



Diver's Compass: Double occupancy with three meals/day and as many as 23 dives is \$922/person, which includes tax ... U.S. reservation office number is 800/66-UTILA or 337/893-0013 ... www.utila.com for the LBR website ... 3000 psi tanks were always full; Nitrox was available; Nitrox certification cards were carefully checked and divers acknowledged the Nitrox mix ... The shop has good rental gear ... Expect bad no-see-ums anywhere in Honduras; a repellent containing DEET is an essential item ...

Free kayaks for paddling the lagoon at the resort ... Rent a bike in town to pedal the rough roads.

Star Dancer, Papua New Guinea

quarter inch critters, thirty foot monsters

Is Papua New Guinea among the best dive destinations in the world? Having been to Palau, the Maldives, Indonesia, the Solomons, and Yap, I have a basis for comparison. To find out, I chose back-to-back September weeks on the Star Dancer, a craft that was my first liveaboard, in 1996 when it was Sun Dancer I in Palau. I even had the same cabin!

An erupting volcano had closed the airport at Hoskins, forcing the Dancer to come and go from Rabaul instead of the Walindi-Rabaul and Rabaul-Walindi itineraries I had expected. It also forced us to change our Air Niugini itinerary, and my partner and I failed to make most of our scheduled flights. Our travel agent, Cliff Comfort from Reef & Rainforest, happened to be with us on the first day and managed to get us to the boat in Rabaul on time.

For the most part we had perfect weather – days in the 90s, nights in high 70s – but rough seas made for a few uncomfortable nights, though this was supposed to be the best season. Under the surface, we usually had calm water – 80-84 degrees and usually 100-foot visibility but as low as 20 feet near shore in the muck. Almost every dive was on a bommie with the bottom at 15-25 feet. Captains Jock or Matt tied up to moorings, so finding both the reef and the boat was easy, as was making safety stops on the reef. Everywhere the hard coral was healthy, and so were the soft corals, fans, feathers, whips, and gorgonians. Midway Reef had acres of staghorn coral, and bright red anemones were home to many spine-cheek clownfish. There were clouds of fish – big schools of trevally and fusiliers and rainbow runners racing around the reef perimeter, as well as varieties of unicorns and groups of barracudas, snappers, and triggers. Often batfish followed me around like puppy dogs. Floating over the reef like confetti were swarms of brightly colored anthias, pennant butterflies, and many kinds of damsels, busy threatening all other fish and all the divers.

The divemasters found plenty of flesh-colored seafans with quarter-inch pygmy seahorses, which are exactly the same pink shade. They showed them to me with the help of magnifying glasses, but I dive with bifocals for occasions like this. Mostly the pygmies hung on with their tails and swayed with the fan, but I saw some motor a couple of inches to a new post. Our divemasters were very protective of them, cautioning us not to do anything to disturb these fragile little treasures. Then, at the other extreme, the second dive day we encountered a massive whale shark. The resulting celebration looked like an underwater version of a home team's winning touchdown. Everyone was jumping up and down and cheering.

Apparently the critter appreciated the applause, returning to check out the boat and allowing many of us to get another look.

On muck dives, I saw unusual critters – elegant firefish, juvenile blue ribbon eels, juvenile yellowtail coris, ghost pipefish and harlequin ghost pipefish, leaf scorpionfish, devil scorpionfish, twin spot gobies, urchin clingfish, and tiny white nudibranchs. Divemasters Tim, Caroline, and Keiko – along with Patrick and Jonah, the dive deck crew – often dove with us. They were expert at finding these elusive fish and at filming both them and the guests. They were also expert at taking care of divers, and were safety conscious and helpful. I set up my equipment upon arrival, and then never had to touch it. They immediately refilled the aluminum 80s to 3000 psi in place, so I was always ready to go. Under the bench in front of each tank was a basket for masks and accessories. Wetsuits hung close by, so I suited up, grabbed my mask, slipped into my tank, walked down the steps to the dive platform where fins were kept, and stepped into the sea. If you have physical problems, they will carry your tank for you. Divemasters were always in the water, but buddies were free to go off on their own. Five dives were available most days, including a night dive, even if only one diver was nocturnal. Warm showers at about sea temperature and warm towels were waiting after the dives.

Chef Andrew and his “galley girls”– Veronica, Patrisha, Mariah, and Beverly – created varied and delicious meals, enabling me to maintain my energy for all this diving. You could have morning coffee in your room – just leave the sign on your door and they would deliver it. Continental breakfast was available before the 6:15 a.m. dive briefing, with a full breakfast after the first dive. Sometimes we had waffles, French toast, or “Aussie Breakfast” (baked beans on toast). Always there were fresh fruit, juice, cereal, toast, and “Eggs How U Like Em” with bacon or ham. Buffet lunch was a feast: hot soup, steamed rice, a choice of four hot and four cold dishes, and dessert. I chose from such things as stir-fried pork and veggies, pasta with chicken, spaghetti, barbecued chicken, coleslaw, “two potato salad,” or marinated tomatoes and cucumbers. If the fishing were good, we had “fresh catch.” Dinners were more formal: soup, salad, entree, and dessert – with wine – were served at the tables. (All drinks, alcoholic and otherwise, are included on Dancers.) There were always two entrees – steaks, pork chops, lamb, chicken, and fish – and you could pig out and have both. Desserts were divine, and some were chocolate. They offered some goodies both morning and afternoon, and giant

Slow Burn

Travel on liveaboards like the *Dancer* and you’ll be greeted with more food than you would ever serve yourself at home. If you eat the early Continental breakfast, then three full meals, enjoy the soups and desserts, have a couple of drinks before dinner and wine with it, and nibble on the onboard snacks like cookies between dives, you could easily partake in a 4,000, maybe even a 5,000-calorie day.

But ah, you say, look at all those calories you burn diving. If you’re like most sport divers, you probably think you burn something like 600 to 900 a dive.

So why is it that many divers, after these trips, write to *Undercurrent* that they actually gained weight on the trip? Because burning that 600-900 calories on a dive is wishful thinking.

Dr. Jolie Bookspan, the author of *Diving Physiology in Plain English* told *Undercurrent* that a diver “burns the same number of calories diving as doing any other light exercise.” And, she adds, “it’s a myth that exposure to cold water burns more. This had been explored some years ago in a study where obese women pedaled stationary bicycles in very cold pools. Beside being unpopular, it didn’t work.”

Think about an easy dive on coral reef like a walk in the park. If you weigh 200 lbs., you’ll be lucky to burn 200 calories an hour. Dive five times a day, eat up, and go home five pounds heavier.

chocolate chip cookies and the "famous peanut butter cookies" were always in the big jar.

Other special amenities include eight comfortable air-conditioned cabins: some with single beds that can be pushed together to make one almost-king, some have twins that can't be moved together, and some have queens. There are ensuite bathrooms, thick terry bathrobes, turn down service with mints on the pillows, videos and CDs in the entertainment center, books in the library, a partially shaded sky deck, and an onboard "boat-ique." Spacious camera tables and rinse tanks are set up on the dive deck, with a separate area for recharging. E-6 photo processing is available, with light tables for viewing slides.



Photographers had plenty of opportunities. One of the best was The Arch, a deep

Papua New Guinea Liveboard Options

Chertan: The 60-foot *Chertan* sleeps 12 in six air-conditioned cabins and offers cruises for up to 10 days in Milne Bay. Exact itineraries change seasonally as critters come and go. Both muck and reef diving, alternating between wide angle and macro photography. www.chertan.com or 011/675-64-11167.

FeBrina: A 72-footer, with seven cabins for 12 passengers, and a crew of seven. Based at Walindi Plantation on New Britain Island, *FeBrina* cruises for up to 14 days in Kimbe Bay, the Witu Islands to the northwest, or Fathers Reefs to the northeast. Captain Alan Raabe and his staff are experts at finding tiny critters. www.febrina.com or 011/675-98-35441.

Golden Dawn: This 80-foot craft sleeps 12. All cabins are air-conditioned, and some have ensuite heads. Usually based in Port Moresby for access to the remote Coral Sea, she also offers seasonal manta and muck diving in southern Milne Bay, Madang departures to Northern PNG, or Wewak departures for big animals. Lots of wreck diving, with Nitrox and rebreathers aboard. www.mvgoldendawn.com or 675/325-6500.

Marlin: A 50-foot, twin-engine, six-pack available for private charter out of Milne Bay. Specializing in adventure diving, underwater research, and film-making, the boat offers unlimited diving, depending on the traveling required. www.png-diveboat.com or 61/145-117098.

Moonlighting: A 100-footer based in Madang, the MV Moonlighting holds 12 divers in six twin berth cabins, all with private bathrooms. She makes seven- to ten-day cruises to the wrecks of Hansa Bay and to the big fish waters of Baganag and Laing Islands. Cruises are organized year round, but the dry season — May to December — offers the calmest conditions. Cramped dive deck, and no facilities for photographers. www.blueseacharters.com or 61/145-130-880.

Paradise Sport: Mike Ball's boat cruises Kimbe Bay from Walindi Plantation. A typical cruise covers an area of the Bismarck Sea, north of New Britain, between Garove Island in the Witu Island Group and Lolobau Island. The 100-foot catamaran, which carries 22 passengers and 12 crew members, also schedules departures from Milne Bay and Kavieng. www.mikeball.com or 800/952-4319.

Haus Poroman Lodge, Mt. Hagen, PNG

Papua New Guinea has many splendid land tours that take travelers back 70 years before the first Europeans arrived. I selected a trip to The Haus Poroman (House of the People) in the PNG Highlands. It's an hour drive from Mt. Hagen — the last half on a dirt road — where this mother of all potholed roads leaves about an inch to spare until the road drops a long way to a river below. The spacious lodge has a fireplace, sofas, a dining table with cutoff logs for seats, a TV, and a bar, but it and our roundhouse were dark and dreary, in keeping with the local houses that have no windows. I came to see how the people live in the interior of the island, and this lodge is the best place available.

Maggie Wilson, who owns the Lodge with her husband Keith, is a descendant of the Leahy brothers, the first white men to set foot in this area, in 1930. That First Contact, as it's called in the book and film, is a remarkable story itself. I joined a party with many Leahy family members, who made me feel welcome — but hearing Elvis singing “Blue Suede Shoes” in that setting was another shock!

The next morning, I awoke to thick fog, which soon cleared. Thomas, our driver, and Pius, our knowledgeable guide, took us for a half-day van trip, stopping first at a recreated village, giving me an idea of how the last generation lived. At the next village, men in loincloths and bare-breasted women — in this tribe they now normally wear western dress — demonstrated fire-starting and bow-and-arrow hunting. In a nearby field most of the tribe was gathered for a traditional Sunday feast. They dug a pit and lined it with banana leaves and heated stones and then put in a butchered pig along with sweet potatoes, vegetables, and chicken. One man proudly displayed a pouch in which he carried the chicken intestines! Fortunately I was not invited to stay for lunch! They were fascinated by seeing themselves on our digital camera. The chief thanked us for coming, sympathizing with us for 9/11, and asking us to tell others to come to his country. In the villages, there is no electricity or running water or plumbing. Few people are employed, most have gardens, but all had big smiles for us.

The second morning we visited the crowded and dusty Mt. Hagen market, then drove into the mountains. Altogether, there are more than 700 tribes, each having its own language, and none understanding any other. They communicate in pidgin or in English. In Chimbu I saw three shows, each staged especially for the four of us. The first group had their bodies painted black with skeletons outlined in white, and a “ghost” who looked more like a gorilla. They performed a short play for us and showed us their “market.” I saw two more shows — the Mudmen and the Chimbu players. I also visited an outhouse. It was either that or a “bush run.” I shook many hands and saw many smiles and drove many miles.

There are many tours to be had in PNG, and a diver who ignores the land in favor of the sea will miss one of the more remarkable places on this small planet of ours. Anyone who arranges your tour to Papua New Guinea can arrange land tours. (www.hausporoman.com — Our three-night Roundhouse Program included breakfasts, dinners, transfers, and tours at \$325/person, double.).

water coral promontory, where the crew rigged a line from a bommie to a beautiful natural arch, covered with fans, whips, sponges, and other growth. I got outstanding shots of divers swimming under the arch — which would be a great spot for an underwater wedding! Elsewhere, I got close-ups of sharks: silvertips, whitetips, gray whalers, and blacktips. Turtles posed for me, and huge Napoleon wrasses and hump-head parrots paraded past. Juvenile black and white snappers reminded me of spotted drums, and the adults were fashionable in their black lipstick. Black and white humbugs and damsels danced above table corals, disappearing as one amid the fingers when I came too close. There were nudibranchs in many colors and patterns and mantis shrimp swiveling their eyes around like satellites.

Yet all is not pleasant in paradise, as one morning underwater I heard a loud boom, and then on the second dive I saw three dead fish. Damn if it wasn't dyna-

miting. The reefs I dived didn't show damage, but it's not a good sign for the future in this still primitive society. Wherever we stopped, local residents paddled out in their outriggers to trade produce for rice, sugar, or salt. Their lifestyle is basically the same as it's always been, and they seem no more worried about the future – unfortunately – than they do the past. We tourists passed out a few trinkets – pens, pencils, combs, hair scrunchies, and balloons – and they rewarded us with big smiles and thank you's in pidgin or English.

As for the diving, each time I got wet I saw more fish than I would see in the Caribbean in a week! But this itinerary didn't have spectacular shows such as those in the currents of Palau's Blue Corner and Peleliu Cut, the walls of jacks and barracudas as in the Solomons, or the squadrons of eagle rays in the Maldives. Because all the diving was on coral gardens and bommies, they were all similar. Nonetheless, the reefs were beautiful, the fish plentiful, and the boat superb. Two back-to-back weeks were too much; next time, I'd take one here and take another of the many boats (see sidebar) that travel elsewhere in PNG. After all, there is a lot of ocean here.

-- K.I.



Diver's Compass: We made all arrangements through Reef & Rainforest in Sausalito, Calif., www.reefrainfrst.com ... Peter Hughes' website for the Dancer Fleet is www.peterhughes.com ... Rates for our cabin in 2002 were \$2195 + \$65 port charges, per week, with a 10% discount for back-to-back weeks ... Nitrox is available at extra charge ... the nearest chamber is Australia, a long and painful haul ... The price for 2003 is listed as \$1895 for the same room – quite a difference ... We used frequent flyer

miles to fly to Sydney, then Cairns, from where we hopped to PNG on Air Niugini ... At the Cairns Colonial Club, our Superior Room was \$105 per night, including transfers, www.rihgacolonialclub.com.

Aladin Air X Nitrox Computers Recalled

at last

UWATEC AG, of Switzerland, is recalling about 390 Aladin Air X Nitrox dive computers manufactured in 1995. The software “may inaccurately calculate desaturation times, resulting in possible decompression sickness under aggressive dive conditions.”

UWATEC has received five reports of DCS “allegedly associated with use of the 1995 dive computers.” UWATEC has stated, “For safety reasons, we ask that you stop using the 1995 dive computer immediately.”

To which we can only reply, “What took you so long?”

It turns out that problems with the Aladin Air X had already surfaced by 1996. We learned of the computer's long, sorry history by reviewing public documents filed in product liability lawsuits by customers who claim they got bent while using the computer. These records allege a pattern of problems either being ignored or denied, in the face of mounting evidence of a dangerous “air-switching” defect. In its Nitrox mode, the user-programmable computer allegedly assumes that the user is still breathing Nitrox during surface intervals. By not switching to an air table, the soft-

ware underestimates the buildup of residual nitrogen during repetitive dives. The greater the number of repetitive dives — and the longer the surface intervals — the greater the danger.

Was a 1996 Recall Stifled?

Bret Gilliam, who today owns International Training Inc. (TDI and SDI) and Fathoms Magazine, is the ex-vice president and CEO of UWATEC U.S.A. He stated in a May 2002 deposition that on his first day of work at UWATEC U.S.A. in April 1996, he found a recall notice drafted by his predecessor, Sean Griffin. Gilliam, who has testified