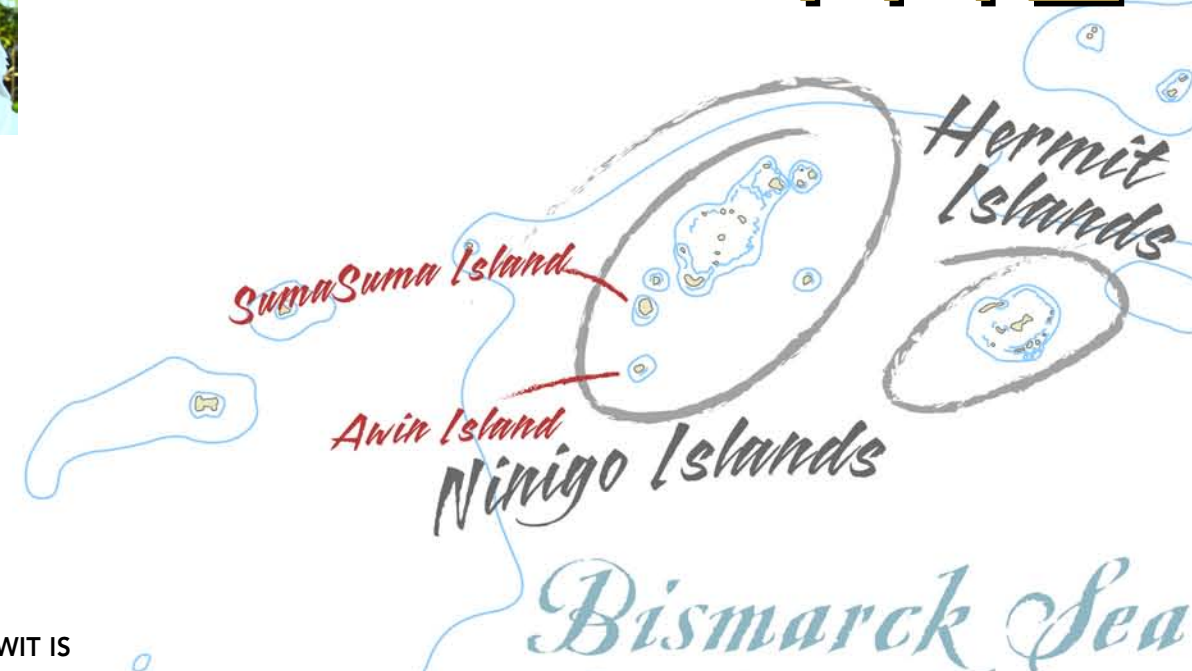


: BOB HALSTEAD

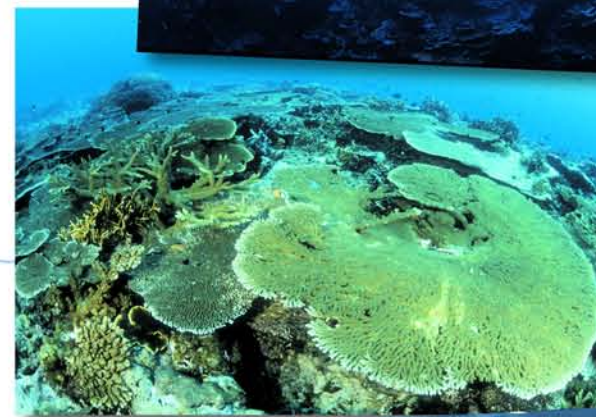


THE BISMARCK ADVENTURE

discovering the ninigos°



+ CAPTAIN CRAIG DE WIT IS DESCENDED FROM DUTCH PIRATES, AND LOVES ADVENTURE. HIS FAVOURITE DIVES ARE WITH SHARKS, ON SUNKEN WRECKS, OR EXPLORING NEW SITES. WHEN CRAIG GREETED ME AT THE WEWAK AIRPORT I OBSERVED HE WAS NOT WEARING AN EYE PATCH, NOR EVEN A PARROT ON HIS SHOULDER, BUT HE DID NOT DISAPPOINT. "BOB, I'VE GOT A NEW ZERO AIRPLANE WRECK FOR YOU TO PHOTOGRAPH. VILLAGERS AT WEI ISLAND SHOWED THE SITE TO ME LAST WEEK. IT'S NEVER BEEN DIVED BEFORE".



I'd taken the 0700 Air Niugini flight from Cairns, made a perfect connection in Port Moresby, and arrived at 11.30 the same day. The rest of the guests, including my dive buddy, sometime Lord Mayor of Melbourne Irvin Rockman, were due in later that afternoon. Irvin took his first plunge in the late 1950s and we're both self-sufficient divers with pony bottles, so we don't worry too much about each other. As long as we're at the ship's bar later to tell each other lies, all's well.

A few minutes after arrival on board MV *Golden Dawn*, Craig told me to get my gear ready, and we'd dive a shipwreck in the harbour while waiting for the others. The prospect of a 'same day' dive spurred me into action - within an hour my dive and camera gear was ready to get wet. I'm breathing Nitrox 32 for the cruise which will limit my maximum depth to 40 metres, but give me a huge safety margin for decompression as I'm going to set my dive computer as if I was breathing air. This year I'll be 21 for the third time, so caution is wise. Irvin has threatened to do a rebreather course during the cruise as long as it doesn't cut into his drinking time.

The no-name wreck is at Wewak point in 12 metres. A commercial fishing boat was anchored over it but they weren't fishing. This area is, after all, an anchorage. The wreck turned out to be a small Japanese cargo vessel from the War and there were plenty of batfish, barracuda, jacks and black corals. Swimming along the hull I peered into a porthole and was startled by a face peering back at me - I thought for a moment that Irvin had arrived early, but it was a giant Queensland grouper. I swam ahead and down into the hold and managed to get one photo before it hid in the wreckage.

War artefacts are strictly protected in PNG but I spotted a bottle and dug to investigate. *Fanta*, circa 2006. Then I realised the wreck and surrounding sand was covered with modern bottles and empty tin cans. The fishing boat was chucking its garbage overboard. I resolved to check with Craig about *Golden Dawn's* cannons and cutlasses, and a revival of his family traditions.

Irvin and the rest of our group arrived - a couple of guys from the USA, a Japanese lady, a young eye surgeon from England and Aussies Ian and Selwin. Selwin makes sausage skins, but

Papua New Guinea

Madang

wasn't as interesting as his French girlfriend Sophie, who didn't dive but definitely improved the view on the boat. Just out of Wewak, Mushu and Kairuru Islands offer plenty of unexplored reefs, good muck diving and more wrecks. I was very keen to dive a Japanese 'Pete' Biplane wreck in 30 metres of silty water, upside-down but smothered with huge black corals and yellow striped snappers and baitfish. In the dark water I could see the biplane was intact but it looked more like a reef than a wreck.

In Victoria Bay the large armed merchant ship *India Maru* lies decaying in 35 metres. Bits have fallen off since I last dived it, and the gun has toppled over, but it's still a wonderful dive, and the mystery of whether it was a gold-carrying treasure ship still hasn't been solved. I can testify that if there was gold it's long been salvaged, and rumours that Craig, Irvin and I have each bought new Ferraris are false – Irvin has a Porche. A resident feature of this wreck is the exquisite blue-ring angelfish *Pomacanthus annularis* – this fish is the real treasure and rare in PNG.

That evening we left for the Ninigo Island group. The sea was flat and next morning we awoke at Awin Island, made a drift dive along its outer wall and saw our first sharks, mostly grey reef but a few whitetips. The water out here is always superbly clear. On the next drift at nearby Suma Suma Island wall we saw even more sharks, including a silvertip. At Suma Suma's north point the typically sheer outer wall started with a slope and we were finally able to moor *Golden Dawn*.

We took a ride in the large inflatable and drifted back to the boat through massive fish schools, including a rare congregation of great barracuda. We guessed they were mating.

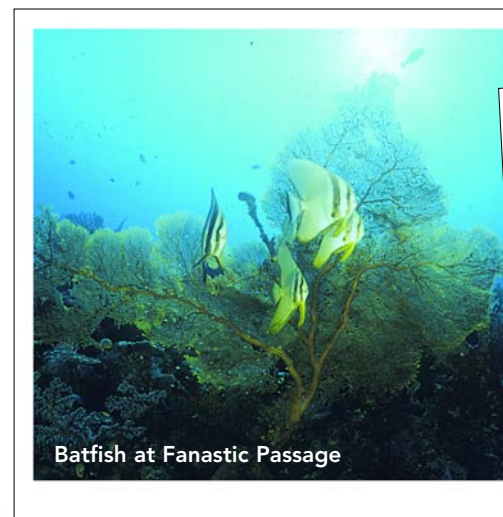
Craig is an expert 'bottle rubber'. A ribbed plastic water bottle is taken down, filled with gas at depth, then rubbed with a metal rod to attract sharks. This is a variation on the shark-calling technique traditional in PNG from New Ireland and the Trobriand Islands. Traditionally a coconut rattle is thrashed at the surface to attract sharks to a fisherman's canoe.

Craig's bottle rubbing is amazingly effective and sharks, thinking the noise is from struggling fish, rush in to investigate. Mostly they are grey reefs but Craig often gets silvertips and even the odd big bull shark. Caution is required – Craig was nipped on the shoulder when a silvertip he hadn't noticed came from behind just as he started to rub the bottle. When chef Sue had a go she nearly became shark sushi; she rubbed a bit too long and the sharks were virtually on her when she stopped. We can't have the chef eaten, especially one as good as she is!

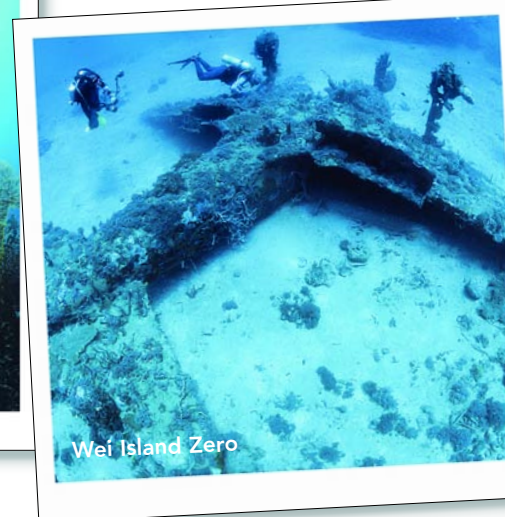
Dawn next day saw us at Fantastic Passage, the western entrance to the Ninigo's lagoon. The entrance slopes up



Baby silvertip



Batfish at Fantastic Passage



Wei Island Zero



The bow of the India Maru

from deep water then breaks up into a series of sand gutters and lush reef ridges. Seafans are abundant but also other corals and schools of fishes. A giant clam, adorned with brilliant soft corals, sits on one of the ridges. Visibility was forever, and several grey reefies and a lone blacktip responded to Craig's bottle.

We dived the other passages of the three main Ninigo atolls and several outer walls. All had something different to offer, hard corals and a huge fat tawny shark on the north side, exuberant orange sponges and gorgonians to the south. Most reefs had resident barracuda and jacks. Solomon's reef, on the northern side of the main atoll, was named after the villager who, two years previously, was spearfishing along the reef with his young son when a squall tossed his canoe onto his face, shattering his homemade face mask, which then neatly sliced his nose off. His son called for help, another canoe picked them up and they sailed to *Golden Dawn*. Fortunately one of the guests was a surgeon who volunteered to sew the nose back on

using *Golden Dawn's* extensive firstaid kit. The surgery was successful and *Golden Dawn* is always especially welcome at Solomon's Reef.

One marvellous morning Craig set off outside the lagoon to dive an oceanic seamount called Pupol Reef. "This is a difficult site unless the weather is perfect – and today it is!" Craig enthused. What a fabulous dive this is. The seamount is five nautical miles outside the atoll in water 800 metres deep and rises to just nine metres. The crew marked the top of a ridge at 30 metres and we dropped down directly, then gradually swam along the ridge to the shallower water where *Golden Dawn* was moored. Sharks appeared immediately and their number grew as Craig rubbed his faithful bottle. I saw a rare 'Java' shark (*Carcharhinus amboinensis*), like a big grey reef but without the black edge to the caudal fin and with a pale patch/stripe on its side. Then we swam through multitudes of fishes and gorgonians. Near the boat a big school of batfish entertained us. After a short interval we were back in for a second dive – the interval was minimal for air but very safe on nitrox. I love nitrox! All too soon it was time to get back into the lagoon to find a safe anchorage. These waters are still poorly surveyed and though Craig has gained a lot of local knowledge over the years, cruising the lagoons at night is just not safe.

Craig is a 'diver's diver', very experienced and an enthusiastic hi-tek instructor for IANTD. He built his own personal rebreather, but hires out KISS fully-closed units on *Golden Dawn*. Irvin was now well into the rebreather course and looking as

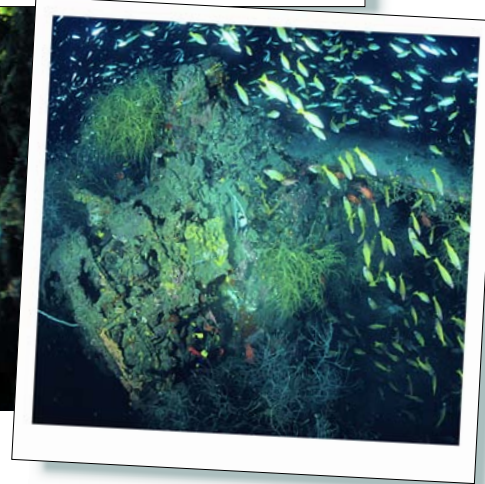
if he might survive, though I put a bid in for his camera gear just in case. Two other guests were on rebreathers the whole cruise. By its end Irvin had earned his IANTD re-breather certification and another two their Nitrox certifications.

Unlike the Ninigos where the islands are flat coral cays, Hermit Atoll 40 nautical mile east is still young and has large volcanic islands inside the lagoon which produce runoff in the rains so the water inside the lagoon is never very clear. But the plus is the lagoon produces plankton which attracts mantas and mobula rays.

Outside the lagoon the water is clear again and Craig has found a spectacular site where silvertip sharks come in to his call. The family includes at least a dozen juveniles. Later I remembered a great site I'd explored in 1978 outside Alacrity Harbour on the eastern side of the atoll, so we went there. My memory was good; a sloping drop off with miraculous vis, gorgonians and fish life. It became 'Bob's Drop'! Sue discovered a pretty swimthrough and a tame turtle. Villagers here are Seventh Day Adventists and don't hunt turtles or other 'shellfish,' so turtles are abundant.

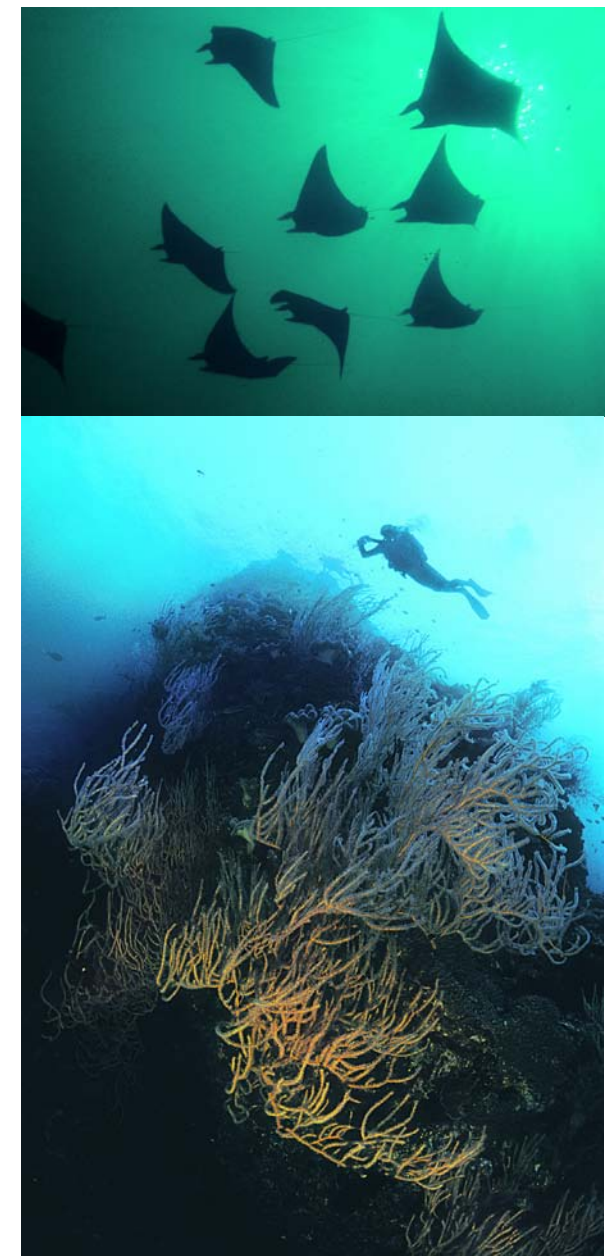
It was time to head back towards Wewak. A slight deviation from our course took us to Wei Island, which Craig had visited for the first time on the cruise prior to ours. He'd befriended the villagers on Wei and we were given a warm welcome when we arrived after another millpond overnight crossing. Villagers had told Craig where a wartime airplane had ditched. They could see it from the surface but it was too deep for them to reach. We were the first full group to dive it after its 'discovery'. The

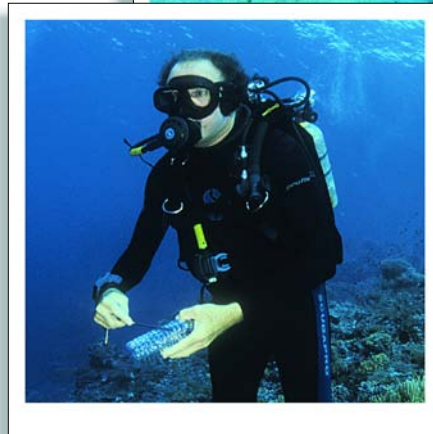
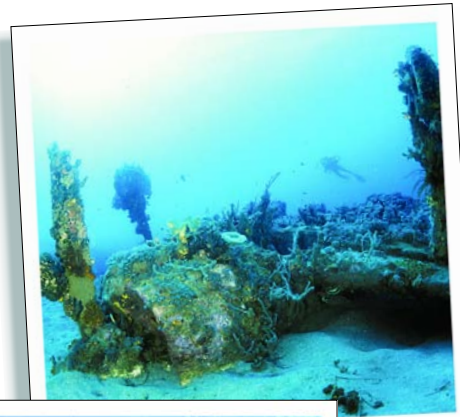
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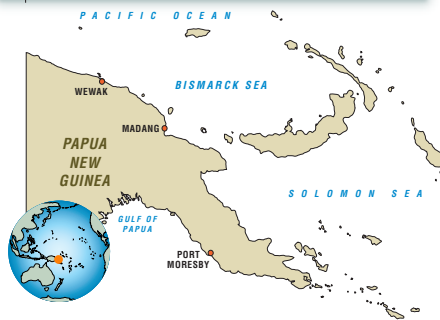
Clockwise from top left: Blue ring angelfish; Kairuru biplane wreck; Hermits Wall

Below: Mobula in the murk; Hermits Wall





Top: Wei Island Zero; Hermits Wall;
Left: Craig bottle-rubbing



Japanese Zero fighter rests upside down in 24 metres. The pilot had survived but for some reason had ditched the plane with the undercarriage down which probably caused it to flip as it sank. The plane is intact but shows clear evidence of battle damage with a gaping hole in the fuselage side.

We stayed at Wei for two days, diving the wreck but also exploring surrounding reefs and visiting the immaculate village perched on a ridge-top blessed with glorious sea breezes. This is a lovely place. The children played and laughed with us and the elders were keen to show us their canoes and some carved artefacts for sale. For me, Wei Island was the perfect place to end the adventure. Its south-seas beauty was haunting, its inhabitants happy and hospitable, and the diving and discovery superb. I met Irvin at the bar and we discovered we had no need to tell lies.

GETTING THERE

FLIGHTS Air Niugini flies direct to Port Moresby from Singapore, Manila and Australia. Daily flights from Port Moresby to Wewak are available. Air Niugini has a special 15kg extra baggage allowance that may be claimed for dive gear if mentioned when purchasing ticket.

VISAS 60 day tourist visas are available for K100 on arrival. Visas for longer stays should be obtained before departure.

MONEY The 'Kina' is divided into 100 toea.

DAN or other dive insurance is required. Emergency flights are available and there is a recompression chamber in Port Moresby.

BEST TIME TO DIVE Diving season is June to September. Wet Season is January through March and can be squally. Weather patterns are very variable from year to year and difficult to predict. Cyclones do not affect the area. Water temperatures range from average highs of 31°C around Dec/Jan to average lows of 27°C July/August.

OPERATORS

MV GOLDEN DAWN is the only PNG dive operator with scheduled cruises to the Hermit and Ninigo Islands. Contact: craig@mvgoldendawn.com
PAPUA NEW GUINEA DIVERS ASSOCIATION Contact for special commercial filming projects or specific advice: pngdive@online.net.pg or visit: www.pngdive.com

