

> THE SCHOOL OF LUNAR FUSILIERS CHANGED FROM THEIR CALM SCATTERED FEEDING TO A PANICKED SILVER AND YELLOW MASS DARTING TOWARDS THE REEF. OVERHEAD A PHALANX OF TREVALLY CHARGED IN TO FEED. AT THE SAME TIME I GLANCED DOWN TO SEE A SHARK SUDDENLY ARC AWAY FROM ME. THAT'S WHEN I NOTICED SIX LARGE SHARKS CLUSTERED TOGETHER SWIMMING ALONG THE REEF, AND BEFORE I KNEW IT THEY WERE UPON ME...



At first I couldn't tell what type of shark they were; for a split second I thought they were hammerheads before realizing they were tawny nurse sharks. Usually these are seen settled under coral plates, or swimming solo along the sandy bottom, but I've never seen a tight group cruising along a reef slope before. Each shark had an entourage of tiny pilotfish riding its bow wave, which distorted the shape of its head. Early in the dive we'd seen a few individual sharks come in close, but this tangle of six swam straight at me. At the last second they split up, panicked by my presence, shooting in every direction at

great speed. In a split second I chose just one shark to focus on – it went straight over the top of me at warp speed, but I managed a few quick images.

Milne Bay has long been known for its wondrous reefs and great biodiversity – the benthos ranges from black sand diving to incredible coral reefs and remote pinnacles covered in seafans of all sizes and colours. All these locations are equally good for macro subjects or wide angle vistas complete with feeding schools of fishlife. To explore this far flung area of Papua New Guinea we were on board the *Star Dancer* to explore the bay itself as well as the islands within the region. The 36m long *Star Dancer* is large enough handle open ocean conditions and reach the less dived pinnacles and reefs. Put simply, her voyage covers the entire gamut of diving around Milne Bay Province.

One of the first European settlements in Papua New Guinea, Milne Bay's history dates back to the late 1800s. Nearby Samarai island was settled before Port

Milne Bay

'swim aninit long sole wara'

: GLEN COWANS & LOUISE STAZZONELLI

DANCER



Moresby and was the first provincial headquarters of Papua New Guinea; some of the original European constructions can still be seen. Samarai Wharf once vibrated to the footsteps of early immigration into Papua New Guinea. Nowadays it's mainly utilized as a fishing platform for the local people.

Underneath, however, there's a world of streaming light beams and schooling fish, attracting divers and underwater photographers from all around the world. This is a spectacular dive for wide angle with thick masses of silversides and minnows swarming around the pylons. Here and there lionfish wait in ambush, hovering with outstretched fins they explode forward and pick off a single fish from the school in a gulp. Around the wharf mobula rays herd the tiny fish as they fly-by in synchronized squadrons. Below all this, nudibranchs crawl on the bottom, harlequin shrimp clutch seastars and surgically remove their limbs, pipefish snake over the sand in front of large wobbiegong sharks that watch you pass with a beady eyed look only a wobbiegong can pull off.

Star Dancer provides four dives per day plus a night dive, the number of dives you wish to do is up to you. Most locations are done twice on the day, so if you can't

decide if you want to do macro or wide angle, there's the chance to see both. That said, the densely schooling fish around the Samarai Wharf pylons were so picturesque, wide angle was a must on both dives for me.

At times waters in the Milne Bay region can be rich with plankton; watch it drift by and you'll see some of the most bizarre miniature creatures imaginable. Microscopic jellies and larval lifeforms flow in with the current and attract various species of fish that feed in schools numbering in the hundreds, sometimes thousands. These feeding aggregations collect on the current-affected side of a pinnacle. In some cases it can take a little effort to get there but once on this exposed side of the pinnacle you'll be in a balanced water flow where the current splits around and over the reef. This is the 'sweet spot' where the plankton compresses up against the reef. Follow your dive-guide to this spot and it's easy to float and watch the action. Darting, quicksilver curtains of minnows, shoaling fusiliers – they all go from blissful feeding to protective schooling action when giant trevally swoop in for the kill. Also keep an eye on the reef for lionfish and large cod waiting in ambush before they burst out to engulf a passing snack. This plankton is the basis of the entire food chain of the



Top to bottom: An angelfish cleaning station; One massively sized mantis shrimp with two attending cleaner shrimp; My tawny nurse shark rockets overhead; This spectacular nudibranch was almost invisible on the black sand.

Milne Bay area and is why these waters are so rich in corals and the schooling fish life is so intense.

Star Dancer enables you to visit the most remote locations and occasionally the opportunity arises for an exploratory dive in a bay or on a reef that hasn't been dived before. Such was our chance at a site directly in front of a picturesque local village. We descended over a sloping seabed with coral outcrops and dozens of large, perfectly formed yellow-green and purple ianthella sponges, a beautiful reef scene. If you focused on small, the substrate was littered with nudibranchs and anemones. This was both a macro and wide angle paradise and a new site worthy of further exploration.

Milne Bay Province also offers black sand slopes that are home to the bizarre and strange. One famous location named Deacon's changes during the dive from a coral-encrusted wall with filtered sunlight streaming through overhanging mangroves, to a black sand slope hosting flamboyant cuttlefish, nudibranchs, hairy octopus and pegasus sea-moths to name just a few. Both dives can be done separately and again doing more than one dive on the same site allows divers to get the best out of both these spectacular ecosystems.

Visiting this remote wilderness wouldn't be complete without visiting a local village for an insight into daily life in Papua New Guinea. The locals are very proud of their villages and bonding together is a very important part of their culture. They like

meeting foreigners and it's a great opportunity to talk to them and learn more about them. They enjoy practicing English language and relish the opportunity to offer amazing craftwork for you to view and purchase, which in turn directly supports their community. We visited the small community of Bunama and enjoyed a tour of their village; we walked up to some amazing lookouts and if the track became slippery or steep, it was considered a great honour among the people to assist with a helping hand. Singing followed our tour of their new school and when we left the village some of the locals followed us in canoes back to the *Star Dancer* to farewell us.

Liveboard diving is the best way to discover and dive as many sites as possible at a remote destination and



being aboard *Star Dancer* allows you to cover a huge and varied area without the fatigue of lengthy dayboat trips. What could be better than stepping off the back of a yacht straight on to a dive site? Doing this in luxury, enjoying delicious food and dreaming away the nights in roomy staterooms, means each day starts refreshed. And the bonus of meeting new people from all over the world who often become good friends by the end of the voyage, makes it all complete.

Below left to right: Batfish under Samarai Wharf; A hawkfish waits in ambush on the side of a massive barrel sponge.



and Kuala Lumpur. A 1 hour domestic flight links to Alotau. Domestic hand luggage is limited to 5kg.

Taxes & Fees: Included in your fare. **Health & Vaccinations:** Suggested for Papua New Guinea are anti-malarials and insect repellent. Like all remote locations, tetanus, and hepatitis A could also be considered.

Entry & Exit Requirements: You must possess a passport with at least 6 months remaining validity. A visa is required on entry to Papua New Guinea, this can be

sourced prior to your travel by sending your passport to the PNG High Commission in Canberra. Cost of a tourist visa is 100 Kina (approx. A\$35) It can also be paid for at time of entry. **Climate:** PNG is a year round diving destination with warm weather and high humidity. Milne Bay wet season is Jun-Oct, the dry Nov-May. Prevailing currents usually result in the clearest water conditions during the wet season. Water temperature ranges all year between 26-28°C.

“ MICROSCOPIC JELLIES AND LARVAL LIFEFORMS FLOW IN WITH THE CURRENT AND ATTRACT VARIOUS SPECIES OF FISH THAT FEED IN SCHOOLS NUMBERING IN THE HUNDREDS, SOMETIMES THOUSANDS. THESE FEEDING AGGREGATIONS COLLECT ON THE CURRENT-AFFECTED SIDE OF A PINNACLE... THIS IS THE 'SWEET SPOT'... ”



STAR DANCER INFO

Yacht and Voyage Specifics: A luxury 36m steel mono-hull motor yacht accommodating up to 16 guests. All staterooms have ensembles and most have picture windows. *Star Dancer* voyages are generally 10 days in duration with up to 5 dives per day and she covers the entire region that makes up Milne Bay Province. A stay on *Star Dancer* includes all diving, meals, and refreshments including wine and local beer. Most diving is done from the rear deck and the yacht features an incredible deco-stop bar that extends down from the hull of the yacht once she's over the site. Nitrox is available and I highly recommend it for multiple diving days. **Electricity and Camera Equipment Capability:** 240v Australian outlets and 110v US style outlets (twin flat pin). Large camera table and charging station right on the dive deck with compressed air. A separate rinse tank is maintained solely for camera equipment. **Gratuities (Tips):** Totally voluntary and if you wish to tip it's based on the quality of service you have received.

Airport Transfers: Complimentary at Alotau, *Star Dancer* operates from the Driftwood Resort, which arranges pick-up and returns you to the airport.



Top: Lionfish on the hunt under Samarai Wharf.
Bottom: A tiny lobster sheltering within the arms of a crinoid.

>LINK: www.dancerfleet.com ■