



OUT THERE

Howard Sawyer

It's not the 8,665 miles from London, England to Kavieng, Papua New Guinea that's the real adventure. It's the next 50.

Sensible is what I do in another life, back home, half a world away.

Sensible would be a package holiday to dive the Egyptian Red Sea on a liveaboard safari boat. Just you, 21 other divers, plus a couple of guides, each of us looking for our own little piece of underwater heaven. Now multiply that by three vessels, all sharing the same mooring, and drop everyone overboard at the same time.

It's like something out of Ian Fleming's 'Thunderball' down there. The charter airlines to Sharm-el-Sheikh

even show behind-the-scenes underwater footage from the Bond movie as in-flight entertainment, so you know what to expect. It's diving for battery hens, and there's only so much of that I can take.

Which is why a year on, I find myself zinging over mirror flat sea in a banana boat towards Three Island Harbour. The tiny staging post of Kavieng, New Ireland, is long gone somewhere over my shoulder, as we slalom seemingly suspended islands.

This is straight out of the pages of the Boy's Own Adventure stories I grew

up with. I am Indiana Jones (I've got the hat). We really are racing the flying fish, and I am living my dream.

Clem turns, flashing his big brilliant smile. He offers me a fist of dwarf bananas and a bag containing battered fish from the kai bar in town. I accept gratefully and wash down the decadent breakfast-to-go with a can of lemonade. I lick my fingers and check my watch. It's not even 8a.m.

Before I met Clement Anton two days ago, when he was just a contact name scribbled in my notebook, I imagined him as a crusty expat perched on a bar stool. How wrong could I be? Clem is a young Papua New Guinean entrepreneur who used to work the local liveaboards, a position he was offered on account of his gleaming guest-friendly smile, having abstained from the common habit of chewing betel nut that turns gums blood red.

Now his own boss, he has his sights set on turning his home, Tunnung Island, the middle islet of Three Island Harbour, into an intimate resort.

We rendezvous with Clem's fishing boat. He acts as a middleman for the



local islanders, buying their catch of fish, lobster, and sea cucumber, then transporting it to the fishery in town twice weekly. Last night, his boat returned with the eight tanks and weights I've hired from the dive shop in Kavieng. There's no compressor or dive shop on Clem's island home.

Carefully, we transfer the cylinders onto our banana boat. When they're securely stowed, we turn towards our destination opposite the large island of New Hanover that Clem refers to as the mainland. He has a house there where his three kids stay during the week to attend school. They paddle their canoes back to Tunnung at weekends. On the approach we slow, passing over the wreck of the Sanko Maru, visible from the surface. It's a big wreck I estimate to be over a hundred metres long.

Tunnung Island is of course idyllic – the stereotypical South Pacific getaway. Slowly we navigate through the shallow rock and seagrass before the boat slides up onto the pewter sand, making one of the best sounds you're ever likely to hear, and the perfect acoustic accompaniment to one of the best spots I'm ever likely to see.

Four stilted beach bungalows sit under dappled shade among the trees just off the beach, with a long house for the kitchen and dining area set to one side. There's a separate bathroom block to the rear of the plot, with a manual flush toilet and a large water drum to shower from. Basic, but brilliant. Lush foliage rings the camp. My initial reaction is that I would have kicked myself all the way home had I chosen to

stay for one night instead of two.

Within half an hour, I've had the guided tour of the facilities, sorted my scuba equipment, and suited up. We take the short hop back to the wreck, leaving Clem's electrician, who we bought from Kavieng, to fix a ceiling fan in my room.

Clem doesn't have a dive computer, so I lend him my spare.

"When I heard you were coming I bought myself some second hand equipment, because you are the first diver I've ever had to stay."

This really is an exploratory trip – for both of us.

The Sanko Maru was an armed freighter launched in 1939. My 'guesstimate' wasn't far out. She is in fact 120m long with a beam of 16m. Once a 'Hell Ship', transporting 346 POWs from Manila to Palawan, in the summer of 1942, she met her end early on the morning of the 16th of February

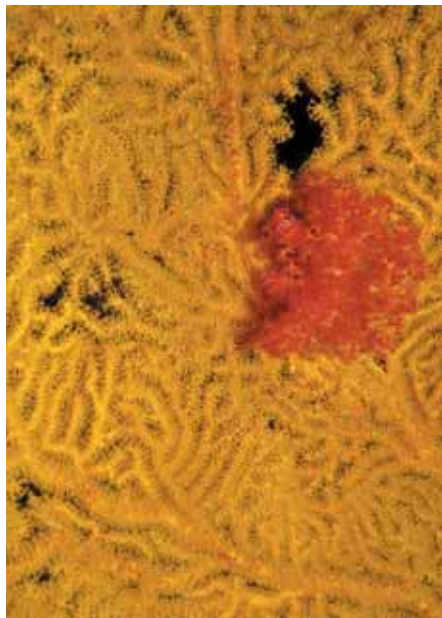
OUT THERE
Story & Photos: Howard Sawyer



Clockwise from top left: Weighing sea cucumbers in Clem's Office; Arriving at Tunnung Island; Carving light posts; and Local transport.



Left: Tunnung Island, long house.



Clockwise from top left: Coral on the Sanko Maru; Coral at night on the Sanko Maru; Coral at night on the Sanko Maru; Night dive on the Sanko Maru.



1944, in a combined action by USAAF B-25 'Mitchell' medium bombers; 41 strafers from the 345th, and three squadrons from the 38th Bomb Group, who were hunting a convoy of 14 ships, reportedly heading for Kavieng.

Six squadrons came round the island of New Hanover from the west, while Captain Max Mortensen led nine strafers from the 500th 'Rough Raiders' along the strait between New Ireland and New Hanover from the east.

They found the Sanko Maru, with a mini sub partially submerged alongside, guarded by a submarine chaser. The freighter was hit by numerous 500 pound bombs, setting it ablaze.

The submarine chaser tried to escape but was strafed repeatedly and, out of control, ran aground on a nearby reef. Disabled and helpless, the 499th 'Bats Outta Hell' queued up to finish off the escort. Hit by 13 bombs, exploding the magazine and boiler, the vessel was reduced to a shattered hulk.

The Japanese sailors in the water tried to make it to shore, but were strafed repeatedly. Returning aircrews reported the sea was red with blood, and the Bats Outta Hell were branded "blue-nosed butchers" by Tokyo Rose in one of her propaganda broadcasts.

For the diver, the Sanko Maru now lies on her starboard side flush with the seabed at 22m. First contact with the wreck is at only six metres, making

it pretty much a perfect dive, even for beginners. The deck is festooned with every type of coral imaginable, but my priority is to the sea bed and the rope Clem has laid out across the sand that leads to the mini submarine.

Although the mini sub was reported sunk by the bombers, Japanese sources say the craft had in fact been scuttled by the crew after the attacks, and this version of events is supported by her pristine condition 65 years on, upright on the sand, twin torpedo tubes at the bow (empty), conning tower, open hatch, periscope, and propellers at the stern. There are no human remains inside, and the sub lies covered with a smattering of corals.

Wreck detectives say this craft is a Type C midget submarine. Weighing in at some 46 tonnes, it seems likely that the mini sub was either towed to its area of operations, or piggy backed on a conventional submarine; ship derricks were unlikely to support its weight.

To me it's now a beautiful surreal toy and the ultimate underwater gadget, like something out of James Bond, not to mention a unique entry in my logbook. Where else could you dive an intact mini submarine in 22m of tropical water?

The visibility is no more than eight metres, and the average here is only 15m, which explains why when divers salvaged the propellor and condenser from the Sanko Maru, they didn't



Above: Stern propellers of the mini submarine, on the seabed at 22m. Above right: Clem explores the hold of the wreck.



find the mini sub. It was eventually discovered by Kevin Baldwin from the Telita liveaboard in 1987.

After finning along the submarine we return to the surface passing up over the masts of the freighter, and although I

don't want to wish my time away, I can't wait for darkness to fall – my research tells me it is best to 'see' the Sanko Maru at night.

We pass the afternoon at Clem's 'office', a bench on the beach looking

out at his beautiful world as he weighs and pays the locals who bring him dried sea cucumber.

He discusses his plans. He might go back to work the liveaboards for a while to save for a few tanks, perhaps



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Above left to right: Hatch to the conning tower.; Sanko Maru attacked - you can see the mini sub on the surface beneath the smoke cloud.

a small compressor. Although he can accommodate up to eight people he says he wouldn't want to take more than a couple of divers at a time. He appreciates the beauty of keeping his resort small and exclusive.

The tide is out as the sun sets in a spectacular blaze. We walk along 'Clem's Highway' the path cut behind the camp to the tip of Tunnung, and wade out to deeper water where the boat is moored. Two minutes later we're back over the wreck. By the time we've kitted up, it's dark. I lend Clem my spare torch and we roll back in.

As we descend over the port side and fall down across the deck our torches reveal a wonderland of coral. Lush trees, heavy fronds, and delicate lacy fans of every hue battle for nutrients. But they're so beautiful they might as well be fighting for our attention, like stars on a coral red carpet that runs along the deck.

It's difficult to equate the scene now at night with the wreck this afternoon.

It's completely changed. The colours are so vivid under our white light and the coral is in full bloom.

As a wreck diver I'm not normally moved by coral. It's rather like dressing up a turkey dinner for a vegetarian. But this dive changes my mind. The Sanko Maru is obliterated by a pristine rainbow of staggering quantity and quality. Even on the three minute safety stop I'm peering over the edge of the ship, playing the torch over the display below me.

We break the surface giddy and laughing in the moonlight. High fives in the water, Clem whooping. "What - A - Dive!!"

Those aren't his exact words, but you get the idea.

"You know when my torch was flicking around all over the place?! I hope you didn't think I was in trouble!!" They weren't my exact words either ...

The pair of us are still buzzing as we wander back down the track to camp. I can't get over the coral, and why the

wreck, certainly at night, hasn't attracted more recognition. Bob Halstead, a pioneer of diving in Papua New Guinea described it as 'an excellent night dive'. He wasn't kidding, but I can't help but wonder what else Bob might have seen after dark that would possibly top the Sanko Maru.

Dinner is a superb buffet affair garnished with lobster tails, which is as shocking as it sounds. I have seconds. The electrician wants to know where the movie stars live in London, and is visibly crestfallen when I tell him I honestly do not know. I didn't think my sighting of celebrity TV chef, Gordon Ramsay, taking morning coffee in the fashionable King's Road several years ago would impress. And Tunnung Island is still one corner of the world where the name of England's favourite son and iconic footballer, 'David Beckham', draws blank looks all round.

Next morning, we explore the wreck's spartan cargo hold, and the large crack that lies just behind where the

bridge used to be. Both cavernous spaces are impressive in their own right.

Sadly, I'm now down to my last pair of cylinders.

On one hand, there's the lure of the unexplored wreck beyond the Sanko Maru, which I speculate is what remains of the submarine chaser, on the other, we can wait until nightfall, and dive the fantastic hanging coral gardens once again. For a second I consider telling Clem he'll have to sit out the next couple of dives, but it's the shared experience as much as anything that's part of the joy. And furthermore, I'm just not that mean.

The sun sets in a blaze. ■

Howard Sawyer

Fact File

Air Nuigini flies a Fokker F100 from Jackson International, Port Moresby to Kavieng daily, via Rabaul.

The easy way to do the Sanko Maru and mini sub is by liveaboard.

Check scheduled departures and ensure they will do a night dive on the wreck.
www.mvgoldendawn.com
www.telitadive.com

Clem has got e-mail:
clem.tunnung2@amosconnect.com

Alternatively, contact Dani Smith, Clem's contact in Kavieng tikitu@adventuresinparadise.com.pg

For accommodation overnight in Kavieng while setting up the trip, try the Kavieng Club.

If Clem still has no tanks or compressor, you will need to hire them in Kavieng. Try Dietmar on nearby Lissenung Island, who can also take you diving locally, and put you up on his island resort.
info@lissenung.com

Clem's return transfer from Kavieng to Tunnung Island is not cheap, but he will also take the cylinders you hire, & the boat transfer can be split between you. The rate is for the boat, not per person.

It may be cheaper to hire a local banana boat to take you across and bring you back, but you will have to bear in mind how many tanks you are taking, and if you will need to hire a second boat. There is no kit for hire on Tunnung. You will also need to take any alcohol or cigarettes you need.

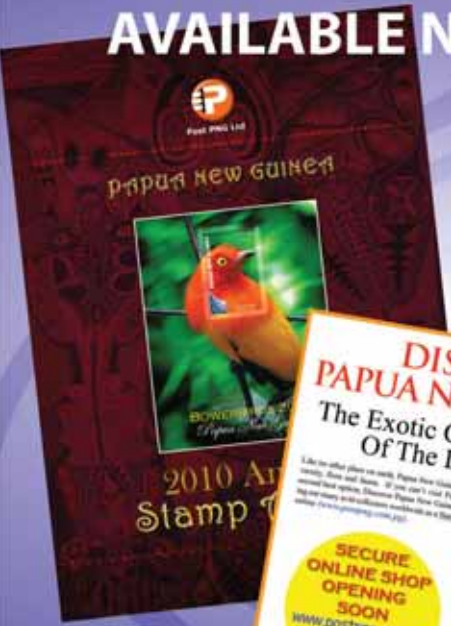
You can pay with cash, in kina, or AUD\$, or pay into Clem's bank account. There are currently no credit card facilities on Tunnung.

Dive Season:
April - September

Source material:
'Warpath Across the Pacific' by Lawrence J Hickey.
Dimensions of the Sanko Maru - Ned Middleton
Photo of the Sanko Maru under attack - Maurice J Eppstein collection.



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