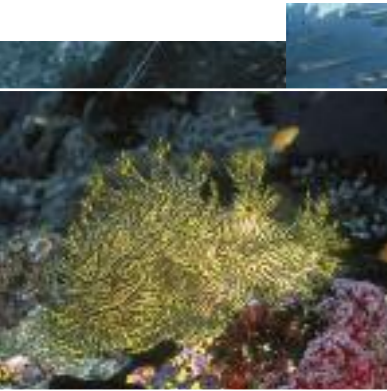


ADVENTURE DIVING

for grown ups



▲ Big lime-yellow *Rhinopias aphanes*
 > Starboard propeller of the Beaufighter



▲ The Dog House in Diving Dog Pass
 > Planking on a B17 turret gun at 41m. Photo Craig de Wit



▲ Jenkins whipray encountered while looking for the P40 wreck



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> THE PORT MORESBY SUB-AQUA CLUB HAS BEEN ACTIVE FOR OVER 35 YEARS AND HAD A SPECIAL SOCIAL NIGHT AT THE ROYAL PAPUA YACHT CLUB THE DAY I FLEW IN FROM CAIRNS. INTERNATIONAL PRIZE-WINNING PHOTOGRAPHER TONY WU WAS MAKING A PRESENTATION TO THE CLUB BEFORE WE JOINED FORCES ON CAPTAIN CRAIG DE WIT'S MV GOLDEN DAWN FOR A VOYAGE OF EXPLORATION AND DISCOVERY.

Having made a presentation to POMSAC myself on a previous visit, I was invited to draw one of the door prizes. I pulled out my own ticket. I felt obliged to call for a redraw, thus missing out on some handy flights around Papua New Guinea courtesy of Airlines PNG. This weird event bothered me, as did other puzzling occurrences later in our adventure. Wait until I tell you about the crocodile...

Our first highlight was a few nautical miles southeast of Port Moresby near Hood Point where Craig had discovered an uncharted pass through the Papuan Barrier Reef a couple of years ago. We tried to dive it last year – but the weather was rough and we could not find it. This year Craig had a GPS fix on it, and we moored up in protected water inside the pass. Oh my! Wonderfully clear water drifted into Diving Dog Pass from the Coral Sea. Green tree corals, seawhips, seafans and soft corals decorated the walls and healthy hard corals coated the

shallow edges. "A myriad of exotic tropical fishes flashed a kaleidoscope of rainbow colours ..." But there were also big rays, and leopard sharks - and The Dog House, two large bommies bridged at their tops and teeming with marine life. I took a lone boat ride to the outer edge and zoomed deep down the outer dropoff to wash away several months of Australian 'nanny-state' rules, then made a slow drift back through the passage, eventually joining the other divers clustered around the Dog House. It was simply gorgeous, and I was revitalised. I carried a completely redundant pony bottle and regulator, and the buddy that everyone needs was in the pickup boat on the surface watching for those who surfaced away from the Golden Dawn.

As we cruised into Milne Bay Province we visited a favourite – Samarai Wharf. This old wharf was resplendent with baitfish, yellow *Tubastaea* corals, and unusually clear water. It was raining, but we were amply compensated by four tasselled wobbegong sharks hanging out on the

bottom patiently waiting for the baitfish to school close. The hiding place of a pair of harlequin shrimp was revealed courtesy of *Star Dancer* which had dived the wharf the previous day.

The Washing Machine drift dive, strictly for grown ups, tumbled us along its lush ledges past mesmerised fish and, as the current slackened, a couple of friendly manta rays. We were on a high, and sped through gaudy corals and looming boulders.

One of our missions was to search for a missing WW2 P40 Kittyhawk fighter. Graeme Houghton, the son of the pilot, recalled the story his father had told of a war-time ditching. The position was vague, but we had the name of a village at the start of the Louisiade Archipelago and decided to dedicate a day looking for the wreck. We had no luck, but did discover some splendid diving. I was happy to get a photo of a large Jenkins stingray resting by one of the reefs. Sharks were scarce, but turtles abundant.





usually come up in the trap are also fascinating, but there were only nautilus this time. Anchored at Dinah's Beach nearby, a strange phenomenon occurred after night fall – the boat was suddenly surrounded by hundreds of large white sea jellies. In we went to get pictures, and I covered as much skin as possible in case the tentacles were vicious stingers. We played with them for an hour, then just as suddenly, they disappeared.

At Cape Vogel we dived the famous B17 Bomber wreck *Blackjack* at 46m and so was an opportunity to adjust our Nitrox for the best mix to avoid narcosis, O2 toxicity and decompression problems. We chose 27% O2. I decided to make a World Record Attempt and became the record holder for the Deepest (41m) Plank On The Turret Of A B17 Bomber Wreck. Hey, I know this is silly, but they called John Cleese silly too in his iconic film on fish identification, so I am proud, even if my technique was a bit bent-kneed.

Soon after this we dived the magnificent Heartbreak Reef near Goodenough Island. There were massive schools of barracuda, jacks and batfish, and great corals in clear water. Nearby I guided Captain Craig to an unlikely anchorage I remembered. It was perfectly sheltered and had a pleasant reef to dive with plenty of fish life. We tucked *Golden Dawn* in the perfect spot and anchored over sand bottom close to shore. Years

But while drawing the mud map for the dive brief I included a sketch of a crocodile near what I called the Crocodile Coast. A sand slope drew divers deep into the blue, and off the point a coral reef extended from the shallows to 35m. In we went. I followed the sand looking for muck critters then cut over to the reef. It was dead! It looked like it had died a year or so previously as it was covered with algae but had no sign of regrowth yet. Fish were still abundant but apart from a few soft coral patches and indestructible green tree corals, the reef was lifeless from the shallows to the deep. Even the cabbage corals were dead and they usually resist such events as bleaching. A kilometre or so offshore the corals were still wonderful, so the cause of the weird coral death was difficult to fathom. None of the usual suspects seemed possible; the best explanation appeared to be a localised and concentrated outbreak of crown of thorns sea stars. I took some photos of the reef and was planning to swim into the shallows and check out the rocks near where I'd drawn a crocodile. But I was a bit spooked after seeing the dead corals, and opted to end the dive. I surfaced to a commotion. The crew had spotted a large real crocodile right where I'd drawn my joke one on the map. Another weird event. They'd also spotted bubbles from master photographer Julian Cohen heading for the same spot. They jumped in the boat and idled above his bubbles.

I wondered if that's more than a coincidence.

At Black and Silver Reef, named for the abundance of black corals adorning its walls (many with silver polyps) I quickly searched for a rare *Rhinopias* sometimes found here. Within five minutes I had a big lime-yellow beauty which soon had the other divers queuing for photos.

Deacon's Reef was splendid and we put down the nautilus trap. I pioneered nautilus trapping in 1987. Divers love to see them alive - and returned safely to the deep after release. But this time a titan triggerfish decided one was an easy meal and attacked. I've seen this once before, but will abandon this site for trapping. The other critters that



before I'd run into a couple of crocodiles in the area and as a result Ron and Valerie Taylor got a group together for a crocodile diving expedition. We even had a cage made for a pig I bought for bait ... well, we found no crocs, and ate the pig, and that was that. We hadn't seen a crocodile there since.

< Left - Wobbegongs patiently wait under Samarai Wharf for the baitfish to come close
 ▲ Above left to right: *Golden Dawn* from the crocodile's position; Tony Wu at work using a rebreather; The crocodile seen previously at the Crocodile Coast

PURE EXPLORATORY DIVING, AND WONDERFUL IT WAS. WALLS AND RIDGE REEFS WITH SANDY CHANNELS, GREAT CORALS, GORGONIANS AND SPONGES

Julian reported that he clearly saw the crocodile walk/swim along the bottom obliquely towards him only 5m away. It was a monster! Fortunately he noticed the boat directly above him and surfaced; some say he did not touch the side of the boat as he came aboard!

Moving to Peer's Patches we were amazed by the fish life even if the vis was down a bit. Then we shifted into Moresby Strait between Goodenough and Fergusson Islands for our anchorage. In the morning we were set to explore the reefs to the east of the Barrier Islands that almost block the Strait. Pure exploratory diving, and wonderful it was. Walls and ridge reefs with sandy channels, great corals, gorgonians and sponges – and a new fish for me at 35m with a sea jelly in its mouth. Luckily I had my fish lens on so took some pics. At only 8cm long I suspected that it was a juvenile trevally; after the cruise I had it identified as a juvenile whitetongue jack *Uraspis helvola*. It must be rare – ichthyologist Dr. Gerry Allen has asked to use the photo. After the dives, Craig gave a masterful demonstration of high speed kite surfing.

The next 'big' dive was one I'd been looking forward to for years. In 2000 Rodney Pearce, PNG's best wreck hunter, using side scan sonar from his dive boat *Barbarian*, had located the wreck of a Bristol Beaufighter in 61m in Hughes Bay north of Fergusson Island. He'd given me

the GPS position, and we had divers with sufficient experience to dive to this depth. The wreck had been ditched and the crew escaped. It took us a little while to find the wreckage on our echo sounder but we did, and quickly had our prepared shotline over the side. This time we opted for 23% O2 in our nitrox mix. This would take us over the recommended ppO2 – but we could get away with that as time is a factor in O2 toxicity, and we were to have a short bottom time. We figured narcosis would be our biggest problem as a couple of the divers had not been as deep before, and the 77% N2 would be fractionally better than 80% N2 air. We all carried pony bottles with 32% nitrox for decompression. Craig used his rebreather.

The day was overcast, the water a bit murky. At 0900 it still wasn't very bright and as I led the divers down the line, I realised that it was going to be dark on the bottom. I mentally switched to night diving mode, and loved every moment of the descent into the gloom. The weight at the end of the line appeared before I'd distinguished the bottom. Damn, I thought, we'll never see the wreck but, looking up, there it was right in front of me. The tail was broken but the rear cockpit visible. Some divers never got orientated and thought the rear cockpit was the front of the plane, but I found the propellers and the pilot's cockpit and was soon shooting away with my trusty Nikon F3 and Velvia

and the ascent and decompression began. We were all exuberant back on the boat, a great dive executed perfectly. Rodney says he's dived it with water so clear the wreck was visible from 10m down, which must be wonderful.

At Observation Point I'd previously planted a series of beer bottles at depth as shelter for Dinah's goby *Lubricogobius dinah*, named for my wife who was first to discover them. I plant a few with their lips pointing at an angle out of the sand, as virtuous divers sometimes clean the bottom and bring them up. I promised Tony I would find a pair of these exquisite



> Julian Cohen and the prophetic crocodile I included in the dive brief
 > Dinah Halstead with Tony's picture of Dinah's goby *Lubricogobius dinah*

100 film – Oh yes I could have done with the higher ISO that digital cameras can use! I did not gain much by shooting at 1/15 of a second. Beautiful deep water anthias swarmed the wreck with fusiliers and a multitude of others. Time was too short to concentrate on the fish, but it is different scenery at those depths. My bottom time of eight minutes was soon up



▲ Cockpit of Beaufighter wreck at 60m; note redbar anthias

small yellow and white gobies as he'd longed to photograph them ever since he saw the first shots of the fish. They aren't rare, you just have to know where they like to live – probably inside deepwater tunicates – but they also love beer bottles! Tony geared up with a rebreather and followed me down with his camera rig. I found one of my bottles – but no goby, and went deeper. Some of my bottles had been removed, but one of them housed two fish. A head was poking out of the bottle and the other fish was sitting on the lip. Forty minutes at 30m later, Tony began ascending, grinning so much he could hardly hold onto his mouthpiece. He'd nailed them – and had one of the images made into a large print for Dinah.

It was an extraordinary cruise and *Golden Dawn* lived up to its reputation for adventurous diving for grownups. Weird things happened, but we explored and discovered and the trip was a great success. And if anyone wants me to pull a raffle ticket out of a bag – I'm ready.

➤ **LINK:** bob@halsteaddiving.com

NEED TO KNOW:-

Air Niugini flies to Port Moresby from Singapore, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Manila, and Australia, with daily connections from Port Moresby to the main domestic centres including Alotau (Milne Bay).

Currency: PNG Kina, divided into one hundred Toea. Check exchange rates before travel.

Visas: 60day tourist visas are available on arrival for K100.00 for most nationalities. Visa information is available at www.pngcanberra.org/visas/index.htm

Seasons: Diving Milne Bay is year round. Calmest and warmest seas are November through April. Southeast trade winds bring clear cool water from the Coral Sea through the region from May until October. Cyclones are very rare. Water temperatures vary from 26 deg C in August to 30 deg C in January.

Operators:

MV *Golden Dawn* www.mvgoldendawn.com
 MV *Chertan* (Milne Bay) www.chertan.com
 MV *Star Dancer* (Milne Bay) www.DancerFleet.com

Bob Halstead is a pioneer of PNG dive tourism and discovered many of the dive sites now popular with visitors. In 2008 he was inducted into the International Scuba Diving Hall of Fame.

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