

While in PNG, Forget Port Moresby

— a diver's alternative

While Papua New Guinea has the world-class diving we all dream about, many people fear having to overnight in Port Moresby, a wild and woolly town where robbery is a way of life.

But a 15-minute ride from the airport, followed by a 10-minute boat trip, I discovered a safe and serene dive resort with characteristic PNG diving. Loloata Island is uninhabited except for a lovely little resort run by Richard (Dik) Knight, a quietly affable, laid-back, 28-year resident of PNG. Favored as a getaway for local expats, it's been open since 1978 and now sports full-service diving. And they shuttle you to and from the airport.

To pique your interest as to the diving, I'll say just one word known to serious divers: Rhinopias.

Accommodations are in 16 simple, single-story waterfront units, two per building. Each shares a spacious balcony overlooking the bay and fringing mangroves. Ventilation is via louvered windows and ceiling fans, but I had a cool breeze blowing off the water, which lapped just below my porch. Each unit features a comfortable queen/king bed, a private bathroom with john, sink, and hot shower.

Meals are served buffet-style in the single-story main building, where the open dining area overlooks mangroves and the sea. The bar sells beer, wine, and other drinks both hard and soft (try the organic Sogeri pineapple juice). The menu is a mix of American and Aussie tastes: dinner includes fresh fish, local beef (avoid unless you have dentition like the Alien), good chicken, excellent pork, and local rice and vegetables.

As for the diving, a 22-foot covered fiberglass boat carries six divers, and a new, well-organized Aussie-built 30-foot aluminum diesel inboard can carry 12 at 25 knots. Amenities: a camera washdown, a hot shower, a stern dive ladder, solid canopy, snacks, tea, coffee, towels, and staff carries your gear to and from the boat and rinses and dries it.

And not only can you dive when you want (no prearranged times) and set your own profile, you can rent your own boat, toddle off, and dive on your own. Mike Hulden, the head divemaster, is used to dealing with experienced, world-hopping divers and understands their needs.

Oh, yeah--Rhinopias--Merlett's scorpionfish. I spent 20 minutes eye-to-eye with a big, dark green one, the most spectacular fish in the ocean. Imagine Hieronymus Bosch rendering a fish in stained glass. Hell, the pectoral fins alone on a Rhinopias are more dramatic than most whole fish. Mike located it for me at End Bommie in 15m of current-free water--around the corner from the

Loloata Island Resort

Diving (experienced)	★★★★★
Diving (beginners)	★★
Diving (for macro photography)	★★★★★
Accommodations	★★★★1/2
Service & Attitude	★★★★★
Food	★★
Money's worth	★★★★★

★ = poor

(World scale)

★★★★★ = excellent

green leaf scorpionfish and the purple leaf scorpionfish. And then a gray reef shark went one way and a green turtle the other. A wonderful dive.

Nearby are several boat wrecks, including one sunken cargo ship of 65 m plus an intact WWII American A-20 Havoc bomber resting on sand at 18 m. Besides an astonishing array of lion and scorpionfish, I encountered mantis shrimp, all manner of pipefish (including the Harlequin ghost), the usual swarms of tropicals, crocodile fish, occasional sharks and rays, sea snakes, and, at The Pinnacles, passing pelagics. Only recently dived, the bommies and reefs around Loloata boast abundant gorgonians, a wealth of healthy corals both hard and soft, pink sea whips, nudibranches, and some spectacular sea urchins.

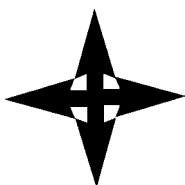


Papua New Guinea

In this macro paradise there's no telling what a diver will find. The long, narrow sand spit that extends into the bay from the resort provides a sheltered spot for easy swimming or snorkeling.

Loloata is a wonderful way to enter and/or bid farewell to PNG, without having to spend a minute in Port Moresby. You want to dive, you dive. You want to chill, you just hang out. By the second day, many staff knew me by name. The island also offers the opportunity to mix with locals, such as the dozen police chiefs from around the country who were holding a conference during one of my visits. Did I feel safe!

– G.A.



Diver's Compass: Telephone on the island is 011-675-325-8590, bookings 011-675-325-1369, fax 011-675-325-8933 or the resort now has e-mail, (loloata@daltron.com.pg).. Prices for a room, three meals a day, and diving are less than the best Port Moresby hotels, the two Travelodges. . . Water is cooler than more northern sites; wear a skin to ward off stingers; vis from 100' down to 2 feet in muck dives. . . . There's limited dive gear sales, extensive repairs and servicing, 110 and 240 battery charging. . . .Kayaks and sailboards are available for rent. . . .Sightseeing or shopping trips into Port Moresby can be arranged for wonderful masks and wood carvings or the resort has a compact but nicely-stocked gift shop for those who don't want to chance/brave the delights of Port Moresby. . . .domestic and international telephone service is available. Crime and Custom in PNG: It exists, it's real, and you need to watch your step. Port Moresby is the worst, but "raskols" are everywhere. Keep track of your bags. If you need transportation, call a hotel and have them arrange it. Address the police in a calm and polite manner, and they will be helpful in turn. . . .Note that in PNG people speak more softly than in the western world. Women should try to avoid traveling alone. Standard rules of sensibility apply: wherever you are going, walk with a purpose and avoid appearing confused. Most people speak at least some English, and Melanesian trade pidgin is fun to try.