

Golden PNG

by Julian Cohen

The dive industry seems to me to be very faddish; dive areas come and go with the fashion. When I first started diving in the mid-nineties, nineteen nineties that is, places such as Sangalaki, Derawan and Sipidan were the most popular places in Asia. There were only two dive centres in Manado, Lembah Straits area and Raja Ampat wasn't even discovered yet. Many of the generation of divers before me had cut their diving teeth in Papua New Guinea, which was really the only place to dive in Asia during the seventies and eighties. Places like Walindi, Kavieng and Milne Bay provided the cover photos for the diving magazines. Then people slowly stopped going to PNG as other places were discovered and became more heavily publicised and attractive. For the dive operators in PNG this was not a great thing, but for us as divers it was wonderful as the reefs didn't get worn and tired from being over dived. It has kept the number of operators to the few that run an efficient and well managed business and when you go on a live aboard you don't see any other dive boats.

I signed up to do a three week trip with Tony Wu on Golden Dawn,

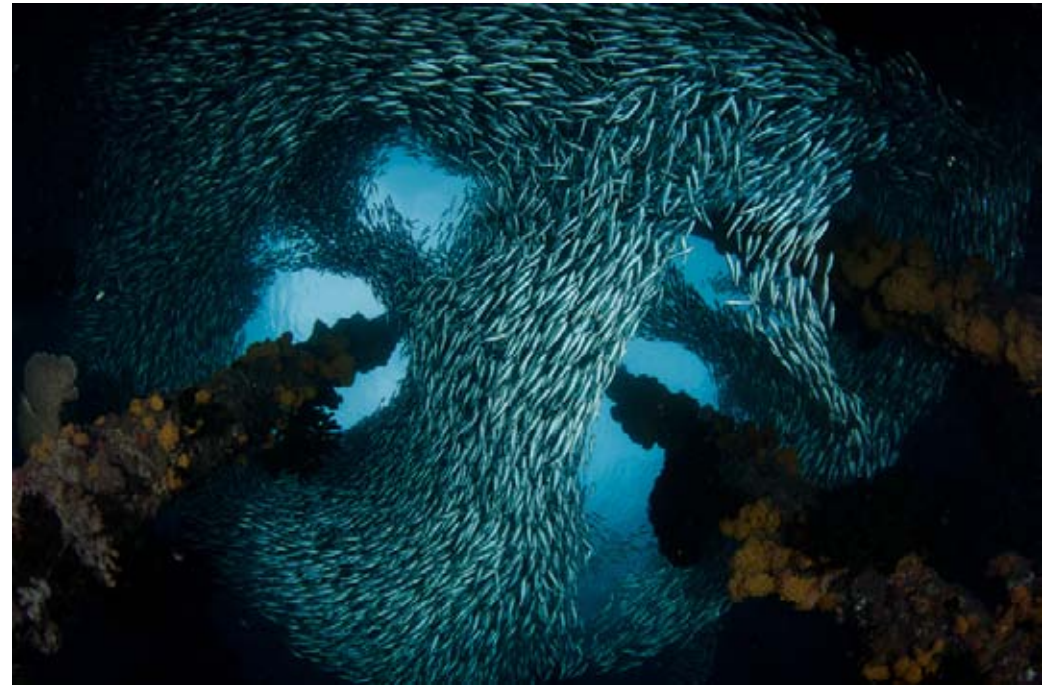
run by Craig de Wit, with a special guest appearance by Bob Halstead. I have done many trips with Tony before and count him as a friend; there is even some evidence that the feeling is mutual. Craig is one of the original skippers in the region and has been adventure diving in PNG for over twenty years. Bob is a legend in diving circles. Inducted into the International Scuba Diving Hall of Fame in 2008, alongside such luminaries as Stan Waterman, David Doubilet and Jacques Cousteau. One of the first to dive Papua New Guinea, author of eight books on diving and fish identification, contributor to myriad magazines and teller of many tall stories, as well as being in his

I spent many dives photographing the ever changing patterns of scads under the pier

1-200 sec at f8.0, 10.0-17.0 mm f-3.5-4.5@10 mm, ISO 100, NIKON D7000, Spot-Meter Mode.

This pretty anemone has been on a few magazine covers in the 80's

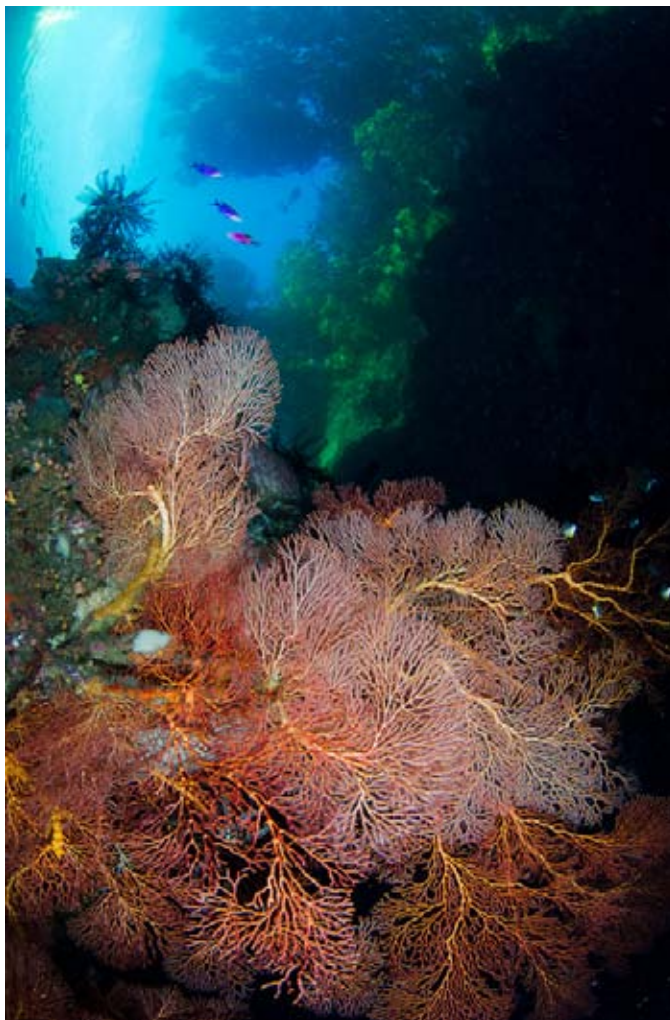
1-160 sec at f10, 10.0-17.0 mm f-3.5-4.5@10 mm. ISO 100, NIKON D7000, Spot-Meter Mode



own words ‘a manic compressive’. He is a man I have long admired and wanted to meet, so the opportunity to dive the areas that he explored, with him personally as a guide, was too good to ignore.

Notice I said adventure diving, as this type of diving is not standard package fare stuff. You are going to places that may not have been dived very often and there is no guarantee that any particular animal will turn up. That is what real life is like. There’s no point turning up with a wish list of critters you want to see and then getting all shirty if it doesn’t get fulfilled. If a dive site is not working then it’s up anchor and go onto the next. If a site is pumping then stay until the media cards are full or you run out of air, whichever is first, come up, change cards, fill the tank and go back in again. That’s the wonderful thing for me, not knowing what you’ll find when you get in the water.

We started in Port Moresby and ended in Alotau, the first week was cruising the coast between these two spots, the second week spent more time in and around Milne Bay, and the third week, ten days actually, was more along the northern shore going up around the D’Entrecasteaux Islands. I was diving with a new camera, a Nikon D7000, as my D3 was nicked in a burglary from my house. I was also diving with a new housing, the Seacam Prelude for the D7000 and the less said about that the better. I’ll just say that amongst its many faults is a lack of focus control, and although I am quite happy to shoot macro with manual focus, it does preclude fish portraiture with a shallow depth of field for anything but a stationary subject. So I spent the majority of my time with a Tokina 10-17 on the camera. Since wide angle is my first love, that is not too much of an encumbrance to me. Often you read in photography manuals about



Orange sea fans at Deacon’s Reef. 1-40 sec at f 9.0. 10.0-17.0 mm f-3.5-4.5@10 mm. ISO 400. NIKON D7000. Spot-Meter Mode

an exercise of keeping one lens on the camera and then going out to look for images. So I decided to do just that. For three weeks. I was helped in this by the fact that this lens is really just the complete all round underwater lens. It focuses almost on the



Bob Halstead looking at the bubble baths. Notice the housing he is using, a twenty year old Aquatica for a Nikon F3. 1-80 sec at f 10. 10.0-17.0 mm f-3.5-4.5@10 mm. ISO 100. NIKON D7000. Spot-Meter Mode



Sea Jellies come to the surface in numbers during a night dive. 1-40 sec at f 9.0. 10.0-17.0 mm f-3.5-4.5@10 mm. ISO 1000. NIKON D7000. Spot-Meter Mode



Samarai Wharf, not named after anything Japanese even though it sounds like it. 1-100 sec at f8.0. 10.0-17.0 mm f-3.5-4.5@10 mm. ISO 400. NIKON D7000 Spot-Meter Mode

dome port for close focus wide angle, and you can zoom into 17mm for shooting subjects further away.

I love diving on the Golden Dawn. The boat is perfectly set up, with a knowledgeable and friendly crew as well as great food for the eating part of the 'eat, sleep, dive' mantra for live aboard diving. Often we would stop at a site, such as Samarai Wharf, where the action was continuous and there was always a great photo opportunity, and the dive deck would be open; go in and out as often as you like. I didn't have to

worry about looking in the rubble for critters, as I couldn't take any photos of them anyway. I did relent on one dive and went in with a 60mm macro lens. After five minutes I saw a wobbegong swimming towards me beautifully framed by the jetty. I went straight back to the boat with the hump and changed back to wide angle. This is really the best way to get the shots that you want, as in between dives you have the chance to review your efforts over a cup of tea, and then work out what, if anything, was going wrong and go back in



*The 10-17 is perfect for larger subjects like this rhinopias aphanes. 1-250 sec at f-8.0. 10.0-17.0 mm f-3.5-4.5@13 mm. ISO 160**NIKON D7000. Spot-Meter Mode*

straight away to improve on them.

Diving Dog Passage has an underwater ridge with a large arch completely encrusted with fans and soft corals. I noted in my diary 'Anthias billowed all over coral, the current was running but not too strong to swim against. There was a leopard shark resting on the sea bed and Bob saw an eagle ray; it's what diving should be like all the time.'

Black and Silver is a very large bommie dropping down to below forty meters. On the side protected from the current was a forest of black

coral trees, mainly white but also some brown and red. I have never seen that many in one place before. We found a beautiful black and yellow lacy scorpionfish (Rhinopias aphanes), which was a perfect subject for a close focus wide angle shot. I'd never seen one that colour before and it's something else to strike off my bucket list.

Deacon's Reef is a relatively shallow ten meter ledge up against a wall with trees overhanging the water. Just further out the drop off goes to a couple of thousand meters so there's



Fans on the Dog House at Diving Dog Passage. 1-60 sec at f9.0. 10.0-17.0 mm f-3.5-4.5@10 mm. ISO 400. NIKON D7000. Spot-Meter Mode

meters of water, sulphur dioxide and carbon dioxide gases rising from the magma below bubbles up through the reef. Although mostly sea grass and mud where the larger geysers are, there are some areas of normal coral reef with gas bubbling up around the corals. It is possible to swim straight over the top of the bubbles and feel the difference in water temperature. It is quite astonishing to see a profusion of life in what one would think would be such inhospitable conditions.

Dropping down onto an unnamed reef in the Nuakata area, Craig pulled out his trusty shark attractor. Basically a plastic water bottle, if scrunched and rubbed the right way the sharks are drawn to it. Craig saw a large grey reef shark on the edge of visibility and as soon as he started to rub the magic bottle the shark immediately reacted and came straight over to us. When she got within a couple of meters of us she changed course to swim back to the reef but as Craig rubbed the bottle she was instantly drawn back to us almost as if she was on a wire. Hovering next to Craig I could feel the vibrations in my chest so to the shark it must have been overwhelmingly irresistible, like a siren's call.

The reefs in Nuakata are only partly explored. Black and Silver and Lynda's Reef are known and were extraordinarily fishy reefs. A large area of pavona coral on Lynda's Reef was swarming with literally millions of anthias. Yellow, purple and green clouds pulsing in and out of the protection of the reef as larger fusiliers and jacks swooped above. There are many more reefs to explore in the area

always a chance of something big turning up. I spent the whole time in five meters shooting Bob's coral garden. These are the orange red sea fans that over the years have been broken by careless divers, and Bob has wedged the broken pieces into the rock and they have carried on growing there, just like a frangipani tree would on land. He has created this beautiful site, with the blue sky and the trees just above your head.

On the island of Dobu is a dive that can only be done in a very few places on earth. In three

and the promise of great dives on unexplored sites.

Some of the dive sites we visited are named after the giants of the dive industry. Humann's Colour Book is a spectacular reef packed with soft corals and fans, named after Paul Humann, the first man to run a live aboard dive boat and coauthor of the fish identification books many of us use on a regular basis. Doubilet Reef, Bob's Knob after Bob Halstead, Calypso, Waterman's Ridge, Deacon's Reef after Kevin Deacon, Carl's Reef and Sea and See Pass named for Carl Roessler. For me this trip was like watching Jacques Cousteau's documentaries when I was a small boy, except I was living the dream.

When I think back on it, I can't understand why everyone is so hell bent on going to Raja Ampat or where ever the new in spot is, although I'm glad that they are. The diving in PNG is just as beautiful, and while they are all over there, I can be in PNG with a few friends diving with no one else to disturb us.

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