

tufi wharves + pt boats

: DON SILCOCK www.indopacificimages.com

> I THINK HOUSE REEFS ARE A LITTLE LIKE NEXT DOOR NEIGHBOURS – MOST PEOPLE HAVE THEM, BUT HOW MUCH TIME DO YOU REALLY WANT TO SPEND WITH THEM? SO WHEN I HEAR THAT THE NEXT DIVE IS ON THE HOUSE REEF I USUALLY ASSUME THE BEST DIVING IS OVER FOR THE DAY...

But the one at Tufi is one of those sites where, despite the number of times I've dived it, I always find new and interesting stuff. The house reef is in the main Tufi fiord and includes the dive shop wharf, the nearby public wharf and the reef stretching out on either side. The area has been a loading/unloading point for the settlement and surrounds for a long time, so the two wharfs are a muck dive – commonly defined as one that takes place where there's no beautiful scenery. The flotsam and jetsam of several decades is scattered around, including 1943 WWII debris when the fiord was a forward base for US Navy PT boats. Away from the wharves there's a little of everything – from seagrass in the shallows around the bay to hard and soft corals through to elephant ear sponges on the headland.

Critters Around the wharfs is great for critters, particularly during the dry season from July to September and in the peak diving months of October and November when the water is cooler and the critters come up into shallow water. As all dives start at the dive shop wharf you can easily spend an hour or more poking around it and the nearby public wharf, because amongst all the rubbish and debris are the nooks, crannies and hiding places critters love. Though the sides of the fiord are quite steep and drop well over 50 metres, most critters can be found quite shallow. It's usually hunger rather than lack of air or deco time that forces you to the surface!

My usual routine if I'm after critters is to spend 10-15 minutes around the dive jetty wharf and then head south to the public wharf and then on to the wall areas leading out from the small bay into the main fiord.

Most critters and things to see are in less than 15 metres and it takes around 30 minutes to reach the point where the bay becomes the main fiord and it's time to turn back. Along the way you will find pipefish, ornate and robust pipefish, dumpling

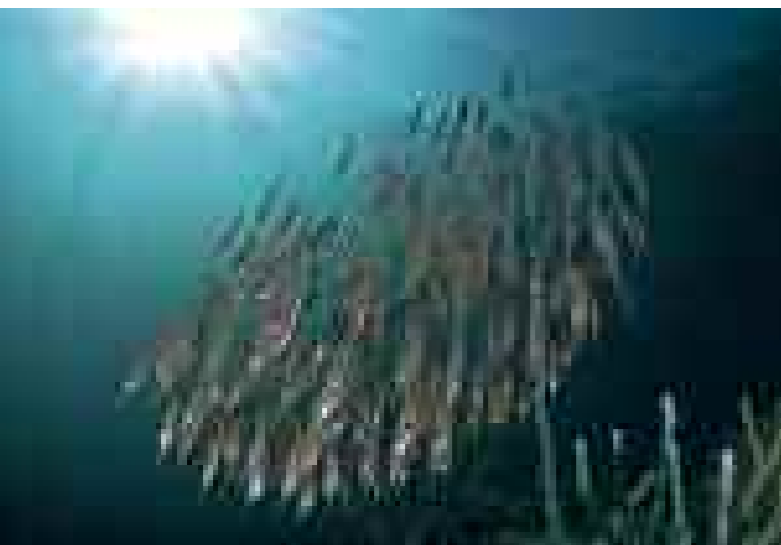


Main: Robust ghost pipefish amongst the funnelweed near the public wharf at Tufi
Left top: A photogenic cuttlefish poses perfectly during the afternoon "Golden Hour" at Tufi Wharf
Left bottom: A twin spot Goby in the area to the south of the public wharf
Below: The remains of a Land Rover at 35m



a target-rich environment

Top to bottom: The resident school of razor during the afternoon "Golden Hour" at Tufi Wharf; A bobtail squid tries very hard to make itself invisible during a night dive at Tufi Wharf; One of the many superb nudibranchs to be found at Tufi Wharf.



squid, twin-spot gobies, crocodile fish and lots of nudibranchs! The Tufi guides know the area and critter locations intimately, so ask for a guide if spotting is not your forte...

The Golden Hour North of the dive wharf a small bay forms which can be extra good in late afternoon; as the sun drops it creates a wonderful 'Golden Hour' effect as the rays hit the water at a shallow angle. When I know conditions are right, I set up a wide-angle lens and head out. The last time I was there I had quality time with the resident school of razorfish and a cooperative cuttlefish in superb light. I could have stayed for hours, but when the sun disappeared behind the nearby ridge it was game over – but I got the shots to prove it! It's less than 6 metres here, so it's a great place at the end of the dive for nitrogen release if you've been deep on the PT Boats.

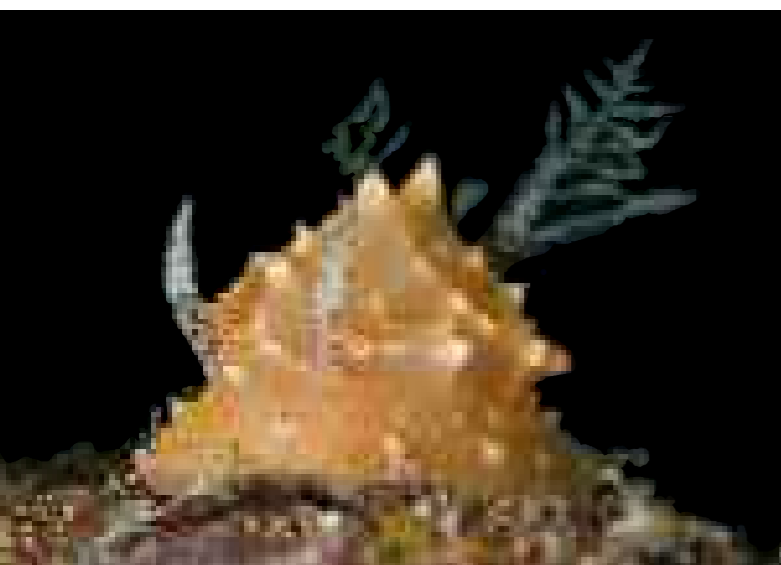
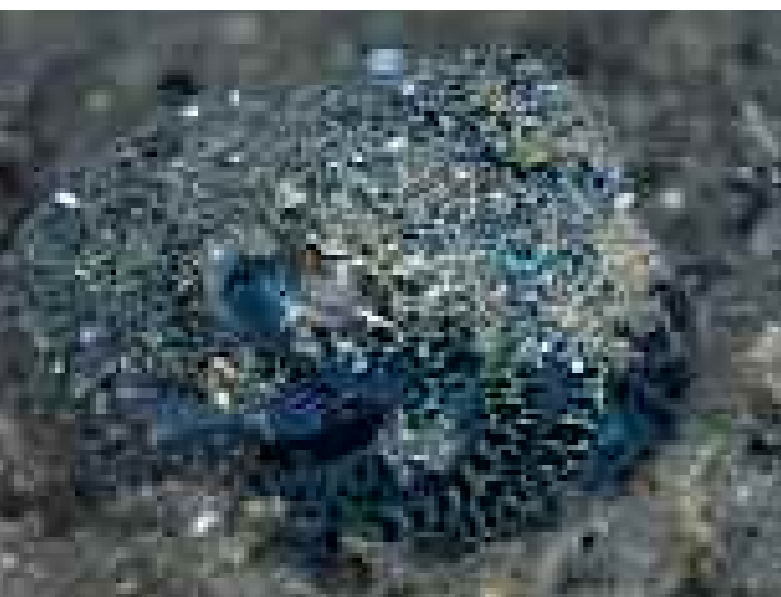
Further round on the eastern side of the bay is a nice hard coral reef with a lot of fish life, but dive it in the morning to see it at it's best as it's usually shaded by the ridge after noon.

Night Dives Most are conducted from the dive wharf and after dark the area around the two wharves is even more of a 'target-rich environment' as many critters asleep during the day come out to feed. The area south of the wharves also has a different persona at night and there's also plenty there you won't see during the day. I always call in on the resident clownfish pair on the slope at about 12 metres to see them tucked up for the night behind the mucus membrane that acts as an early warning trigger if a predator tries to sneak up on them in the dark. I've often seen the porcelain crab that usually hides under the skirt of the anemone during the day tucked up with them!

PT Boats Tufi Fiord played a small role in WWII. In 1942 the US Navy selected it as an advanced base for PT Boats supporting the campaign to turn back the Japanese invasion of Papua New Guinea. PT, or Patrol Torpedo, boats were small fast vessels designed to attack and sink the enemy's major capital ships by using their speed and maneuverability to get close enough to launch their on-board torpedoes.

Tufi Fiord offered an excellent base – the chosen site was the small bay where the government station jetty had been built. The bay – the site of the current dive and public wharves – provided good cover from enemy planes plus an area to store gasoline and a supply of fresh water from a nearby small waterfall. The PT boats ran regular patrols from Tufi Fiord all the way to Buna and occasionally up into the Huon Gulf and were credited with the sinking of one Japanese submarine and at least 18 armoured barges.

The most common urban myth associated with the sinking of PT Boats 67 and 119 was that they were attacked by Japanese fighters while at anchor in Tufi Fiord. But according to *At Close Quarters* by Robert Bulkley (the authoritative history of PT Boat service in WWII), the actual story is that they sank as a result of an accident during refuelling! On the afternoon of the 17th March 1943 when a refueling operation at Tufi Jetty had just been completed a sheet of flames erupted between the two boats. The fire spread so rapidly that the boat crews had to dive into the fiord to escape the imminent explosion of the on-board gas tanks and stored ammunition.



The fire and subsequent explosion sank both boats plus the AS16, a small Australian cargo ship moored at the jetty unloading supplies. The flames spread quickly to the dock and the nearby gasoline and ammunition stores resulting in further major explosions and fires, which burned well into the next day.

Amazingly, given the size and intensity of the fire and explosions, there was not a single death or injury. A subsequent investigation concluded that the fire probably started when one of the local villagers lit a cigarette and threw his match into the water, igniting some spilt gasoline on the surface...

Diving the PT Boats Diving the PT Boats is very straightforward because the former fishing boat that's moored in the fiord is anchored right above them; entry is from the dive wharf then a five-minute surface swim. As you descend down the mooring line, at about 35 metres you can see the wreckage below spread out on the sandy floor of the fiord.

Near the mooring is one of the original torpedo tubes – still loaded with a live torpedo – and about 10 metres further down is the hull of one of the boats, the bow of which is still intact and clearly recognizable, as is the mounted machine gun just behind it.

The gun's mounting rails lie in the sand with the gearing that allowed it to be turned and aimed, but there is not much left of the rest of the hull. Scattered in the sand are numerous old 45 gallon fuel drums which must have been on board the two boats.

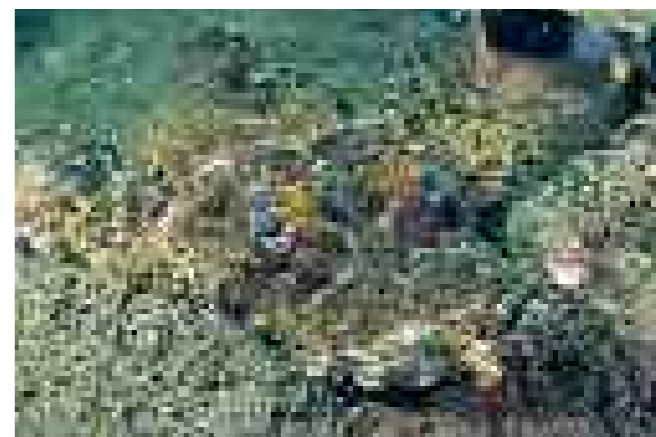
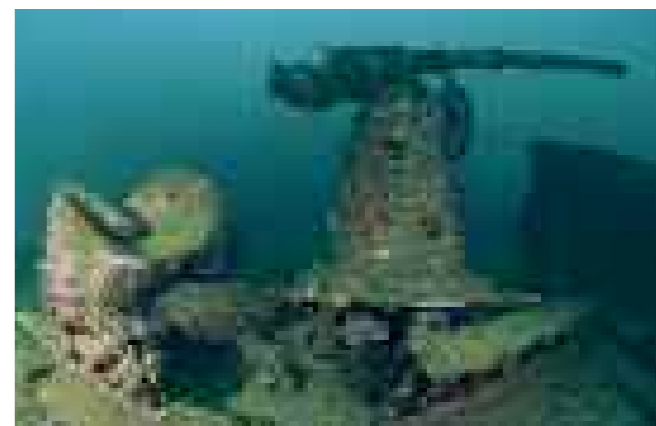
Dive time at this depth is quite limited, but as most of the wreckage is in a fairly small area, there's usually enough to see everything before heading back up to shallower water. On the way there's more 45-gallon fuel drums and another torpedo tube complete with loaded torpedo.

Ascending the sloping sides of the fiord, at 35 metres there's an old Landrover parked amongst more PT Boat wreckage, including one of the engines. Then there's a large number of beer crates. Hard to say if they were deposited when the PT Boats sank, or if they're part of the reason why the Landrover's in the fiord...

Photographing the PT Boats I rarely dive greater than about 35 metres because I think the best things to see and photograph are usually in shallower waters, so it's either a wreck or some other very specific thing that draws me deeper. But this means that I have very little tolerance of nitrogen narcosis – or as Jacques Cousteau so eloquently put it, "the raptures of the deep".

As every diver knows, the deeper you go the higher is the partial pressure of nitrogen you're breathing, and once you go past the 30 metre threshold the so-called 'Martini effect' kicks in and a significant increase in over-confidence occurs, coupled with a marked decrease in the ability to rationalize and do basic calculations.

Top to bottom: A very shy pipefish; The machine gun still in it's mounting on the PT Boat wreck; A crocodile fish found right under Tufi Wharf; The torpedo tube and live torpedo from the Tufi PT Boats.





Tufi fiord



The main lodge at Tufi Dive Resort



The pool at Tufi Dive Resort

This was all brought home vividly to me when I began photographing the PT Boats. I'd figured it would be a fairly straightforward exercise as I could set my camera up for wide-angle photography the night before, use it on the offshore reefs in the morning. Once back at Tufi Wharf, I'd do a mid-afternoon dive on the PT Boats without having to change anything around – too easy...

But nitrogen narcosis and underwater photography are words that should not really be used in the same sentence, never mind practiced... and it took me five attempts to get the images. Simple camera and strobe adjustments made without thinking at 20 metres become major philosophical judgment calls at 50 metres. With an increasing sense of shame I had to report to my Japanese underwater 'supermodel' and Tufi Divemaster Yuko Kuramoto that each day's attempts had failed.

Then I realized Yuko was suffering from the 'narcs' possibly as much as I was – despite my pleas about not disturbing the sandy bottom, the vis would suddenly reduce to about two metres – or she'd forgot to turn on the torch. Yuko and I came to use Pidgin to describe the impact of narcosis at 50 metres – "head, him no good..."

But by attempt number five we were both comfortable at 50m and the seven minutes we'd allowed ourselves at that depth went completely to plan and I could use the 23 minute decompression stop near the Tufi Wharf to review some decent images!



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