

MILNE JEWELS

> AT THE SOUTHEASTERN TIP OF THE MAIN ISLAND OF NEW GUINEA LIES THE PROVINCE OF MILNE BAY, AND WHAT MANY CONSIDER TO BE SOME OF THE BEST ALL-ROUND SCUBA DIVING IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA.

: DON SILCOCK



Main: An inquisitive goby poses for the camera at Cobbs Cliff
Left to right: Mating mandarin fish at Tawali jetty; Large barrel sponge on the slope at Crinoid City; Rhinopias on the slope near the Coral Garden; Elephant ear sponges at Wahoo Point

Milne Bay was the first place I dived in PNG as a result of reading the many stories published by Bob Halstead and his wife Dinah after they built MV *Telita* and opened up Milne Bay as a premier dive location. *Telita* was the first liveaboard to operate there and the renowned Carl Roessler in the US was sole booking agent for many years. Others, such as MV *Chertan* and MV *Golden Dawn*, followed later due to the strong international demand.

The province abounds with natural resources both above and below water and Conservation International has classified the marine biodiversity of the area as "exceptionally rich". CI's studies have identified nearly 430 coral species, 950 species of molluscs and over 1100 species of fish, which exceeds the nearest comparable ecosystem – Australia's famous Great Barrier Reef!

The diversity, abundance and quality of dive sites here is amazing and encompasses everything from the famous muck diving sites at Lauadi and Observation Point, to the renowned manta cleaning station 'Giants at Home' near Samarai Island. Add to this mix some of the many WWII wrecks, such as the *Black Jack* B17F Flying Fortress bomber at Cape Vogel, plus some of the superb reefs, and it's clear why Milne Bay is on the must do list of most divers.

Tawali I first met Rob Van Der Loos in 2003 on a 10-day trip on his MV *Chertan* – Rob also has a strong reputation among underwater photographers – and we dived many great Milne Bay locations. It was also my introduction to Tawali; on our way back from Normandy Island, Rob said he needed to stop

for about an hour to drop off the wooden beams that had been lashed to the roof of the boat since we left Alotau. I was curious about delivering building materials on the remote north coast; Rob's matter-of-fact response was "We're building a resort".

Many premium dive locations offer both liveaboard and resort based diving, so a new resort on the sheltered north coast close to some of the best sites had its merits. But the area is both remote and without any logistics like roads or mains power supply so this was not just a bold move, it was a major undertaking! So with considerable curiosity I went back to stay at the Tawali resort and re-visit many of the great dive sites in the area.

The Resort Tawali is on a limestone headland on the northern side of the peninsula forming the north coast of Milne Bay. On either side of the headland are two bays. The resort overlooks the smaller southern bay while the larger northern one has the service area of the resort. Arrival at the resort is via boat at the main jetty in the southern bay and as we approached I scoured the headland for obvious signs of buildings, but it looked almost as it did in 2003. A short walk up a wooden boardwalk brings you to the main lodge entrance and reception area, restaurant, a small bar and the large observation deck overlooking the bay. Covered walkways lead from the main lodge to individual guest bungalows and then around the headland to the service area.

The finished resort is impressive and exceptionally well run, the guest bungalows are very nice and the restaurant produced superb meals. The outdoor observation deck was a favourite of mine, it's a great place to linger with a cold beer and watch the sun go down after a long day's diving...





A large cuttlefish



A diver illustrates the size of the elephant ear sponges



A pair of sweetlips



Beautiful soft corals

WELCOME TO THE GLOBAL EPICENTER OF MARINE SPECIES DIVERSITY...

Dive Logistics During my 10 days at Tawali everything happened the way I was told it would. From my dive gear disappearing from outside my room on day one and appearing whenever and wherever I needed it next, to the dive sites I asked to re-visit, or requesting something special for lunch. Logistics can make or break a trip and I liked the way the service area functioned like a satellite to the resort, complete with its own jetty and re-fueling area. This allowed guests to wander down from the resort to the main jetty at the assigned time with the

boat ready to go, having already been prepared round at the service jetty. On return, the boat pulled up at the main jetty again dropping you off for the short walk up to the main lodge for a coffee or cold beer if the day's diving was finished.

The Diving There's a large selection of sites accessible from Tawali. Though I dived every day, I still couldn't cover them all. Here are the highlights:

House Reef stretches from inside the bay on the southern side of the headland,

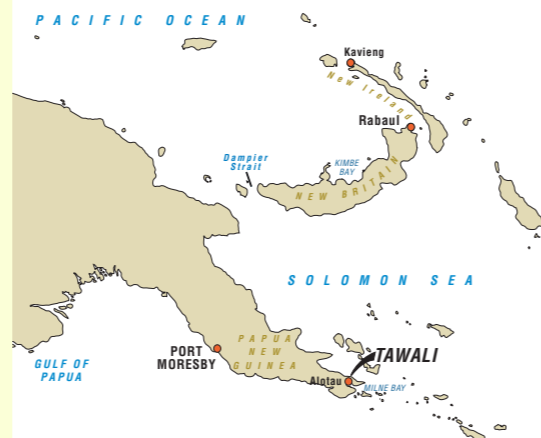
round the headland itself into the northern bay. You could spend hours just grazing the house reef – there's a lot to see – but you must do one dusk dive right at the end of the jetty because there's a very nice coral head with numerous mandarin fish. They're small, superbly-coloured photogenic fish that live in coral heads and rubble and only emerge at dusk to mate – a fascinating process to watch but difficult to photograph due to the fading light and the speed at which it occurs. If you try to up the lighting by turning your torch on, all bets are off and the mating is

WHY IS MILNE BAY SO DIVERSE?

Milne Bay is at the eastern tip of the Coral Triangle. This is considered to be the richest area of marine biodiversity in the world. It encompasses Indonesia, East Malaysia (Sabah), the Philippines and Papua New Guinea. The principal for Milne Bay's tremendous biodiversity are the major regional currents resulting from the SE trade winds and NW monsoon seasons. A detailed explanation of this is available at the Australian Institute of Marine Science website:

www.aims.gov.au/pages/reflib/billfish/pages/bf-05.html

These currents are important because of a very simple principal that applies with the world's oceans and seas, and the marine biota that inhabits them – when something dies it usually sinks to the bottom. This detritus of the sea, rich in phosphorus and nitrogen from decayed organisms, would remain on the bottom, but these currents create cold water upwellings rich with organic nutrients – the catalyst that creates the incredible biodiversity of Milne Bay Province!



A very wary coral trout at Little China



A crocodile fish



Diver and Rhinopias

over for the day – maybe one of the pair doesn't like sex with the lights on... Watching the process a few times helps to judge when a pair is about to mate because their body language changes and they start to 'cuddle up' before suddenly rising into the water column to simultaneously release their eggs and sperm. A long macro lens is needed to capture the mandarins together, but it's not easy. That coral head was almost a home-from-home by the time I got an image I was happy with!

Dinah's Beach at Lauadi is a great muck site: I did several dives there. The site is in a sheltered bay and consists of a black volcanic sand beach sloping off at about 30 degrees into the depths. Almost all the critters are usually found in less than 10 metres. This trip I saw a superb orangutan crab, an incredible decorator crab, some beautiful Coleman, harlequin, and mantis shrimps, a moray eel cleaning station, cockatoo waspfish and colourful frogfish... and there was much more if I'd had time!

Deacon's Reef at Lauadi is a favourite of mine; it's off the headland protecting the bay where Dinah's Beach is located. On all my previous dives here I was using film and though it's an incredibly beautiful and photogenic reef, it's quite shallow, subject to strong sunlight and very difficult to photograph. I never produced images that did the site full justice, and I had no way of knowing I'd failed till I was back in Australia and had the films processed. My frustration at Deacon's was one reason I invested in digital, but when we arrived there'd been a significant coral spawning the previous night and there was lots of particulate in the water. We

decided to wait a few days and do the offshore reefs where the water was clearer. On the second last day of my trip we went back – the vis was much better and in two long dives here I filled my 4GB memory card!

Wahoo Point This has huge elephant ear sponges unlike any I've seen elsewhere. As with many north coast reefs, Wahoo often delivers the 'big dogs' of the sea with regular sightings of mobula and manta rays, hammerhead and tiger sharks, minke whales and whale sharks. But on my two dives I was fixated on the sponges. Like Deacon's I'd failed to capture good images here, mainly because the sponges are on a slope that goes down to 18 metres before dropping off to about 60 metres. You're shooting up the slope, usually with the sun in the frame. This time I not only got the lighting right, but my dive guide doubled as a model and was a great comparison for size of the elephant ear sponges.

Coral Garden is a superb hard coral garden about 15 minutes north of Tawali in about 6-8 metres close to overhanging rainforest. The hard corals are in excellent condition. I dived here a couple of times and really enjoyed it, only going onto the dropoff on the second dive when a red Rhinopias was confirmed at 22 metres. Rhinopias are one of those creatures that underwater photographers have to shoot no matter how many images they already have, so on the second dive I followed the dive guide and sure enough the Rhinopias were waiting. And while I was busy shooting, the dive guide found a nicely positioned crocodile fish!

Crinoid City is a coral mound that rises

from about 60 metres and hosts a wide variety of crinoids. There are at least two Rhinopias at Crinoid City. One, a large green specimen, was on top of some pink hard coral. The second, the highly sought-after yellow variation, wasn't located. Crinoid City also has a variety of black coral trees on the front reef slope and just round from that area are large schools of fusiliers, anthias and jacks.

Little China is a pinnacle that rises from about 50 metres to six metres below the surface and is aptly named because of the sheer profusion of marine life found there. This is an impressive site, and is apparently typical of 30+ similar sites in the general area. The most intense fish life is found at the pinnacle's front face

BUT I DON'T WANT TO DIVE TODAY...

Not everybody dives or wants to spend all day underwater, so I checked out what other activities there are:

- There is an easy walk through the bush to some local underground caves, which contain the skulls of hundreds of people. Why the skulls are there is a mystery, though many rumours abound. A guide is a good idea, as they are full of info about the caves and the local flora/fauna.
- The local villages, Walalaia and Waggahouhou, are within walking distance and well worth a look. Expect to be swamped by loud local kids!
- There is yet another walk to a nearby waterfall. Again, the rainforest is beautiful and the falls and pool are lovely.
- One must-do is to take a kayak and explore along the coastline around the resort. Peaceful and adventurous.

where large schools of jacks and trevally circle in the blue, and on the south slope there are some superb soft coral gardens bursting with marine life.

Conclusion

It was a real pleasure to stay at Tawali, not just because it's a great place with some fantastic diving, but also because I admire people who make a big bet and then deliver on it. Building a significant resort on the north coast of Milne Bay and then kitting it out with state-of-the-art dive equipment, dive boats and all the support logistics required is a big bet in anybody's language – so to see the place fully functional and hosting local and international divers plus their families was great! I thoroughly enjoyed my 10 days there and would go back there at the drop of a hat. I thoroughly recommend it to anybody looking for a few days of excellent diving, or as an alternative to a liveaboard in Milne Bay.

WHEN TO DIVE TAWALI?

Tawali can be dived virtually year-round due to the resorts location. Visibility at most sites is optimal from June to August, and remains good until October. Water temperatures vary from around 30°C to 25°C.

TAWALI RESORT

Tawali is the brainchild of Rob Van Der Loos, one of the pioneers of Milne Bay diving and the owner of MV *Chertan*. His partners are Bob Hollis, founder and CEO of US diving equipment company Oceanic, and the large Alotau based PNG company, Nawae Construction. It took eight years to negotiate the lease on the tribal land the resort is built on. The resort's remoteness meant everything needed to build it had to be shipped in. There was no electricity at all until generators were installed three months before the resort opened late 2005, so everything was literally built by hand. The resort does everything possible to minimize its impact on the local environment both above and below water. It has however impacted on the local economy by becoming a major employer in the area. To further help the locals the 'Bubu Association' was started. This assists villagers to put their children through school. Public education is not free in PNG and many villagers cannot afford the fees.

>LINK www.tawali.com



The reception and bar



The Spirit of New Guinea liveaboard



The observation deck

Conservation volunteering delivers the perfect challenge for environmentally conscious travellers and leading the trend in Australia is Earthwatch, which brings scientists and volunteers together to help research threatened species and habitats.

manta underbelly imaging for science

Lady Elliot Island, a coral atoll off Queensland's coast, was formed over 3,500 years ago and teems with wildlife. This is base to Earthwatch's new Project Manta research expedition where volunteers are invited to swim with manta rays in the name of science. Led by Earthwatch scientist, Dr Kathy Townsend, University of Queensland, Project Manta is a seven-day snorkelling and diving research adventure which aims to investigate the biology and conservation status of the vulnerable manta ray along the Australian east coast.



The manta ray is the world's largest ray with a disc width reaching up to seven metres and though they're commonly seen and dived with along the coast, little is known about their biology and ecology. These beautiful creatures attract divers worldwide to the island and swimming alongside these graceful giants will be an unforgettable experience. During the project Earthwatch volunteers will spend time in the water with the mantas photographing the pattern on their underside. This unique pattern acts as a