

H E SAWYER

TO DIVE FOR

> PAPUA NEW GUINEA – SINCE FOREVER, THE DIVE INDUSTRY HAS EXTOLLED THE VIRTUES OF THIS UNDERWATER PARADISE. THE NATIONAL CAPITAL AND GATEWAY TO PNG – PORT MORESBY – HAS BEEN CONSISTENTLY RANKED AS ONE OF THE WORST CITIES IN THE WORLD. THE QUESTION IS: WOULD MORESBY EVER MAKE IT TO THE TOP OF YOUR TO-DIVE LIST? WOULD YOU FANCY WORLD CLASS DIVING FROM THE ARMPIT OF THE PACIFIC? OF COURSE YOU WOULDN'T.

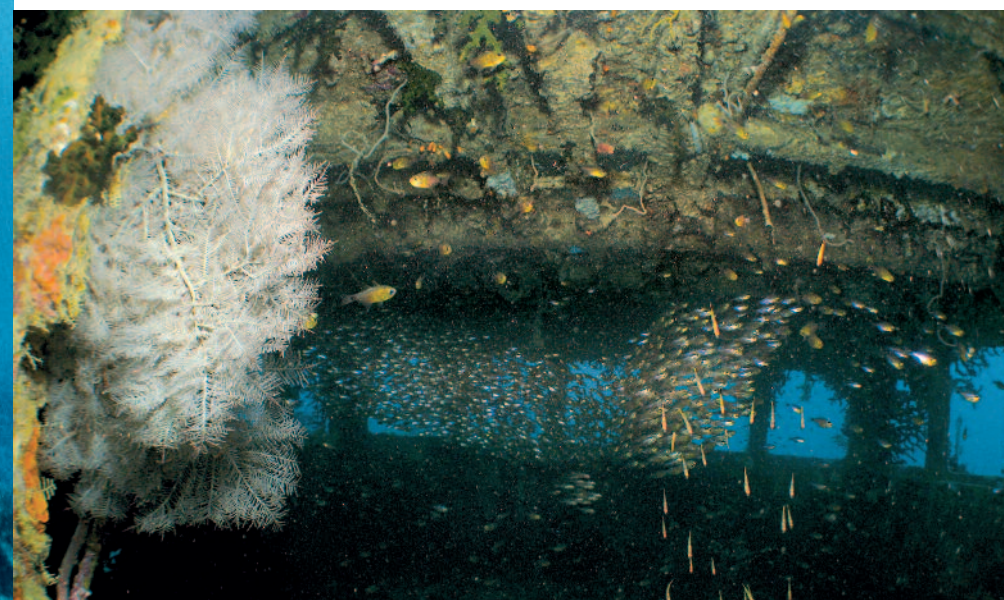
Imagine it. Lost valleys, hidden tribes, smoking volcanoes, the whole 'land that time forgot' gig, coupled with diving war wrecks off palm-fringed beaches. It's all very vintage *Lonely Planet* because PNG has a bit of a scary reputation, though much of it is misinformed. The mosquitos will eat you alive, but I had DEET, doxycycline, socks, and a shirt that buttoned down to the wrists. What worried me was what went down in Moresby on a daily basis. I found the worst bits trawling the internet just before bedtime – I planned my first expedition so I transited only through Moresby's Jacksons airport.

But once I was pointed safely towards Australia, I felt guilty because I hadn't given it a chance. I was victim to its reputation, and worse still, I reinforced it. Moresby was touted as having the best diving of any capital city in the world. I mean honestly, how bad could it be?

Seven years on and closer to death anyway, I decided to grow a backbone and test the waters for myself. Most dive packages to PNG will send you and a loved one to a couple of locations for your 10 days, and if Moresby's one of them, then you'll probably be staying on Loloata Island. You're whisked out of

Moresby and ensconced in beachfront luxury until it's time to go home. Being on an island away from the city is part of Loloata's appeal for the weekend expat community. Sadly I'm too cheap for Loloata, despite their enticing web site.

John Miller, a greying wily fox with a twinkle in his eye who runs the Dive Centre booked me into the Ela Beach Lodge, just down the road from the Ela Beach Hotel, and at a fraction of the price. There's no mention of Ela Beach Lodge in my guide book, so I ask a group of expats from the capital I met on my travels. "You're staying at Ela Beach



Captions: Left to right
Crossing the bridge of The Pacific Gas
Bridge of the Pai II
Mast of the Pai
The Bridge of The Gas





Top left to right

Mast of the *Pai*; Boston Havoc A20; Coral on *The Gas*; Boston Havoc A20

Far left below

The *Solatai* in Bootless Inlet; A ladder on *The Gas*



Lodge??! Not Hotel??! Ela Beach Lodge??! Mmmm..." A young woman from PricewaterhouseCoopers actually gets up and shakes my hand.

John and driver Maino picked me up early and transported me to the Airways Hotel where the Dive Centre is based. Corporate guests were gently fanned over breakfast at the poolside restaurant, everyone focused on their laptops. They pretended not to notice me, the ghost of a man with a thousand-yard stare, who spent the endless night chain-smoking behind the razor wire.

We loaded the cylinders then ducked back into the city craziness, heading for the coast, zooming through shanty towns that give way to rolling countryside, and arrived at Bootless Inlet inside 20 minutes. The dive boat *Solatai* was there with skipper and guide Thomas and boatie Getto. It's fair to describe the *Solatai* as serene but I'm the only passenger, we're on PNG time, and I'm in no rush to get back to Ela Beach Lodge.

Most weekends the *Solatai* becomes a diesel powered getaway with the Moresby diving expats. It's a good job they dive, because the handy city guide issued by the PNG Tourism Promotion Authority limits the places of interest in Moresby to four, and one – the Ela Beach Craft Market – is only held on the last Saturday of the month. The others are the golf course, the Museum, and Parliament House. But there's also the beautifully maintained Bomana War Cemetery, the yacht and gun clubs, though for the yacht club you need to be signed in by a member and it's 'strictly no hats'.

On the other hand... "If you feel like taking a stroll, check with your hotel first to find out if it is safe to do so. The best piece of advice we can give you is to trust your instincts." This roughly translates as; "Is it safe?" "Dunno mate. What d'you think?!"

It took the best part of an hour to get to the wreck of the MV *Pacific Gas*. Formerly the *Nanaya Maru*, a 1967 Japanese-built liquid gas carrier, she was eventually condemned and donated to PNG diving pioneer Bob Halstead, who arranged for *The Gas* to be scuttled as an artificial reef in 1986. Bob deserves recognition and gratitude from the diving community for clearing the decks and sinking *The Gas* at a site where tidal flow would encourage prolific marine life, because the result of his labours is 65m of top quality wreck upright on a slope, the bow at 14m running down to the propeller at 43m. Typical vis is the 20-25m which I enjoyed. The best bits are the bridge and the stern, so I finned there first when I came off the line at the bow,



over the void previously filled by the gas containers.

The doors and windows of the bridge at 25m have been removed so the interior can be enjoyed with care, as can the crew quarters and engine room below. Behind the bridge stands a beautifully decorated funnel, and it's well worth hanging off the back of the ship to admire the perspective of the stern. There's a range of great features, including ladders, hatches, winches, bollards, and railings, all beautifully coated with hard and soft coral. Jacks, snappers and sweetlips cruise the wreck, and ghost pipefish and leafy scorpionfish have been found at the bow. All this in blue water between 24°C and 29°C.

There's a bowl of noodles for the surface interval as we chug over to Susie's Bommie. This is the premier fish dive of Bootless Bay, a coral seamount rising from a sandy bottom at 30m to about 10m shy of the surface. There's a channel between this pinnacle and the wall behind it, and we had plenty of current so there was a superhighway of fish life racing up and down. The site is renowned as a hiding place for pygmy seahorse, rhinopias, and the amazing weedy scorpionfish. I didn't see either because I was bushed after finning head down like a drongo into the current for 25 minutes.

Back at the dive shop mid afternoon, I hung around lapping up the rarified atmosphere at Airways, with gift shop,

Italian deli, and panoramic view over the airport runway. Before you know it it's time to catch a lift back to Ela Beach Lodge, now known as 'Dave's'.

Originally from Cornwall, Dave is happy to see the back of England, his ex-wife, and the cold weather. He runs a tight ship in his Hawaiian shirt, shouting at his staff, who he swears are stealing from him. To this end the phone in reception is locked, so no one can phone out, including the guests. We share a beer and a fag on the porch as darkness falls. There's a couple of guards with keen dogs on duty round the clock in the compound, the steel door to the building is always locked behind you, and the doors of the rooms are braced with 3mm steel plates on both sides, with an aggressive lock that would give the police some backchat. Dave tells me he sleeps with a 9mm under his pillow. I was just here to 'survive' for a couple of days out of curiosity so I could say I'd done it. I suspect Dave's here for good, what with his local girl and kid. The newly signwritten sandwich board out front that advertised the 'Day Rooms' is pulling the punters in, but it's then reduced to matchwood under the wheels of a reversing truck.

Dave's management style is pretty much 'Mr. Angry', although it's fair to say I've warmed to him. Joking aside, Ela Beach Lodge does the job. The room is clean, secure and affordable, and they'll even cook you breakfast and bring it up on a tray, just like your mum. Outside the compound there's either the public beach

across the road, or the central business district, aptly called 'Town', just 10 minutes walk up a steep hill, where there's a view of the container ships, a character playing the bagpipes, and somewhere with airconditioned broadband internet access.

After dark the only place to go is a couple of hundred yards to the 'Beachside Brasserie', pool side at the Ela Beach Hotel. Racks of lamb, fish and the usual pizza-burger-fries, a bar with expats, wannabe local girlfriends, and a big telly. How you get there is up to you. I walked, wearing my Hawaiian shirt, pretending I was Dave.

The *Pai II*, a former prawn trawler, was also scuttled, thanks again to Bob Halstead. It's upright, 27m long and rests with the keel on the sand at 30m. There's plenty to see with a wheelhouse packed with copper sweepers and vibrant coral growth everywhere, especially the mast. The wreck has been visited by mantas, hammerheads and whale sharks but, as always, not the day when I dive. Though not as impressive in scale as *The Gas*, it has the same ingredients and is a superb wreck. To say it's photogenic is an understatement. The mast is choked with coral, so you'll want to save time to examine it in detail. The purists might sniff at wrecks sunk as artificial reefs, but these are simply tremendous dives.

My last Moresby dive was the *Boston Havoc A20*, a WWII twin engine attack bomber discovered by Dik Knight on a

fringing reef south of Loloata Island. Maximum depth is only 18m, and though the aircraft is intact and in good shape after ditching (the nose cone is broken off and lies behind the tail), typical visibility is only about 12m. The lack of current means that the wreck has very little growth on it, and the water is generally filthy. One for WWII enthusiasts, plane anoraks, or the desperately curious.

There are many other drawcard dives around PNG, so it's easy for visiting divers to overlook Moresby's diving and that's a great pity because the capital has something to offer above and below the waterline. If nothing else I'll take the kudos for having toughed it out and survived. I'm not sure if I earned my spurs for venturing outside my room or for staying inside.



GET A LOAD OF MY SOUVENIR!

Moresby doesn't have an Avenue des Champs-Élysées for shopaholics, but it does have PNG Art, an emporium that may well be the artefact collector's ultimate wet dream. Secreted away on Spring Garden Road, Joe Chan's 'museum' is a warehouse jam-packed with the best handicrafts Papua New Guinea has to offer. Huge masks, shields, spears, storyboards, bilum bags, drums, jewellery and prints, this is an eclectic mix sourced from every corner of the country, gathered in

one location to save you the trouble of hunting them down from a remote village halfway up the Sepik. There's a range of pieces to suit every pocket, and if you can't fit it in your carry-on, PNG Arts will crate up your treasure and handle the paperwork to ship worldwide with DHL.

PNG Art, Spring Garden Road (PO Box 264), Waigani, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea; (675) 325-3976, fax (675) 325-7803; pngart@daltron.com.pg

MAKING YOUR OWN WAY

• You can fly to Port Moresby with Air Niugini from Manila, Singapore, Tokyo, and either Brisbane or Cairns, Australia.

www.airniugini.com.pg

• John Miller at the Dive Centre (+ 675 323 1355 www.divecentre.com.pg) will arrange a suitable dive and accommodation package for your budget, and provide PADI instruction and rental hire. He'll also arrange a safe reliable taxi and ensure your mobile phone works.

• There's a frequent complimentary shuttle service from Jacksons airport to the Airways Hotel where the Dive Centre is located.

• It is worth bearing in mind that many of the hotels in Moresby have discounted rates over the weekends, so shop around before you go.

Airways Hotel + 675 324 5200 / 325 7033 reservations@airways.com.pg

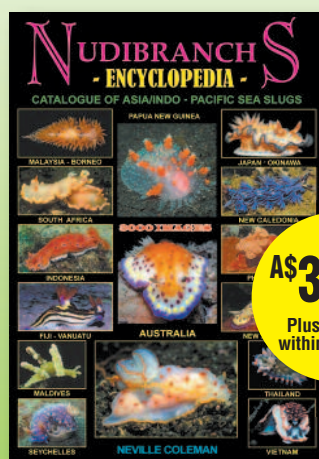
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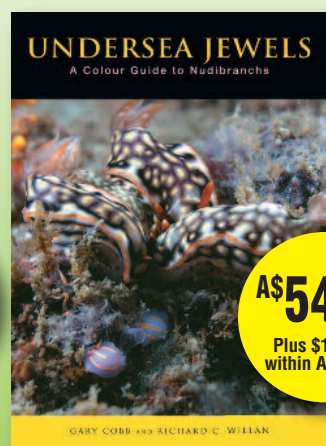
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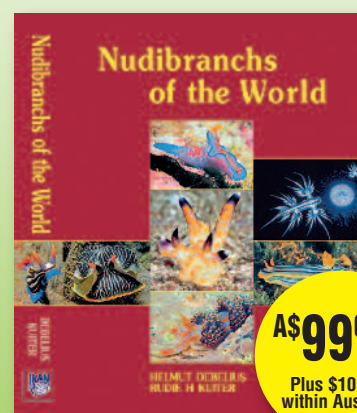
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