



WRECKS & WILD REEFS

Christopher Bartlett

New Ireland's diving has long had a reputation for pelagics and sharks. Attracted by the fresh deep water flushed between the multitude of small islands and passages making up the area, dogtooth tuna, Spanish mackerel, trevally, barracuda, and blacktip, whitetip, silvertip, and grey reef sharks all frequent the area. Yet the diving is not all about the big fish. An important base for the Japanese imperial forces during WWII, a number of easy-to-reach and easy-to-dive plane wrecks in the area and a good mixture of vibrant and colourful reefs are big attractions.

Dorian Borcherds, joint-owner of Kavieng Scuba Ventures, arrived from the Solomon Islands in 2000 with his wife and business partner Cara. On the edge of the South Pacific Ocean, and with the Bismarck Sea close by to the west, Kavieng has an abundance of dive sites, over a dozen of which are less than a 10-minute boat ride away from Nusa

Island.

We were picked up from the doorstep of our villa on the water's edge, under the palm trees at Nusa Island Retreat opposite Kavieng harbour on our first morning, and at Blowholes on the tip of Nusa before we got our wetsuits on.

The site is fairly open to the current, which has eroded the rock to create large blowholes, and though it lacks the usual riot of coral that typifies PNG reefs, it's still home to some interesting creatures. Peering into a couple of low caves we came across white tip reef sharks lazing the day away. These nocturnal hunters do not need to be in constant motion like many of their shark relatives as they have muscles that pump water over their gills to extract oxygen from it.

The viz wasn't Kavieng's best, so we set out for some macro action. Dorian is a keen macro-hunter, and soon found a tiny juvenile goby darting between the polyps of some broccoli-like soft

branching coral, and then a cunningly disguised allied cowry hiding on a stick of bright red whip coral. After sneaking a peek at a couple more white tips, and watching tube anemones feeding in the

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current, a banded sea snake (krait) joined us on the final section of the drift.

We spent the surface interval lazing on the deck, eating fruit and swapping yarns. It turned out that Dorian was born 40 minutes down the road from



Clockwise from far left: Soft branching coral and purple sea squirts and divers at the amazing Albatross Passage; A Japanese “Jake” aircraft in the Kavieng harbour area, a couple of minutes from Nusa Island; Freshwater cave diving with Dorian; Allied cowry on whip coral.



where I used to live in South Africa (in KwaZulu-Natal that's practically next door) and that his mum and my partner's mum worked in the same museum in North Wales. The most memorable thing about Dorian though was his resemblance to the 1970s and 80s adult movie star John Holmes (because of his 'tache and curly locks).

Next up was the trevally and anemone festooned Echuka Patch where it was hard to decide whether to watch the wall of big-eyes hovering over the deep, the 15 tomato anemonefish darting around their giant green host, or the garden of crinoids sitting in the current. Close by, laying on its starboard side,

sat the Korean fishing vessel shipwreck Der Yang with its field of red, orange, and white whip corals and gorgonian fans around the stern. Soft branching corals clung to the deck and a snapper sheltered inside.

Dorian has a wealth of knowledge of both the Japanese and Allied planes found in the area and our second day was to be a wreck day. Japanese Deep Pete lies in 39 metres of water just behind Nusa and Dorian assured us the visibility here was always great, even when it was a bit murky elsewhere. We descended into a blue-green soup with six-metre visibility, my wide-angle lens redundant. Albeit it a fruitless photographic experience, it was my buddy's first sub-30-metre dive, and we enjoyed our mutual narcosis in the eerie gloom, gawking at the oversized central float on the upside-down erstwhile reconnaissance plane.

Back inside the outer harbour area, which is more a sheltered bay than an industrial area of docks and quays, we dropped onto a Jake float plane. A plethora of pipefish danced on its twin floats, partially hidden in the shallow, hard coral garden a mere three metres

down. The aircraft's body was resting on the sand nearby, its cockpit full of glassfish. I don't know what it is about WWII plane wrecks; the old radial engines, their defining role in shaping the recent past and the present, or just that they look so cool with fish on and in them; but I love them. Nearby the

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remains of an Australian Catalina flying boat, several unexploded bombs, and a pile of dumped wartime ammunition became our third dive of the day. Much of the wooden seaplane has disintegrated but the large engines and props sit proudly on the sand 12m down with lichen and coral decorating them brightly.

After a day's diving we were always famished, and NIR's kitchen provided some excellent fare to keep

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Clockwise from left: A juvenile wrasse hides in soft branching coral; Nusa Island Retreat, a five-minute boat ride from Kavieng; A spinecheek anemonefish looks out from the protection of its host anemone.

us fuelled. During the months from October to March the multitude of small islands and channels are dotted with apparently excellent surf breaks and the accommodation is often taken up by surfers, the owner Shaun being a keen wave rider himself. NIR lays on a great buffet every evening with a range of soups and fresh main courses, salads, veg and starches.

Out to the west, the Bismark Sea sites were half-an-hour away and well worth the trip through the islands and mangroves. Albatross passage has stunning soft coral coverage and a wide range of fish, with pygmy seahorses, cuttlefish, dogtooth and sharks. On an incoming tide it is a truly excellent dive; one of the best reefs I have dived anywhere. Down by the wall and on the sandy shelf the atmosphere is surreal and calm – gorgonian fans, broccoli corals and whips everywhere – but ends on the reef top with a safety stop on reef hooks watching the action below, flying the current that surges in the pass on an incoming tide. Schools of fusiliers fly past, attracting grey reef sharks,

blacktip and whitetip reef sharks, and the occasional silvertip.

On the way back, a B-25, the Stubborn Hellion, awaits in 12m of water on the edge of the mangroves. After sustaining damage in a bombing raid she crashed into the sea 68

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years ago. She is in remarkably good condition, with a spinecheek anemonefish manning the twin-machineguns in the top aft turret.



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Arming fish would be one way of increasing their chances for survival, but twin .50 cal's in the fins of an anemonefish would be extremely foolhardy. Nothing in the ocean would match this little fish in an “aggro-pergram” analysis so this lady should have nothing bigger than an air pistol.

Dorian is a positively affable chap with a fun sense of humour that will at some point have you laughing till your mask fills and you can barely keep your reg in, but he takes his diving seriously. It was only after we'd been diving

together for three days that he asked if I'd like to do an afternoon freshwater cave dive half-an-hour inland. You bet! Despite having well over a 1000 dives in my logbook, I'd never done a penetration dive, so was a touch nervous as we carefully clambered down inside the mouth of a cavern.

With two torches each, we slipped into what appeared to be nothing much more than a large puddle and followed an orange safety line down and in, mindful to not disturb the fine silt on the bottom. After an initially narrow section

we emerged into a series of huge caverns draped in stalactites and stalagmites full of gin clear water, only troubled by the odd halocline. The environment and total stillness were enthralling in their own right, but it was even more thought-provoking with the knowledge that the water level was once much lower and the caves surely inhabited. Close to the entrance and exit, in 6m of water, lay the remains of Japanese rice bowls and a clay bottle made in the late 1800s in the Netherlands. I wondered what older prehistoric animal or human relics might lay further in.

A week flew by, and left us with a feeling that we had only just scratched Kavieng's surface; we'd had no time to visit the WWII gun emplacements on little Nusa, and had only taken a brief walk around the half of big Nusa that is home to local communities and most of NIR's employees. We'd only dived each of the sites once, but most of them were worthy of being dived again and again. Six days before, we'd arrived as strangers and now we felt like we were leaving as friends, keen to return. ■

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