

KAVIENG

SHIPS, PLANES, AND JOURNEYS TO THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH

BY TONY KARACSONYI

The tunnel narrowed at this point and the strong current prevented further progress. Dorian has been a few extra metres when the spring wasn't flowing as strongly. It's a safe dive to the 38 metre mark – anything past this is definitely for experienced cave divers. We stayed for about five minutes simply enjoying being there, then surfaced slowly for a few minutes deco at 5 metres.

Drifting downstream, fat tropical leaves were collected against palm fronds and fallen branches in a kaleidoscope of colours. Schools of trevally, scats and deep-bodied, transparent, hatchet-like fishes sought refuge among the leaves. Fish that have evolved or adapted to live in freshwater are always fascinating.

Dorian and Cara now include this and other freshwater cave dives on Scuba Ventures' list. They've operated diving in the Comores, Mozambique and Gizo in the Solomons. For the past two years they've worked hard to compile an exciting dive list specialising in Kavieng's many WW2 aeroplane wrecks and shipwrecks.

Kavieng has an amazing WW2 history, when the Allies engaged in a massive air offensive 11 to 15 February 1944 against the Japanese. They tried a new low-flying bombing strategy with their B25 Mitchell bombers but lost many planes to Japanese anti-aircraft fire and exploding fuel dumps. One of these was the Stubborn Hellion, now in 12 metres with machine guns still in place. Another yet unaccounted for is the Gremlin's Holiday which went down about three miles from Kavieng.

One of our most spectacular dives was an Aichi E13A 'Jake' float plane in 20 metres discovered by Dorian in March 2001. The 'Hinomaru' (red Japanese rising sun emblem) is still visible on its starboard wing. It's a beautiful wreck with pink soft corals coating its propellers. Another 'Jake' lies on coral at 10 metres at another site. We dived both, plus an unidentified Japanese shipwreck with piles of live ammunition, depth charges, cordite sticks and even rubber shoe soles laying around. A school of blue-stripe sea perch hung over the wheelhouse with a pair of courting pufferfish.

The Taiwanese fishing trawler Der Yang was our first dive – the wreck and red seaweed gardens are at 30 metres. From here we swam to a reef at 14 metres, watching grey reef sharks, blue-finned trevally, swarms of fusiliers and a green turtle. The Der Yang dive is a wonderful combination of shipwreck and coral reef.

The legendary Silvertip Reef, also known as Valerie's Reef, is unforgettable. We snorkelled for some 30 minutes waiting for

Above: Entering the large craggy entrance of the Fissoa freshwater spring.

Left: Dorian exploring a Jake Japanese floatplane which he discovered at 20 metres, with prop blades hosting soft corals and allied cowries

Dorian checks out a porthole on the unidentified Japanese shipwreck

NORMALLY THIS PART WAS QUITE EASY, BUT HEAVY RECENT RAIN HAD DORIAN CONCERNED THAT THE FLOW OF THE SPRING COULD BE TOO STRONG. WE SLITHERED TO A HALT BY A RAINFOREST-EDGED CRYSTAL CLEAR STREAM WHERE WE GEARED UP; A STEAMY HIKE THROUGH THE JUNGLE ENDED AT A MAGNIFICENT BLUE POOL. TREE STUMPS AND PALM FRONDS LAY ACROSS ITS ENTRANCE, AND I INSTANTLY IMAGINED CROCODILES. ENTERING WAS BY A GIANT STRIDE SO AS NOT TO DISTURB THE SILTY EDGES. THE SIGHT AHEAD WAS UNBELIEVABLE – A 45 DEGREE TUNNEL BURROWING TOWARDS THE HEART OF NEW IRELAND. OUR ADRENALIN BUBBLED!

Dorian and our Swiss dive buddy Reto Graf were already snapping wide-angle silhouettes of the cave's entrance. The swim down the tunnel lined with ancient coral took us to what seemed like 20 metres depth, but my gauge showed 38 metres! Fresh sweet water rushed past our faces – ahead of us, sizeable scats and a good sized tarpon fought the current. Fish here? What could they possibly be after at these depths, I wondered.

info

Cara has also found a flashing clam. It doesn't expose itself to passing divers but has an amazing streak-lightning effect across its lips when a torch is shone on it. A friend had shown them one in the Solomons. The flashing clam *Ctenoides ales* has a pale yellow shell and a vivid crimson mantle with long red tentacles. The flashing clam is able to roll up and unroll very rapidly, it's brilliant silvery-white outer edge, of the upper and lower mantle curtains, producing a lightening-like streak that flashes on and off, looking like a flashing white neon light.

*Notes on flashing clam, courtesy Simon Foale.

topped off with freshly sliced coconut, paw paw, fresh pineapple. Dorian got the coconut idea after diving in the Maldives and divers really enjoy it.

Albatross Passage was one of our most spectacular dives. With an incoming tide, we were dropped at sea and quickly swam down with the current onto the reef, a very safe and effective way of starting the dive, much better than mooring and having to fight against the current to reach the wall. Several grey reef sharks patrolled the blue. The seafans, soft corals and black coral trees here are fantastic. Further up the wall were several deep-water hawkfish on the fans and a grey reef shark silhouetted against the sunlit surface. The sun was in the right spot over the wall for wide angle on morning dives. Pairs of bannerfish, coral cod and glasseyes hovered over the seafans. Here Dorian even found me a magnificent and minute pygmy seahorse on a pink fan.

Dorian is also a keen and very talented underwater photographer with a special interest in anemone fishes and commensal shrimps. He recently hosted avid British macro-photographer Mark Graham (his third trip to Kavieng in 18 months) who found four allied cowries on a soft coral adorning the Jake. Mark did more dives there than at the famous 'bottle shop' muck dive where they sometimes see the harlequin ghost pipefish. An incredible variety of creatures can be seen at the bottleshop including pipe fishes – ghost, banded, ringed, mesmate and double-ended. Divers from Febrina even saw the shy hairy ghost pipefish! Other often seen critters are panda clownfish and ornate ghostfish. On my dives there, I saw banded pipefish, juvenile harlequin sweetlip, harlequin shrimps (small but amazing), red clingfish, large red firefish

and shrimpfish in the ribbon weeds.

On another recently discovered clear water muck dive we saw a big variety of soft bottom dwellers – juvenile and adult leaf scorpionfish, many black shrimp gobies complete with commensal shrimps and yellow shrimp gobies. There were garden eels which seemed very approachable and a gorgeous anemone with a pink mantle.

I spent five days with Dorian and Cara and merely scratched the surface of Kavieng diving – you could easily spend two weeks exploring the many channels, reef passes, ship and aeroplane wrecks. Or if you're crazy about macro, Dorian may be persuaded into three or four 60 to 90 minute muck dives each day! Then there's freshwater limestone sinkhole dives with crystal clear water, stalactites and stalicmites underwater in a cave system close to Kavieng.

The general diving routine is to be picked up on the beach at the Malagan Beach Resort at 8.30 am. We were usually back for lunch at the Malagan by 2pm, with the option of a third dive or so after lunch. Some of the best macro dives such as the bottle shop are only five minutes boat ride from the Malagan.

With exciting wreck, reef and muck diving, plus sharks, turtles, thousands of anthias and tiny marine animals on virtually every dive, Scuba Ventures is a great ticket to much of Kavieng's best diving.

Below: Dorian with a happy group at the Malagan.

Kavieng children hand feeding eels near Kavieng

You don't need much to enjoy yourself here!

Dorian and Cara's boat Rok Rok picking up divers at the Malagan Beach Resort



Their other boat, a 23ft footer, is set up in a similar way. When they have large groups, Dorian takes one boat and Cara the other. A third 24 footer named 'Mad Fish', since October 2002, as well as a fourth 22 footer named "Dau Dakona" also used for sportfishing. At each site submerged mooring lines are used as well as hand held GPS to put divers right onto the best dives.

Peters Patch is an underwater Eden, the fishlife is so intense. On an incoming tide, the only time to dive Peters', the reef was alive with fusiliers, big-eye trevally, Spanish mackerel and a melting pot of butterflyfishes, coral trout, scibbled and clown triggerfish, schools of juvenile purple queens (a kind of anthias). I even saw fire gobies, blue-spotted fantail rays and yellow-margin triggerfish on this little reef extending from 6 to 25 metres. This, with Albatross Passage were my favourite reef dives, although the soft corals at Planet Passage in a ripping current were nothing short of absolutely spectacular.

The blow holes off the front of Nusa Lavu Island are spectacular with some unusual pinnacle like soft corals, lovely yellow soft corals hosting crabs, robust ghost pipefish, sleeping whitetip sharks, unusual crabs on seafans and painted crays.

Friday night buffets at the Kavieng Hotel are awesome with a huge variety of seafood, ham, chicken, pork, seafood, fruit and the Sunday night Beach BBQ at the Malagan beach Resort is superb. Divers often say that the fruit seems flavour enhanced in Kavieng and I agree. Fruit from our local supermarket just doesn't taste the same. Each dive is



for shots.

It's hard to describe just how beautiful, graceful and controlled these silvertips were. These true oceanic sharks, big females two to three metres long, were the most magnificent I've seen. The silvertips made many passes and shooting with a 24 to 50 zoom port partially filling with salt water was unnerving. (In 1997 there were nine magnificent silvertips here, but tragically an overseas fishing company commissioned the locals to massacre the sharks for their fins. Seven of the nine were killed. Shark-finning is now banned in the province).

the sharks to arrive.

Native beche dermeer fishermen paddled over to us and snorkeled alongside waiting for the silvertips. Dorian decided to go for it.

My zoom camera port was flooding miserably; I'd taken it back to the boat and was on my way back down when the sharks suddenly appeared – I had two silvertips on my tail. Dorian went for the surface for his camera and I did too. Flooded port or not, no way was I going to have two silvertips within touching distance without trying

Above and inset below: A solitary anemonefish eyes off the intruder from its host

Top left: Dorian watches a red firefish, one of several living on the un-identified Japanese shipwreck