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Ben Davison's **In Depth**

The Personal Diving Report . . . for Traveling Divers

The *Tiata*, Papua New Guinea

Beneath the volcano, the bones of war

*When you finally get enough time and money to invest in a Pacific trip, it had better be good. Papua New Guinea is a heavy contender for the best the Pacific has to offer. The *Telita*, diving PNG waters, has been named by In Depth subscribers as one of the top live-aboards in the world. Can the *Telita*'s sister ship, the *Tiata*, compete with that title? Our reviewer takes a look.*

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Dear Fellow Diver:

I had glided through a natural amphitheater streaming with schools of fish; I had explored the sunken arsenal of a half-century-old war; I had watched sharks fighting for morsels just over my head. Now, as I swam with four large cuttlefish, each a different, shifting color pattern, I was having difficulty remembering how worried I had been about our change of plans.

Oh, yes, our plans had definitely changed. I was to have boarded the *Tiata* in Rabaul, on New Britain, but the August 1994 eruption of two large volcanoes overlooking the harbor had made the captain rethink his itinerary. Besides, there was no longer any way to meet the boat there -- the airport had been destroyed.

Now, four months later, we were departing from Kavieng, at the northwest tip of New Ireland. New Ireland lies athwart the northeast tip of New Britain, where not only Rabaul but also the well-known Walindi Plantation dive resort is located. Together these two islands, along with the main island of Papua New Guinea to the southwest, mark the south and east boundaries of the Bismarck Sea. (On the map it looks like a couple of diving songbirds harrassing a large turkey.)

Kavieng is the only town of any size on New Ireland, meaning at most a mere 5,500 souls. Our original itinerary had Kavieng at the end of the trip. In a prime location for diving, Kavieng sits across a 20-mile strait from the smaller island of New Hanover (well, all these islands were new to the European explorers). Between these two are dozens of tiny islands, some so close together that you can swim from one to another.

Paradise in a Small Place

Through this scenic paradise the 65-foot *Tiata* meandered at leisure, with minimal transit time between dive sites -- the

Lonely Planet's Papua New Guinea guidebook is quite useful, as is the small paperback Reef Fishes of New Guinea, a good fish ID book by Gerald R. Allen showing the most commonly found species.

The Perils of Plate Tectonics

airfield when one of the volcanoes suddenly erupted in an incredible explosion of smoke and ash. He immediately took off, and as he banked over the harbor, he saw the water below thickly spotted with geysers, as if the ghosts of the WWII American air force were replaying their destruction of the Japanese fleet in 1942. In fact, it was enormous boulders hitting the water with the force of bombs. Then the second volcano erupted, and the shock waves seemed to want to tear his plane to pieces; he was lucky to escape unscathed. He says it was the most terrifying experience of his life. During our trip, we frequently passed through areas of tiny floating pumice stones, hundreds of miles from the eruption.

Head for the Hills

Be sure to spend several days in Papua New Guinea's central highlands (on the main island). We did two days at the beautiful Ambua Lodge in Tari (highly recommended; three days would be better) and two days at Tribal Tops Lodge in Mt. Hagen (don't bother). Many people we met enjoyed their three- to five-day cruise down the Sepik River on the *Sepik Spirit*. Some of the people in the mountainous highlands live much as they did when the first Europeans entered the region less than 60 years ago. Papua New Guinea has more than 700 tribes, and as many dialects, but on our visit to a local village we heard clear English. These days many youngsters attend school in Kavieng for months at a time. Contact Trans Niugini Tours, 011-675-52-1438 or fax 011-675-52-2470.

ideal diving environment. For nine full diving days, we saturated ourselves with nitrogen, the astonishing underwater fauna, and the equally terrific live-aboard that is the *Tiata*. We were in the water the first day just hours after boarding -- and by the last day we were still only a few hours out of Kavieng.

At a site called Chapman's Reef, a huge natural amphitheater 40 meters across, swept daily by a strong current, filled with schools of cruising jacks, barracuda, unicorn, and batfish, through which serenely glided big dogtooth tuna, gray reef sharks, and an eagle ray. Dropping down to an outcropping at 135 feet, I looked up into this incredible scene. The entire area was filled with fish, and I barely noticed the profuse reef life covering the rocks. We dived there four times over two days. On our last dive, we saw an enormous school of perhaps a thousand barracuda streaming through the water, splitting, merging, reforming, twisting, and spiraling in endless movement.

"Muck diving" was a new term to me, but I quickly caught on that a huge segment of the marine diversity was camouflaged in low-visibility silt and algae. An abundance of pipefish, flatworms, mantis shrimp, octopuses, scorpionfish, and a variety of anemones with tiny shrimp more than compensated for the lack of corals and the 35-foot viz. I found another small cuttlefish, all green and lumpy to match the background. At night I saw lobster and squid.

But If You Like Wrecks

The *Taishyo Maru* is a WWII Japanese freighter that the American navy sank in 70 feet of water after Australian spotters on a nearby island radioed its position. The wreck lies on its port side, its deck overgrown with stunning soft corals and enormous gorgonians -- an outstanding dive. Only 100 feet away across the sand bottom is a three-man Japanese minisub that had been tied alongside

the freighter when it came under attack. (The *Tiata* has copies of American naval photos taken by the attacking planes, showing

the sub at the surface and the sinking *Taishyo Maru* surrounded by burning oil.) The externally loaded dual torpedo tubes and intact propeller make great photos, even in the 25-foot visibility we experienced.

We also dropped into the water over two ditched World War II vintage planes. A Japanese Nakajima ("Kate") dive/torpedo bomber, the same type of aircraft that devastated the U.S. Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbor, rests flat on the bottom in 45 feet of water. The fabric on the wing and tail control surfaces is long gone, of course, but otherwise the plane is in good shape.

Visibility was a disappointing 15 feet on the second plane, discovered only a few months ago: a U.S. Air Corps B-25 "Billy Mitchell" bomber downed during a bombing run on Kavieng in 1943. The pilot, recently contacted in the States, told how he tried to ditch the plane on a shallow reef. As he hit the water, both engines were torn loose, the nose pitched down, and the front of the cockpit was ripped off. He was thrown forward, still strapped in his seat, as the plane flipped over him. He hit the water and found himself floating on the surface facing his plane. It sank in 40 feet of water, resting upright, engines and nose nearby. Six of the crew survived and were rescued several days later; the navigator was never found.



*New Ireland,
Papua New Guinea*

Shark Feeds and Nautilus Roundups

You are guaranteed to have big sharks in your face. The Tiata has developed a well-managed shark-feed dive on a shallow reef. Six silvertip reef sharks ranging in size from four to eight feet are well acclimated to visitors without being overfed. The first dive was done without food to get everyone used to the layout; the sharks, curious and graceful, came quite close and seemed perfectly at ease. Later in the day, on a second dive, with everyone upcurrent of the feeding location, a signal was sent for the dinghy driver to send down the food. Conditioned to the sound of the outboard motor, the sharks raced around after the dinghy, ignoring the divers completely while making high-speed passes right over our heads. The food

The *Tiata* has only a loose relationship with Bob Halstead's *Telita*, the live-aboard that put PNG diving on the map. It was Bob who first suggested to *Tiata* owner Kevin Baldwin that maybe the live-aboard market in PNG had grown large enough for another boat. Now they share resources for marketing and advertising, but otherwise are independent operations. Kevin is looking into the possibility of running charters shorter than 10 days in 1995 to attract more divers from the Asian market. So far it has been about 65 percent Americans, 30 percent Europeans, and a sprinkling of expats from the Asia Pacific region.

bag was pulled down to our 40-foot depth, and within moments the sharks hit the fish. It was all over in less than five minutes, and they resumed their relaxed cruising. To avoid a frenzy, only a small amount of food is used. The feeding is limited to twice a month in hopes of not disturbing the sharks' natural feeding behavior.

The night before our last day of diving, the crew set a large mesh trap in 1,000 feet of water to catch specimens of the deep-sea-dwelling nautilus. This cephalopod is related to the ammonites, creatures with 6-foot shells that inhabited the oceans before the age of dinosaurs. The trap was baited with chicken drumsticks (seriously); when it was hauled up the next morning, there were 24 nautiluses inside, two of which were still clutching chicken bones with their tentacles! They were taken to a nearby site and, with a splendid vertical wall as backdrop, gently released at 60 feet.

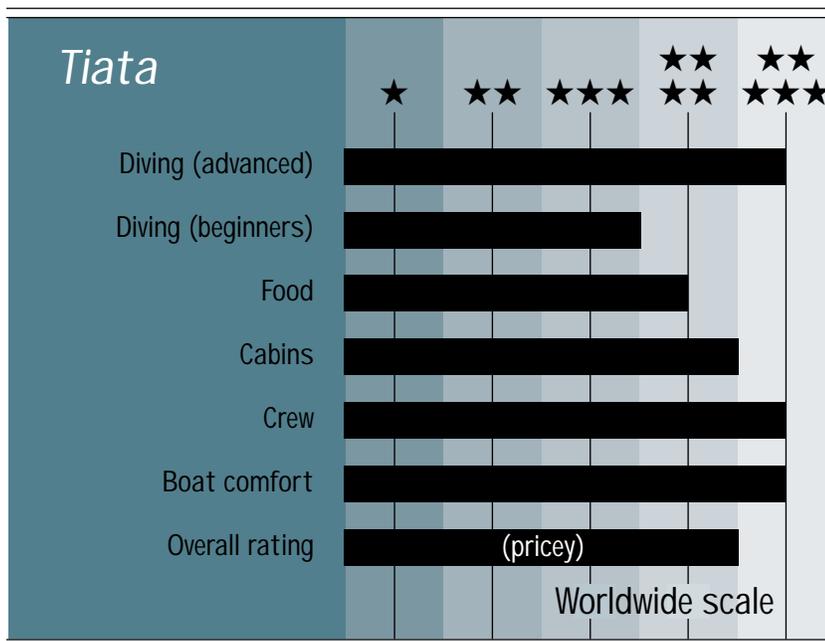
A Perfect Boat?

Designed as a dive boat, the *Tiata* was built in 1992 in Brisbane. It has five double cabins, each with a sink and adequate storage space. Two of the cabins have a lower berth wide enough for couples who want to be cozy. Air conditioning in the cabins is perfect -- plenty of it, but not too cold, and with easily controllable vents. There are two heads on the main deck with shower and freshwater (!) flush toilets. The high-capacity desalinator, pumping an astonishing 3.2 liters/minute, means no restrictions on daily bathing. A comfortable inside eating and lounging area has TV, VCR, and CD player, and a place where you can store, charge, or work on your camera.

(The large topside dining tables are covered with a rubber mat, so you can work on your camera there as well.) Lovely hardwoods are used liberally throughout the boat, and the attention to detail extends right down to cabin lighting with dimmer switches.

The small dive area is set up so your tank stays in your BC all the time, filled right in the rack, with your own personal storage bin below it. The two hot-or-cold freshwater showers at the stern are refreshing, and there are two perfectly positioned ladders on the large swim step. There are even two large camera dip tanks in the

gear area. The boat has a range of steel tanks available, from compact 80s up to a 120, or you can have aluminum if you prefer. A comfortable 15-foot Naiad inflatable dinghy is used on



some dives. Ask for a tour of the immaculate engine room to check out the twin compressors, dual soundproofed generators, and two AC units -- there seems to be a backup for everything on this boat.

A Superb Crew

Captain Dave Miller, an Australian, has been with the boat from the start. An affable thirtyish fellow with a sly grin and a ready wit, he loves to dive, is very safety conscious, and does amazing macro work with his massive video setup (the crew calls it his "tractor"). He will enthusiastically show you where all the critters live, while leaving you to dive as you wish. Two PNG natives, Jonathan and Ela, fill the tanks, handle the dinghy, take care of the cabins, and handle general chores with unfailing good humor. I won't waste words trying to describe the phenomenal food prepared by the English cook, Lesley Everley; she's leaving the boat after two years, and her culinary skills and energetic personality will be sorely missed.

Owner Kevin Baldwin, another Aussie expat, came to Papua New Guinea in the '70s to salvage brass from Japanese wrecks in Rabaul, and now runs an electronics/import business in Port Moresby. He met us on arrival at the Kavieng airport (just coming off the boat) and then again in Port Moresby after the trip. A big, easygoing guy who appreciates the importance of getting to know his guests, Kevin lamented that he makes only a few trips a year on the boat. He and Dave work hard to maintain good relations with the people in the local villages -- as Dave puts it, "We dive in their backyard." The boat supports the local economy by buying fresh food along the way. We were stocked to the gills with pineapples, papayas, yams, green peppers, pumpkins, ginger, lobsters, and crabs, all brought to us by locals in canoes so narrow they sat on rather than in them.

I Shall Return

My dive log reads, "Some of the best damn live-aboard diving ever!" True words, and I plan to return to dive on the *Tiata* when it's in the Milne Bay area. If you like the live-aboard lifestyle, want to photograph amazing critters and big sharks, or simply want an all-around incredible dive experience, book it and go. The flight from the States is long, the price is high, but all is forgotten when you hit the water.

C. B.

See & Sea Travel in San Francisco books most of the charters. The remainder either are private trips or are booked from Europe. I paid \$2,970 for 10 days/11 nights. Round-trip airfare from Los Angeles runs around \$1,500. . . . The monsoon arrives at New Ireland in December, so the *Tiata* moves south to Alotau (*Telita's* headquarters) in Milne Bay Province from January to April. Now that Rabaul is out of commission, for May to December charters the boat will depart from and return to Kavieng. . . . There is a wide range of opinion about prophylactic treatment for malaria, with various medications available. Consult a physician specializing in tropical diseases. . . . No rental gear available, but Dave handled emergency gear repairs with skill and panache. No E-6 film processing, either. There's a good stock of fish ID books, as well as interesting references on PNG and local history. . . . Water temperature was a constant 84-86°, even at depth; when they operate in Milne Bay, it can be 78-82°. Visibility ranged from 15 feet at the plane wrecks to well over 100 feet. There were some strong currents, but dives were well planned and well supported, with a current line in the water from anchor chain to stern.

Ditty Bag

The Gateway Motel is within walking distance of the Port Moresby airport, and we found it reasonable and convenient. We did not go into town during our 18-hour stay there, as there is little to see and tourists can be the target of violence.