

TRIP NOTES

PAPUA NEW GUINEA TRIP MARCH /APRIL 2004 & JULY 2005

Please note that trip notes are exactly what the name suggests. They are not polished literary works. If you want to know something specific about the area visited, feel free to e-mail me.

Rabaul, Talele Islands and Walindi, Kimbe Bay

I visit the Rabaul region regularly, so rather than generate a trip report for each visit, I add to this existing report. For further background and information please consult the Sept 2002 trip report, which deals with other regions, visited in PNG. Note that some information regarding Rabaul has been obtained from the Sept 2002 trip notes.

Papua New Guinea – General Information and Experiences

Overall PNG is an interesting place to visit. Some areas are dangerous to white folks such as Port Moresby and these areas are best left alone. The nationals are for the most part friendly and inquisitive. Most of the nationals (outside Port Moresby) live a basic subsistence life style that revolves around the village structure. Bureaucracy and corruption amongst the Government agencies is obvious everywhere. Aid money gets filtered away from projects into people's back pockets continually. The roads are very poor with pot holes everywhere. The vehicles are either wrecks that barely drive or brand new state of the art four wheel drives – usually driven by Government officials!

The average national thinks along the line of three things: Cash crop (to get instant cash for the village and himself); Compensation (how can he/she can gain instant cash out of the expatriates) and protein (protein being the requirement for fresh meat as most of their staple diet is carbohydrates and fruit).

Although the press highlights the dangers of travelling in Papua New Guinea, basic common sense and an awareness of the political situation will minimise the chance of injury. Basic safety is always travel in a group, if possible with a national, do not travel at night, do not engage in heated arguments regarding political or religious beliefs and treat all nationals with respect.

One problem I did see was that many of the expatriates do not tolerate national beliefs and customs and appear to be only concerned with making a profit for themselves. Unfortunately this can lead to the national population not really getting along with expatriates. Tourists are fine most of the time. But, sometimes the line between the tourist and the expatriate is rather thin. At these times tourists can and do get themselves into trouble. It is best to be humble and keep your mouth shut most of the time.

Rabaul – New Britain (a very brief history)

Rabaul is located on the Gazelle peninsula of East New Britain and was one of the first areas of PNG to have permanent contact with Europeans with the passing of William Dampier in 1700. In the 1870's traders were attracted to the area in search of pearls, pearl-shell, tortoise-shell, rare woods and copra – not too mention rare minerals and the beche-de-mer which was eagerly sought for markets in China. In 1874 the German trading company Godeffroy and Sons established a permanent trading post in the Duke of York Islands (near Rabaul) and established another post with a permanent wharf and buildings near present-day Rabaul.

In the early 1800's the Germans had firmly established themselves in the region to the concern of the Queensland Government (Australia) which was the nearest country. The Chief magistrate of Thursday Island in Queensland decided to travel to Port Moresby and declare the archipelago known as New Guinea as a sovereign of the Crown, however, the British Commonwealth appeared to show little interest. The Germans did show considerable interest and immediately dispatched two warships to Rabaul and raised the German flag officially on the 3rd November 1884. In the following year New Guinea was annexed and divided into three regions owned and administrated by the Dutch, German and British Governments.

The first German capital was established at Finschhafen by the German New Guinea Kompagnie, which was the first private trading company in New Guinea. The company was responsible for administrating the territory in addition to operating as a privately run, profit making company. In 1898 the company surrendered its assets and control to the Imperial German Government and in 1910 the capital was moved to Rabaul; the town flourished.

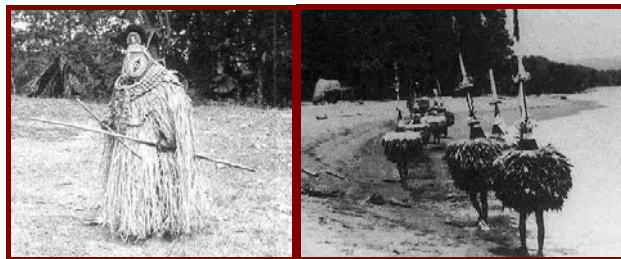
Rabaul quickly became known as the jewel of the Pacific with its picturesque harbour, majestic volcanoes, tree-lined boulevards, and stately tropical style houses and bungalows.

In 11 September 1914 soon after the outbreak of World War One, Britain requested that Australia occupy German New Guinea to prevent its use to re-supply German submarine and surface raiders. Australia complied and Australia landed on the Gazelle Peninsula to secure the wireless station at Bitapaka. It was here that the first Australian servicemen were killed in the First World War (before Gallipoli).

The Germans surrendered the territory and the Australian Government administered the region. On May 9th 1921, Australia was granted a mandate to administer what was German New Guinea on behalf of the League of Nations; Rabaul remained the capital and Port Moresby remained a separate administrative headquarters for Papua.

Indigenous Peoples (PNG Nationals)

The Gazelle Peninsula is home to several indigenous populations; the Taulil, Baining, Sulka and Butam tribes. The Tolai are not the original inhabitants of the region and migrated from New Ireland several centuries earlier, but outnumber the original inhabitants.



Above: *Duk Duk* – supernatural powers belonging to the world of sorcerers.

Before the arrival of the Europeans in the late 1880s there was frequent fighting between Tolai clans, and captured enemy were killed and eaten! Early Tolai society had no chiefs, but men who were successful warriors or were rich became the big men of the clan. A big man could own his own mask in the powerful male secrete society of the *Duk Duk*. And he would acquire supernatural powers by joining the society of the sorcerers. Many followers would come for his protection and he was allowed several wives. Today, the Tolai are predominately Christians of mixed denomination (United, Adventist, Methodist and Catholic). Despite this, *Duk Duk* societies still exist and pay back killing within the constraints and rules of the culture is still common.

A unique feature of Tolai society which is still used today is shell money called *tambu*.

Today the Tolai are a very friendly, outgoing and helpful people and are frequently thought to be more superior to other tribes within New Guinea. This is most likely because they have been in contact with Europeans and Asians for a longer period of time than other tribes. Certainly, they are very adapt at doing business white man style!

The Molkolkol

Everyone wants to think that there is a tribe somewhere that has not seen white man!

If there is a place anywhere in the world that this can occur, then it is New Guinea. The island is very rugged and the terrain inhospitable and exceptionally difficult to traverse. Precipitous jungle clad mountains with deep impenetrable ravines bisect the country. Tribes that live in one valley do not know of the existence of another tribe in the valley beyond.

The Molkolkol is a very small tribe which prior to and during the war years raided coastal settlements with great ferocity. The Tolai, German and Australian administration feared the Molkolkoli, as did the Japanese administration (1942-1945). The Molkolkol were a band of fierce natives that undertook fast hit and run raids – Very few of the attackers had ever been seen and war-time patrols failed to secure the area from their attacks. An Australian patrol once had a contact with a group of Molkolkol and both parties quickly went their separate ways; such was the legendary terror perceived from this small tribe.

After the second World War post war patrols failed to find any sign of the Molkolkol who were estimated to have a population of around 50 people. It is thought they were probably part of the Bainings tribes. Finally in 1951, an Australian patrol managed to find two round houses constructed by the Molkolkol and make contact with the small tribe. Although regularly on the move, the Molkolkol kept houses and gardens that they would periodically visit. Today they are peaceful mountain tribe with a rich culture that is fiercely protected.

Rabaul Today

Rabaul is a city with a definite use by date that has been exceeded several fold. Before the 1994 volcanic eruption Rabaul was the seen as the jewel of the Pacific with an absolutely stunning harbour and clean well structured buildings. The volcanic eruption in 1994 destroyed 90% of Rabaul and deposited a thick layer of volcanic ash over much of the countryside.

Unfortunately, since the eruption little work has been done to improve the situation in Rabaul. Large areas are completely covered in volcanic dust, which covers everything very quickly; it is very hard to remain clean in Rabaul – unless it's raining – and then if ash is present in the air the rain becomes mud!! Sulphur dioxide from the nearby volcanic vents can, when the wind is blowing in the correct direction, whiff through the town. Anything constructed from metal corrodes quickly due to the sulphur dioxide in the air.

Since the eruption there has been a continual debate as to whether Rabaul or Kokopo (Kokopo is the nearest town to Rabaul) should be the capital of New Britain Province. Continual bickering between Rabaul and Kokopo officials ensures that any work requirements are delayed or do not occur. The main argument appears to

be that Rabaul has an existing port facility that Kokopo lacks. Another argument is the fact that Turvuvur volcano will erupt again at some stage and Kokopo is far enough away that an eruption will not cause major problems and loss of life (hopefully, but unlikely).

Infrastructure, public services and utilities are still lacking. Raw sewage discharge from several of the larger motels complexes still operational is evident and the roads are dotted with pot holes. In fact the road situation in the region is deplorable and major road works are required to bring the road up to a level that they can be safely used. Pot holes are usually in-filled with unconsolidated volcanic ash, which in the short term rectifies the problem, however, monsoonal rains and vehicular traffic soon cause the hole to develop again.

Electricity is available, however, maintaining the electricity lines and a constant supply during peak periods is problematic. Several nationals are electrocuted each year when they try to “connect themselves” to the grid for free power.

Rubbish is also a major problem with no efficient or regular rubbish collection service. Paper and plastic bags, cans and bottles litter the streets. Unemployment is generally high and nationals spend considerable time engaged in chewing beetle nut (a mild hallucinogenic drug derived from chewing beetle nut, lime and mustard). The red blood coloured remnants of this chewing is spat out at every conceivable point you can imagine.

Despite this, Rabaul still has a certain charm about the place. I equate Rabaul to what I envisage the American Wild West to be like during the gold rush era in the 1800s. There are rules and regulations, but you really do not need to follow them if you do not want to. There is a police station, however, the police vehicle is unregistered and frequently requires towing. I heard several accounts from individuals who claim to have called the police, only to be told that they would be required to be picked up as their vehicle was broken at the time. Likewise, public health – especially emergency services is poor. More than often the local ambulance is used to carry firewood or has a flat tyre!

Rabaul and many other areas in PNG have many small offshore islands that are mostly uninhabited, although several large islands such as Watom and Duke of York Islands have several large villages. Jungle reaches the shore and coral growth begins at the low tide mark. The coral is stunning in the shallows and snorkelling is very enjoyable as the water temperature is 30 degrees Celsius. Underwater visibility can exceed 40 meters offshore, however, closer to shore visibility can be 20-30 meters falling to 10 meters within Simpson Harbour. Ambient temperatures also range between 29 and 35 degrees Celsius as Rabaul is located 2 degrees south of the equator. Rain is infrequent during the dry season and downpours with very high humidity common during the monsoonal wet season.

Clothing

Nationals wear a variety of clothing, mostly which is western based. The Tolai women wear a special style of customary dress that indicates that they are from the Tolai tribe. The dress looks like a dress worn over another dress! I saw one fellow with a machete slashing grass and he was wearing what appeared to be banana leaves wrapped around his torso (being pulled up between his legs). I queried his dress and was told that he was a highlander mowing the lawn in “style”. Apparently the locals called this fellow “leafman”.

PNG is in the tropics and rain is frequent. As such many of the women folk sport large umbrellas. Those unlucky enough not to own an umbrella slash taro or banana leaves with their machetes (everyone carries a long bladed machete) and hold them over their heads until the rain has ceased.

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Local Transport

Local transport is via public motor vehicles (PMVs). These vehicles which are usually old style tray back or utility type four wheel drives. PMV's ply the road system picking up and dropping off passengers at undefined locations and at unposted times. I have attempted to catch a PMV during my last trip to PNG, but gave up when it did not turn up when expected. Locals cram into the back of these vehicles and overloading is very common.

Turvuvur Volcano

For those interested in understanding more regarding the geology of this volcano and area, please navigate to the appropriate section on the website.

Turvuvur Volcano is (at least to me) is one of the highlights of a trip to Rabaul. There are not very many active volcanos in the world that can be observed at such close quarters that are so easy to reach. There are several cones and craters in Rabaul in addition to numerous vents. Turvuvur appears to be the most active and acts as a major vent to the New Britain Volcanic Zone.

The volcano can be climbed and the trip is well worthwhile, however, I should point out that this volcano is very active and can erupt at anytime. Timing of the ascent is vital and if the volcano shows any form of activity before the climb the ascent should be postponed. I have climbed the cone and from the summit there is a magnificent view of the surrounding area, not to mention access to the imposing and very dangerous twin craters. Sulphur dioxide gas is heavy in the air and I recommend only a short stay at the crater rim without some form of breathing apparatus or gas mask.

I felt very insecure when standing at the rim knowing the instability of the area, and to remind me of this instability the volcano “degassed” whilst I was standing above the main crater. A degassing event is not an eruption of magma, ash and country rock, but rather a gas eruption consisting of various gasses including carbon dioxide, sulphur dioxide, hydrogen sulphide, methane and nitrox oxide. I’d thought about this eventuality before my climb and ensured the prevailing wind was blowing away from location, but despite this, my ascent to the rim was probably one of the more foolhardy things I’ve done of late.

On a later trip to Rabaul (six months after my climb) Turvurur was erupting continuously. The volcano would erupt probably 10-15 times a day. Some of the eruptions were explosive, whilst others were degassing events. The explosive eruptions produced a very loud bang whilst the effusive eruptions made a noise similar to 747 jet taking off. The noise was a very loud, deep and resonating roar. During my July 2005 visit, ash was heavy in Rabaul and masks were required on occasion to stop ash ingestion. When travelling to dive sites in the boat, you would have to travel through ash clouds. The ash is actually silica (microscopic rock) and it can cause breathing difficulties and eye problems.

Eggs and Volcanos

The area near the volcano consists of several large hot springs, which are adjacent to the ocean. On my July 2005 visit, the ocean near the springs was very warm (38 + degrees Celsius in some parts). The sand beneath your feet was also very warm and you couldn’t stand in some areas in bare feet.

The warm sand attracts a bird named the megapode bird. This smallish bird lays a very large egg, which it buries, in the warm sand to incubate. Nationals regularly raid the nests for the eggs, which they consider a delicacy. Some children who had fetched some eggs boiled them for me in one of the boiling sulphur springs. I found the taste of the egg to be very strong and rich in flavour similar to a duck egg, but a lot stronger in taste. Personally I didn’t like the taste.

Diving near the Volcano

When diving close to the volcano, you could actually hear the roar underwater in association with a very mild shaking. I experienced a small underwater earthquake (tremor) when diving on a wall. The fish life went very quiet, sand began to fall

down the wall from above and I heard the volcano roaring. It was a very odd feeling and it's difficult to describe, it feels like something is electrifying you and it's a feeling I didn't like. Diving on reef areas downwind of the volcano was not fruitful as a layer of volcanic dust had settled on the bottom covering corals and sessile marine life.

Our Accommodation

Last trip to PNG we stayed in Rabaul, but this trip we decided to stay outside Rabaul at Kabaira Lodge at Ataliklikin Bay. The lodge is about 30 minutes drive along the coast from Rabaul half way between Rabaul and Kerevat. The road in many places is in very poor condition and often it felt as if drivers were playing "chicken" as they aimed their vehicles at each other only to swerve at the last moment to avoid a large wash out or pot hole. Kabaira is a nice area overlooking one of the many bays in the area. Originally part of a copra plantation, its 1950's hostel style accommodation has subsequently been converted to accommodation for visiting travellers and divers.

The actual copra plantation was still operational and was located across the bay about 30 minutes by boat. The copra plantation was very interesting and the owners (Australian expatriates) lived a pretty good lifestyle. The lifestyle is very similar to what you would expect – open style plantation house, large, well organised and appointed meals with national servants, etc. If you want to see what it was like living in PNG in the 1950's, then I'd recommend you arrange a visit to the plantation – it's like going back in time.

Food and Condiments

The nationals live for the most part a subsistence lifestyle. Food is obtained from maintaining gardens in the surrounding hills and from fish stocks from the harbour and island. Entrepreneurial nationals can be seen along side the road in ready made stalls selling beetlenut, local produce and fresh fish. The deceased fish hangs from a stick with the plastic bag over its head enticing would be punters passing by to purchase it. Personally I draw the line at eating fish un-refrigerated for several hours in hot and humid conditions – but the nationals do not seem to mind!

I bought a small parcel of taro from one of these road stalls. Taro is a starchy vegetable which is wrapped in leaves and cooked in the fire. Interestingly the taro is edible even after a few days in the sun! The flavour is quite sweet and I would definitely recommend it. I also tried pit-pit, which is like a thick starchy grass. Pit-pit is peeled and cooked by numerous methods – fried, raw on the stem, charcoaled, grilled, baked – you name it. It tastes wonderful with soy sauce, and was probably my favourite PNG dish aside from orange red paw-paw and fried small bananas. Interestingly, some bananas can be eaten raw (after peeling) and others must be cooked.

Local food is always available at the market and the nationals enjoy lining up the food in rows with the smallest to the left and the largest to the right. If you are

unfamiliar with the various types of starchy food available, then a guide is necessary, although many of vendors understand and speak English. Beetlenut is for sale everywhere, and although a PNG delicacy, I did not really take a liking to the taste – or the severe after effects!! No one said not to swallow the foul tasting liquid after crushing the nut, lime and mustard between your teeth. The effects from chewing beetlenut cause the chewer to become intoxicated. Tobacco spears are also very popular. A tobacco spear is very strong raw tobacco leaf rolled in your hand and then rolled in a piece of news print paper. The spears can be quite long (three times the length of a normal cigarette). Cigarettes are sold in packets, but as many nationals do not have a lot of money, cigarettes are also sold individually with one match and a piece of striker match paper.

World War Two Relics – Rabaul.

I was a little shocked at the state of the WW2 relics. I spent considerable time in the 1980's looking about (once again mainly diving) in the Solomon Islands. The preservation of the plane wrecks, ship wrecks and other junk on the land was quite good. You could still hunt about and find an old American helmet, a pineapple grenade and similar such items in pretty fair condition. The relics I saw in the bush in PNG were mostly just bits of rusty metal bearing some similarity to what they originally were used for. Helmets were bits of tin with holes in them. I guess time is marching on and I suspect that in another 20 years or so there will be little left of the smaller relics. The tropical conditions with constant rain certainly do not enhance the preservation of metallic objects!

Despite this, there are still many items that are in reasonable, if not excellent shape. The aircraft are especially noteworthy. During the war the Japanese used a heavy metal primer which has protected much of the aluminium frame from erosion. Unfortunately the Americans failed to use the same primer; Japanese planes are in better condition than there US counterparts.

Aircraft

We dived three aircraft worth mentioning: A Japanese biplane US code named "Pete". This plane was in excellent condition at 30 m depth in Simpson Harbour, Rabaul. Everything was as is, including cabin machine guns, sliding canopies and all gauges. The wire between the two wings was even still present. Apparently it was sunk at its mooring by an Australian aerial attack.

Another aircraft we dived was a Japanese zero in 32 meters of water. The aircraft is almost in new condition (as wrecks go) and sits upright on the sand. The only item missing is the canopy which the pilot ditched before landing. You can take your tank and fins off and sit in the seat - Great fun! Once again everything is there. Apparently a diver about 10 years ago found a pistol under the seat (not there now). The plane was ditched just offshore after being shot up by allied planes. Locals said that the pilot crashed, swam ashore and rejoined his unit!

Interestingly, I was speaking with two guys in Rabaul who commented that they had just discovered a US dauntless dive-bomber (US Navy). The plane still had the tail gunner strapped into his rear seat. Apparently what happened was that the pilot ditched into the sea and the rear fuselage snapped in half with the tail section bending over the front section, trapping the gunner in his seat. The pilot swam free but the gunner drowned. They had just come back from diving the plane and reported that the bones were in place with the aviator's accouchements about the body.

These discoveries are not uncommon. In 1998 a Australia RAAF beaufighter was discovered with flight crew. The crew was later interned at Bitapaka War Cemetery with full military honours. A USAAF B-25 was discovered with crew remains in a bay at Rabaul in 2001 and a USAAF Lightning P-38 was discovered near Tobera a few years ago with pilot remains.

To find these wrecks on the land is very difficult. The jungle is very thick and almost impenetrable in places. The topography in PNG is very mountainous and there is no infrastructure such as extensive road systems or rail systems. This in conjunction with the climate ensures that many of the wrecks above land erode relatively quickly. However, wrecks underwater (especially aircraft as they are constructed of aluminium which does not corrode at the same rate as steel) are another matter. Many of the undiscovered wrecks are deep – some in excess of 90 meters. I saw a side-scan radar image of an area of coast 30 kilometre long. The side-scan read out recorded 135 plus images on the sand. These images were planes or parts of planes.

Shipwrecks

We also dived quite a few ship wrecks – all Japanese! The wrecks were interesting, although those located in Simpson Harbour at Rabaul are becoming silted up and are quickly deteriorating - especially since the 1994 volcanic eruption event.

The majority of shipwrecks are in deep water (plus 35 meters) with a few in over 45 meters of water. Although it is not recommended due to the silty conditions, penetration dives can be conducted if suitably trained and experienced. Crews quarters, engine rooms, cargo holds and workshops can be inspected. Because of the 1994 eruption many of the wrecks are covered in a few centimetres of silt which masks many artefacts to be found such as plates and cups.

One excellent wreck at Rabaul was Georges Wreck. This wreck lies off the coast, outside the main harbour perpendicular to the shore; the bow is in 10 meters of the water and the stern is in 60 meters of water. Visibility is excellent and the wreck is intact. The ship was assigned to the Imperial Japanese Navy as a mine layer (mines can still be seen) and was bombed by US aircraft. The captain of the ship ran it ashore, however, the ship sunk shortly afterwards at a precarious angle (about 50 degrees).

This wreck also makes for a wonderful and memorable night dive. The angle of the deck and bow is very eerie when back-lit with reflected light from the moon.

Offshore from my accommodation were the remnants of three Japanese barges. All that was left was the large engine blocks and some of the barge ribbing. During a dive at Watom Island I discovered the remains of another Japanese barge in 20 meters of water. Once again little remained other than the barge ribbing, collapsed sides and some netting.

Tunnels

In Rabaul there are hundreds of miles of underground tunnels. Some still require exploration. The tunnels we explored were very hot and stuffy and had resident black spiders and the odd snake or two! The spiders were large (hand size) and looked very fierce! (which probably means they are harmless).

We visited a few of the larger tunnel systems and found them very interesting. One was a hospital tunnel which was very extensive. You could see where they had wooden structures constructed for beds and so forth. The tunnels are constructed in volcanic ash, therefore, there are many indents in the wall to house lamps, etc. Jolanda found some war junk in one tunnel, but you could not really make out what it was.

In one area we discovered the remnants of Japanese motorcycles and trucks; the jungle had to be cut away to see them. We also found a cache of medical equipment which included ornately enamelled plates and saki cups (some with naval insignia) medical probes, thermometers, glass vials containing saline, sake and beer bottles and an assortment of other odds and ends such as a large anvil, soup ladle, aviation drums, drum pumps, shovels and the blades of long bayonets.

One tunnel, near Simpson Harbour, had 5 Japanese barges still in it. The barges were in OK condition. The barges were used to ferry supplies to Japanese troops on outlying islands during the hours of darkness, and during the day the tunnel provided protection from allied aerial attack. POW troops were used to haul the barges 1 kilometre to the shore and back again. Then the POW's lifted and hid the railway tracks that allowed the barges to be moved. POW's also grew bamboo above the tunnel entrance to hide the entrance from prying allied aviator's eyes! (the bamboo is still there, but the rails are long gone – I saw some holding up a fence nearby!).

Another area we visited had a lookout tower, several underground bunkers and some anti aircraft guns. The guns were in very good condition. I was told the area is literally riddled with tunnels and unexploded ordinance. I was shown one tunnel, which had caved in many years ago. I was told it was for ammunition supplies and that the tunnel had collapsed during an air raid along with 200 allied POW workers! Apparently it's too dangerous to dig out and remove the remains.

Bitapaka War Cemetery

On every visit to Rabaul I make a point of visiting Bitapaka War Cemetery. The area is very peaceful and relaxing with large rainforest trees (called rain trees) and neatly cut grass. The cemetery is maintained by the Australian War Graves Commission. I searched the hundreds of brass plates each marking the final resting place of a serviceman who fell during the Rabaul conflict from a number of services and nations; army, naval, police and air force from Australia, India, New Zealand, Netherlands, Fiji, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea. Many personnel were listed as missing or killed in action and several plates had final departing messages from loved ones.

Bitapaka is predominantly a cemetery for World War Two service personnel who fell during the Rabaul conflict, however, the cemetery also is the final resting place for Australian personnel “who paid the ultimate price” during the First World War when the area was grappled from the hands of German occupiers in 1914. The sinking of Australia’s first submarine during the First World War is also commemorated at Bitapaka. The submarine, which has yet to be found, was lost with all personnel off Rabaul.

The official visitors book records the comments of visitors with one comment from a fifteen year old Australian girl just saying “thanks”.

The areas tranquillity masks the events that took place at Bitapaka during the First World War in which the first Australian casualties occurred six months before Gallipoli (for a full account of this action navigate to the section within the web site). Interestingly, on both my visits to Bitapaka it has rained heavily.



Above: Bitapaka Cemetery and plaque of fallen RAAF Airforce pilot

Diving in Rabaul

All our diving activities took place from Kabaira and for the most part involved using banana boats with a 40 HP Mercury outboard to visit various reefs in the vicinity. Although many locations were dived, one memorable dive was when we decided to plan a night dive on Georges Wreck.

Georges Wreck is located some way from Kabaira and to dive the wreck required considerable logistical insight. We left at 7 PM for a proposed 9 PM dive. Dive gear was assembled and placed into the rear of a utility, along with an outboard engine, fuel, oil, spare parts and other dive gear. Jolanda and I then climbed into the rear of the utility and were joined by three national locals wanting a ride into town. What followed was an 80 km/h ride along a pot holed road swerving continually to either miss pot holes, wash outs, stray dogs, other nationals walking or sitting on the road, or other vehicles coming in the opposite direction (doing the same thing). I was glad there were few bugs about this night, otherwise I would have swallowed those not caught in my teeth whole!! Our destination was a national's house located on the shore near the wreck who had a boat but not an engine. The dive was one of the best night dives I have done despite the four odd hours required to travel to the site, load, unload, dive the site and then return to Kabaira.

Another memorable dive was at a reef that is difficult to find. It is a very small pinnacle that rises from 90 meters of water. The visibility from the surface looked very poor and upon entry I could just make out Jolanda's fins at 3 meters! 4 meters beneath the surface however, the visibility improved to 20, then 40 meters! The upper surface was a fresh water lens.

This particular dive was one of the best dives of the trip. Delicate corals (*acropora spp.*) grew in an array of different shapes and platform corals were abundant. Several coral bommies marked a trail to deeper water. Large fire fish were observed at the deepest bommie at 33 meters and whilst circumnavigating the pinnacle schools of jacks made swimming passes along with a resident school of barracuda. As always a solitary individual made an approach away from the group to investigate us. A school of batfish including juveniles hung beneath a platform of staghorn corals which were growing laterally out from the reef. Large blue speckled coral cod and trout made their rounds and opened their mouths to be cleaned by cleaner wrasse that had set up business along several sections of the pinnacle. A smallish white tip reef shark was very curious and made continual approaches quite close to us – strangely it was unafraid of divers for its smallish size. White tips are usually very skittish in the presence of divers, as are black tip reef sharks.

The fish life, which included several largish schools of large barracuda, rainbow runner, bonito tuna and jack trevally spp. made this dive one the most memorable dives of the Rabaul segment of our trip.

One interesting feature at Kabaira was the large tank used to wash dive gear. The tank was made of aluminium and was about 1 cm thick and 1.5 meters in diameter. You could comfortably sit in the bowl. The bowl was originally used by the Japanese during the Second World War to cook rice in!

Talele Islands (Bainings)

The Talele islands are located approximately four to five hours banana boat ride from Rabaul. They are a small cluster of uninhabited islands a few kilometres from the shore. The islands would meet the requirements of a tropical island with large rain trees and white coral sand beaches surrounded by clear warm shallow water. The backdrop to these secluded islands is the precipitous Baining Mountains. I spent two nights camping on the main island of the group snorkelling and diving the several ribbon and patch reefs in the area. I also did some exploratory dives at the fringe of the mangroves and silt reef flats.

Diving at Talele Islands

Unfortunately, the weather at the island was not the best and diving had to be confined to the inner most reefs. Despite this, several of the reefs were very good diving and several fish species previously unseen were observed; especially species from the goby family. On one dive an unseen species of dart fish was discovered along with a “herd” of black spot garden eels (*Heteroconger hassi*). Garden eels are notorious for being cryptic and I was lucky to observe an eel at very close quarters. Garden eels are not to be confused with the larger moray eel; garden eels rarely exceed 1 meter in length.

Sharks were uncommon, however, a small black tip reef shark made an appearance on two of the dives. Nudibranchs (small slug like creatures which sport the most fantastic colour combinations) were very prevalent.

It was unfortunate to note that several of the more closer reefs to the islands had been dynamited by the nationals seeking reef fish. At some locations dynamiting reefs is common practice and authorities are finding it difficult to enforce the countries no reef bombing rules.

Walindi, Kimbe Bay, New Britain Island

Kimbe Bay is located 30 minutes fly time from Rabaul. Hoskins airport is interesting in that it was initially used by the Japanese during World War Two, then the allies in the later part of 1944. We had rather bad flying weather the day we departed Rabaul for Hoskins with heavy rain and squally conditions. The Dash 8 turbo prop bounced from cloud to cloud as it made its final approach to Hoskins. I noticed that the aircraft maintained about 1000 feet with landing gear deployed and was flying half figure of eights, before making a final hard left bank and decent to the strip. This perplexed me as I knew that Hoskins had IFR flight aids (NBD and VOR). I was told later on that these flight aids, like many things in PNG, do not work, and pilots

always fly visual into Hoskins. The pilot was flying half figure of eights to find the strip!

Kimbe Bay is completely different to Rabaul. The region is used mainly for growing and processing palm oil. As such, much of the vegetation in low lying flat coastal areas has been removed and replaced with palm oil plantations. The area is surrounded by at least thirteen active volcanoes of which Pago is the most dangerous.

Towns are relatively clean (no volcanic dust) and infrastructure, utilities and roads in fairly good order. It seems that many regions of PNG have rubbish problems. Although rubbish was visible, especially in the town, the level of rubbish was nowhere near as great as that observed in Rabaul.

Walindi is a well known dive resort (if bungalows constitute a resort) about 30 minutes drive from Hoskins. The resort is located overlooking a wide bay.

Diving

The diving was good although I thought the fish life would have been more prevalent. Although schools of jacks and barracuda were observed their schooling numbers were nowhere near as high as seen on earlier trips to PNG in the mid 1980's. No doubt long line fishing is beginning to make its effect felt in these once prolific waters.

The corals at Kimbe Bay were exquisite and were by far the best I have ever seen. Many species were observed that were for the most part not damaged either by storm events or anthropogenic impacts. On several dive sites sea whips, huge sponges, sea fans and soft corals were very common. Some of the sponges on the deeper wall dives were literally 3 meters in diameter. Likewise some of the *acropora* spp. corals were so delicate and untouched.

Grey whaler (*C. amblyrhynchos*) sharks were seen on a few dives along with silvertip (*C. albimarginatus*), white tip (*T. obesus*) and black tip (*C. melanopterus*) reef sharks. On two deep dives at 30 meters we had large grey whalers zapping in and out quite fast. One minute you were looking into the blue with the coral reef wall on your right hand side, when the next moment there were 3 or 4 large sharks swimming beside you. They appeared so quickly as if they materialised from nothing! One swam past about 2 meters from my mask; so close I could see the colours in her eye and note remoras swimming in and out of her gill slits – now this is what diving with big fish is meant to be like!

On another dive off a volcanic sea mount we had 7 large grey whalers and 2 average sized silvertip sharks swimming beneath us while snorkelling. The sharks were quite curious and although used to divers still required coxing to come close; a plastic bottle was used for this purpose quite effectively. After one dive our group hung back about 50 meters from the dive boat watching the above-mentioned sharks

whilst snorkelling. Later I was to learn that the water depth in this area was deeper than 2000 feet! We were all splashing about trying to coax the sharks in and they eventually obliged swimming 3 meters below us. The group moved back to the boat but I was a little slower snorkelling and lagged behind the group. I rolled over and saw 3 grey whalers making rather close approaches. I thought they would bump me and I prepared to give them a good kick with my fins, but this was not required as they kept their distance. It is quite lonely floating on the surface looking into the blue abyss with several large fish swimming beneath you.

Schools of barracudas accompanied us on quite a few dives. The main school of 20 or so individuals would hang 7 meters from us whilst one individual would glide toward us for an inspection. Chevron barracuda are an inquisitive fish that grow to around 2 meters.

Smaller and more cryptic fish were also observed in Kimbe Bay and we were lucky to see some of the species that have been on our fish list for sometime. Mandarin fish with their bright green and orange lines, fang blennies, fire and elegant dart fish and several pipefish spp. to mention but a few.

Japanese Zero Aircraft

Towards the end of our stay we dived a Japanese zero in 18 meters of water. Due to the proximity of a river system the visibility was only around 10 meters and the bottom was silt covered rather than sand covered. The zero was in perfect condition and untouched. The gauges were still in the cockpit as were the 20 mm cannons and 7.7 mm machine guns. The perspex canopy was swung back over the main canopy and the perspex was still in the canopy, although a few perspex tiles had fallen from the aluminium frame. The pivot tube was silver coloured and smooth to touch. Although there was marine life festooned on the prop hub, there was little marine life on the remainder of the aircraft bar a large anemone with resident anemone fish and commensal shrimp. The condition of this aircraft was excellent. The silver colour of the fuselage was clearly evident when the thin cover of silt was rubbed away and the only damage I could see was on the right and left side inner wing.



Above: Japanese naval zero fighter. *Photo courtesy of Rene Mortara (American dive buddy)*

From inspection of the aircraft it would appear that the pilot ran out of fuel and ditched close to the shore. Minimum prop damage suggests the prop was feathered. The flaps are down and the stick is in the aft position indicating that the pilot was flaring the aircraft before landing on the water's surface. Lastly the presence of the canopy in the open position (pushed back on the runners) indicates a passive exit of the pilot. It will be interesting to discover the history of this well preserved aircraft wreck.