

# DIVING

## Milne

Don Silcock explains how this large bay on the eastern tip of the Papua New Guinea's 'mainland' is what first brought the country to the attention of travelling divers and underwater photographers around the world

Photographs by Don Silcock

**I**t was the mid-1980s when articles and images started to appear – still the very early days of liveaboards in exotic locations that few people had actually heard of... And yet here was this British ex-schoolteacher on board a locally built, custom dive vessel exploring a place called Milne Bay in a country named PNG.

His name was Bob Halstead and, together with his then-wife Dinah, they established the first liveaboard operation in Papua New Guinea. Their boat, the MV Telita, was, shall we say, compact... but it enabled them to get to and dive the many reefs and islands that form Milne Bay.

Bob, who passed away in December 2018, was always forthright in his opinions and seemed to relish being controversial – or as someone once described him, 'not always right, but never in doubt'. But there was absolutely no doubt that he could take great underwater photos and captured superb images of the sites he and Dinah found in Milne Bay. Using them to illustrate the numerous articles published in the global diving media – effectively establishing Milne Bay as a 'must-do' dive location.

Other adventurers followed Halstead, most notably Rob van der Loos with his boat MV Chertan - and the rest, as they say, is history!

### So... Why is Milne Bay special?

Papua New Guinea is one of the six countries that form the Coral Triangle, the region of the Indo-Pacific widely acknowledged as the richest known area of marine

biodiversity in the world. Studies of the Coral Triangle's marine biodiversity have categorised more than 600 species of coral, together with 3,000 species of reef fish and to put those numbers into perspective – the Red Sea has around 200 coral species and 1,000 fish species, while the Caribbean has 50 and 900!

The lifeforce of that intense biodiversity are the nutrient-rich, but incredible complex, regional and equatorial currents that nourish and sustain it all and also distribute the resultant eggs and larvae. Of those six countries, only PNG is touched by all of the main currents due to its location on the epicentre of the Coral Triangle and Milne Bay is effectively the very eye of that incredible storm of biodiversity. That's why it's special!

### Milne Bay 101

There are actually two Milne Bays... The first is the large, sheltered bay on the south-eastern tip of New Guinea island, named after the British Admiral Sir Alexander Milne, ►



### *Did you know?*

Manta rays birth little manta pups about every second year, conveniently rolled up like little burritos. However, this is a relatively slow reproduction rate, which makes manta rays vulnerable to overfishing.



and then there is the much-larger province of Milne Bay.

Milne Bay Province is roughly the size of New Zealand, but only about 5% of that area is dry land, and the rest are the waters surrounding the 600 plus islands that make up the province. With those islands falling into four main groups: the Trobriands, the D'Entrecasteaux Islands, Woodlark Island and the Louisiade Archipelago.

Apart from the occasional exploratory trip, diving is largely concentrated in and around Milne Bay itself - which is still a really large area and is best thought of as the northern section, consisting of the Solomon Sea side of the East Cape peninsula together with the islands and seamounts around Nuakata Island. Then there is the southern part, with the area centred around Milne Bay's former administrative capital of Samarai Island.

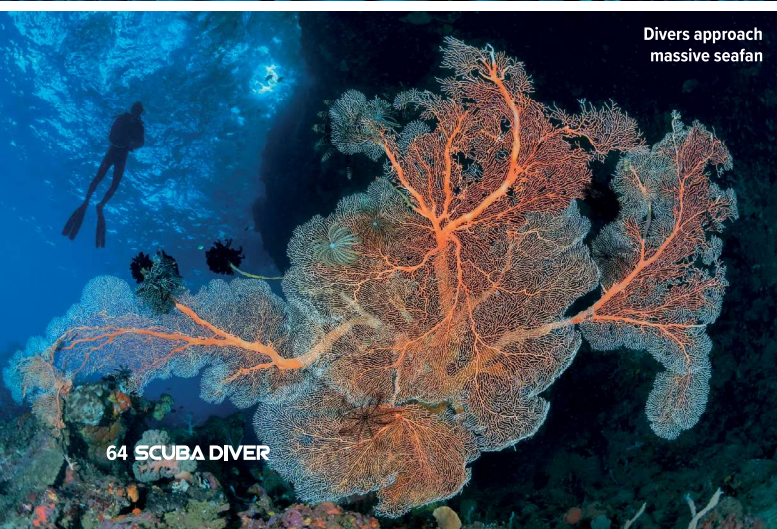
### Diving Northern Milne Bay

On the northern (Solomon Sea) side of the long and narrow East Cape peninsula are numerous small bays – the headlands of which project out into the nutrient-dense current flows of the north coast. Those rich nutrients, together with the eggs and larvae carried with the currents, have created beautiful coral gardens on the sloping terraces that descend into the depths of the Goschen Strait between the East Cape and Normanby Island. They are effectively self-contained ecosystems that host the myriad of marine life the Coral Triangle is renowned for and are a joy to dive.

There are several to choose from, but my favourite is Deacon's Reef - named after Sydney underwater photographer and diving pioneer Kevin Deacon.



Porcelain crab



Divers approach massive seafan



### *Did you know?*

Located in the Asia Pacific region's Coral Triangle, surrounding by the Bismarck, Coral and Solomon Seas, PNG has a stunning array of marine species just waiting to be discovered!



PNG is stunning topside

Deacon's is an absolute gem of a dive and never ceases to amaze me with both its intense richness and the random pelagic encounters that can happen there. The Goschen Strait and the north-east coast of New Guinea island is somewhat of a pelagic super-highway and you literally never know what chance encounters may happen and all the headland sites are known for the chance of a random encounter! The other incredible thing about Deacon's Reef is that the bay, where its headland is located, is the place where 'muck diving' was born – Dinah's Beach.

Dinah Halstead's home is the village of Lauadi and she convinced Bob to try diving the beach area in front of it and much to his surprise, he discovered all the critters in the black sand. Bob's images of these strange and exotic creatures were captivating as many had never really been photographed before. He came up with the term 'muck diving' trying to convince a party of well-heeled American divers and underwater photographers to forego the beautiful reefs and try the black sand. In turn they thought Bob was just trying to save on fuel... but they gave it a try and the rest is also history!





Gorgonian under the dive boat



Frogfish

“ Milne Bay is an all-year round destination as the shape of the bay itself and the many islands of the province mean that sheltered locations can always be found ”

### Diving Southern Milne Bay

If the 80/20 rule applies in the north, where 80% of the dives are on beautiful reefs and coral gardens, rich with wide-angle photo-opportunities and 20% being muck and critters – then the south is 20/80... Where 20% of the dives are reefs and wide-angle, but 80% is muck and critter diving with abundant macro photo-opportunities.

Let's start with the 20% and my favourite dive in the south - Gona Bara Bara island and its wonderful reef manta cleaning station Giants@Home – the most reliable place in PNG to see these beautiful creatures.

The site is in about 9m of water, just off the beach at Gona Bara Bara, and consists of a solitary bommie in an otherwise featureless sandy area. The bommie is about 5m high and is home to lots of cleaner wrasse that service the mantas when they are ready to be cleaned of parasites.

Cleaning stations are a kind of marine version of a demilitarized zone, where the normal rules of the reef

(winner takes all...) are suspended under a process marine biologists call mutualism. It's a fascinating and intriguing ritual to observe as the mantas hover above the bommie and the cleaner wrasse service them! Gona Bara Bara also has some good critter sites, but the very best of that 80% is without doubt Samarai Island jetty!

Samarai was selected by the British in 1888 as the administrative capital of the province because of its strategic location near the southern end of the China Strait, the important channel that is used to enter Milne Bay by sea. And by 1900 the island had become a bustling and attractive cosmopolitan port town and major commercial centre. But unfortunately, those glory days are long behind it and the town has fallen into disrepair and nowhere is that more evident than the large jetty, much of which is basically crumbling... ▶

### Don Silcock

In more normal times Don is based from Bali in Indonesia, but is currently hunkered down in Sydney... His website has extensive location guides, articles and images on some of the best diving locations in the Indo-Pacific region and 'big animal' experiences globally.

[www.indopacificimages.com](http://www.indopacificimages.com)

[WWW.SCUBADIVERMAG.COM.AU](http://WWW.SCUBADIVERMAG.COM.AU)



Dive boat on the jetty

SCUBA DIVER 65





“ Completely refurbished a couple of years ago, Oceania is a wonderful boat and very well operated ”



Harlequin shrimp

But underneath that decaying structure it's a different story and critters galore have colonised the accumulated flotsam and jetsam of the last 130 years or so! The jetty comes out about 50 metres from shore and the various sections stretch about 150 metres along it, so there is quite an area to cover – but there is a lot to see with scorpionfish, stonefish, toadfish, crocodilefish, octopuses down in the rubble and baitfish, batfish, convict-fish, catfish and angelfish swirling around the pylons.

### How to dive Milne Bay

There are a couple of ways to dive Milne Bay... either you can base yourself on the north coast at Tawali Dive Resort and concentrate on the East Cape and Nuakata Island sites, or you can use one of the two liveaboards that operate there and mix those northern sites with some of the southern ones.

**Resort-based:** Tawali's location on the East Cape peninsula means that excellent sites like Wahoo Point are just minutes away from the resort by day-boat, while Deacon's Reef, Dinah's Beach, Coral Gardens and Barracuda Point are about 30 minutes away. The farthest sites on the tip of the East Cape, Nuakata Island and the seamount sites are at most a 60-minute journey.

Two to three dives per day, with lunch on the boat are the

norm, and late afternoon or night dives are available on the house reef at Tawali.

**Liveaboard-based:** There are two liveaboards currently operating in Milne Bay – the MV Chertan and MV Oceania. Chertan has been based from Alotau for nearly 35 years and its skipper and owner Rob van der Loos knows the bay better than any other single individual. He is also a very accomplished underwater photographer specialising in exotic critters and the smaller side of things!

Rob's itineraries cover both the north and south of Milne Bay – but if critters and macro photography are your thing, then the south is the best choice! Oceania is skippered by Dan Johnson, another long-term PNG resident who normally bases the boat from Kimbe Bay on the north coast of New Britain. But Oceania relocates to Milne Bay in February and March as part of Dan's plan to operate the boat year-round in the best locations in Papua New Guinea.

Completely refurbished a couple of years ago, Oceania is a wonderful boat and very well operated. Its Milne Bay routes are designed to get to the best sites in both the north and the south – so it's a great choice if that is what you are looking for.

### When and how to get there

Milne Bay is an all-year round destination as the shape of the bay itself and the many islands of the province mean that sheltered locations can always be found. But to dive Milne Bay at its very best, you should visit from November through to late-March as that is the dry season for that part of Papua New Guinea and the minimal run-off from the rivers and streams means that underwater visibility can be exceptional.

The only really viable option for getting to Milne Bay is by air from Port Moresby to Alotau's Gurney (GUR) airport, which is served on a regular basis by both Air Niugini and PNG Air.

### In summary...

Located as it is in the heart of the Coral Triangle, Papua New Guinea has some amazing diving and Milne Bay has some of the very best. But you do have to make a bit of a choice between concentrating on the north or the south of the Bay...

What would be the perfect trip? Well, for me, it would be about five or so days at Tawali to sample the wonderful north coast sites and then a liveaboard trip – on Chertan if critters and macro are your thing, or on Oceania if you want the best of both worlds! Tough choice, but wonderful options!! ■



Vibrant marine growth