
Beyond the Horizon, the *Golden Dawn*

Diving at the edge of the world

We keep going further and further afield in search of pristine, high-voltage diving. Is it worth the effort? This month's reviewer wasn't exactly bucking the odds when he chose the Eastern Fields; New Guinea and the Coral Sea rank in the top five spots in the world for diving. However, in the marine world nothing is a sure thing and the quality of a live-aboard can make big difference.

J. Q.

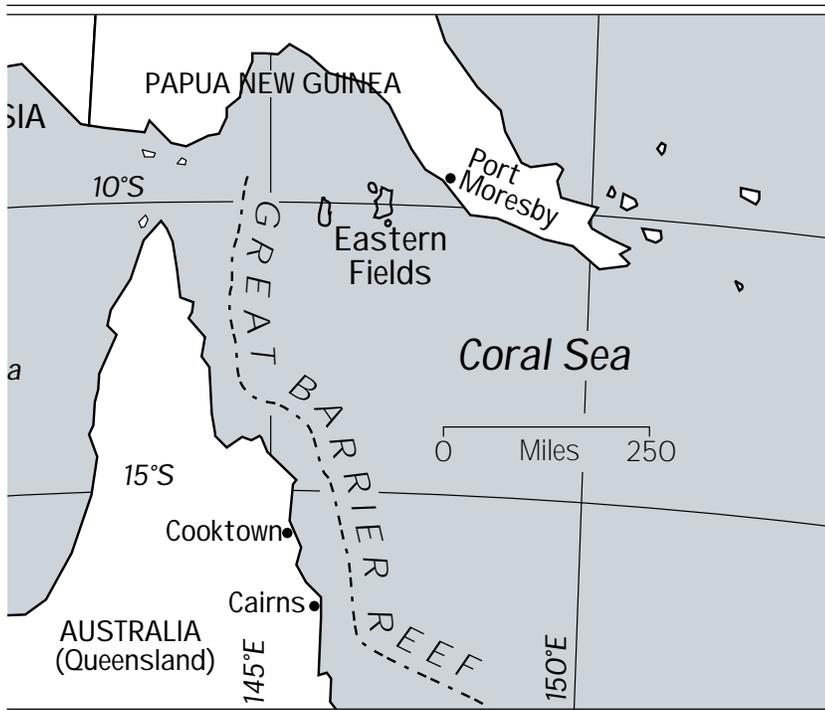
Dear Fellow Diver:

I like to study maps of the world and dream about exotic locales. I love to travel the untrod path. Some might call it wanderlust -- but Webster's defines wanderlust as an urge to travel aimlessly. My travels always have an aim; I just don't want to go to the same old places, thank you.

My most recent dream was to dive the northern Coral Sea off Papua New Guinea. The *Golden Dawn* ferried me there. But the *Golden Dawn* is more than just a ferry, she's a very comfortable yacht indeed, and she's now at the top of my list of the world's great live-aboards. Extensively refitted in 1992, she's now opening new diving horizons at the far edges of the Coral Sea -- the Eastern Fields and Portlock Reefs, 100 miles southwest of Port Moresby.

Brave New World

Our adventure started not far from Port Moresby. After stowing our baggage, feverishly greasing O-rings, and praying to the gods who prevent camera floods, we made our first dives on Moresby's barrier reefs. Our first dives were mainly to get us reacquainted with the sea and our weight belts -- but even with 20- to 60-foot visibility, we were treated to sightings of banded sea snakes, baramundi cod, stingrays, lionfish, vast schools of anthius, and curious batfish. Nudibranchs and colorful flatworms dotted the underwater landscapes, which included small soft corals of all colors. At the Pinnacles, three bommies 50 feet apart with tops 8-20 feet below the surface, we caught our first sight of some of PNG's endemic, exotic creatures: two leaf fish. Surrounding depths lured me below 90 feet along the seamounts' vertical sides.



Eastern Fields, Coral Sea

A brilliant sunrise greeted our arrival the next morning at Eastern Fields, where we spent the day diving both Eastern and False Passages, two 100-foot-wide cuts in the barrier reefs,

one to 120 feet and the other to 60 feet. With visibility upwards of 125 feet in the outgoing tide, the channels showcased large sea fans adorned with multihued crinoids, abundant soft corals, a few grey reef sharks, four-foot Queensland groupers, scrawled filefish, anemones (with several species of anemone fish, including Clark's, tomato and skunk), and schools of unicorn fish and bumphead parrots.

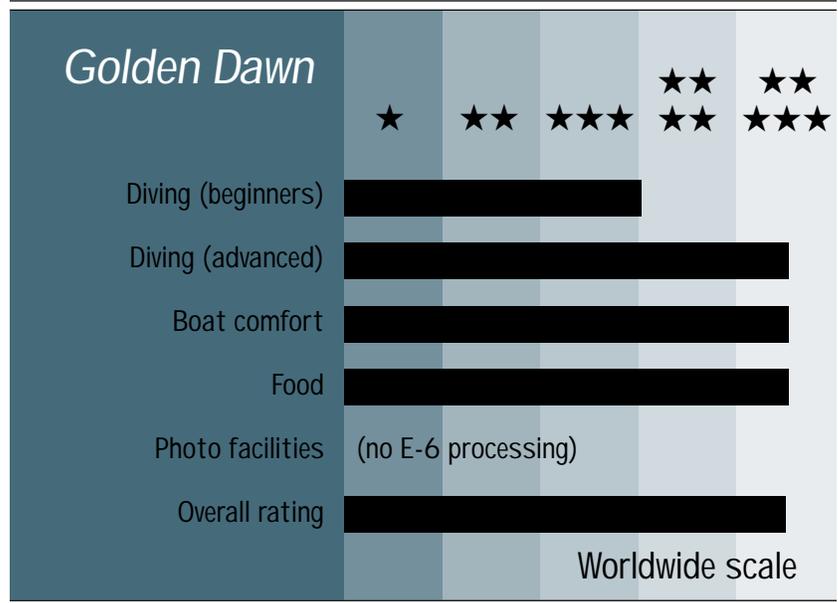
Dives at Shaw Thong, a 150-foot-diameter pinnacle sloping steeply down beyond 200 feet, offered lush growths of brain, staghorn, finger, elkhorn, and other hard corals in all hues of the rainbow. The 150-foot-plus vis distracted me from closeup views of coronet, clown, unicorn, and foxface rabbitfish. Grey and whitetip sharks and a resident school of Pacific barracuda added to the thrills.

Neptune's Garden, whose deep cuts, prominent buttresses, and labyrinths of hard corals encouraged lengthy explorations, provided a real treat for my buddy and me. We spotted a clump of algae moving against the current; upon closer inspection (and after reviewing the Golden Dawn's fish ID books), we realized we had come upon a juvenile rockmover wrasse, an expert at camouflage.

Famous Photographer's Famous Sites

Like any good showman, Craig DeWitt, owner and master of the *Golden Dawn*, made sure each day's adventures were better than the last. On the fourth day, he took us to Carl's Ultimate (named after Carl Roessler of See and Sea Travel). This pinnacle, one of several, boasted 125-foot-plus vis, a flat top in 10-15 feet of water, and vertical walls to 150-200 feet. My deepest dive was to 87 feet; average was 20-60 feet, where the flora and fauna muscled each other for space within the lush undersea garden. Five lionfish posed on a single three-foot-wide coral head; countless thousands of anthius darted about the hard and soft corals; schools of curious batfish were entranced by our sparkling bubbles. Whitetip reef sharks and dogtooth tuna silently patrolled the seaward points. Schools of jacks flashed by, punctuated with gold-backed puffers and gold-scrawled trunkfish; longnosed hawkfish posed on red sea fans. A note in my log reads, "Great, great place -- want to stay rest of trip."

Moving on overnight to Portlock Reefs, we experienced the thrills of Shark Reef, where a safely controlled feed of some



Most of the new luxury live-aboards have private showers and heads in every cabin. The Golden Dawn does not. So why five stars for boat comfort? Three divers whose opinions I trust, who have been on the Golden Dawn, all rated the boat as excellent. I acquiesce to the five stars.

J. Q.

If you want to see what bizarre creatures you can find close in to New Guinea's shore, take a look at Bob Halstead's muck dive photos in the November 1994 issue of Ocean Realm.

J. Q.

18 silvertip, whitetip, and grey reef sharks was conducted at 50 feet, allowing us to film these majestic creatures no more than 10-30 feet away from the comforting reef slope. Mutiny Pinnacle provided exquisite videos of a freeswimming crinoid. Burt's Backyard (honoring photojournalists Burt Jones and Maurine Shimlock) produced colorful sweetlips, curious saddle-backed grouper, slingjaw wrasse, and numerous nudibranchs.

On the return leg of our cruise, we were again treated to magnificent seascapes at Carl's Ultimate, as well as herds of grazing parrotfish and a close-up of a sweetlips being tended by two groups of meticulous cleaner wrasse. Grand Canyon provided an exciting drift dive at 70 feet, where we sailed by group after group of five- to 10-foot sea fans and made the acquaintance of a sea turtle.

Coming full circle, our last dive, once again at the Pinnacles, supported Craig's contention that some of PNG's greatest diving is close to shore in "only" 75-foot vis. On this particular dive, we scored a scorpion leaf fish, crocodile fish, and cuttlefish; I videotaped what I think were mating olive sea snakes, close up and personal

You Came All This Way . . .

at least a week touring PNG's cultures. While staying at comfortable, full-service lodges, you can sample the centuries-old lifestyles of both river and highland peoples. Trans Nuigini Tours, the largest local tour operator, offers several different packages, including treks in the Highlands and cruises up the Sepik River. These packages, though all-inclusive, are expensive, averaging \$250 to \$300 per day, probably because there are so few tourists. The rates will drop when tourism increases, but so will the experience. It's worth the bucks.

Taking nothing away from the *Golden Dawn*, the land tours were the best money I've ever spent. Watch out for severe baggage restrictions on these land portions of your trip. To help you avoid additional charges, Trans Nuigini Tours will hold your overweight baggage or diving gear in Port Moresby.

Papua New Guinea was one of the last corners of the world to be explored by Europeans. Because of its remoteness and rugged terrain, the villages and people of PNG still retain most of their primitive culture. It won't last forever. Don't miss an opportunity to spend

The Dawn of Diving

Depending on sea conditions, currents, and anchorages, we conducted our dives in three different ways: (1) entry and exit over the *Golden Dawn's* sides via giant-stride entry or midship ladder and

platform; (2) entry from the mother ship and exit to the Zodiac tender; or (3) diving entirely from the Zodiac. In all cases, the crew expertly handled our photo and video equipment as though it were their own. For those of us who were uncomfortable stepping from the mother ship's side to the Zodiac, the crew placed our tanks in the tender, then helped us put them on in the Zodiac. The *Golden Dawn* deployed a Jesus line and down line for safety; on drift dives, the Zodiac and tethered camera boat would quickly come to wherever we happened to pop up.

Three or four dives a day was normal, but a fifth, night dive was usually offered. Indeed, Craig encouraged us to dive till we dropped.

Almost all our dive locations allowed a 15- to 20-foot reeftop safety stop amid lush corals and darting reef fish. The number of dives per day was determined by guest consensus; three or four was normal, but a fifth, night dive was usually offered. Indeed, Craig encouraged us to dive till we dropped. He made most dives with us, but none were guided, hand-holding affairs. Craig would present a white-board pictorial description of the site and things to look for during the dive, and say, "Let's go diving!" A few currents were a bit strong, but we used them to our advantage. Less experienced divers should

buddy up with Craig, or better yet, bring along their own knowledgeable buddy on a trip like this. A Scuba Tuba or Sea Sausage is required; a whistle (and strobe, for night diving) is highly recommended.

A First-Class Ferry

A typical world-class live-aboard, the 80-foot *Golden Dawn* was designed by owner Craig DeWitt to accommodate 10 discriminating divers. There are five spacious cabins, each with individual air conditioning, portholes or windows, closets, plenty of drawer space, fan, bunk reading lights, and washbasin; however, they do have to share four saltwater flush toilets, three of them with showers. The PNG crew of six kept our cabins clean and neat, handled all our diving and camera equipment competently, and ably assisted us into and out of the water.

The spacious, carpeted main salon, finished in exotic New Guinea hardwoods, has padded benches, hi-fi, television, VCR, and a great CD and book library. The *Golden Dawn's* wooden hull, decks, and bulkheads effectively muffle engine and compressor noise; I was not the only person to note how quiet the boat was.

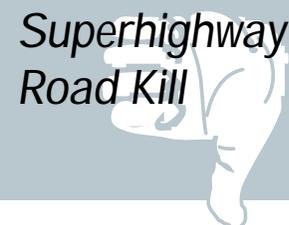
The dive-gear area at the stern requires some diver cooperation. Benches with 72-cubic-foot aluminum tank holders allow sit-down gearing up with milk-crate diving-stuff stowage below. Tanks with BCs were filled in place to 3,000 psi cold. A rinse tank was provided for cameras, another for masks. A large above-deck area furnished with padded benches and a couple of chaise longues is used for dining and relaxing; the rollup windscreens and awning provide shelter from weather, prevailing winds, and UV exposure.

So what sets off the *Golden Dawn* from the others in its class? Not the unlimited freshwater showers available midship for apres-dive rinses, the abundance of navigation, oxygen, or safety equipment, freshly laundered towels after each dive, nor the absence of unnecessary diving limitations. What the *Golden Dawn* does have that differentiates it from competitors is (1) both dynamic-cruising and static-anchoring stabilizers that turn the churning ocean into a placid lake, (2) an extremely stable midship dive platform, (3) an honor-bar cooler on the topside lounge, (4) reboarding foot chains on the Zodiac tender, and (5) a dedicated mini-Zodiac towed by the diver tender to transport all camera equipment to and from the dive sites. And -- above all -- Craig DeWitt's dedication to mending perceived problems *right*

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Billing it "High Adventure on the Information Superhighway," Turner Home Entertainment launched their Outdoor Adventure on American Online. I haven't made it through the rest of the great outdoors, but I did check out their scuba section. Did you know that the *Superior Producer* is one of Bonaire's two best wreck dives? Well, Outdoor Forum says so, even though the *Superior Producer* is actually outside Anna Baai on the island of Curaçao. Outdoor Forum also says the wreck of the *Hooker* is on a 60-foot-deep bottom. If you believe that, you'll get bent; bottom is over 90 feet. The list goes on and on ("Bonaire is great for fish, sharks, and mantas...").

Sorry guys, you've got a long way to go before I believe anything I read on this forum.



Superhighway
Road Kill

It's the only boat diving the Eastern Fields, but compared to PNG's Telita or Tiata, Golden Dawn is cheaper by a couple of hundred dollars, plus you save a couple of hundred more on airfare because it leaves from Port Moresby.

J. Q.

now, providing absolutely the best diving and cruising satisfaction possible, and his love of PNG's ocean and its resident creatures. The *Golden Dawn's* master still has a beginning diver's enthusiasm, which tends to infect even the most jaded of us.

Icing on the Cake

As if the boat and the diving weren't enough, Mary, an ex-pat Aussie, was always fussing about the galley baking fresh bread, croissants, cookies, and cakes for us throughout the day and night, along with her sumptuous meals (always served with complimentary fine Australian red and white wines). Breakfasts generally were cereals and croissants, but also included pancakes, french toast, eggs and bacon, and omelets. Lunches were more like dinners: spinach-cheese pies, Hawaiian pizza, roasted chicken, french-fried shrimp, homemade soups. Dinners were lamb chops, broiled baramundi steaks, lasagna, spaghetti with fresh vegetables, chicken satay, grilled mackerel, and quiches. All meals were served with fresh lettuce salads, pasta salads, and al dente fresh broccoli, peas, beans, and other veggies. Cheesecakes and other decadent desserts tortured our common sense.

Ditty Bag

Tours packages. Ten days aboard the *Golden Dawn* costs \$2,750 without West Coast air fare, which will set you back another \$1,500. . . . A visa is required. After spending this kind of money, you probably won't care that \$25 Australian and 15 New Guinea Kina are required departure taxes, or that 10 Kina are needed for an on-arrival visa. . . . Malaria is a problem; a malarial prophylaxis prescription is recommended. Call the Centers for Disease Control (404-639-2572) at least a month before leaving to get latest malaria warning. . . . Ten-day cruises are limited by weather to the months of September through December. . . . E-6 processing is not available aboard the *Golden Dawn*. And bring your own spirits.

See and Sea Travel is the only service booking the *Golden Dawn* in the U.S. (800-DIV-XPRT, or 415-434-3400 in California). They'll provide both *Golden Dawn* and Trans Nuigini

Minor gripes: A second tier for camera equipment would be useful, along with a larger camera rinse tank for those obsessive-compulsive divers and their expensive toys. Because so many of us donned 3- or 4-mm wet suits for the cool (75°F) water, we almost didn't have enough weightbelt lead on board. Other minor quibbles included the lack of 24-hour availability of coffee, and . . . what else? Can't think of anything.

Ad Poke

reads Sherwood's new ad. The full-page photograph is of photographer Andrew Wight scrutinizing his console under water. It may be getting close to time for Andrew to take that glance: while it's almost impossible to read his darkened Encore computer, right below it his old mechanical pressure gauge is easy to read. It reads 350 psi.

The insert accompanying TUSA Imprex fins (SF-7700) says "Congratulations [sic] on your purchase." While I try to be politically correct, I can't help but comment on TUSA's lousy proofreading — at least that's what I hope it is. It also says, "Please read and adhere to the instructions in order to fully master the performance and maintenance ensuring [sic] a long trouble free life. Remember 'Practice makes perfect.'" So that's the secret of longevity in Japan.

"Encore tells me everything I need to know at a glance. So we're free to concentrate on capturing the kind of footage that puts our audience right there in the water with us."

Bottom Line

My adventure to PNG's far-flung sea delights ended all too soon. But I believe my experience on the *Golden Dawn* and her trips to the far horizon will be with me for a long, long time. My recommendation: book her as soon as you can.

F. D.