

# OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

LONELY PLANET DESCRIBES PAPUA NEW GUINEA AS ONE OF THE LAST FRONTIERS FOR TRAVELERS - A DIFFICULT BUT IMMENSELY REWARDING PLACE TO VISIT. FOR DIVERS IT IS PROBABLY AMONGST THE TOP FIVE DESTINATIONS IN THE WORLD AND OUR REWARD FOR VENTURING THERE IS THE AMAZING DIVERSITY THAT LIES BENEATH ITS WATERS.

: : DON SILCOCK © 2005



Clearing access on the Isis River



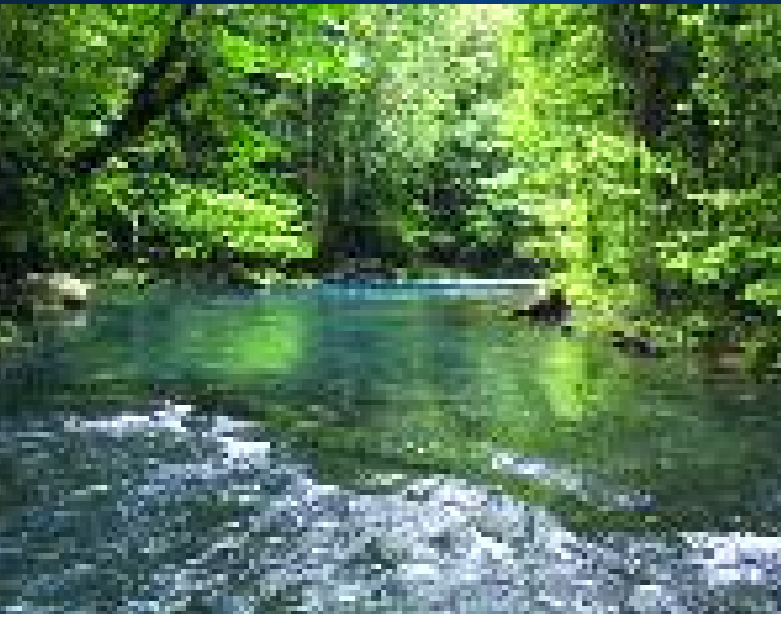
Mitsubishi seaplane wreck complete with bombs

This is a wild and rugged country – one half of the island was formerly known as New Guinea, the other half now claimed as the Indonesian province of Irian Jaya, plus numerous islands to the east in the Pacific Ocean and Solomon Sea. The largest of these islands is New Britain, which covers an area of 35,500 square kilometres – roughly half the size of Tasmania – and diving on the north coast has been well established for many years. To date Kimbe Bay, the Witu and Fathers Islands and Rabaul to the north have been the most popular. However, the south coast of the island has remained basically unexplored and largely ignored by the dive charter boats that cover the New Britain area and New Ireland to the north.

Alan Raabe, owner/skipper of *Febrina*, and now co-owner of *Star Dancer*, has periodically explored the south coast during the 19 years he's lived and worked in Papua New Guinea. These exploratory trips were for his own



Unforgettable reefs in the West Entrance at Lindenhaven



Top: The 48m deep Blue Hole in the Isis River at Waterfall Bay  
Above: The Blue Hole is clearly visible at the surface.  
Centre: Alan's Island at dusk; negotiating with a village chief or 'big man'.

### Trip Highlights

**West Entrance at Lindenhaven** – The condition of reef was just superb, pristine is the only word that really fits! I could have spent the whole 10 days in this spot.

**The Blue Hole in the Isis River at Waterfall Bay** – a two hour trip up the river with spectacular scenery and local villagers waving from the river banks, followed by a final navigation of some fast flowing rapids and then into a 48 metre deep sinkhole????

**Grey reef sharks coming up from the deep** – we were already at 36 metres – buzzing aggressively and seeming to tempt us deeper if we wanted to get 'that photograph'.

**Mitsubishi sea plane wreck** – crashed WW2 Japanese sea plane lying on it's back with one float still attached and sticking up into the water plus two bombs in it's bomb bay

**Observing negotiations** with the village big men to secure access to the dive sites

personal enjoyment, but what he discovered ultimately led to the conclusion that not only was the diving as good as the north coast, but in some places it was potentially far better!

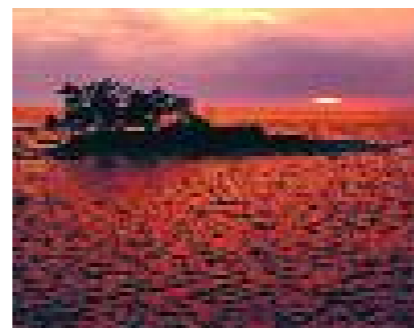
A number of key points contribute to the south coast's uniqueness:

- The very deep waters of the Solomons Trench lie close to the coastline and strong coastal currents mix with the cool upwellings from the Trench to produce an optimum blending mechanism.
- The south coast of New Britain is the second wettest place on earth – in the rainy season the numerous rivers provide a rich source of nutrients for the offshore reefs.
- The area is very remote and sparsely populated; there's only one unpaved logging road penetrating the dense mountainous rainforest that separates the north coast from the south. Basically the only access to the area is by sea, which means the reefs are virtually untouched and in some areas can only be described as pristine!

The result is some incredible diving combining most of the weird and wonderful critters previously only found in Milne Bay with superb reefs and pelagic action usually associated with the Witu Islands and Kavieng.

In 2004 Alan Raabe conducted a number of diving expeditions to the south coast to identify the best locations and create permanent moorings (see side bar) on them so that regular trips could occur the following year. In late January 2005 I took part in the second of what looks like will be many future trips to the area – over a period of 10 days we dived a variety of locations in the Lindenhaven and Waterfall Bay areas and I saw WWII wrecks, reefs in pristine condition and a great variety of critters and pelagic fish.

All my images here were taken on the 10-day trip. This is virgin territory where the boat often had to reach agreement with the head of the local village, known locally as the 'big fella', to dive in his territory (see side bar). Similarly in some locations the



**Securing Dive Site Access** As diving on the south coast is so new, many dive sites are still being identified and many dives are exploratory. However, once a site has been confirmed as a good one, continued access needs to be negotiated with the local village. I was personally very impressed by Alan Raabe's approach to this as he's genuinely interested in improving the lot of the village, not just the 'big man'. A lesser person would take the easy route and grease the palm of the big man to secure access – but Alan's view is that properly managed, there should be three benefits derived from opening up diving on the south coast - One – there's a direct payment made to a community account opened up in the village's name (not the big man's), Two – the villages are able to trade with the boat for fresh vegetables and with diving tourists for locally produced artifacts. Three – the net positive effect of introducing a new dynamic of tourism, albeit on a small scale initially, to an area that has previously been largely closed to foreigners.

locals were completely amazed at the sight of Star Dancer moored up and us gearing up and entering the water – clearly they'd never seen anything like it before! On one memorable dive we surfaced surrounded by about 20 local kids in their canoes all highly excited by what we were doing!

Another interesting facet of the south coast is that it's wet and dry seasons are the reverse – when it's raining on the north it's dry on the south and vice versa! The reason is that the northwest trade winds which bring in the low pressure troughs and resultant heavy rain on the north coast don't make it over the mountainous spine of the island. Similarly, the southeast trade winds that bring heavy rain to the south coast are isolated from the north coast by the mountains.

At the end of the day this means that truly world class diving is available year round in New Britain – the north coast is at it's best from April till November and the south coast comes into it's own from January till April.

**Getting There** Our trip to the south coast commenced in Rabaul on the northeast tip of New Britain, a one-hour internal flight from the capital Port Moresby. The internal flights connect with international flights arriving from Australia and though there's typically only just over an hour between arriving in Moresby and departing for Rabaul I made the connection with no hassle. However it only takes one thing to go wrong and either you or your scuba or photo gear could miss the flight and therefore the boat!

A much safer option is to travel the day before and overnight at either of the two airport hotels, so you're much more certain of arriving in Rabaul on time with all your gear! Alternatively, I highly recommend a few days at the Loloata Island Resort just outside Port Moresby before your charter as this makes almost certain that you'll have all your gear plus you'll have a chance to dust off all the cobwebs at the great dive sites



Top: Mandarinfish  
Above: Wreck discoveries continue as new territory is opened.



The fabulous Rhinopias was relatively recently discovered in Papua New Guinea and is still a fabulous find!  
Opposite: A beautifully camouflaged octopus mimicking the terrain.

Loloata has to offer!  
Check out [www.loloato.com](http://www.loloato.com) for more information.

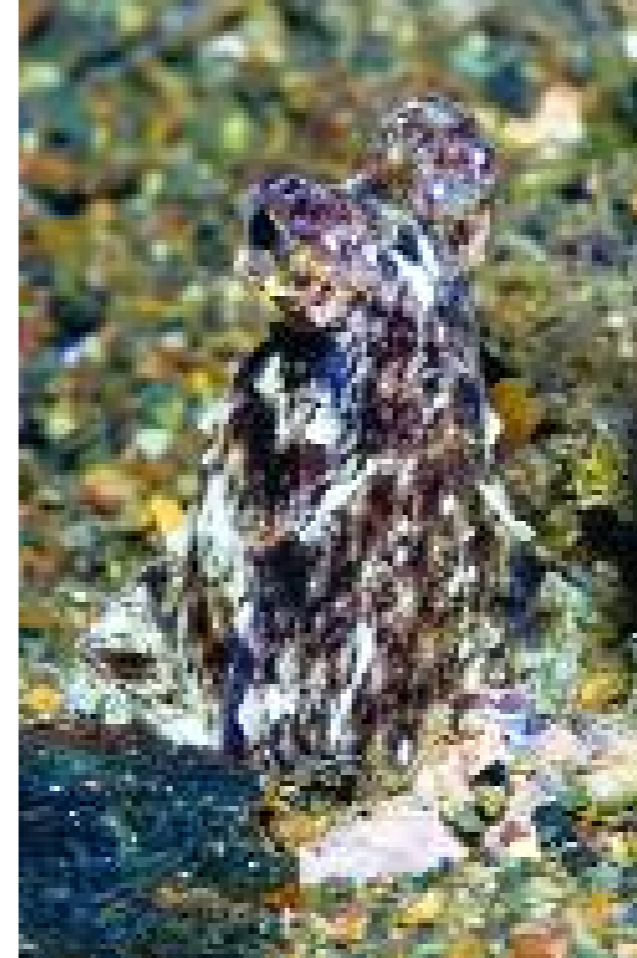
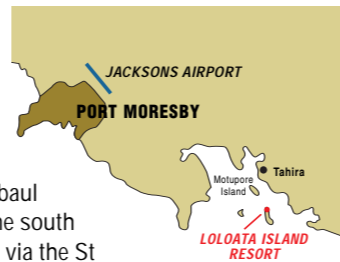
Departing from Rabaul means access to the south coast dives sites is via the St Georges Channel separating New Britain and New Ireland.

**Currents.** Currents can be very strong in the channel and reached 11 knots on our trip, but generally you should be on the first dive site early the following morning, which means (with a bit of luck at Port Moresby airport) you can leave Australia one morning and be in the water on the south coast 24 hours later – how good is that?

**What To Take** I always take my own personal scuba equipment whenever I dive in PNG and I use a 3mm wet suit as it offers just enough warmth on some of the longer dives plus great protection from inadvertent brushes with the reef.

Camera equipment depends on what you have, but you should try to be equipped for both wide angle and macro photography as some of the reefs are just unbelievable.

Local currency is the Kina, but I usually only change about A\$50 in case of emergencies as



credit cards are widely accepted and in my opinion much safer than carrying a pile of money around.

**Electricity** The power supply in Papua New Guinea is 240 volts and Australian 3 pin plugs are used and on Star Dancer; both 110 and 240 volts are available onboard.

**Health** Malaria is prevalent throughout Papua New Guinea and, having tried most modern medications and experienced their side effects, I now personally opt for the regular use of insect spray containing DEET, having reached the conclusion that prevention is better than the 'cure'. However, please consult your own personal medic for advice well before leaving home. More info re malaria is available on the internet via respected international tropical disease research centres in Britain and the USA.

**When To Go** The dry season – January to April!

