

Into the mermaid's lair

: PIERRE CONSTANT

+ "AFTER WORLD WAR II, THE AUSTRALIAN NAVY USED TO COME HERE FOR PICNICS, YOU KNOW, HAVE A SWIM IN THE POOL, ENJOY THE COOL SHADE OF THE CLIFF. WE CALL THIS PLACE WASH WASH MERI..." TWO DEGREES SOUTH OF THE EQUATOR, PAPUA NEW GUINEA'S ADMIRALTY ISLANDS ARE A FORGOTTEN EDEN FAR FROM CIVILIZATION. DURING THE PACIFIC WAR, AMERICANS HAD BLOODY FIGHTING WITH THE JAPANESE WHO HAD OCCUPIED MANUS FOR A COUPLE OF YEARS, BEFORE THEY WERE DISLODGED IN 1944.

On the north coast of Los Negros Island, named by 16th century Spanish navigators, there's an impressive 40 metre jungle-covered limestone wall running roughly northeast to southwest along Tewi Lagoon which connects to Seadler Harbour and the Pacific Ocean. Thick mangroves fringe the waterfront; nearby is a bamboo grove where, according to the locals, a big female crocodile dwells.

I'd been to Wash Wash Meri once in July or August 1999 and swam and snorkeled in the clear turquoise water. I dove down on one breath to about 10 metres, but couldn't see the end of the sediment slope under the cliff base. Under the surface some fishes wriggled shyly: orbicular cardinalfish, mangrove snappers, *Lutjanus argentimaculatus* and some black and white banded archer fish with a yellow tail.

One December morning I decided to do a tank dive to check if the pool got deeper. I drove my minibus to the village nearby. An old man named Paul was quietly smoking his pipe in an ancient armchair under his house. I assumed he was a 'bigman'. Introducing myself, I asked permission to dive into the pool. Paul, curious and open minded, stared at me for a while. "Nobody has ever scuba dived Wash Wash Meri. You are the first white man with such a funny idea", he smiled. "By the way, we have a legend about this place".

A long time ago, two sisters Inimei and Inipoon – mermaids, half human, half fish – lived in the lagoon. One day, they were caught by fishermen. One was killed for food, while the other, Inipoon, escaped after marrying the leader of the men. She became pregnant and returned to the lagoon where it's believed they

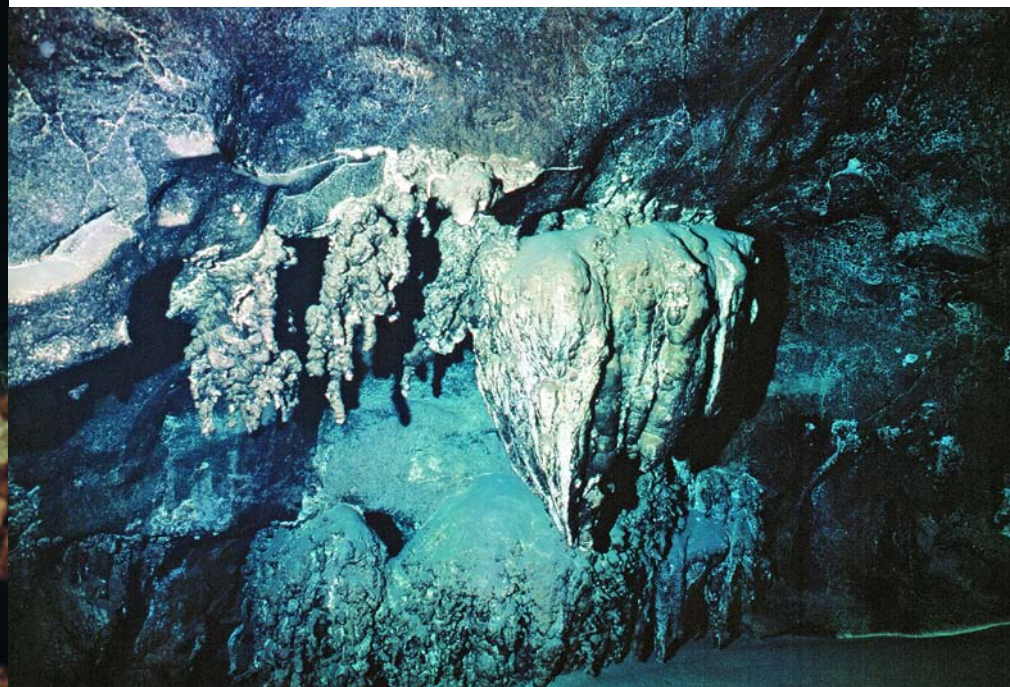
both originated. Eventually Inipoon, the younger of the sisters, landed and walked across to the pool where she hid. This is where she disappeared forever.

With the blessing of Paul the bigman, headed for the waterhole with a joyful party of local boys. Not sure what to expect down there, I told my wife to stay behind until I found out a bit more. I had a small Scubapro torch but no reel. Once underwater, I followed the left side of the wall. At the base of the slope, I touched the bottom at 17 metres. Any fin contact with the silt would instantly raise a dark cloud of dust that would totally obstruct visibility behind me. I went as far as I could without losing visual contact with the surface light. There was a bend to the left; another drop brought the tunnel depth to 21 metres, so I returned to the exit after 33 minutes. I discovered a pile of oyster shells and other marine bivalve debris on a side slope plunging to 25 metres. Did prehistoric men live here? Some translucent freshwater shrimps were hopping around on the sediment. I knew this wouldn't be my last dive in Tewi cave. Something was still hidden in the darkness.

March 2000: I resume my exploration after a two month break. This time I had a 110 metre reel from South Australia and felt more confident. A big rusty Chinese style junk had anchored in front of Lorengau (capital of Manus) with a cosmopolitan crew of young men and women travelling the globe researching coral reefs. I convinced a nice French guy named Michel to come on this second dive. I took the reel but 'fought' with it most of the dive – the additional stress pumped up quite a bit of air! Eventually we reached the end of what I called the first chamber. A small twin-headed stalagmite rose from the bottom after the



Top left: Tewi Lagoon, Los Negros. Above: The last chamber of Tewi cave.



Above: Bulging stalactites in the deep chamber.



pointing at the ceiling like a missile, the other was about 1.5 metres tall. Now, in total darkness, the bend to the left led to a curve on the right into another quite large chamber. In the middle was a small rise crested with three stalagmites. My light couldn't reach the sides of the chamber. I felt like playing the odds, but if the system suddenly branched into different chambers, I could easily be trapped. A big-eyed shrimp stared at me from the bottom. I turned back, a 100 bars left on my pressure gauge.

On subsequent dives, I reached a total dive time of 57 minutes, discovered a peculiar marine life at the entrance funnel: a cowrie shell digging through the sediment, white bryozoans, sponges, translucent ascidians. In the depth of the cave, small red-banded cave shrimps *Rhynchocinetes hiatti* skimmed the bottom, hopping in circles if the torch beam hit them. I also tried to enter the third chamber through the side crack at the end of the first chamber, but each time I silted in and was afraid to venture further down. "Very wise indeed...", said Tony, an Australian cave diver, whom I spoke to on the phone.

Realistically I wasn't a trained cave diver. I had to accept my limitations, my lack of technical knowledge and poor equipment. One evening I decided to contact the Australian cave divers I'd met the year before in South Australia. The morning after I sent my emails one cave diver answered in a hurry. My story got him seriously interested.

At the end of March Chris, a Frenchman, came to Manus and brought a powerful underwater light for me. I took him as far as I'd gone and we discovered an ancient snake skeleton lying on the sediment. The exploration was getting exciting. The main tunnel continued further.

Early April, Gary and Tony, the two Australian cave divers, arrived from Melbourne, each with 100kg of luggage. I took them straight to the lagoon. Sweating profusely, they said: "We can't do this every day with twin tanks and all our dive gear! We need some porters". Next morning, supervised by Simon my trust man, 10 men silently crawled single file up through the jungle like a slow caterpillar, carrying yellow tanks, dive bags with lamps and heavy batteries, cameras and bush knives. I'd mentioned to Simon that it was hard to climb over two big dead logs laying across the trail;

he'd chopped a large passage through the logs with a simple axe. "It took me only two and a half hours", he said modestly.

Tony and Gary were impressed by the waterhole at the base of the limestone cliff. Tony, the reel man, drew the line to where I'd gone with a single tank, Gary took some pictures. The following day, they both put on twin tanks and we went further down a long straight tunnel to an area crested with stalagmites. I name it: "The Chandelier". On the right side a big hole led deeper. The tunnel continued up into another much narrower chamber where fresh and saltwater would mix. The visibility changed drastically, and rapidly became blurry. Tony began waving his lamp in circles and signals me to return. The message is clear - I've gone too far on a single tank - so I retreat along the guideline. Chris was inspecting a rusty old 20-gallon Japanese drum lying on its side near a pile of debris and small rocks with a few bones and the skull of a mammal, maybe a cuscus which probably fell through a hole in the roof. The pincers of a large coconut crab were also part of the bounty. The ceiling was very high. At a depth of 8 metres, it continued further up in a mix of fresh murky water.

In the following days, numbered arrows were fixed to the guideline to show the distance to the exit. Little yellow markers were attached where the line changed direction, 16 in all. Gary noted 'Fishers' or cracks in the wall, as well as solution tubes, but no branching tunnels leading elsewhere. After four days, Tony and Gary decided their exploration was finished. At the end, they notice a small chamber with a single 1.5 metre high stalagmite and straw-like stalactites hanging from the wall. "A very nice room", says Gary. "Only 8 metres deep, very silty, almost zero visibility". Tony tied the end of the line and estimated a total distance of 300m. "It may even be 350m if we made a mistake...", he reckoned.

Later, the sketch of the extended guideline done afterwards, resembled a fishing hook. Tewi Cave first headed southwest, then south, then east and ended due north. Tony reckoned there were other caves in the area. There are quite a few dry ones used as refuge by both locals and Japanese soldiers during WWII. There's also an underground river flowing in the mountains of central Manus, with human skulls and bones from the cannibal times. Spooky!



bend. On the right hand side Michel found a crack just wide enough to sneak through. It led to another chamber below, at least 10 metres deeper maybe even to 30 metres. Beyond the stalagmite, a crest culminated at 19 metres and the reel was fully extended. The tunnel continued. Back home I measured the reel line - it was only 90 metres!

A week later I tried a third time but decided not to use the reel, it was too much trouble. Any respectable member of the CDAA would throw me the stone for my foolhardiness. PNG claims to be the land of the unexpected and I had to adapt to the situation. Unaided, I climbed up the ridge in the jungle, scuba tank on my back, dive mesh bag in one hand and camera in the other, sweating hard, then down to the Lagoon over sharp dolomite limestone. Fifteen minutes later I was soaking in cool water.

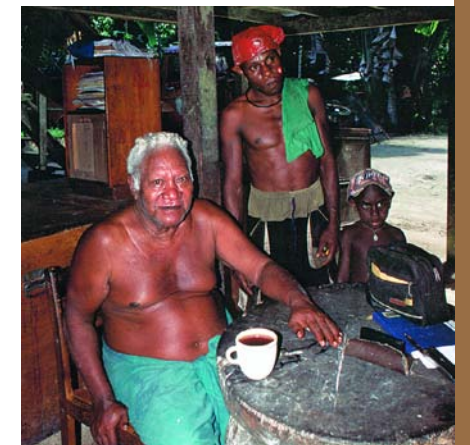
I went straight to the end of the first chamber, then uphill past the small stalagmite. This time it was all new in the great dark beyond. My torch beam shone to the left, I was amazed to discover two stalagmites, one three metres high

The island of Los Negros has typical karstic features, like Swiss cheese. An old fringing reef that was tectonically uplifted, then submitted to erosion for a few million years, before being partly submerged again. If one considers the size of a three metres stalagmite, Tewi cave could be at least a few hundred thousand years old!

June 2006: Six years have passed since I was last in Manus. The emotion of Tewi Cave's discovery, the thrill of exploration are still fresh in my memory. My only frustration was not finding the end of the system due to the lack of proper equipment and necessary training.

Spring 2003, I did the Cave Diver Association of Australia's Cavern/Sinkhole course in South Australia to become a certified cave diver able to use twin tanks and lay a line. For the next two years I trained further in the Mt Gambier sinkholes and my girlfriend Vivien also became certified in 2005.

Back to Manus, the locals remembered Kisokau, my local name in Titan and I'm

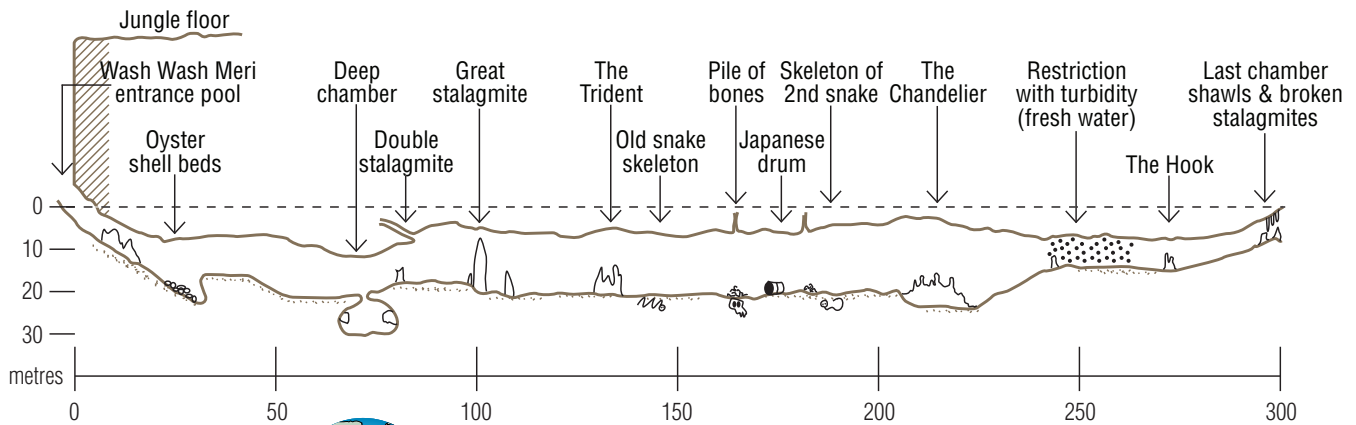


Clockwise from bottom left: A pile of bones from a mammal. Vivien in the Wash Wash Meri pool with twin tanks. Vivien descends into the hole experiencing a silt out. A stalagmite of the Hook. Paul, the 'bigman', at home with Amos, Los Negros Island.

>LINKS: www.pngtourism.org.pg
wikipedia.org/wiki/Admiralty_Islands



TEWI CAVE - LOS NEGROS ISLAND Admiralty Islands - Papua New Guinea



ABOUT THE AUTHOR -

Pierre Constant is the author of a coffee table book: 'Manus - Admiralty Islands, lost world of the Titans', of land and underwater photographs, with a text of his adventures in Papua New Guinea. 160 pages, 204 photos, AUD 60 + postage.

To order contact: Pierre Constant
Fax: 331 4621 7736

Email: calaolife@yahoo.com
www.calaolife.com

NOTE - Pierre Constant obtained his Cave Diver rating at Mt Gambier in March 2007 with Linda Claridge.

welcomed like a hero! In the village of Lolak, Paul the 'bigman', president of the island of Los Negros said: "You've been gone a long time!" I discuss further exploration of Tewi Cave, and Paul offered to make the trail user-friendly again. He assigns us Thomas and Amos as porters. Joe comes along as a scout. Amos is deaf and mute but strong enough to carry Vivien's tank and BCD. We cross the limestone ridge in the jungle and reach the waterhole 20 minutes later. The water of the cave is dark and dirty green,

despite the sunlight filtering through the canopy. The support team stared as we melted underwater into the murk. After 70 metres, my companion showed signs of distress so I shone my torch along the algae-covered line laid 6 years earlier. Comforted, she accepts to move on. The giant stalagmite (3m high) loomed in the beam of light, then the 'Trident'. The of the fossil snake skeleton still lay where I first found it.

On our second immersion we pushed on to the 'Chandelier', a cluster of various smaller stalagmites, 210 metres from the entrance, where the main tunnel seems to split in two. On the right a depression leads to a dead end which drops to 24 metres and goes around the Chandelier. On the left the passage narrows, then climbs up into a corridor that I name 'The Hook', due to a very sharp curve towards the left. Twin tank diving is compulsory from then on. Poor visibility didn't allow photography, so I postpone our third dive. Allowing Tewi Cave to regain its visibility. Joe, Amos, and Thomas used the extra time to cut down extra trees around Wash Wash Meri to help light penetration into the cave.

Saturday June 3rd. Transport of the four tanks and the equipment wasn't easy. Four porters were needed; two of them disappeared as soon as we reach the cave. "Gone wild pig hunting", reckons Joe. The water visibility had improved. We went straight to the 'Chandelier' with twin tanks, then entered the 'Hook'. The water blurred due to the halocline and the passage narrows. Two small stalagmites rose on the right. The corridor curved to the left in a 90° angle. We reach a last chamber with a truncated stalagmite and shawls on the wall; some

broken stalagmites rest against the sides at an angle. Evidence of earthquakes, probably. Finally, the dead end faces due north – there's little space to turn around. Vivien points her luminous halo in my direction, in the turbidity that surrounds us. A real science fiction movie! With a motion of my finger, I signal the turning point. We've reached the end of the 'Hook' 300 metres from the cave entrance.

On the way back we explore the sides of the tunnel. A newer snake skeleton lay next to a pile of debris; the reptile had coiled up in its last convulsions after falling from a crack of the roof. Near the giant stalagmite, a forest crab was flipped upside down. One last exploration remained: the lateral hole at the end of the first tunnel, a deep chamber with a narrow entrance where the volatile silt awaits...

Our first tie-off is made on the side of the tunnel above the hole. I go in first and a small cloud of dust follows me. A few metres down my torch lit up a round chamber 10 metres wide, with the bottom at 30.5 metres. On my right two thick stalactites bulge from the wall like mushrooms. Reel in hand Vivien came down in a haze of brown silt and did another tie off on the ceiling. I signal her to join me quickly as the dust invades the chamber like a sly trap. We had to retreat. I groped toward the exit, hitting my head on the ceiling. Vivien reeled in behind me, humming to herself. The brown fog dissipated as we moved into the gin-clear vis of the main tunnel.

Despite our fears we'd unravelled the mystery of Tewi Cave. Other caves and underground rivers wait to be discovered in Los Negros and the mountainous interior of Manus. The adventure lives on...