

: BOB HALSTEAD

# Samarai

## WORLD'S BEST WHARF DIVE

**A**s John Moresby wrote "After pulling six or seven miles to the west, we found our conjectures verified by the discovery of a clear broad blue channel, two miles wide, leading fair from sea to sea - fit for a fleet to pass through under sail. Our hearts filled with delight and wonder as we looked. There and then I named it China Straits; the wish being father to the thought that I had found a new highway between Australia and China."

Previously ships had to sail 250 nautical miles to the east to clear the Louisiade Archipelago, and many failed to make it.

Overjoyed at his discovery he went ashore to celebrate and dine on an island in the Straits and, with a lack of his usual shrewdness, called the place Dinner Island. He had modestly named Port Moresby after his father, and later named Milne Bay and Normanby, Fergusson and Goodenough Islands after his bosses, all Lords of the Admiralty. He was a man determined for greatness.

Fortunately 'Dinner' was soon forgotten and the island reverted to its traditional name of Samarai. Please note the spelling - no 'u', there is no Japanese connection!

Missionaries, mercenaries and misfits were the first European residents of Samarai - missionaries from the London Missionary Society, mercenary gold prospectors and pearl divers, and government misfits posted to this remote outpost. Since the Missions and Government agreed that the best way to bring civilisation to the 'natives' was to teach them to play cricket, the island swamp was soon filled, spears became wickets and shields became bats. Jolly good show!

But two home teams is one too many, so the missionaries were deported to nearby Kwato Island to fill in another swamp and soon both home and away matches were held, and civilisation bounded forward.

Samarai grew, four hotels and two hospitals were established, and a large wharf built to berth overseas steamships.

> THE FIRST EUROPEAN TO SEE THE TINY ISLAND OF SAMARAI WAS CAPTAIN JOHN MORESBY ON A VOYAGE OF EXPLORATION AND DISCOVERY FOR THE BRITISH ADMIRALTY IN 1873.

Part of the old wharf  
A diver films convict fish





The old wharf falls into disrepair  
Baitfish swirl around a wharf pylon  
An adult convict fish spitting sand

A local boy collects small fish at low tide  
A baby wobbegong shark  
A black crocodilefish  
A toadfish  
A rare black Samarai angelfish

Around 1900 it was the Government headquarters and biggest town in Papua. After a brutal punitive expedition against villagers was ordered by the acting administrator, C.S. Robinson, the Missions condemned him and, distraught, he committed suicide. This upset the miners who erected a memorial to the man whose "aim was to make New Guinea a good country for white men". The memorial stands to this day, its racist remark a poignant reminder of the foibles of colonialism.

Samarai was 'The Pearl of the Pacific' and became a magnet for adventurers of all kinds – even Malinowsky, the

**SAMARAI IS A SHADOW OF ITS FORMER GLORY. EXCEPT UNDERWATER. HERE IT HAS NEVER BEEN BETTER. CARESSED BY THE NOTORIOUS TIDAL CURRENTS OF CHINA STRAIT, THE WHARF PILES ARE HAVENS FOR A MIRACULOUS MULTITUDE OF MARINE CREATURES.**

renowned anthropologist, stayed for a while. Business and Government flourished. Fine homes were built and a bakery and soda water factory produced essential food and drink. Rubbish was dumped at sea just off the wharf – but in those days everything was biodegradable, except for glass.

Now divers can scavenge through the multitude of modern beer bottles, to find torpedo and marble-stoppered bottles from the 1890's. Poorly blown, with imbedded bubbles, some of these bottles have laid undisturbed for so many years that the glass is thicker on the side the bottle has laid on. Most, abraded by the sand and sea, are without financial value, but fascinating for their history. A fine display can be viewed at Tawali Dive Resort. Probably the most sought after is the marble bottle marked 'Patchings – Samarai' made especially for the soda factory on the island.

Eventually Port Moresby became the centre for government and Samarai, lacking a convenient airstrip, was not even deemed suitable for the Provincial (District) Headquarters. In 1968 the town was moved to Alotau. Even some grand houses were moved piece by piece, the remaining cement stairways rising

perhaps to heaven - but nowhere else.

Samarai, somehow still retaining its charm, defiantly surrenders to tropical mould, rust and termites, and big ships pass her by. Even so the eastern section of the wharf still stands while the middle section was demolished and the west section left to fall apart. A pearl farm, gallantly breeding Gold Lip pearl shell in a bio-clean room inside an ancient warehouse, has brought back enterprise, and happy greetings are the rule from the friendly inhabitants, but the fact is that Samarai is a shadow of its former glory.

Except underwater. Here it has never been better.

Caressed by the notorious tidal currents of China Strait, the wharf piles are havens for a miraculous multitude of marine creatures. Yellow Tubastraea corals, polyps blooming even in daytime, provide a backdrop to swirling baitfish, batfish, convictfish, catfish and angelfish – including the elsewhere-rare black Samarai angelfish, now named after Tawali operator Rob Vanderloos (*Chaetodontoplus vanderloosi*).

A Wobbegong shark is usually resting in the shade of the wharf along with scorpionfish, stonefish, toadfish, crocodilefish and octopus. Care needs to be taken to avoid fishing line snares and

#### FACT SHEET

Samarai is a small island off the southeast tip of the mainland of PNG. You can walk around the island in 20 minutes. It is approximately one hour in a speedboat from the Milne Bay Province capital of Alotau. There are daily flights to Alotau (Gurney airport) from Port Moresby by Air Niugini and Airlines PNG. Flight time is one hour or less. Accommodation near Samarai can be obtained at the Doini Plantation Resort see [www.doiniisland.com](http://www.doiniisland.com) Live-aboard dive boats MV Golden

Dawn, FeBrina, Chertan and Spirit of Niugini occasionally include Samarai on their itineraries. Tawali Dive Resort offers day trips to Samarai for its guests. A six night 15 dive package at Tawali costs US\$2,206.00pp for double occupancy. Live aboard rates pp per night are Chertan at US\$285.00; Spirit at US\$340.00 – US\$360.00; FeBrina at US\$395.00 and Golden Dawn at US\$350.00 - US\$400.00.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Bob arrived in Milne Bay in 1973, exactly 100 years after Captain John Moresby and set out to explore Milne Bay underwater. He has made thousands of dives in the Province, many of them at Samarai Wharf. bob@halsteaddiving.com



*Under the Samarai wharf  
The infamous memorial  
A Samarai Patchings bottle  
Hunting for treasures in the muck*

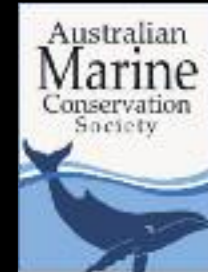


sharp-edged clams, and a Port Moresby tide chart is useful to predict Samarai slack current – two hours before and four hours after high tide Moresby. If you have a fancy modern navigation computer you may be surprised to find its information not so accurate.

Current scoured sand gutters off the wharf are good places to search for old bottles. Lively reef patches edge the gutters where resident lionfish, damsels and feather stars hide the lairs of mantis shrimp. A rusty overgrown anchor juts out from the seabed, an unusual maroon-coloured sea star snuggling a fluke.

For many years the sea has not been the official dumping ground for Samarai rubbish. Old junk is now the home for fish, and a base for coral growth. As Samarai above water continues its decline, its underwater surprises multiply and astonish.

# TOP END SEA LIFE: WORTH PROTECTING



The top end is a haven for the only species of dugong in the world.



Six of the world's seven species of sea turtle occur in our tropical seas. Photo courtesy of Hannah Seward, Greenkey.

The Northern Territory's 'Top End' tropical waters are like no-where else. A study of human impacts on the world's marine ecosystems from the University of California suggests that our Top End waters are one of the last remaining relatively unspoiled tropical marine environments left on the planet.

The good health of our Top End waters mean they are a haven for sea life. Six of the world's seven species of sea turtle are found in the Top End and our stunning sandy beaches are critical nesting grounds for five of these species. Endangered hawksbill and green turtles feed on the algae that grow on our warm and shallow reefs. Vulnerable flatback turtles clamber up our beaches on full and dark moon nights of the dry season to bury their eggs in the warm sands high above the tide.

The Top End is also a stronghold for unique and threatened marine mammals. The near threatened and rarely-seen snubfin dolphin, only described in 2005, inhabits remote northern waters. Vulnerable dugongs, the vegetarians of the sea, whose numbers are decreasing around the world, graze in relative abundance on the sea-grass beds in our unique shallow waters.

While tropical fish may be harder for divers to see in the sediment rich waters of Darwin harbour, waters off the remote Arnhem Land coast are crystal clear and home to a multitude of big colorful fish, making them perfect for divers seeking an out of the way adventure.

While the Northern Territory is fortunate to have this abundance of healthy habitats and rich wealth of marine life, there are some worrying threats.

Tragically each year too many of our sea turtles are drowned by drifting ghost nets and active fishing gear or killed by boat strikes and entanglement in marine debris. Dugongs also suffer from boat strikes and their sea-grass feeding grounds are increasingly impacted by sediments from inappropriate coastal developments like the proposed INPEX gas plant in Darwin Harbour.

Most alarming is that less than 1% of the NT's marine environment is properly protected in marine sanctuaries, where sea life is safe from harm. But this year we have the power to change things for the better.

The year 2011 is shaping up to be our best chance for marine protection in Australia.

The Commonwealth Government will be declaring a network of marine protected areas around Australia as part of our international commitment to protecting more of our oceans. Western Australia and South Australia are in the midst of declaring marine parks along their coastlines too. This will put the NT Government under increasing pressure this year to deliver on their decade-old commitment to create a network of marine sanctuaries in the NT's coastal waters.

We need to ensure however that these are not just paper parks with tiny sanctuary zones that don't adequately protect sea life. With a strong show of support for increased marine protection, our Top End Sea Life will get the protection they deserve.

Visit [www.sealife.org.au](http://www.sealife.org.au) and sign an online petition to show your support for our Top End Sea Life.

**“Because divers make the world of difference!”**



**Become an AMCS Sea Guardian Today**

AMCS Sea Guardians help us create more marine national parks, reduce pollution, save our endangered ocean wildlife and make our fisheries sustainable. For as little as 50c a day you can make a big difference. Our conservation work is funded through the generous support of Australians who want to give something back to our precious oceans. Join Now! Call 1800 086 299 or join online at [www.amcs.org.au](http://www.amcs.org.au)

"I joined AMCS because they're the real deal. For 40 years they've been fighting for our seas and getting results. Ningaloo, Great Barrier Reef, new marine protected areas. If you're worried about overfishing, if you're angry about pollution and rapacious coastal developments, if you're anxious about endangered species then why not add to the effort? Let's join together and get results!" - Tim Winton, AMCS Patron

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