bahrain in the Persian Gulf, working in the oil and gas industry. Every month, my issue of National Geographic magazine would appear in our post office box, and I would devour it from cover to cover – filling my head with exotic locations for the future.

But that April issue was really something special as the front cover had a stunning image of an underwater WWII aircraft wreck - part of an article by renowned author Peter

Benchley (of Jaws fame) and the extremely accomplished underwater photographer David Doubilet.

It was called Ghosts of War in the South Pacific and in it they documented their travels around Milne Bay & New Britain diving the wrecks of WWII.

Doubilet’s images were superb – the wrecks seemed to jump out of the page at you and the scenic shots of huge sea fans were unlike anything I had ever seen before!



Deacon's Reef - Doubliett Image_1 (Don's Version)

I had no idea where PNG actually was... But soon discovered its proximity to Australia, which helped convince me that if I really did want to follow my dreams and dive some of the best locations in the world, it was time to pack our bags and head south!

It would be another 10 years before I actually went to PNG as some minor logistic issues (migration, changing careers, building a house, kid’s education) kind of got in the way a bit...

But when I did, I headed for Milne Bay because I wanted to see for myself what David Doubliett had photographed so well! That was just over 20 years ago and next month I will be returning to PNG for my 24th trip and will be back in Milne Bay again!

Where is Milne Bay?

Just to confuse everyone, there are actually two Milne Bay’s - the large bay on the south-eastern tip of New Guinea (PNG’s main island), which is centered around the provincial capital of Alotau. Then there is the much larger province of the same name.

Milne Bay Province stretches out over a huge area that is roughly the size of the United Kingdom, but only



Milne Bay Map



Deacons Reef

about 5% is dry land, with the rest is taken up by the waters surrounding the 600 islands of the province.

The province itself abounds with natural resources both above and below the water and Conservation International classified the marine biodiversity of the area as “exceptionally rich” – with nearly 430 species of corals, 950 species of mollusks and over 1100 species of fish!

In reality, only a tiny fraction of the underwater world of Milne Bay Province has even been explored and the main diving locations are concentrated around the north coast of Milne Bay itself and down in the south around the China Strait.

Both areas offer exceptional experiences, but I have to admit that I am emotionally attached to the north coast...

North Coast Dive Sites

The northern dive sites are concentrated into two main areas – the coastal ones along the Solomon Sea side of



Dinah's Beach - Coleman Shrimps



Deacon's Reef - Doublieff image (Courtesy of National Geographic)

the north coast and those on the East Cape and around Nuakata Island.

Both areas are nourished by the complex and seasonal monsoonal currents that run up and down the north coast on New Guinea island.

There are a total of 24 sites in the overall area with 9



Dinah's Beach - Frogfish



Dinah's Beach - Harlequin Shrimp

coastal ones, another 3 on the East Cape and the rest are mainly seamounts in and around Nuakata Islands. All have their specific features and attractions that cannot really be covered in a short article like this.

So, I am going to describe a few of what I consider to be the very best and my personal favorites, starting with where David Doublieff took his shot of the sea fan for that 1988 National Geographic article – Deacon's Reef.

Deacon's Reef: Named after the well-known Sydney based underwater photographer and dive shop owner Kevin Deacon (who also helped me a lot in my early days...) Deacon's Reef is, in my opinion, possibly one of the very best sites in all of PNG!

It is very much a wide-angle type of dive and even on a bad day it is good... but on a good day it is simply spectacular!

It is located on a headland near the small village of Lauadi and those nutrient-dense coastal currents have created an incredibly rich array of beautiful hard corals, sponges and sea fans.

And, because it is a relatively shallow dive, it is bathed in light – so it's a delight to photograph! Plus, the nearby deep waters mean that there is a good chance of seeing cruising hammerheads, whale sharks & oceanic mantas out in the blue.

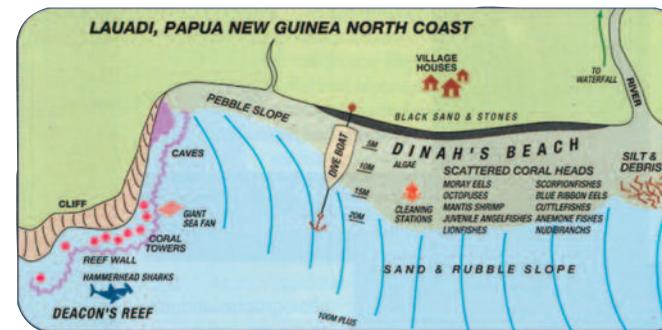
My goal whenever I dive at Deacon's Reef is always the same – try and take images as good as Doublieff's... But, like life itself, underwater photography is a journey not a destination and I will be trying again next month!

Dinah's Beach: But wait, there's more... just inside the bay formed by the headland where Deacon's Reef is located is the birthplace of muck diving!

"Dinah" is Dinah Halstead, the first wife of the legendary Bob Halstead. Together Bob and Dinah established liveaboard diving in Milne Bay and put the



Wahoo Point Elephant Ear Sponges above and right.



place on the international dive travellers map.

Just off the beach in front of Lauadi is where Bob managed to convince passengers to forego the delights of nearby Deacon's and instead switch to a macro lens and check out the black sand for critters.

It was quite a hard sell at first, but from those humble beginnings we now have a whole new world to explore and because Dinah was from Lauadi, it is very appropriate that the site is named after her!

Wahoo Point: Another firm favourite of mine is this site, which is located on a similar headland to Deacon's and also swept by those rich coastal currents.

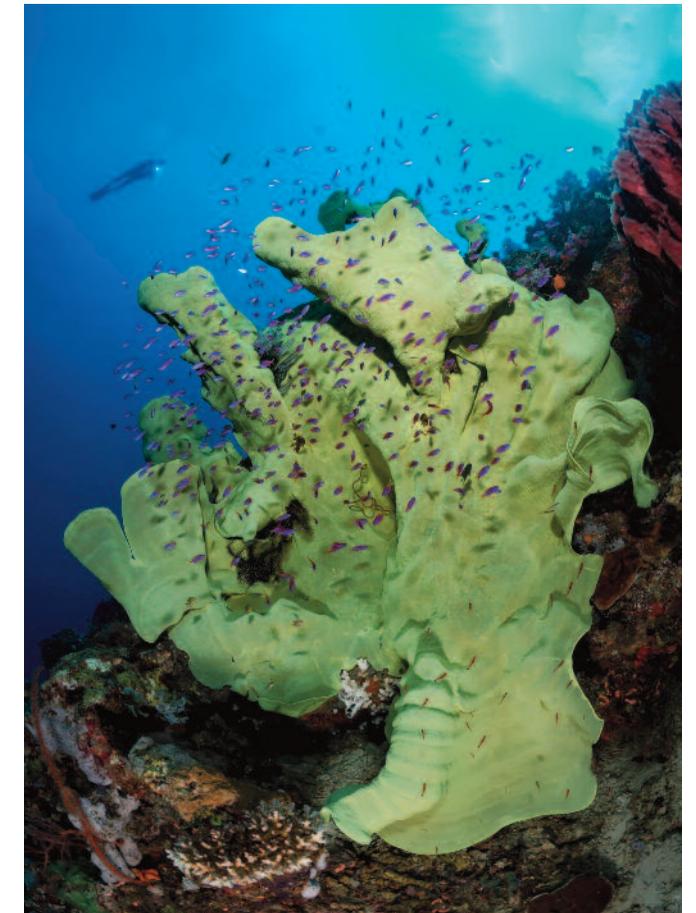
The defining feature of Wahoo Point are the huge elephant ear sponges, which are incredibly photogenic and the likes of which I have not seen anywhere else on all of my travels!

How to dive the North Coast?

Probably the very best way to dive the north coast sites is from Tawali Dive Resort, which is located on a very scenic limestone headland on the Solomon Sea side of the peninsular that forms the north coast of Milne Bay.

Tawali's physical location means that, depending on the weather, all the 24 coastal, East Cape and Nuakata Island sites are accessible by day-boats with a journey of between 10 and 60 minutes.

The day boats leave at 08.00 every morning with most guests opting to do three dives with an excellent



There are a lot of other nice things to see at Wahoo, if you can tear yourself away from the elephant ear sponges...

Thank you for getting this far through this somewhat self-indulgent article, but Milne Bay is a very special place for me and I will be bring you more in Tales from PNG soon!

ABOUT DON SILCOCK

Don is based from Bali and his website www.indopacificimages.com has extensive location guides, articles and images on some of the best diving locations in the Indo-Pacific region and "big animal" encounters globally.

packed lunch provided on-board. Typically returning to the resort mid- afternoon in time for either a night dive on the house reef and jetty or a sundowner on the excellent observation deck at the main lodge...

The north coast is also serviced periodically by both MV Chertan and MV Oceania. Chertan is based from Alotau and is captained by Rob van der Loos who literally knows Milne Bay better than anybody, having spent over 30 years diving every nook and cranny!, While Oceania is based from Kimbe Bay in New Britain but relocates every year to Milne Bay as part of skipper Dan Johnson's plan to open up the very best diving in PNG.