

Milne Bay was the first place Don Silcock ever visited in Papua New Guinea, and even after many years and several return trips, his fascination with the area endures to this day

Photographs by Don Silcock

**M**ilne Bay is a truly special place with much to see. But it is also a really big area and logistically, getting to all the best locations and spending sufficient time there in a single trip can be a challenge.

2023 marked the 25th anniversary of that initial journey, and I wanted to orchestrate something really special to celebrate my on-going fascination with PNG, its people, their rich cultures and, of course, the diving.

So, I embarked on planning what I fondly referred to as 'the big one' - a journey back to Milne Bay that would enable me to immerse myself in all it has to offer in one comprehensive trip. In essence, the ultimate Milne Bay adventure!

#### Milne Bay 101

The first thing to understand about Milne Bay, and why diving all the best locations can be challenging, is that there are essentially 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, and then there is the much-larger province of Milne Bay.

Milne Bay Province spans an area roughly equivalent to the size of New Zealand. However, only about 5% of this expanse constitutes dry land, with the remaining 95% encompassing the waters surrounding the 600-plus islands that compose the province.

Those islands are categorized into four primary groups: the Trobriands, the D'Entrecasteaux Islands, Woodlark Island, and the Louisiade Archipelago.

Diving, however, is primarily focused in and around Milne Bay itself, which is still a vast area and can be divided into two distinct regions - the northern section, comprising the Solomon Sea side of the East Cape peninsula, together with the islands and seamounts near Nuakata Island to the east, and the southern part, centred around Samarai Island which, in colonial times, served as the administrative capital of Milne Bay province. Understanding that distinction is the key to planning the ultimate Milne Bay adventure. ▶

# THE ULTIMATE MILNE BAY *adventure*

### *Did you know?*

Manta rays are filter-feeding planktivores that use their mouths and modified gill plates to strain plankton and small fishes from the water. They have teeth, which are tiny, peg-like and about the size of a pinhead, but they are not used for feeding. Instead, they are utilized during breeding so that the mating mantas can hold on to each other.





Huge Sea Fan at Deacon's Reef



Emperor Shrimp on Sea Cucumber

Elephant Ear Sponge at Wahoo Point



### Dividing Northern Milne Bay

The northern (Solomon Sea) side of the long, slender East Cape peninsula features a series of small bays, with their headlands extending out into the nutrient-rich currents that flow along the north coast. Those currents function as nature's distribution system for the region's eggs and larvae. It's almost the perfect supply chain, delivering eggs and larvae to generate marine life and providing nitrogen and phosphorous-rich nutrients to support growth.

The outcome is the development of stunning coral gardens on the gently sloping terraces that extend into the depths of the Goschen Strait, between the East Cape and Normanby Island to the north.

These self-contained ecosystems are thriving with the diverse marine life for which the Coral Triangle is renowned, making them a true delight for divers. While there are several options to choose from, my personal favourite is Deacon's Reef - named after Sydney-based underwater photography and diving pioneer Kevin Deacon.

Deacon's Reef is a remarkable dive site that consistently astonishes with its abundant marine life and occasional, unexpected encounters with pelagic species.

The north-east coast of New Guinea Island, particularly the Goschen Strait, acts as a kind of pelagic superhighway, and the headland dive sites are well-known for the thrilling encounters that happen when curious pelagic creatures make a random appearance.

To the east of the East Cape is Nuakata Island, with the area in between dotted with several seamounts that offer outstanding diving on their vibrant reef systems rich with beautiful hard and soft corals.



Picturesque Observation Point

But the north coast is not all coral gardens, reefs and random pelagics... it's also the spiritual home of muck diving – loosely defined as diving where there is no beautiful scenery!

The term was coined by Bob Halstead, the original pioneer of diving in Milne Bay who, together with his first wife Dinah, built and operated MV Telita - the very first liveaboard in Papua New Guinea. Bob came up with the term while trying to convince a party of well-heeled American divers and underwater photographers to forego the beautiful reefs and try the black sand and critters at Dinah's Beach. Apparently, the Americans' thought Bob was just trying to save on fuel, but they gave it a try and the rest is history!

### How to dive the North

There are two options for diving the north of Milne Bay – either you base yourself at Tawali Dive Resort and use their day boats, or you do it from a liveaboard and that means booking a trip on the MV Oceania when it operates there from mid-January to the end of March.

Both will get you to the best dive sites and which one to choose really is a function of how many dives you want to do, basically why I put together 'the big one'... ▶



## Magical Milne Bay's Pride & Jewel Tawali Leisure & Dive Resort

Located in the tranquil and secluded waters of Alotau, Milne Bay is perhaps Papua New Guinea's best kept secret - TAWALI RESORT. Situated on a limestone bluff backed by densely rain forested hills overlooking the clear and protected waters of Milne Bay.

Milne Bay is the home of diving in Papua New Guinea and a destination that put PNG on the map as a diver's paradise and must-dive. The diversity, quality and abundance of dive sites are astounding.

Set within pristine surroundings, Tawali is in a great location for divers with access to 25 day trip sites all year round.

Tawali dive sites include Coral Garden and the highly rated Deacon's Reef. Tawali is also the home of Lauadi, the birth place of muck diving and recognized as one of best macro dive sites in the world.

Discover the dive sites that put PNG into the world class map of diving!





### 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... 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.

Stunning Elsie's Reef



Devil Scorpionfish



### How to dive Southern Milne Bay

The south is too far from everywhere for day-boats to even be an option and the only way to dive there is on a liveaboard - and these days that means booking a spot on MV Oceania.

Oceania's home base is Walindi Dive Resort in Kimbe Bay, New Britain and it covers the best locations in the Bismarck Sea from there when the weather is at its most optimal.

During the rest of the year its skipper Dan Johnson relocates the boat to where he knows the weather and conditions are at their best, and for Milne Bay that means the first three months of the year.

Oceania's Milne Bay routes are typically about ten nights and will take you to the best sites in both the north and the south. For sure you will have some really great dives, but... is that enough time for such a great location? ▶

### 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 renowned for its exceptional marine biodiversity.

In-depth studies of the Coral Triangle's marine life have identified over 600 coral species and an astonishing 3,000 species of reef fish – roughly three to five times that of the Red Sea and the Caribbean.

The heartbeat of this remarkable biodiversity is the complex network of nutrient-rich equatorial and regional currents that nourish and sustain the region, while also distributing the eggs and larvae of all those species.

Of those six countries, only Papua New Guinea is touched by all of the principal currents and Milne Bay sits at the epicentre of that extraordinary biodiversity.

Playtime with the locals at Matong Jetty



Reefs of Linden Harbor



Colourful Crinoid



Jake Snaplane at Linden Harbor







Villagers in Waterfall Bay

*Did you know?*

With barrier reefs, coral walls, fringing reefs and sea grass beds along with spectacular World War Two wrecks, diving in PNG reveals treats around every corner!

“ Papua New Guinea has some amazing diving and Milne Bay has some of the very best ”

**The big one – my ultimate trip**

Once per year there is a unique opportunity to dive not only the best sites in Milne Bay from Oceania, but also some of the rarely visited ones to the north of the East Cape around Normanby Island, as the boat heads for New Britain.

Around the end of March Dan starts the process of relocating Oceania back to Kimbe Bay, which opens a pretty special door to dive legendary sites like Observation Point in the far north of Milne Bay. Together with those like Lindenhaven on the remote south coast of New Britain.

That trip became the foundation for my ultimate trip, which I built on by arriving in Milne Bay ten days early and diving the East Cape and Nuakata Island from Tawali.

It really worked out perfectly and I was able to get to all my favourite sites in the north on Tawali's day boats and then revisit some of them on Oceania before heading south.

The icing on the cake was the new manta ray site Dan has found in the south at Kei Island, which he had hinted at when I was last onboard with him and it was big smiles all round when he delivered!

**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...

My ultimate trip meant that I did not have to choose and I got the double bonus of diving those rarely dived, but wonderful locations in the far north of Milne Bay and the south coast of New Britain. My only regret from the whole adventure being that I had to wait 25 years to do it! ■



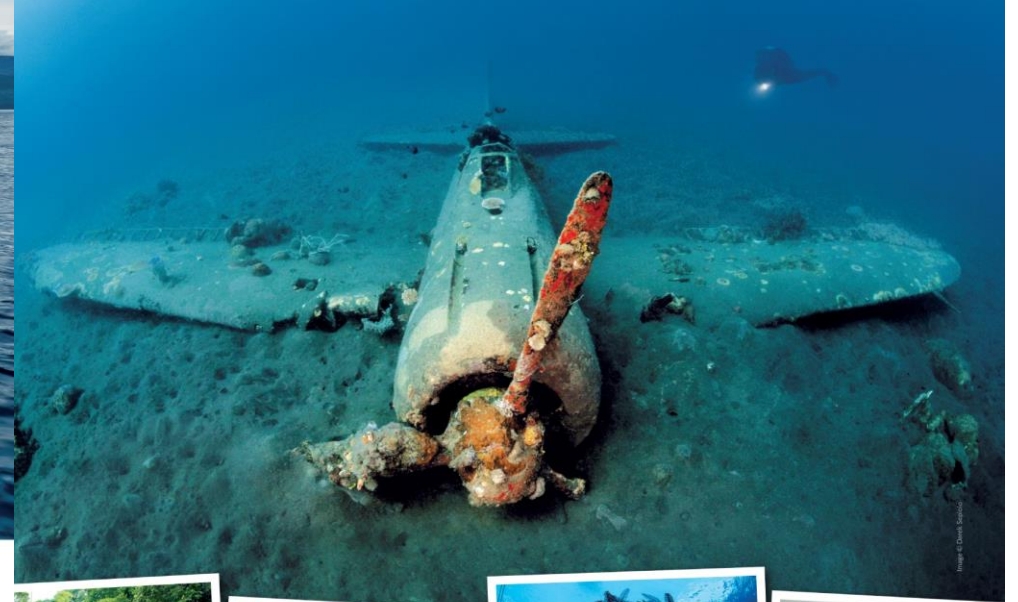
Sponges and Crinoids



Linden Harbor East Channel

**Don Silcock**

Don is Scuba Diver's Senior Travel Editor and is based from Bali in Indonesia. 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)



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



Our newest liveboard operating out of Walindi Resort, MV Oceania, a 27 metre catamaran fully refitted for up to 16 divers in 8 cabins. Her itineraries include Kimbe Bay, Northern New Britain, Milne Bay and beyond.

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



MV Febrina has been operating from Walindi Resort since 1991. A boutique, traditional style live-a-board catering for 10-12 guests in 7 cabins, including large and small singles diving the waters of the Bismarck Sea and Kavieng.

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



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