

+ THE SCENERY IS JAW-DROPPING AS THE PLANE DESCENDS. MASSIVE TRIANGULAR VOLCANOES, DEEP GREEN JUNGLE AND WAVING PALMS EDGE THIS MASSIVE BAY. BUT THE LAND ISN'T WHY I'M HERE. I'VE COME FOR SOME OF THE BEST CORAL REEF DIVING ON THE PLANET.

Kimbe Bay is part of what's known as the 'Coral Triangle' – a stretch of ocean which boasts the highest diversity on the planet. More corals and reef fish live here than anywhere else on Earth; it stretches from the Philippines in the north, to Indonesia in the south and the Solomon Islands in the east. Though this region covers only about 2% of the world's oceans, it's home to more than 30% of its reefs.

Kimbe Bay's reefs are in exceptional condition. My visit overlaps with one by Professor John Veron who's here to survey corals on behalf of The Nature Conservancy. "What a great spot!" he exclaims as we come up from our first dive. "It takes me back 40 years to when reefs were lush, healthy and vibrant. You just don't find reefs in such great shape now." High praise from a world expert on corals and author of 14 books who's spent

7,000 hours underwater studying corals in every reef region on the globe.

In an area only about four times the size of the greater metropolitan area of Sydney, Veron counts 413 species of hard corals in Kimbe Bay which is half of all the world's hard corals and more than the total number of hard corals found on the Great Barrier Reef which is 2,000 kilometres long. Here these corals grow in lush profusion in the shallows and cling to pinnacles in the bay. They form reefs which are home to a myriad of animals including the world's smallest seahorse and about 860 other species of fish.

But these incredible waters also boast some of the world's biggest marine animals. The stunning volcanic landscape above water plummets to more than 600 metres. These deep oceanic waters are globally significant for dogtooth tuna,

dolphins, and sperm and killer whales. Hawksbill, green and leatherback turtles also live and breed here.

With internationally important coral reefs and deep oceanic waters, and few threats except land use and climate change, Kimbe Bay has attracted conservationists to work with local communities, government agencies and private industries to make sure these exceptional marine systems remain that way.

The Nature Conservancy has identified 15 marine areas in Kimbe Bay which, if carefully managed, will form a network to protect the extraordinary marine biodiversity in the area as well as the livelihoods of local people in the face of climate change.

"This is the first place in the world where a network of marine protected areas has been designed specifically to address the threat of climate change," says Dr Alison Green, senior marine scientist with The Nature Conservancy. To design the network, scientists collected an enormous amount of information about the biological and physical features of the bay, as well as socio-economic information on the needs and interests of

: LOUISE GOGGIN



the incredible **Kimbe Bay**



local communities. It took several years to collect all they needed, but this exhaustive process enabled the scientists to identify 15 priority areas in the bay that were particularly important for marine life.

However Green stresses that while the network is the blueprint for conserving biodiversity, the local communities own and manage the bay's resources and will make the final decisions about the exact location of marine protected areas. "The science process simply helps us decide where we should invest our efforts," she says.

The proposed network of protected areas stretch over 180 kilometres of ocean. Some are owned by only one community; others can be owned by up to 10. Some communities can only be reached by a day's hard travel on very rugged roads, with others only accessible by boat. Despite these hurdles, it's hoped that a fully functional marine protected area network is about 2-3 years away.

The Nature Conservancy is working with communities to establish Locally Managed Marine Areas or LMMAs. These protected areas are managed locally by the communities who own the resources. The LMMAs are legally binding, established under local Marine Environment Management Laws. It can take a year to establish each LMMA.

Leo Bualia from The Nature Conservancy and his 14-person team facilitate the entire process with each community – from initial awareness about the unique marine life in the bay to final signing of the agreement, and on to monitoring the plan's success to conserve marine resources. Bualia stresses that his team simply facilitate the process, and that the communities make decisions about how best to manage their resources.

"We focus on areas relevant to the community. For example, they might own a turtle nesting beach which is significant because it is unique in some way," says Bualia. "The community comes up with practical solutions about how they can look after it. They may decide to prohibit the killing of turtles or perhaps the taking of eggs." The community's ideas are incorporated in the LMMA plan and agreement. Ultimately, the agreement is signed by community leaders as well as local government – a legally binding commitment to look after their resources. Some communities will establish a *tambu* area – or a no-go or no-take area - and erect signs to alert visitors to a change in management.

The future looks bright for the spectacular marine life in Kimbe Bay. "We have a great situation here," says Green. "A sensational natural environment plus a good socio-economic and cultural framework that provides a good opportunity for conservation. Local communities are the resource owners, and can and do choose to protect their reefs. If local communities protect these priority areas, we believe we'll be successful in protecting biodiversity in the bay."



WALINDI PLANTATION RESORT

When Max Benjamin bought a run-down cocoa plantation called Walindi in 1969, having arrived in as an agronomist with Papua New Guinea's Department of Agriculture, little did he suspect what lay below the waves lapping his property.

Max removed the cocoa and planted a newly introduced crop, oil palm. Not happy to sit and wait for his crop to grow, Max began courting Cecilie, a young Australian who'd arrived in Papua New Guinea as an agricultural extension officer in 1972. Three years later she was married to a very determined Max Benjamin.

Then there were just two buildings on Walindi Plantation. To communicate with family in Australia, the Benjamins wrote letters which could take weeks to arrive. Long before the invention of mobile phones or internet, they used two-way radio for faster communication which later progressed to phone calls via a manual operator in Lae.

The oil palms were growing; Max and Cecilie looked around for other things to do. They learned to dive in 1976 and have now spent more than 30 years exploring the lush vibrant reefs at their front door.

By 1983 they'd built two small bungalows and their first guests arrived in time to celebrate Australia's win of the America's Cup in the United States. It's now 25 years since these first visitors, and Cecilie and Max have transformed the sliver of land beside the Bay into a resort which attracts about 1,000 visitors a year from around the world. Twelve bungalows and four plantation houses nestle in magnificent gardens and a bar and dining room on the water's edge overlook the Bay where killer whales have been spotted. There's wireless internet access, a small shop stocked with a range of Papua New Guinea art, a pool and, of course, some of the best diving in the world. Three boats cater for daily diving at more than 40 dive sites throughout the Bay. In 1991 two liveaboards were added; MV Stardancer carries 16 passengers, and MV Febrina carries 12 passengers on trips throughout Kimbe Bay and beyond. A wharf now accommodates the boats and a dive shop has a full range of gear for hire.

Max and Cecilie are committed to preserving the marine environment for future generations. They installed

permanent moorings on dive sites to minimise the impact on delicate coral reefs and make sure that every visitor sees the reefs just as they first saw them 30 years ago.

In the mid 1990s they realised a long-held dream – they provided part of the Walindi Plantation to build a research and education facility. Mahonia Na Dari, Guardian of the Sea in local language, opened in 1996 and initially funded by the European Union and The Nature Conservancy, has already built an impressive reputation. Mahonia Na Dari runs a Marine Environment Education Program for local and other provincial primary and secondary school children which emphasises the value of protecting the marine environment for the future. Part of the program has been incorporated into Papua New Guinea's national school curriculum.

With the emphasis on marine education and ongoing work in marine conservation, divers can be assured they'll enjoy the reefs as Max and Cecilie first saw them almost 30 years ago.

TRAVEL TRICKS

Getting there: Kimbe is about 50 minutes drive west of Hoskins airport on New Britain Island. Air Niugini flies ex Cairns and Brisbane to Port Moresby connecting to Hoskins. Allow plenty of time for connections within PNG because flights are often delayed. **Baggage:** Air Niugini allows 20kg with an additional 15kg dive gear allowance flying in and out of the country with a 16kg baggage and additional 15kg dive gear allowance within country. **Conditions:** Wet season is from January through to March when temperatures are hottest but prices are cheaper. Dry season for the rest of the year with more prevailing winds. Water temperature is around 30 degrees C most of the year. **Entry and exit requirements:** Australian passport holders can purchase an entry visa for 100 Kina (about A\$45) on arrival for 60 day stay for Australian passport holders. Exit tax incorporated in ticket at time of purchase. **Electricity:** 240vAC, 50hz, Australian outlets (two angled pins and one vertical earth pin below).

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Answer _____

Question 2 Walindi Resort is a working plantation, what do they grow there?

Answer _____

Question 3 On what bay is Walindi Resort located?

Answer _____

YOUR NAME _____

YOUR ADDRESS _____

Postcode _____

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THE REEFS OF KIMBE BAY: Professor Charles Veron, former Chief Scientist of the Australian Institute of Marine Science said: "It takes me back 40 years to when reefs were lush, healthy and vibrant. You just don't find reefs in such great shape now!" High praise from a world expert on corals and author of 14 books, who's spent 7,000 hours underwater studying corals in every reef region on the globe!

TO SEND IN YOUR WALINDI COMPETITION ENTRY COUPON:

Fax to: + 61 3 5944 4024 (03 5944 4024 within Australia)
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 Snail mail to: Walindi 25th Birthday Competition
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The first 3 correct entries will be drawn on 15 December 2008. Results will be published in January 2009 issue of Dive Log Australasia.

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