

Located along the edge of the Bismarck Archipelago, the province of New Ireland forms the eastern flank of Papua New Guinea. It is quite remote from the main island of New Guinea and the province has its own distinct and remarkably interesting traditional cultures.

It is also world renowned for its fabulous malagan carvings and tatanua masks, together with its kulap sculptures and overall, the province offers an experience that really is quite different to the rest of PNG. The province consists of the large, musket-shaped island of New Ireland, which is also known as Latangai, together with numerous other smaller islands - the largest of which is New Hanover.

The diving in New Ireland is centred around Kavieng, the main town and regional capital and also has its own distinct flavour, compared to the other main locations in Papua New Guinea like Milne Bay and Kimbe Bay. On offer is a broad smorgasbord of diving - with shipwrecks, World War Two aircraft wrecks, dramatic walls, dynamic channels, bustling reefs and schooling pelagics. Above water Kavieng is a laid-back and friendly place with an interesting colonial and World War Two history that is often described as a typical 'Somerset Maugham South Sea island port'.

KAVIENG

Mention Kavieng among any group of experienced scuba divers and you will quickly discern four key themes - wrecks, big currents, schooling pelagics and clear blue water.

A quick look at the map, combined with a basic awareness of oceanography, will tell you why... Located as it along the eastern rim of the Bismarck Archipelago, the long, thin, rifle-like shape of New Ireland forms a natural barrier between the rich deep waters of the Pacific Ocean to the north and east. And those of the Bismarck Sea to the west.

It is also very much an integral part of the Coral Triangle - widely recognised as the area of greatest marine biodiversity in the world. Because of that physical location, the island's coastline is exposed to a complex mix of oceanic, equatorial and regional currents. Kavieng's position means that it sits on the very nexus of those powerful water flows, which circulate back and forth through the channels between New Ireland and nearby New Hanover.

Those currents and the sheer biodiversity of the Coral Triangle combine to make diving Kavieng one of the absolute must-do diving locations in Papua New Guinea. Simply stated... the area has a great combination of wrecks, reefs, coral gardens, big fish and muck diving.

TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN!

Diving around Kavieng can really be thought of as two distinct and separate areas. The first being the sites on the Pacific Ocean side of New Ireland, around the actual town, which are principally wreck sites... Mainly World War Two aircraft, but there is also the wreck of a former Taiwanese fishing boat, the Der Yang. Then there are the dive sites to the south on the Bismarck Sea side of the island and, just to keep life interesting... when one side is at its best, the other is probably not! ►





DIVING PNG *New Ireland*

Scuba Diver Senior Travel Editor Don Silcock continues his series focusing on Papua New Guinea, in this article concentrating on New Ireland

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DON SILCOCK

That is because, as those strong currents flow through the main channels between New Ireland and New Hanover, they flush out the detritus from around the islands and surrounding 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 that there can be 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.

KAVIENG AND WORLD WAR TWO

When the Japanese forces invaded Papua New Guinea in January 1941, they landed first at Kavieng. And soon after at Rabaul, in nearby New Britain. The military base established in Kavieng was much smaller than the one at Rabaul, but strategically it was particularly important, as it was effectively the backdoor of the overall invasion. It was from Kavieng the Japanese guarded their rear flank as they pushed further into PNG.

So, when the tide of the war in the Pacific changed in 1943, Kavieng became an important target for the Allies. These days there is little left to see above water from those offensives, but underwater is a different story!

PACIFIC OCEAN SIDE DIVE SITES

In and around Kavieng there are a total of six World War Two aircraft wrecks, ranging from the remnants of one of the RAAF's illustrious PBY Catalina flying boats to my personal favourite the Deep Pete, the wreck of a Japanese Mitsubishi F1M floatplane. Then there is the wreck of the Der Yang, a long-line Taiwanese fishing boat that lays on its side at a depth of 30m in the clear blue waters to the north-west of Kavieng. The boat was scuttled in 1988 and is both an excellent dive and a great alternative to the aircraft wrecks.

Finally, if you have had your fill of wrecks, there is the Echuca Patch reef near the Der Yang. Plus, the interesting Nusa Blowholes site with its caves, swim-throughs and healthy population of whitetip reef sharks.

BISMARCK SEA SIDE DIVE SITES

On the Bismarck Sea side of Kavieng, there are numerous excellent sites. However, all share the common characteristic that they are at their absolute best when dived on an incoming tide, with the prevailing currents bringing in clear blue waters from the Bismarck Sea.

But, with all those tides, picking the right time to enter the water requires significant local knowledge.

“ Three-Island Harbour - the last resting place of four Japanese World War Two vessels, all sunk by the Allied forces in February 1944, one of which is probably the best diveable and fully intact midget submarine anywhere! ”

Snapper shoal around the broken wreckage

DON SILCOCK

In more normal times, Don is based on Bali in Indonesia, but is currently hunkered down in Sydney... 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' experiences globally.



The reefs are vibrant and healthy

Get that timing wrong and you will either end up with the out-going tide and all the detritus from the islands and mangroves it has swept through - meaning really bad visibility...

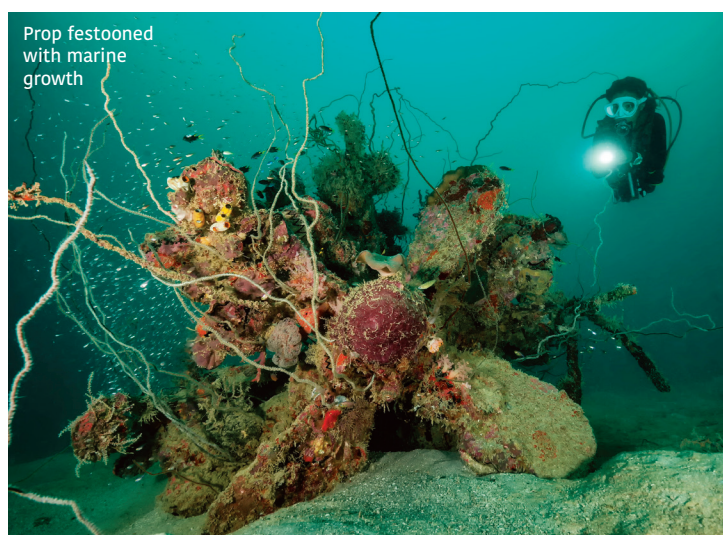
Or you will feel like somebody pressed the spin-cycle button on you, because at their peak, the in-coming tides seem to reach warp speed!

Timed to perfection would have you in the water as the incoming tide from the Bismarck Sea has flushed away the detritus, but there is still enough current to stimulate the marine growth and schooling pelagics.

HOW TO DIVE KAVIENG

There are two land-based options to dive the Kavieng area, Lissenung Island and Scuba Ventures. Both are great operators and know the area and its sites very well. All my personal experience of Kavieng has been with Lissenung, which is run by Dietmar Amon and his wife, Ange.

Dietmar came to Papua New Guinea in 1996 in search of adventure and to escape the cold of his native Austria, but ended up buying an island... He basically lived under the stars on Lissenung Island while he built the accommodation, main lodge and established 24-hour power and running water. In between he searched for and surveyed all the sites and wrecks - it really is quite a story, and one which Dietmar tells superbly!



Prop festooned with marine growth

I like my adventure in large servings, but when I talk to people like Dietmar and hear their stories, I always feel like I have lived a sheltered life! Ange arrived in 2005 and brought many really nice touches to the resort and between them, they run a really good operation that also puts a tremendous amount back in to the local community.

Plus, they also privately fund and run a highly active turtle conservation project from Lissenung Island that involves meticulously moving newly laid eggs to safe havens so they can hatch in safety.

NEW HANOVER

The second largest island in New Ireland province is located some 40km to the west of Kavieng. It is a volcanic, rugged and very much untamed island! Its traditional name is Lavongai Island and most divers will probably never have heard of it.

It is much better known among surfers for its waves and excellent breaks.

While anthropologists know it for some of its traditional customs, along with the interesting Johnson Cult the locals used against the former Australian colonial rulers. ▶



Expect encounters with the friendly locals

But on the north-west tip of New Hanover is Three-Island Harbour - the last resting place of four Japanese World War Two vessels, all sunk by the Allied forces in February 1944, one of which is probably the best diveable and fully intact midget submarine anywhere!

HOW TO DIVE NEW HANOVER

Although there is some exceptional diving in New Hanover, it is quite difficult to dive there because of its remote location, lack of a compressor and suitable dive boat. There is accommodation at Clem's Place, run by Clem Anton on Tunnung Island, which is primarily focused on and caters to surfers. Lissenung Resort organises an annual expedition to New Hanover in June or July each year, which is how I got to dive the wrecks of Three-Island Harbour...

Accommodation is at Clem's Place, with Lissenung organizing all the logistics and it is a real adventure that I would thoroughly recommend!



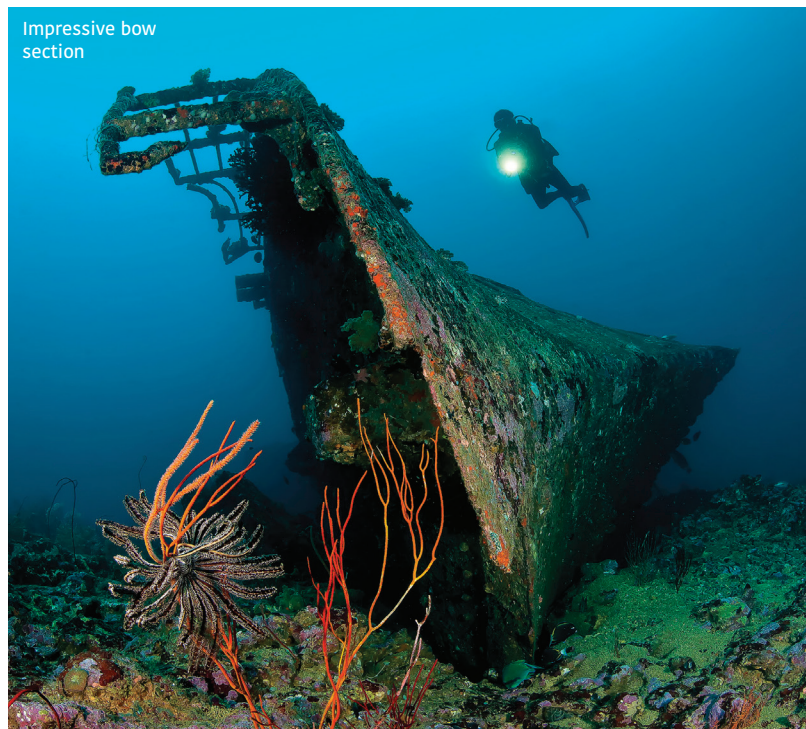
Some of the wrecks are vast



Huge shoal of barracuda



Massive gorgonian seafan



Impressive bow section

“ ...you will feel like somebody pressed the spin-cycle button on you, because at their peak, the in-coming tides seem to reach warp speed! ”

IN SUMMARY

New Ireland's fairly remote location on the eastern rim of the Bismarck Archipelago gives it a distinctively different look and feel to the other main diving locations in Papua New Guinea.

In a country with so many interesting cultures, New Ireland stands out for its quite unique wooden carvings and its traditional rituals and ceremonies. Underwater it is also different, with all of its excellent wrecks, superb reefs, excellent coral gardens and schooling pelagics making for some truly excellent diving.

In a country that has so much to offer the traveling diver, New Ireland is yet another of Papua New Guinea's truly special places! ■