

KAVIENG'S UNDERGROUND SECRETS

BY ANDY NELSON

It's a long way from the deserts of outback Australia to the jungles of Papua New Guinea's New Ireland Province, but it was enough to lure me on the promise of virginal cave diving in some spectacular and wild country. I don't live in the outback, but it's where we normally travel to dive, often thousands of kilometres, to the Nullarbor, Kimberley and northern Queensland. Thanks to a lead by Paul Hosie I was invited to New Guinea by Cara and Dorian at Scuba Ventures Kavieng. Thanks to the very kind assistance of Air New Guinea and Malagan Beach Resort, I journeyed to this spot of paradise two degrees south of the Equator to find a very agreeable climate and some even more agreeable locals willing to show me some of their untouched limestone sinkholes.

Getting to Kavieng is an adventure in itself, and to an Australian with a growing appreciation of the role played to our north during World War 2, a chance to see the incredibly rugged Owen Stanley Ranges as the Air New Guinea jet flew north from Port Moresby on the multi-leg flight to New Ireland Province. A short stop at Rabaul preceded my arrival into Kavieng across the serene harbour of Kavieng, belying its violent years during the Japanese occupation of this strategically important port. Now the harbour provides an idyllic base to explore the many underwater wrecks and reefs of the area that attract open water divers the world over.

manage my air supply with the need to lay guideline, record survey information, take photos and note all the usual cave data required to gain a full appreciation of these new sites.

Over subsequent days we ventured further south of Kavieng down the east coast of the island, visiting a number of villages and meeting the very open and friendly people living around the many freshwater holes ranging down the coast and into the hills. Although relatively close to Kavieng itself, these caves offered a very different type of diving with quite deep (45 metre plus) sites plunging into the bedrock, but

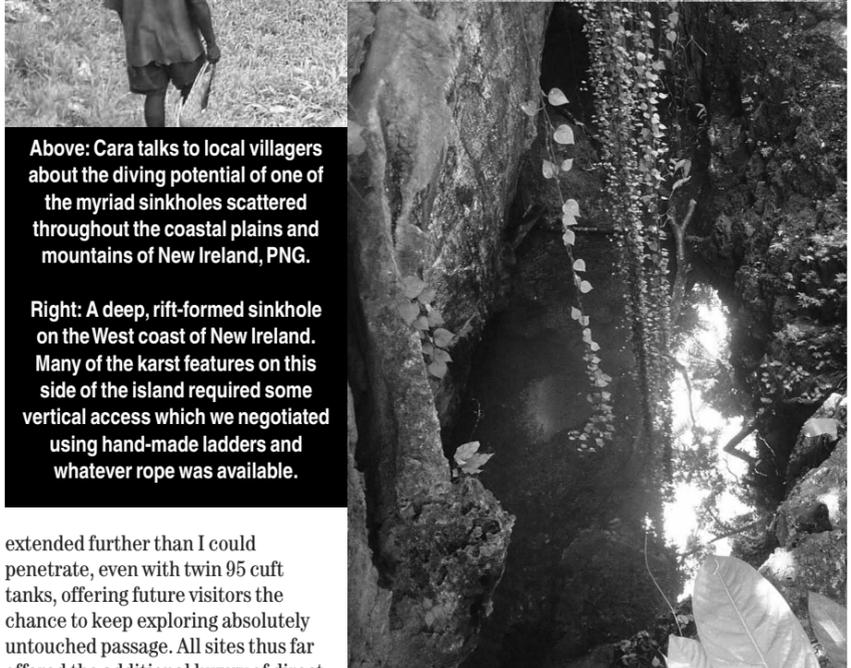
Cara and Dorian hosted my 10 days in Kavieng with a view to exploring, surveying and mapping some of the many underwater karst features of this limestone rich region. This will hopefully give the local Government and the villages of the area a greater appreciation for the potential for technical dive tourism in the area. Thanks to the time spent by Cara and Dorian working with all concerned, the majority of sites were accessed with the full agreement and indeed enthusiastic support of local villagers and landowners.

In the first two days I dived and surveyed two sites quite close to Kavieng township itself, and

Yet another crystal clear, phreatically formed karst feature, most of which are spring fed from below sea-level, resulting in most sites containing a freshwater/salt-water thermo-/halocline. Note the freediving goggles worn by this local villager, proof of a keen spearfisherman.



Above: Cara talks to local villagers about the diving potential of one of the myriad sinkholes scattered throughout the coastal plains and mountains of New Ireland, PNG.



Right: A deep, rift-formed sinkhole on the West coast of New Ireland. Many of the karst features on this side of the island required some vertical access which we negotiated using hand-made ladders and whatever rope was available.

extended further than I could penetrate, even with twin 95 cuft tanks, offering future visitors the chance to keep exploring absolutely untouched passage. All sites thus far offered the additional luxury of direct surface access to the waters edge, unlike many Australian caves that require hours of hauling heavy dive gear to the waters edge, sometimes hundreds of feet below the surface of the surrounding land. Simply drive to the site, don diving gear and fall into the clear warm water. PNG offers Mt Gambier-like ease of access (mostly) with unlimited potential for new sites.

Ranging all around these sites were an incredible number of smaller freshwater sinkholes that the locals were amazingly generous in showing us to. It was a brilliant experience to be walking through the low lying hills of the coastal regions, following the repeatedly appearing rivers that flow both above and below ground from pool to pool. Many of these show potential for future exploration. At

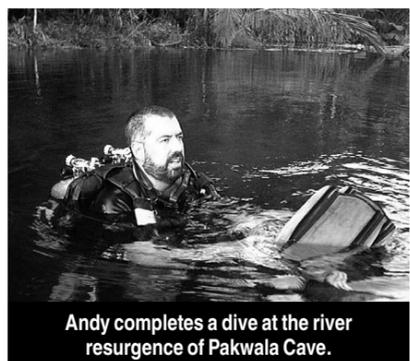
The last phase of the trip saw us heading across the central ranges of the island and venture down the less-frequented West coast villages and another change of cave structure, keeping in mind the altitude issues associated with returning each day over the 1000 foot high ranges. The limestone in this region appears to be subject to more distinct weathering by rainfall action penetrating weaknesses in the rock, forming vertical fissures above the water that continue underwater. Access to the water's edge is slightly more challenging, requiring considerable agility whilst lowering the dive gear to the water's surface. These sites revealed incredible potential for further exploration as the number of sites available in

this region blossomed the more we looked, with up to five diveable locations identified in a single days walking and talking with the locals.

All too soon the trip came to an end, but not before I took the chance to dip my gear into the usual reason for divers visiting Kavieng, the amazingly intact wrecks and stunning reefs that abound only minutes from the resort. This place has everything a diver could dream of!

Thanks to Cara, Dorian, the folks at Air New Guinea and the very hospitable staff at the Malagan Resort. For further information, photos and survey sketches of all sites visited during the expedition, go to www.trimixdivers.com, and

for links to SCUBA Ventures Kavieng go to <http://scuba@global.net.pg/>



Andy completes a dive at the river resurgence of Pakwala Cave.

these were to prove beyond my expectations. In Australia, the existence of underwater cave formations such as stalagmites, stalactites, columns, shawls and helictites is exceedingly rare, and has only been found in two cave dive sites, Wellington (NSW) and Tombstone (WA). And yet, within minutes of my very comfortable resort lay two sites with outstanding water clarity and spectacular formations. These formations are unique because they rely on the water level once having been much lower than present day levels, necessary to enable the growth of cave features of untouched quality. Floating silently through the tall columns and hundreds of stalagmites hanging precariously from the roof of the caves held me spellbound. My time was precious as I balanced the need to



LIGA ONUI cave near Kavieng contains a stunning array of formations from its drier days. Many of the larger formation display signs of previous seismic activity.



All sites dived by Andy Nelson quickly attracted curious, but always willing to assist, attention from local villagers. With twin set, reels, lights, survey and photographic equipment such help was always appreciated.



Dragon's Teeth formation. Whilst the challenges of balancing solo cave exploration, line laying and surveying make poor partners for photography (not to mention my still-emerging skills in this area!), not too many print quality resulted from this light exploratory trip. However, the quality of formations found in several sites equalled, if not exceeded, the quality of those found in Limekiln cave, Wellington, NSW.

with little cave decoration. However, in these sites the thrill of exploration offers a different appeal as the volume of water emerging from deep underground attests to a potential for limitless expanses of cave passage. Two sites

all times we were accompanied by crowds of friendly and open villagers keen to show us more of these beautiful glimpses into the underground world. The openness of the villagers will stay with me forever.