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Ben Davison's **In Depth**

The Personal Diving Report . . . for Traveling Divers

A Civilized Boat in a Primitive Paradise

Diving the Chertan, Papua New Guinea

All divers owe it to themselves to make a trip to PNG. It's expensive and it takes time, but it's that good. Here's the Chertan, the least expensive of the current live-aboards. Do it or do one of the others, but do it. Whatever it takes — sell the farm if you have to. It's a diver's delight.

*John Q. Trigger
Editor*

Dear Fellow Diver,

More than a few years ago I made my first expedition to Papua New Guinea, one of the last adventure frontiers left in the world. I'll never forget it. Diving from Halstead's *Telta* on a film shoot with a dive crew from Cousteau's *Calypso*, watching hammerheads fade into the deep blue; dancing in a sing-sing with Huli wigmen; watching the slow Death Dance of Asaro mudmen; attending a scarring ceremony of a Sepik River crocodile-worshiping tribe. The trip blew my mind. The memories have led me back several times.

Although diving in Milne Bay has been praised before in these pages, this trip surpassed both my expectations and my memories of past dives in New Guinea. The coral reefs, walls, and sheltered bays displayed a surreal diversity of underwater life. Swimming with swirling barracuda, finning off the wall to catch the last glimpses of big sharks heading deeper than I ever would, muck diving with mantis shrimp -- everything about this late-summer trip on Captain Rob Van der Loos's *Chertan* was well worth my money.

Return to Paradise

Our diving on this ten-day voyage was along the northeastern coast of the Milne Bay peninsula and at several walls and bays off Normanby Island. At Wahoo Point, only a few minutes into our first dive, my buddy showed a certain aplomb as he casually signaled me: "If you look over your left shoulder, you might be interested in the three large hammerhead sharks swimming by." His nonchalance amazed me; I got bug-eyed as the magnificent beasts swam slowly out into the blue.

The schooling barracuda and jacks helped make up for the unfulfilled dive-briefing mention of "occasional mantas and a

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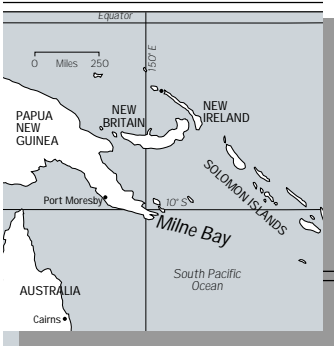
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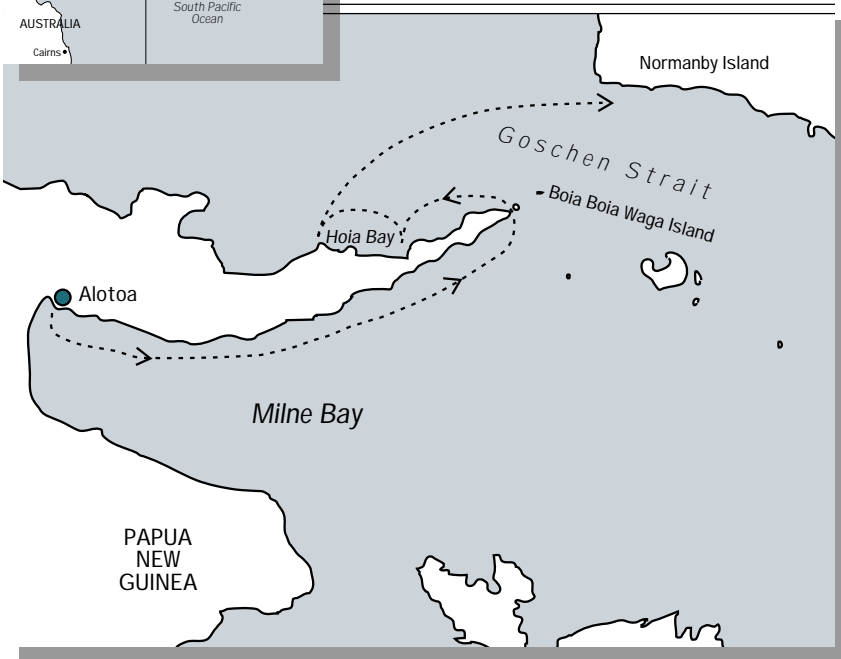
rare whale shark." Finishing off the dive in the shallows, watching gobies with attendant burrowing shrimp and ubiquitous anemone clownfish, I knew early on that this was going to be a great trip.

The dive that night entranced me. Flashlight fish were clearly visible in my red-lensed light. Coral-banded shrimp were cleaning and feeding on the sleeping body of a glorious parrotfish. Scorpionfish skulked under healthy coral. Paddlefin cardinalfish eyed me -- or was it the worms corkscrewing in my dive light they were interested in?



A Short Walk to the Community Head

The *Chertan* is a relative newcomer to the PNG scene, with all the amenities the hard-core could hope for in this remote corner of the globe. Sixty feet long with a broad, 21-foot beam, she is plenty roomy. The polished natural hardwood interior belies the boat's fiberglass construction. Captain Rob Van der Loos had her constructed to lend an air of luxury to the PNG dive scene.



And there is a measure of luxury in her cabins. Each of the six below-deck cabins has a television set and sound system, so movies and the day's video can be played throughout the boat from the master VCR in the salon. The air conditioning system below decks struggles in this tropical clime, but individual cabin fans help stir a breeze. These double cabins

Milne Bay, PNG

have sleep-inducing mattresses, wash basins, and good storage space. Cabins 5 and 6 feature two lower bunks. The other four have the usual upper and lower configuration. Rooms are made up daily and sheets and towels are changed as needed.

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Other amenities are a bit more fundamental. The two large bathrooms with toilet, shower, and wash basin are on the main deck aft. Some may prefer the convenience of toilet facilities en suite, but I find the absence of the usual boat toilet aromas below decks a fair trade-off for the short trip from the cabin up to the bathrooms. Even with a full boat load of 12 guests on my trip, there was no undue waiting for use of the facilities -- although a chronic shortage of fresh water limited our showering.

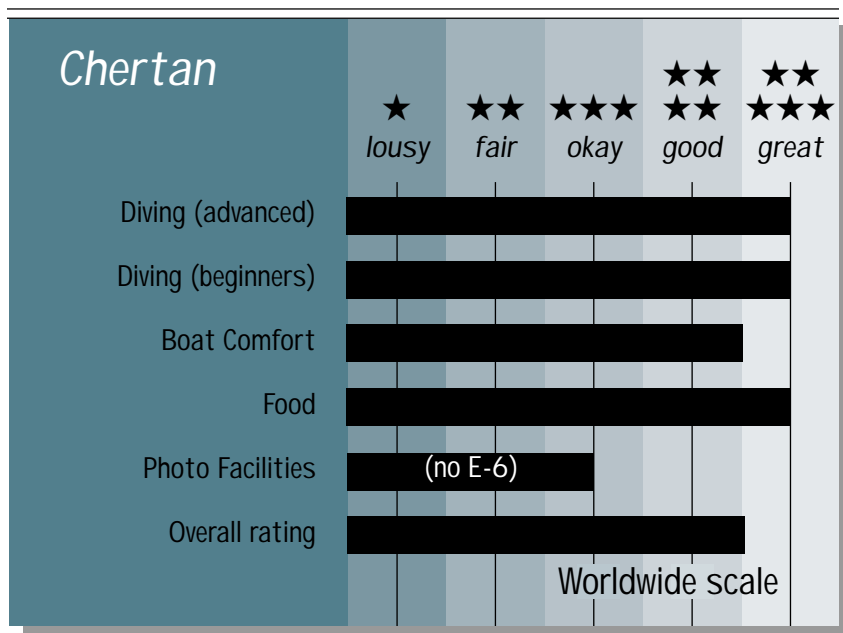
On the main deck are the salon, galley, and dining area. The separate salon seats eight in overstuffed sofas and chairs. For entertainment, there's a TV and VCR, a sound system with a good collection of CDs and tapes, and an extensive library covering PNG above and below water. Twelve guests can sit (albeit snugly) around the large dining table.

Pao, the chef and genial hostess, served excellent meals that fit into our diving schedule. Breakfast always included fruit, especially local bananas and papayas, as well as pancakes, eggs cooked to order, and cereals. Hamburgers, casseroles good for plenty of carbo loading, vegetables, and green salads were served at mid-day. The evening culinary event often featured locally caught fresh fish (usually grilled, baked, or in a cream sauce), but we also had spaghetti, chicken satay with Malay peanut sauce, grilled chicken, roast beef, and baked leg of lamb. One of the guests was a vegetarian; the cook cheerfully complied with his requirements. Desserts and after-dive snacks were always served -- fruit pie, chocolate cake, flan. Free wine was available at dinner; liquor and beer (after diving) cost \$2.50 a pop. Fresh hot coffee, sodas, and water for hot chocolate and tea were always available. At sundown people gathered at the table and chairs on the top deck or hung out around the open wheelhouse, munching on nuts or cheese and crackers while awaiting the elusive "green flash." This was also the designated area for the few smokers on our voyage.

The Dive Scene

Most diving was from the dinghy, which was too small. Fortunately, deckhands Stanley and Ahmed were quick to pick up surfacing divers. The dive deck was also small for 12 divers, as might be expected on a 60-foot boat. However, each diver had a separate crate for stowing dive gear, and there was a closet for cameras and camcorders, and hangers and a sturdy line for wetsuit drying. The warm towels provided after each dive were welcomed.

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... Captain Rob's cheerful enthusiasm was infectious, even when he was telling us how much more wonderful the dives would have been had the weather cooperated.

Once we learned to be considerate of each other, gearing became an easy matter. BCs were kept on the tanks, which were quickly filled to capacity after each dive.

I liked the way the entire crew worked to make the operation smooth. Boat Captain Kaniku, Engineer Jimmy, and First Mate Kevin all were genuinely friendly and enjoyed telling stories about their country. Jimmy was especially interesting, since he had lived through what he called the "Great War." He told tales of the cargo cult, the local religion that had been inspired by the American fleet, which stretched out of Milne Bay as far as he could see. He and Kaniku spoke about the "good magic" allowed by the "misin man" (missionary). In whispers, he described the "bad magic," now forbidden but still secretly practiced for love, revenge, or riches.

A weather front caused heavy wave action during my trip, so we weren't able to dive some of the open-water bommies. Muck diving at Lionfish City off Neneuna Bay delighted us with cuttlefish, banded pipefish, spotted eels, schooling striped catfish swirling and feeding along the bottom, jacks striking into a school of baitfish, and lionfish stalking prey at night.

Photographers and videographers in our group were particularly interested in macro and close-up work, so we spent a lot of time on muck dives and found some splendid subjects. I imagine that right now in homes across the country my shipmates are gleefully viewing their slides of blue ribbon eels, octopus, nudibranchs of many bizarre colors, mantis shrimp, juvenile scorpionfish, schooling juvenile trevally, hermit crabs, unusual sea cucumbers, and jellyfish.

Captain Rob has been diving these waters for many years, and he knows how to run a dive boat. He went out

of his way to show us many inhabitants of the reefs that we would have otherwise missed. His knowledge of underwater life rivals that of many marine biologists I have known. His cheerful enthusiasm was infectious, even when he was telling us how much more wonderful the dives would have been had the weather

A Plea for Florida's Reefs

Six miles off the Florida Keys, extending 165 miles from north of Key Largo to the Dry Tortugas, lies North America's only living coral barrier reef, the third longest in the world. With 50 species of corals and 150 species of tropical fish, the Florida

Keys National Marine Sanctuary attracts ten times as many sport divers as the Australian Great Barrier Reef, an area ten times larger.

All these divers, Keys tourists, and all the people who decide to live in this unique area place enormous environmental stress on the reef. The greatest threat is millions of gallons of inadequately treated, nutrient-laden sewage. Domestic wastewater, storm runoff, landfills, mosquito spraying, irrigation, marinas, live-aboards, and other sources share the blame.

The sanctuary's main line of defense is the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Together with the State of Florida, Monroe County, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, it is now implementing the Water Quality Protection Program of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. A draft plan for the program has been released for public comment this fall.

Unfortunately, the program fails to budget even a dollar toward corrective measures. Without efforts to improve the way sewage is treated in the Keys — and more importantly, money to do it — water quality will continue to decline.

Call or write state and federal elected officials and the EPA. Reef Relief will provide a list of key individuals to contact or will mail copies of your letter (or theirs) if you cannot. Contact Reef Relief at 305-294-3100 or fax 305-293-9515.

cooperated. I particularly liked his laid-back approach to dive rules. He quickly sized us up and let each individual's computer, common sense, and respect for the distance to the chamber in Cairns, Australia, determine his dive profiles.

Several dives at Photo Alley off Lauadi and at Witches Cauldron off Boia Boia Waga Island provided us with the thrill of the vertical. Dogtooth tuna cruised off the sheer walls looking for lunch, jacks followed them, and a small school of bumphead parrotfish lumbered along in queue. Sponge life was healthy, varied and prolific. The reefs at the top of the walls were rich with small tropicals. Lettuce and mushroom corals sprouted everywhere. Whitetip sharks prowled the bottom, waiting for night to fall to begin feeding.

Tania's Reef and Carol's Reef also live in my memory bank. Blue-spotted lagoon rays sailed among crinoids, sea fans, and tridacna clams that could swallow your pet pot-bellied pig. Schools of snappers, harlequin grunts, anthias, spadefish, and trumpetfish swirled around me, while a stream of fusiliers threaded through the middle. One evening we brought up a cage from the depths. A dozen nautilus had taken the bait, which meant they had to pose for us as they jet-propelled their way back down.

Last Place in the Talent Show

Twice during the voyage we had villagers come aboard. Each time they did a sing-sing for *theol man meri blong Amerika* (men and women from America). My favorite was their singing a roundelay version of a missionary song, "Father Abraham." We were obviously outclassed. The best we could counter with was a pitiful version of "Jingle Bells," only to have them say, "Americans always sing that, do you know any other tunes?"

To the great amusement of the crew, our group of physicians, computer nerds, and other assorted inhabitants of the Western way of life vied to prove our utter lack of talent with an impromptu talent show. Fortunately, it was the last night and we will never see one another again. It was the most fun I've ever had on a dive trip, although I'm not usually the talent-show type. Who knows, maybe the loose, spontaneous attitude of the Papuans rubbed off some of our repressions and inhibitions.

Book with wholesalers such as Adventure Express (800-443-0799), Poseidon Ventures (800-854-9334), or Tropical Adventures (800-247-3483). Current pricing is \$250 per day, substantially less than the *Telita, Tiata, Golden Dawn* or *FeBrina*. Recommended tip is also

much lower than other live-aboards I've been on Although you're next door to the equator, water temp can drop below 80°F, so bring the equivalent of a 1/8-inch wetsuit or a chicken vest. . . . The Gateway Hotel near the airport is fine for an overnight or a short layover; call them for pickup. Call 253-855 or Fax 254-585 As always, adventure in Papua New Guinea begins with a flight of more than 30 hours from the U.S. My routing this time took me from the East Coast to Los Angeles, Honolulu, and Sydney, Australia, then up to Port Moresby, PNG. Dress comfortably and partake of whatever jet lag medication your doctor recommends to help with the grueling flights. Shop carefully for special airline rates to Australia and PNG. Flights to Port Moresby leave from Sydney, Melbourne, and Cairns. Have your travel specialist look into the additional baggage allowance for scuba gear on Air Niugini. . . . Malaria is prevalent and chloroquine resistant. Get medical advice from a tropical disease specialist. Divers have died from malaria acquired in PNG.

Ditty Bag

. . . One evening we brought up a cage from the depths. A dozen nautilus had taken the bait, which meant they had to pose for us as they jet-propelled their way back down.

... The Huli Wigmen, with their elaborate hats of human hair, did an axe-carrying dance march that would have been chilling were I a native of another tribe, about to be attacked.

How to Make a Good Thing Better

A new, larger dinghy, beefed-up air conditioning, and the addition of a water maker would improve this live-aboard and are said to be slated for this autumn. But whether they arrive or not, I'm keeping the Chertan at the top of my list. For the price -- and it's substantially cheaper than its rival live-aboards -- it's more than adequate.

I had heard a rumor that Bob Halstead of *Telita* fame was miffed at Rob for starting an operation in Halstead's home waters. I found no indication this was true. Captain Rob spoke highly of the Halsteads -- he even told me they were godparents to one of his children. I noticed also how he cooperated with the *Telita*, sharing weather information and dive sites.

Once again, PNG lived up to my memories, with diving as psychedelic as anything on this planet and a look into a way of life that is at the same time terrifying and appealing.

E. E.

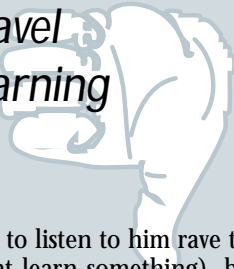
A Sing-Sing with Huli Wigmen in Arse Gras

Don't go to PNG without a side trip to the interior, even if you're a dive curmudgeon who thinks that scraping everything off the surface of your average island would be an improvement. This is one place where the surface scene is just as surreal as the underwater one. The world would be a much blander place without the people of Papua New Guinea on it.

If possible, book your trip to coincide with the Mt. Hagen Tribal Show (Sing-Sing in pidgin English, which is itself known as Tok Tok *Pijin*). This two-day annual event in late fall is one of the most remarkable tribal performances on the planet, and only a handful of foreign tourists have seen it. Imagine more than 80 tribal groups, each decorated in their own cultural style with body painting, shells, and feathers, almost all armed,

chanting, dancing, marching, beating drums, playing flutes, and blowing whistles. Many men had vividly painted faces and intricate feather headdresses. Their bodies were shining from an application of black oil. The Huli Wigmen, with their

Travel Warning



When you visit Pirate's Point on Little Cayman, it's great to have Gladys cook you brie crepes for lunch and charm you with a story about Carnival in Rio over after-dinner drinks.

When Fred Good takes you diving at St. George's Lodge in Belize, you may have to listen to him rave that his way is the best way (pay attention, you might learn something), but he knows his reefs well and he makes the diving great fun.

If I traveled all the way to Papua New Guinea's Walindi Plantation, I wouldn't want to miss Max Benjamin's expertise (have him tell you the story of the orca eating the hammerhead and the frenzy that ensued).

So, for the week of January 14, 1996, traveling to a resort that is personally run earns *In Depth's* thumbs down. The personality that makes the experience will most likely be attending the Diving Equipment and Marketing Association show in New Orleans. Savvy *In Depth* readers will avoid these dates when booking.

elaborate hats of human hair, did an axe-carrying dance-march that would have been chilling were I a native of another tribe, about to be attacked. Many of the men wore nothing but paints, shells, wigs, and a grass skirt-like thing called "arse gras." The number of spears, axes, bows, and arrows was astounding. The warlike marches, threat gestures, posturing, and feigned lunges brought visions of the bloody warfare and cannibalism that has always characterized the culture of the Wahgi Valley.

There were 40,000 PNG residents and performers at this show, and fewer than a hundred foreigners. This spectacle is not put on for tourists, but is a vigorous celebration by people proud of their particular traditions; their warlike rivalry is only barely contained and even today occasionally erupts. What always astounds me is the fact that these tribes from the western highlands of PNG weren't even known to Europeans until 1933. They evolved into many distinct, warring tribes isolated from one another by the extreme ruggedness of the terrain.

Photographers are welcomed, both during the performances and in the staging areas during the elaborate preparations. Handicrafts are on sale at low prices. Some of the most tempting items are masks, stone axes, wooden bowls, and bilums (intricately woven string bags).

Dances with Skulls

We went ashore at Bunama village on Normanby Island. A local bishop was due for a ceremonial visit. A dance troupe had gotten together to welcome him, decked out in feathers, shells, grass skirts, and body paint. Their dress rehearsal of their courtship dance showed a lot of enthusiasm and female breasts. It seemed as though we had dropped in on their tribal life and were witnessing something genuine instead of a manufactured event to entertain the tourists.

Between dives we also made two visits to skull caves back in the bush. We clambered through dense vines into dark holes in the ground. Our flashlights revealed dozens of human skulls leering at us from the damp rock. Older men in the village told us these were the leftovers from cannibal feasts.

E. E.

Bill and Nadine Beard are the owners of Aqua Safaris in Costa Rica. They have provided the diving service at El Ocotal, on Costa Rica's Pacific coast, for the past nine years. According to the Beards, the resort has now decided to provide its own diving service. El Ocotal has erected a new dive shop five feet away from the Beard's dive shop and they are using the same name, Aqua Safaris. Confusing? You bet. Subscribers should be aware that if they are planning on diving with the Beards, not only should their voucher read Bill Beard's Aqua Safari, they should inquire at the dive shop as to which operation they are diving with.

As an alternative to El Ocotal, *In Depth* readers might check out the La Costa Hotel and Villas a couple of beaches to the north at Playa Hermosa, where Diving Safaris also has an operation with daily boat dives. Yes, that's Bill Beard's Diving Safaris.

*Will the Real
Diving Safaris
Please Take a
Giant Stride
Forward?*

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