



Walk on the WILD side

Christopher Bartlett

Flying over the Coral Sea from Brisbane I couldn't stop looking out the window in search of the remote reefs of the Eastern Fields as I tested my new camera's zoom on an unknown ray-shaped island. Imi and I were itching to get in the water and hoped we would get to Tufi Dive Resort before sunset for a welcome dip. Alas the vagaries of tropical weather were



against us and our connecting flight from Port Moresby was postponed until the following morning. Airlines PNG put us up in Moresby overnight and had us back at the airport at six o'clock the following morning.

Sitting at the back of the De Havilland Twin Otter with my partner Imi and an American Mom, Dad, and teenage son combo in front, I peered through the misty clouds at the swathe of trees below, occasionally cut by the hairline crack of a path or the meandering swirls of a river. The jagged peaks of the Owen-Stanley range that run down the spine of the island weren't that far away as we headed east from Port Moresby to Tufi. The landscape was rugged to say the least, and it was easy to understand why both Australian

Above: Barrel sponge and juvenile sea cucumbers. Left: Vibrant reefs.

and Japanese troops had struggled here during WWII.

As we approached the east coast of Oro Province the spectacular fjords of Cape Nelson came into view. A strange mix of glacial action, now topped by lush tropical forest, fused with the aqua coral reefs surrounding the headlands clearly visible in the cobalt blue of the Solomon Sea. Banking steeply, we lined up with the gravel airstrip and touched

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down. Two 4WD vehicles were waiting to take us on the one-minute drive to the resort.

With a fruit juice in hand, we whizzed through the usual paperwork, left our dive gear outside our rooms, and were on our way to the dive centre within 20 minutes.

Less than 90 minutes after landing, the five of us were in a boat with our instructor Glen and DM Alex, heading off across the flat sea to Bev's reef, part of the mid-distance reef system. Using a well-drawn dive site map, Glen laid out the plan for a drift dive, and in we went.

Imi hadn't dived in four months and I had the new camera so we were planning on just chilling and getting comfortable again. A wall dive seemed ideal. Rolling in we both burst into grins; not just from the simple pleasure of being in the water again, but because of the clear blue water filled with corals, reef fish, and colourful purple, yellow, and white sea squirts. Nudis, schools of fusiliers and snappers, whitetip reef sharks, and three of the nine species of anemonefish found in PNG were highlights of this first dive.

Wending our way slowly at the back of the group, I had to do a double take as we came over the top of a coral outcrop to have a gander for big stuff that might be hanging out in the current. Sitting there, next to a crinoid, was one of PNG's underwater grails, a black Merlet's (or lacy) scorpionfish, *Rhinopias aphanes*, which has the peculiar habit of shedding its skin every three months or so. Photographers spend days and days searching for these and here I was pointing an unfamiliar camera at one after barely 30 minutes in the water. It turned out to be the only one I saw, but it was the start of a long list of new sightings for me.

One of Tufi's signature sites is Veale's reef, often dived on the same trip as Bev's. Veale's is sometimes frequented by an albino hammerhead, but not on this occasion. Still, it was hard to grumble with of schools of baitfish, barracuda, black and white snapper, batfish, some Spanish mackerel and a couple more whitetips around. We certainly had enough to talk about over a late but delicious lunch on the veranda.

Some reefs are just a short trip from



Above: A school of Barracuda. Below: Tufi Dive Centre and wharf.

the resort, such as Blue Ribbon reef, which we dived during a tropical storm, just round the runway headland. The sea turned an atmospheric deep blue as we searched for ribbon eels. All ribbon eels are born black with a yellow dorsal stripe. Adult females are yellow with a black anal fin and white margins on the fins while adult males are blue with a yellow dorsal fin.

The outer reefs, such as Cyclone reef, are a 30-minute boat ride away. The

story goes that it appeared from nowhere after a severe storm in 1972, brought up from the depths by the elements. Its very top breaks the surface of the sea and is a haven for mating seabirds while its lee side allows the coral reefs to grow undisturbed by wave action during the Trade Winds season. There are actually three distinct dive sites at Cyclone.

Cyclone Bommie lies off to one side and is a good place to spot turtles with reef fish and the occasional hammerhead





shark coming up from the deep to investigate. The far wall has some interesting swim-throughs and deep caves. Starting at only five metres below the surface it makes an ideal spot for a safety stop.

Cyclone Wall plummets vertically to beyond 40m where it slopes down into the depths. The walls are covered in colourful lichens, hard and soft corals, and are a favourite area for nudibranches. With great viz, the photographer's dilemma of macro or wide angle crops up. The only solution is to either have two cameras, or to dive it twice.

Cyclone reef's outer wall is a huge site all on its own that extends for nearly a kilometre. When the current is slack you can dive it as a "return trip", going one way at 20+ metres down, then returning at half a tank, multi-levelling back to the start point. This leaves plenty of air to play around the large brain coral at the top of the reef.

Minor reef is nearby and often dived in tandem with Cyclone. The reef top sits a few metres below the surface and its plate and staghorn corals bask in the sunlight illuminating the damselfish that adorn them, making it a great spot for no-flash photography. The large



Clockwise from above: *Rhinopias aphanes* - lacy scorpionfish, on every photographer's wishlist; Nugget's reef; True clownfish family.

bright yellow and black *Notodoris* minor nudibranch often found there gives this reef its name.

Mulloway's reef is another must-dive. The current can be strong, racing along the coral-covered reef that drops down to 200 metres. But combined with the upwelling this current provides loads of nutrients and creates an extremely healthy marine ecosystem, offering divers the whole gamut of reef life from tiny shrimp to reef sharks and the occasional manta. There are

over 40 named dive sites around Tufi, with plenty more waiting to be dived, explored, and christened.

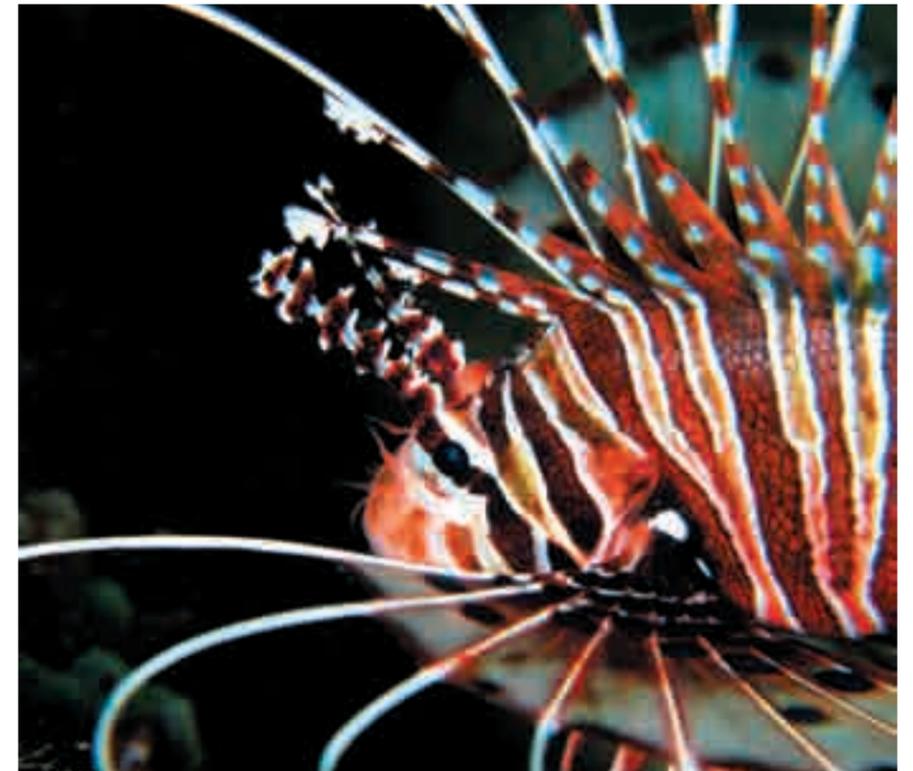
Back at the resort, looking at the maps on the walnut-panelled walls I got a better sense of the remoteness and the size of the area. Whole swathes of the Solomon Sea were marked with the word "uncharted", starting at Cyclone and Minor reefs.

The area is covered with reefs. Jack Daniels and Nuggets are two recently discovered ones, which Glen and his

brother Archie were keen to get us out to. Armed with a small, almost empty plastic bottle, Archie began crunching and rolling it between his hands as soon as we were down JD's slope and onto the wall. Within a couple of minutes he had attracted the attention of four grey reef sharks, a couple of turtles, and a couple of whitetip reef sharks. The sharks kept their distance, only occasionally darting a bit closer to receive these odd, large, bubble-blowing creatures. They hadn't had much interaction with humans.

With our appetites for diving well and truly whetted, we went for an afternoon dive off the public wharf. It is talked up as a photographer's delight and one of the best spots in the world for so-called muck-diving. Muck-diving gets its name from apparently uninteresting sites that can be either silty, sandy, muddy, or just rather barren-looking, but that are actually home to a large number of small, weird, and wonderful creatures.

Tufi's wharf dive site is more of a junk dive than a muck dive. The sloping wall of the fjord is littered with debris from the harbour's previous life as a torpedo patrol boat base during WWII, and the dumping of old bits of machinery, the odd fuel drum, and some girders that were no doubt formerly part of the jetty. The remains of a PT boat and its torpedoes sit down at 45 metres, but there was more than enough along the fjord slope and wall to keep us occupied with ornate and robust ghostpipefish, frogfish, ringed pipefish, common seahorse, loads of nudis, crab eye gobies, anemonefish, mantis shrimp, cleaner shrimp, lionfish, and 50 metres past the remains of the torpedo boat wharf are walls, little caves, and tons of



Above: Spotfin lionfish

sponges on the corner of the harbour. If you fancy a fourth dive in a day, dusk dives are available, and Alex and Archie, the eagle-eyed guides, are experts at finding nocturnal action right by the wharf, including brightly-patterned mandarinfish.

On our final afternoon we took a two-seater canoe and paddled up the fjord, hearing the sounds of the forest as we went. At many of the small beaches we saw an outrigger parked up and heard voices in the distance, mainly children whooping with laughter, frolicking unseen in the trees. It was certainly a place that inspires happiness. We canoed

the deep blue in the centre of the fjord, apparently bottoming out at around 200 metres below, and popped over to the shallow reef tops lining it for a dip and a snorkel.

Alas, we didn't have enough time to go on an outrigger safari around Cape Nelson, nor try our hand at deep-sea fishing or dive the B17 bomber three hours to the south. As the plane's turbo props buzzed and the aircraft rushed down the airstrip towards the Solomon Sea, we asked each other the same question: when are we coming back? ■

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