



Walindi & Loloata Papua New Guinea

Text and photos by Scott Bennett

Papua New Guinea. A name evocative of the exotic, this island nation is one of superlatives. Lying south of the equator some 450 miles north of Australia, it shares the world's second largest island with the Indonesian province of West Papua. It is a magnificent, untamed land of towering snow-capped peaks, smoking volcanoes, impenetrable forests, exotic wildlife and even more exotic cultures. A population of just over six million is comprised of a staggering 700 cultural groups speaking 800 languages. The multitude of attractions aren't limited to the land; its vibrant tropical seas are home to some of the best diving on the planet.

The allure of this island nation has always beckoned, and as I was going to be in North Queensland, the opportunity was too good to pass up. With my time somewhat limited, I'd arranged to visit two of the country's most famous dive resorts: The Walindi Plantation Resort, located on the island of New Britain, and Loloata, a mere stone's throw from Port Moresby's International Airport.

The adventure began at Cairns' International airport for my 70-minute flight to the capitol of Port Moresby.

Feather stars decorate the reef at Baldwin's Bommie, Loloata



CLOCKWISE: Volcanoes are a dominant feature of the New Britain landscape; Whip corals frame an orange sponge; A blennie plays hide and seek; Walindi Plantation Resort

From there, I would connect with a domestic flight to Hoskins, on the island of New Britain. Checking in, I was struck with a bombshell: I'd have to pay AU\$260.00 in excess baggage fees! The carry-on rules were equally strict, allowing only one bag. I stuffed my computer and hard drives in my camera bag and grudgingly paid my bill. Someone once told me that situations like these are the reason God created credit cards.

Soon, all was forgotten as my flight winged its way over the azure waters of the Coral Sea. Upon arrival in Port Moresby, I collected my bags and headed to the domestic terminal. Several hours later, I boarded a Dash 8 and took off for Hoskins, hoping to get to Walindi in time to squeeze in a night dive. Shortly after takeoff, we traversed the cloud-

swathed spine of emerald mountains bisecting the island. Upon crossing the Dampier Strait, the clouds rolled in and by the time we landed, the heavens had opened into a torrential downpour.

More troubling was the realization that two of my bags were missing, one of which contained all of my underwater camera equipment. A quick phone call to Port Moresby confirmed they were still there and would arrive the next morning.

My driver then loaded the van with my sole suitcase and headed for Walindi. Minutes later, the heavy downpour ceased abruptly. However, the air was still laden with humidity, a fact evidenced by the swathes of mist wafting lazily above the road. Legions of frogs were scattered along the damp pavement, of which my driver did an impeccable job of avoiding!

Around 30 minutes later, we finally turned up the tree-lined roadway leading to the Walindi Plantation Resort. On hand to meet me was owner, Max Benjamin,

along with a pair of curious canines that he jokingly called his sniffer dogs. Having checked out the new arrival, they quickly retreated for the dining area. I was just in time for a BBQ dinner and a cold South Pacific lager, the perfect antidote for a long day of travel.

Enroute to my bungalow after dinner, the rain returned, necessitating a somewhat a hasty retreat. With no camera gear to assemble, I decided to call it an

early night. The rhythmic patter of rain on the roof accompanied with a chorus of frogs soon lulled me into a deep and pleasant slumber.

Early the next morning, stepping outside my fan-cooled bungalow was like stepping into a sauna. The rain that had fallen throughout the night had finally ceased and was replaced by humidity of epic proportions.

The resort grounds were like an immense tropical garden. Massive trees dripped with epiphytic ferns, while the air was redolent with a profusion of tropical flowers. Something else was in the air too; a faint yet unmistakable hint of sulphur. I discovered the resort's next-

door neighbour is Mt Garuna, an active yet benign volcano.

Walindi

Walindi Plantation Resort really is a plantation. Initially established as a cocoa plantation in 1935, the property was purchased in 1969 by Australian agriculturist, Max Benjamin, who replanted the property with oil palms.

In the early 1970's, Max began to explore Kimbe Bay and soon discovered a marine habitat of unparalleled diversity right on his own doorstep. Max eventually shifted his focus from the palm plantation to running a dive business with his wife Cecile. By 1983, two guest bungalows



PNG

CLOCKWISE: Massive orange sponges are common at Kimbe Bay; A scribbled filefish poses on fan coral; barracuda school cruises the reef top; Chilling out at Walindi Plantation Resort

tion was established in 1996 as a headquarters for marine and terrestrial research supporting conservation of some of the world's richest environments.

With pristine reefs and rainforests on the doorstep, scientists have easy access to ecosystems of astonishing diversity. The Centre is operated by a local non-government organization whose goal is to be a national leader

for conservation education and awareness, community action and sustainable development in the area.

Diving

After breakfast, I wandered over to the dive shop, where I met managers, Dan and Cat, who gave me a rundown on the diving. Walindi's dive boats regularly visit approximately 25 dive sites, with travel times ranging from five to 75 minutes.

Largely unspoiled by human activity, the nutrient-rich waters boast more than 200 reefs and dive sites possessing a staggering 70 percent of all coral species recorded in the Indo/

Pacific region. Fish species are equally prolific, with 900 recorded species present; a total sure to increase as additional research is carried out. I was really starting to miss my camera!

With an hour to relax before my bags arrived, I took position on a comfortable lounge chair overlooking the bay for a snooze. My relaxation was interrupted by the arrival of Dan with the ominous question, "Do you want the good news or the bad news?" It turned out my bags were coming, but the flight had been delayed until 4:00 pm, effectively putting the brakes on the day's underwater photographic endeavours.

However, this was a reminder that diving isn't all about photog-

raphy. With all that diversity on the doorstep, I was eager to get into the water, gear or no gear. Dan suggested a dive after lunch, and my arm didn't have to be twisted!

Arriving at the dive shop, I required a full set of gear. As I've never been fond of shortie wetsuits (due to a hodgepodge of cuts and stings obtained on previous occasions) I was fitted with a sleek blue lycra wetsuit. Once suited up, Kat joked that I looked like one of the X-Men!

Dive sites

Our destination was Hanging



had been established, with an additional six constructed over the ensuing decade. Today, a maximum of twenty-four guests are catered to in 12 self-contained bungalows nestled amidst the luxuriant tropical vegetation. Max and Cecile are also

actively involved with the Mahonia Na Dari Conservation and Research Centre. Translated as "Guardians of the Sea" in the local dialect, the organiza-



CLOCKWISE: Anemone and attendants; Complaint cuttlefish poses for a portrait; Pinjalo School; Chevron barracudas

Gardens, a mere five minutes away from the dive shop. Plunging in, the water temperature was a bath-like 31 degrees. The previous evening's downpour had severely hampered visibility but not our enthusiasm, as we descended to a precipitous wall that plunged to nearly 30m.

The site's dominant feature is the masses of rope sponge cascading from the rock walls. Reaching lengths up to three meters, the sponges were everywhere, their intricate tangles adorned with a multitude of feather stars. In addition to several large caverns, the vertical wall was riddled with a plethora ledges and overhangs, which were home to an abundance of sponges, sea squirts and nudibranchs. Just off the wall, a school of juvenile bigeye trevalley kept close tabs

of it.

Mind you, I didn't wish to become permanently liberated and was looking forward to finally getting my housings for the next day's diving. A full-day excursion was on the agenda to visit some of the outlying dive sites including Susan's Reef, one of Walindi's signature sites.

Luggage woes

Upon reaching the jetty after the dive, I was informed the van had arrived from the airport with my luggage conspicuously absent. When I told Max, he immediately got on the phone to the airport in Port Moresby. Within a matter of minutes, they were tracked down, and we were assured they would arrive on the early flight the next morning and should be at

on our progress.

At first, I almost felt naked to be to be diving without my camera, but after a short while, it almost became somewhat liberating. As a photographer, it becomes all too easy to be wrapped up with taking pictures. I was able to enjoy my environs and dive for the sheer enjoyment

the resort around 7:00AM. In addition, I had my flight changed to a day later to make up for the missed day.

Still, I can't really complain; in all the years of travelling, I'd never lost any luggage, and the law of averages dictates it would happen somewhere. Oh well, time for another South Pacific Lager!

I awoke early the next morning, eager for the day's diving that lay ahead. Upon exiting the dining hall, the girl at reception gave me "the look" accompanied with a somewhat timid "excuse me..." I immediately knew what that meant.

It seemed my bags wouldn't arrive until 10:00AM, effectively scuttling my participation in the 8:00AM departure. Down but not out, I headed back to my bungalow and resigned myself to taking some more shots around the resort.

Setting up a shot ten minutes later, I stared in utter disbelief as I saw my bags being carried to the front desk! Euphoria set in, and I made a mad dash for the dive shop while the bags were delivered. "My bags arrived. Don't leave without me!" I blurted out to Dan, as I broke a land speed record racing back to my bungalow. Assembling my housing in record time, I ran back to the dive shop and made the 8:00 departure in the nick of time.

It was a full boat. In addition to dive guides, Andrew and Keiko, were a

French couple I'd met the day before, and a trio of Japanese loaded with cameras. As we departed the jetty and progressed further into the bay, I finally got to see the source of the sulphurous aromas. Looming large behind the resort was the silhouette of Mt. Garuna volca-

no. Scanning the horizon in all directions, I discerned the landscape was strewn volcanic cones, a testament to the island's violent geological history.

Inglis Shoals

Forty-five minutes later, we arrived at





CLOCKWISE: Kimbe Bay; coral trout hides amongst an intricate tangle of whip corals; incredible undersea gardens of Susan's Reef; Curious grey reef shark comes in for a look; Feather star clings to a mass of whip corals

Inglis Shoals, an isolated seamount whose distance from shore ensured visibility would be unaffected by sediment from the recent heavy rains.

Descending along the mooring line to the reef top at 12m, we were soon engulfed by a multitude of fish, including a small school of chevron barracuda. I immediately approached them to get a few shots, assuming they'd immediately disperse at our presence.

After a few per functionary glances, they ignored us and continued patrolling the perimeter of the reef.

Below, the pinnacle's summit was shrouded with a patchwork of anemones, giant orange sponges, and table and staghorn corals. Swirling amongst them were successions of purple anthias, angelfish, surgeonfish, triggerfish and one very compliant cuttlefish whose tentacles practically touched the domeport of my housing.

At the northern edge of the reef, a red fan coral was home to a scribbled filefish while a school of pinjalo hovered above the nearby drop-off, their deep red color contrasting sharply with the blue of the open water.

During our safety stop, a couple of grey reef sharks arrived to check us out. Coming progressively closer with each pass, they were starting to make me a tad uneasy, and I was eager to get back on the boat. Dan told me later that this happens at Inglis Shoals all the time, and the sharks were



PNG

merely curious. (To my knowledge, all divers have made it back to the resort intact) Still, I'd take a shark over a titan triggerfish any day!

Susan's Reef

Our next stop was the most anticipated dive of my visit. Susan's Reef has made many a diver's top ten dive site list—winning accolades for its dense aggregation of whip corals. Occupying a submerged ridge, Susan's is connected to a much larger reef by a saddle, which creates a channel between them. I was initially concerned that we might miss the whip corals, an assumption that was quickly laid to rest.

At 16m, it came into glorious view, an impenetrable tangle of red punctuated with sponges and plate corals. Truly stunning! The southern end of the reef proved more spectacular, with dense congregations of staghorn corals, ele-



phant ear sponges and magnificent fan corals. Encrusted with a myriad of feather stars, some specimens were nearly three meters across! All the while, legions of fish went about their business, oblivious to the unbridled splendour of their surroundings.

The magnitude of life jam-packed into this relatively small area was like an undersea Garden of Eden. With unlimited





PNG

LEFT TO RIGHT: Fan corals, Kimbe Bay; Colourful but unglamorously named varicose wart slug; A variety of corals crowd the reef tops of Kimbe Bay

Christine's Reef

A series of detached reefs connected by underwater ridges, Christine's was another knock-your-fins-off site with all the Kimbe trademarks. Towering barrel sponges adorned with multicoloured feather stars sprouted from the rugged terrain as mélange of gorgonians, soft corals, whip corals, and massive orange sponges set the reef ablaze with riotous abandon.

Even the sea cucumbers were stunning! Inching across the sandy bottom was the remarkable *thelenota rubolineata*. With its intricate network of vivid red lines and knobby protuberances, it must rank as one of the most photogenic members of its family.

By the end of the dive, I wasn't sure who was more exhausted; the camera or me!

Finally, it was time to head back to the resort, arriving at the jetty moments before a

late-afternoon cloudburst doused the intense tropical heat. Earlier in the day, I had asked reception if it was possible to change my flight back to Port Moresby to a day later in order make up for the missed diving. Upon arrival, I was ecstatic to discover my flight had been changed, giving me an extra day of diving. The photo gods were finally smiling!

Joel's Reef

The next morning, I awoke with a plan. It's a cruel inevitability that whatever camera setup I take on a dive, something will present itself that makes me wish I had the OTHER one! This time, I decided to take both housings on each dive—one set for wide-angle and the other for macro.

The sea was calm as we headed out, our progress made somewhat tricky by the low tide. In front of the resort, the dogs joyfully bounded across the exposed flats trying to catch any hapless shorebirds they could get their paws on. Apparently, they have yet to meet with any success!

After the superlative dives of the previous day, I couldn't wait to see what guides Keiko and Peter had in store. First up was Joel's Reef, another outlying sea-mount. Commencing the dive was a case of déjà vue.

While descending the mooring line, the first thing we encoun-

photo ops at every turn, I could have easily spent all day in this one exquisite location.

After a surface interval and lunch, I wondered what other marvels Kimbe Bay had in store for our final dive. Susan's was a tough act to follow, but Christine's Reef admirably rose to the challenge and delivered in spades!



The *thelenota rubolineata* sea cucumber is one of the most colourful members of its family



Some of Kimbe Bay's fan corals stretch an impressive three metres across





LEFT TO RIGHT: Barrel sponge towers above the reef; Anemones of Kimbe Bay come in a vivid array of colours; Big-eye trevalley school; Dwarf Stonefish

tered was a school of chevron barracuda, this time attendant school of big-eye trevalley in tow. Below, the reef top was blanketed with magnificent hard coral gardens interspersed with numerous

and orange ocelli.

Good buoyancy was imperative here; during our dive brief, we were informed a large portion of the reef top was blanketed with fire coral!

Emma Reef

Next up, South Emma Reef was another site of superlatives. The reef top was bursting with a myriad of reef fish, including butterflyfish, fire Dartfish, clown triggerfish, batfish, longfin bannerfish and the all-pervading species of anemonefish. Further down, at 12m, the bommie boasted a prolific mantle of hard corals, soft corals and sponges.

Restorf Island

Our final stop of the day was Restorf Island. Turquoise waters gently lapped a luminous beach of white sand, while a short distance away, the tropical forest crept right to the water's edge. During the surface interval, the boys took our gear ashore, as we all tucked into a

anemones and sponges.

After taking a few wide-angle shots, I spotted some phyllidia nudibranchs and switched to macro. Boasting harlequin patterns of black and blue accented with yellow pustules, their colourful appearance belies their rather unappealing common name of wart slugs!

Nearby was a short hand commensal shrimp, its transparent body accented by a colourful wardrobe of large white spots and a tail punctuated with five black



tasty buffet lunch.

Observing the proceedings from a bare branch high above, a patient brahminy kite sat waiting for some scraps. Peter tossed a chicken bone aloft, which the raptor deftly snatched from midair with its razor-sharp talons.

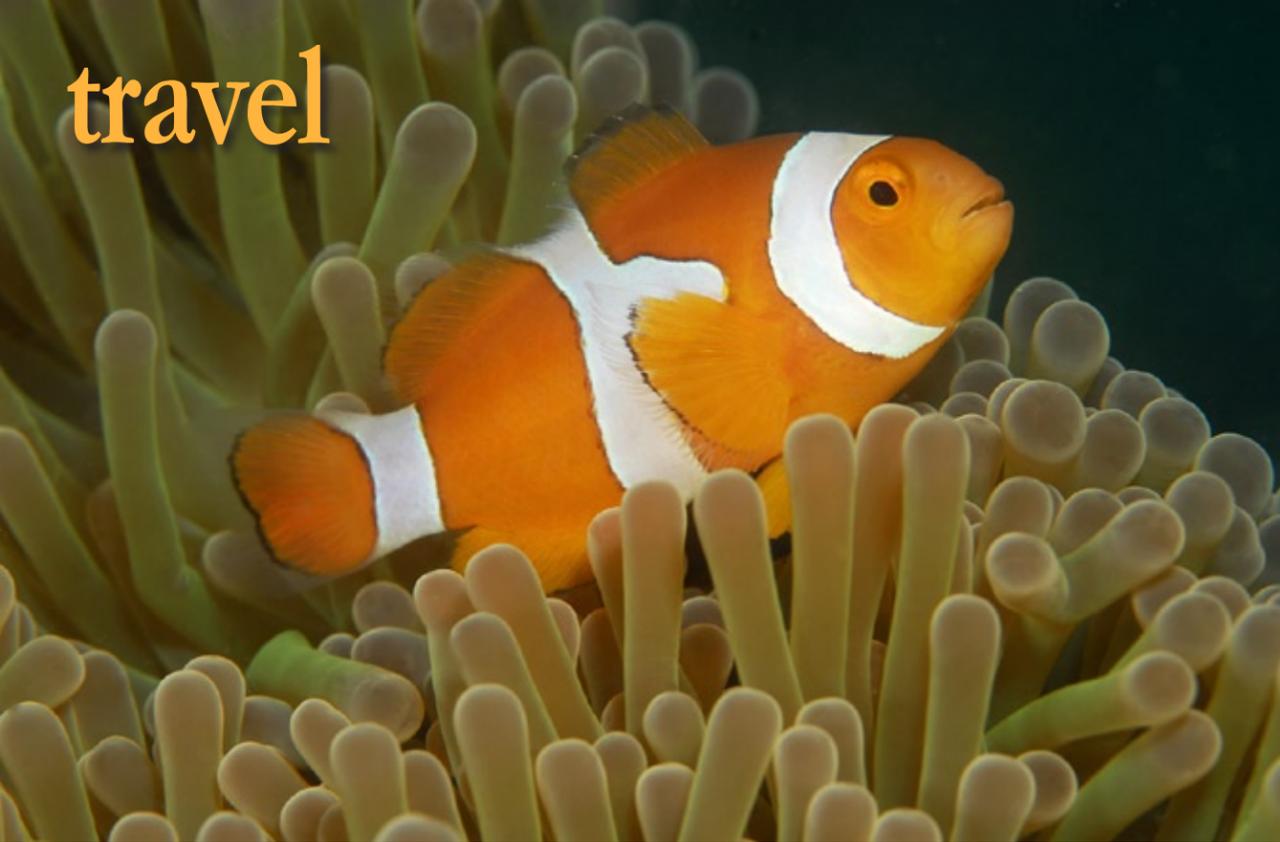
For our final dive, I abandoned my wide-angle set-up to concentrate solely on macro. Here, on the western side of the island, the reef slopes downward amidst a patchwork of loosely connected coral bommies. While the slope descended to 32 metres, my flight the following morning the next day necessitated a shallow dive.

Sandy areas linking the island and the reef were home to large congregations of garden eels. Maddeningly shy, they immediately ducked for cover the moment my camera got anywhere with-



Commensal Shrimp

Corals and anemones



PNG

CLOCKWISE: Clown anemonefish; Spinecheek anemonefish; Hard corals and purple anthias; Early morning at Kimbe Bay

in range. Far more cooperative were numerous gobies, each diligently standing guard as their attendant partner shrimps bulldozed unwanted debris from the confines of their communal burrows.

Moving on, the bommies were home to loads of reef fish, morays, nudibranchs and a colourful Christmas tree worms. Numerous anemones housed colonies of spinecheek anemonefish, pink anemonefish and clownfish.

The highlight was a white dwarf scorpionfish, sitting immobile and practically invisible on the sandy bottom. I was so engrossed photographing it that I almost knelt on a much smaller second individual sitting nearby!

Unfortunately, all good things must end, and soon it was time to head back to the resort. The next morning, I sadly bid my generous hosts farewell. Despite my all-too-brief stay, the incredible diving was already making me think about a return trip.

But onwards! More diving adventures lay in wait at my second destination, Loloata Island Resort.

Trip to Loloata Island

On the drive back to the airport, a roadside sign caught my attention. Reading the caption "Leukeut", I was confused to its meaning until I sounded it out phonetically—"Lookout"!

I then realized it was written in Pidgin, one of PNG's official languages. Tok Pisin, more commonly known as Pidgin, has evolved as the medium through which the nation's multitude of cultural groups is able to communicate with one another.

We arrived at Hoskins airport with time to spare before the flight. As it

turned out, PLENTY of time to spare. My original flight the day before had been cancelled, thus bumping everyone onto mine. The next flight wasn't until late afternoon, giving me a five-hour layover. To put a positive spin on things, it gave me some much-needed photo editing time on my laptop.

I finally arrived in Port Moresby around 6:00pm. Patiently waiting outside my terminal was my driver from Loloata. The drive to the jetty was a mere 15 minutes, followed by a brief ten-minute boat transfer to the island by water taxi.

With the waning rays of the setting sun giving way to a twilight canvas of purple, we arrived at the resort jetty around 6:30. It was one seriously long jetty too, necessitated by the very shallow waters at low tide. My late arrival ensured my night diving ambitions had been derailed once again. I was



Chelidonura nudibranch



shoreline. At reception, I was told to watch out for banded sea kraits along the path. At night, the venomous reptiles slither up from the shore to spend the evening curled up on the warm pavement. Fortunately, my stroll proved to be snake-free, and I made it back to the room without incident. Upon completion of my nightly camera assembly and battery charging duties, I fell unconscious moments after hitting the pillow.

Loloata Island Resort

The name Loloata is derived from two Motu words, "loloa" and "ta" which mean "hill" and "one". The main house was established as a private residence in the early 60's and by 1970, Loloata was established as a weekend retreat. By 1978, it was a bona fide resort catering to holiday-makers, diving enthusiasts and conference groups. Longtime manager, Dik Knight, is a true diving pioneer in the region and has personally discovered a number of the area's dive sites.

Mingling with the frequent guests is a number of island residents, albeit

non-native. Some years ago, wallabies were introduced to the island and have since multiplied, becoming the Loloata equivalent of pigeons. There are also pigeons, but of the decidedly jumbo variety. Wandering amid the grounds is a trio of Queen Victoria pigeons, the world's largest species. The size of a small turkey, they sport impressive headdress of lacy feathers resembling a blue-grey afro.

In contrast to Walindi's lush tropical surroundings, the drier environs of Bootless Bay are more reminiscent of Australia. Rolling hills dotted with eucalyptus trees fringed the shoreline, while rugged blue silhouettes of mountains rose in the distance. Most



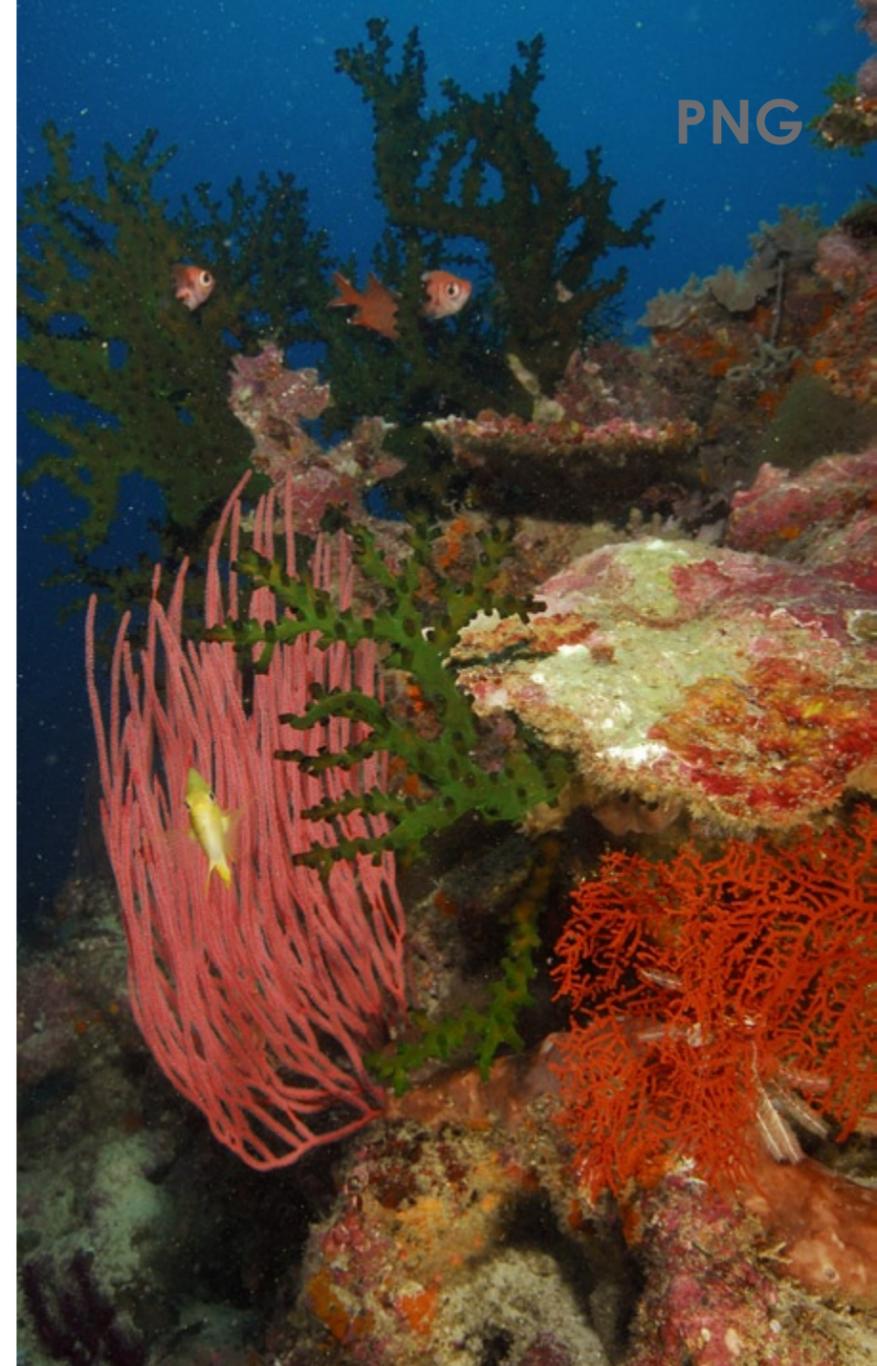
surprising was the not-so-distant skyline of Port Moresby.

With its close proximity to the airport, Loloata Island Resort is also a preferred overnight stopover for visitors with connecting flights as well as expats seeking a weekend respite from the nation's rough and tumble capitol.

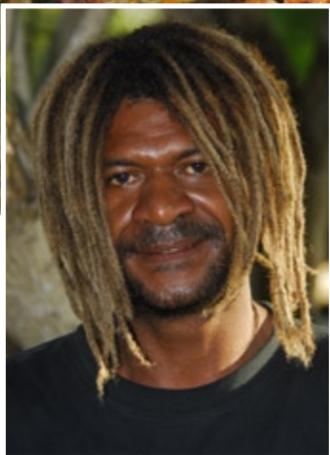
Just like the above water topography, Loloata's undersea environs are noticeably different than Walindi's,



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: One of the impressive carvings on display at Loloata Resort; View from Loloata Island; Fish soup at Suzie's Bommie, Loloata; Pair of common lionfish hang out in the current; Loloata Island



CLOCKWISE: Pumpkin Patch; Leaf scorpionfish; Loloata reef scene; Oblique-Banded Sweetlips; Franco, dive guide extraordinaire



found on several of Loloata's dive sites, and it was right at the top of my photo wish list!

Strolling to the dive shop after breakfast the next morning, I met Franco, who was to be my guide for the next two days. Boasting big dreadlocks and an even bigger smile, he inquired if there was anything specific that I wanted to photograph. I knew immediately where I wanted to go!

Several days before I departed Australia, I had met a diver who had just come from Loloata. During her stay, she had observed no less than three of my sought-after scorpionfish at a site called The Pumpkin Patch. Due to its location, however, Franco suggested we save it for the next day and do a few dives closer to home. Sensing my disappointment, he assured me he had something special in mind.

Suzie's Bommie

Under a glorious clear blue sky, we set

out across Bootless Bay for the 20-minute boat ride to Suzie's Bommie. As on my second day at Walindi, I assembled both housings to maximize image potential. Little did I know of the wonders that lay ahead!

Upon arrival, our entourage of three photographers and two guides quickly entered the water and headed straight to the bottom at 30m. Beneath me, I spied what appeared to be the graceful contour of a large moray eel undulating above the sandy bottom. Upon closer inspection, my eyes widened as I realized this was no eel, but an enormous olive sea snake! Just as I was getting into position to take a shot, it propelled itself to the surface for a breath of air. (And I wasn't about to get in its way!)

Moving on, we approached the site's massive bommie and slowly started to work our way around its perimeter. Moments later, Franco pointed out a

trio of leaf scorpionfish, two purple and one white. However, the best was yet to come.

Approaching the end of the bommie, I was greeted by a panorama of sheer spectacle. Hovering above the current-swept point was a swirling maelstrom of fish. Dominating the proceedings was an immense school of oblique-lined sweetlips. Intermingling amongst them was a cornucopia of yellowtail fusiliers, harlequin sweetlips, anthias, coral trout and a couple of camera-shy Napoleon wrasse.

On the reef top below, an incredible profusion of tubastrea, fan and soft cor-

boasting a plethora of different environments and species. However, it was one specific denizen that had piqued my interest.

Over the last few years, Loloata has gained fame as one of THE places in the world to observe the lacy scorpionfish, the Holy Grail of the underwater photographer. This gaudily attired member of the scorpionfish family is predictably





als created a rich tableau, their polyps extended to capture passing morsels swept in by the strong currents.

While gaping at the extravaganza before me, I felt a finger tapping my shoulder, which then gestured to a

large fissure in the rock less than a metre away. It took a few moments of careful scrutiny to realize I was staring at a massive stonefish! Attired in a patchwork of pink, orange, white and green hues, its unsightly counte-



PNG

CLOCKWISE THIS PAGE: Weedy scorpionfish; Porcelain crab; Leaf scorpionfish portrait; A Pegasus sea-moth creeps across the substrate

nance blended seamlessly with its vibrant surroundings. Colourful, but deadly.

Di's Delight

After the adrenaline rush of Suzie's Bommie, the next two dives proved to be equally spellbinding. Di's Delight featured three coral bommies separated by four-metre clefts jam-packed with Gorgonians. Upon descending the mooring line, it was a short swim across a sandy area to the reef tops at depths of 10-13m.

Franco gestured for me to follow him to the middle bommie. Sitting on a rocky outcrop was an orange weedy scorpionfish. Okay, it wasn't a lacy, but hey, who's complaining! I spent the majority of the dive happily photographing it from every conceivable angle.

Quayle's Reef

Equally impressive was Quayle's Reef. A tiny fan coral at 18m was home to a miniscule bargibanti pygmy sea-



horse, while further exploration of the reef revealed an abundance of nudibranchs. Especially impressive were a pair of spectacular long-cirri phyllodesmium, or "solar-power" nudibranchs.

Lion Island

Still game for one more dive, we set out that evening for neighbouring Lion Island for a night dive. Descending to three meters, the bottom was carpeted with extensive beds of seagrass, while further down, a slope of sand prevails.

A small wreck at a depth of 12m revealed several species of nudibr-



WORLD WAR II

During the latter part of World War II, New Britain was the scene of heavy fighting between Allied and Japanese forces. Between December 1943 and August 1945, more than 100,000 Japanese military and civilian personnel were stationed on New Britain and nearby New Ireland. The majority of these were based in the capitol of Rabaul, a key base for the Japanese campaigns in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. The New Britain Campaign was a major assault conducted by Allied forces to route Japanese forces entrenched in the region. By the end of the war, the Japanese forces were restricted to Rabaul and the adjacent Gazelle Peninsula. The Rabaul base was abandoned entirely in August 1945, prior to the surrender by Japanese forces the following month. As a result, the waters encircling New Britain are strewn with a cornucopia of wrecks, both navy & air force. Each year, new wrecks are discovered as dive sites are explored further, making the the region a must for World War II history buffs. ■



LEFT TO RIGHT: Lacy Scorpionfish portrait; Gird-led Glossodoris; The Holy Grail: my first lacy scorpionfish. INSET: Queen Victoria pigeon

branches. The highlight of the evening was a pair of Pegasus seamoths. Resembling a pair of squashed seahorses, they meandered along the sandy bottom, totally oblivious to our presence.

Nearby, a large anemone was like an undersea apartment complex, housing Clark's anemonefish, porcelain crabs, glass shrimps and three-spot damselfish.

After a pleasant 60+ minutes dive, we surfaced under a clear starry sky, accented by sporadic lashes of lightning over the mainland. We arrived back at the resort just in time to see the conclusion of a sing-sing, a traditional Melanesian musical performance put on by the hotel staff dressed in flamboyant traditional finery.

Baldwin's Bommie

The next morning, I awoke early for my last diving day. It felt like I had just arrived (actually, I had!) With plenty of dive sites and little time, it was hard to decide where to go. Franco suggested somewhere different: Baldwin's Bommie. As it turned out, he hadn't even been there for 18 months. Not knowing what we'd find made the prospect exciting, so off we went.

We descended the mooring line to a finger of reef jutting outwards from the main section.



Swimming along a saddle at 25m led to an isolated bommie rising to within 14m from the surface.

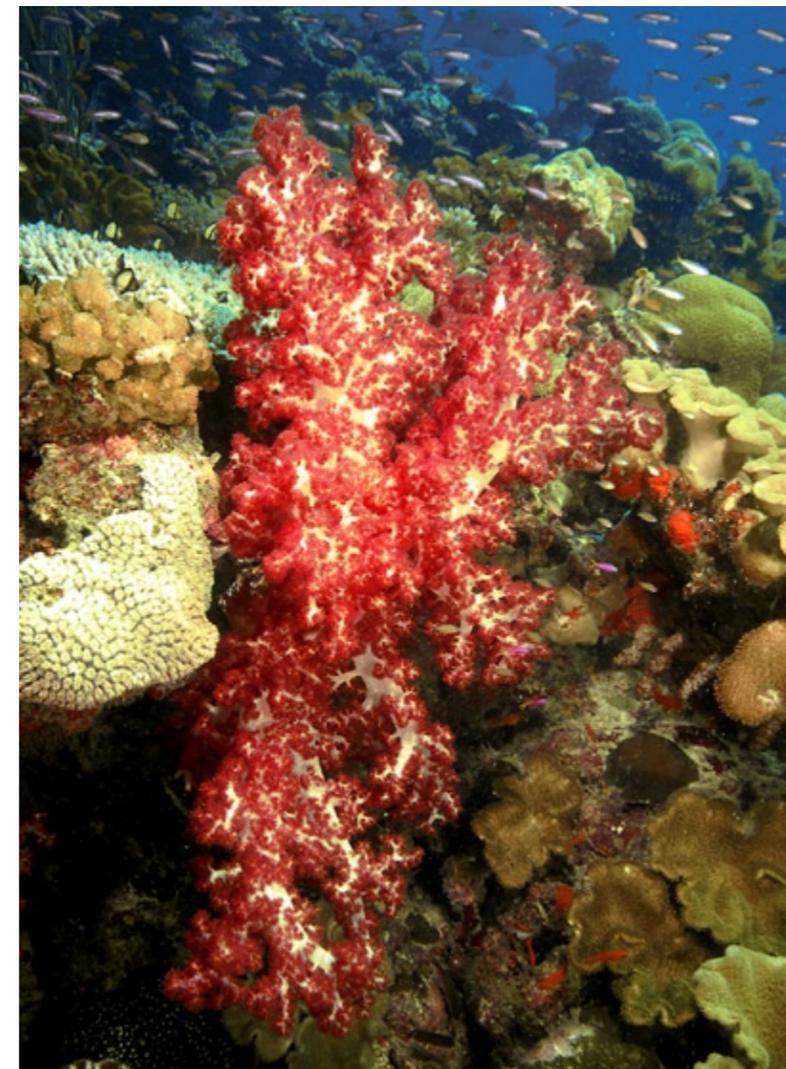
Soft corals,

whip corals, innumerable purple anthias and scores of angelfish painted a rich canvas with photo opportunities at every turn. Nudibranchs were also common, including an exquisite spotted hypselodoris, its slender red frame accented with spots of purple. The star attraction was a pair of white halameda ghost pipefish that obligingly posed for endless photos.

Pumkin Patch

For the final dive, it was finally time to visit the Pumpkin Patch in search of the elusive lacy scorpionfish. To ensure success in locating our quarry, no less than three dive guides came along for the ride.

Located just under 10km from Loloata, Pumpkin Patch consists of seven bommies connected to the main reef via a ridge cloaked with staghorn corals. While the reef was stunning, I paid little



Halameda ghost pipefish pair
FAR RIGHT: Soft coral



CLOCKWISE: A view across Bootless Bay looking towards the mainland; The Loloata staff perform a traditional Sing-Sing for the guests: Spotted Hypselodoris

injury, my computer was on the verge of going into deco.

Firing away at a rapid pace, I was soon interrupted by Franco. Incredulously, he had found ANOTHER one a scant few metres away. This one was pink and positioned in an even more inaccessible position. Undaunted, I managed to fire off a few shots before the cursed "beep beep beep" of

heed, for I was on a Grail Quest!
Thirty minutes into the dive, I was starting to get nervous. The scorpionfish were conspicuously absent, and time was starting to run out. I was beginning to resign myself to the possibility that we may not find them, so I concentrated



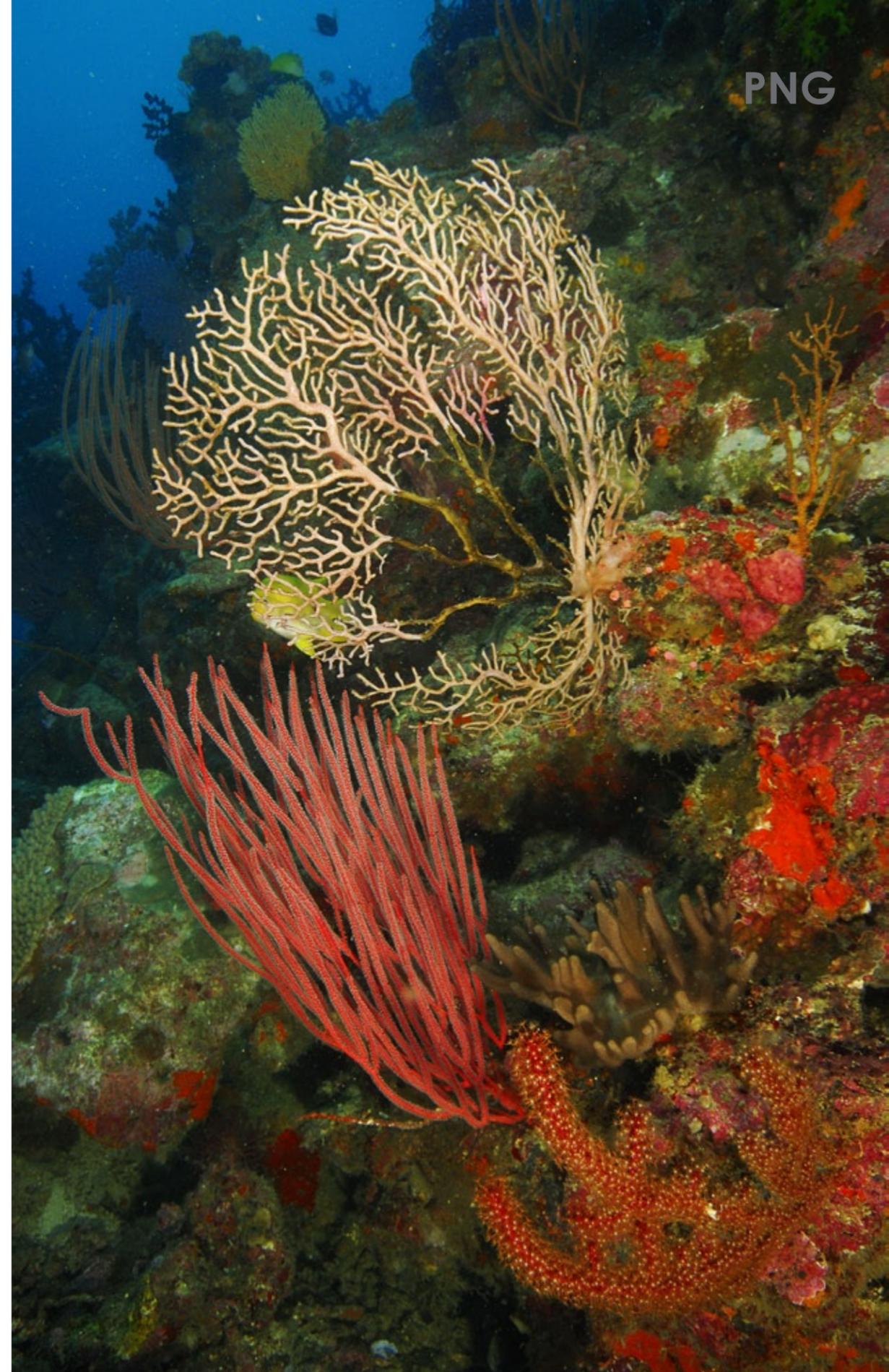
my efforts on shooting some wide-angle images of the luxuriant coral growth.

Moments later, Franco came at me like a torpedo. Wildly gesturing for me to follow, we swam to the neighbouring bommie and descended to 20m. There, perched on an outcrop, was a black lacy scorpionfish.

Getting close to photograph it proved easier said than done. A strong current coupled with a number of obstructing coral spires, made photography difficult. To add insult to

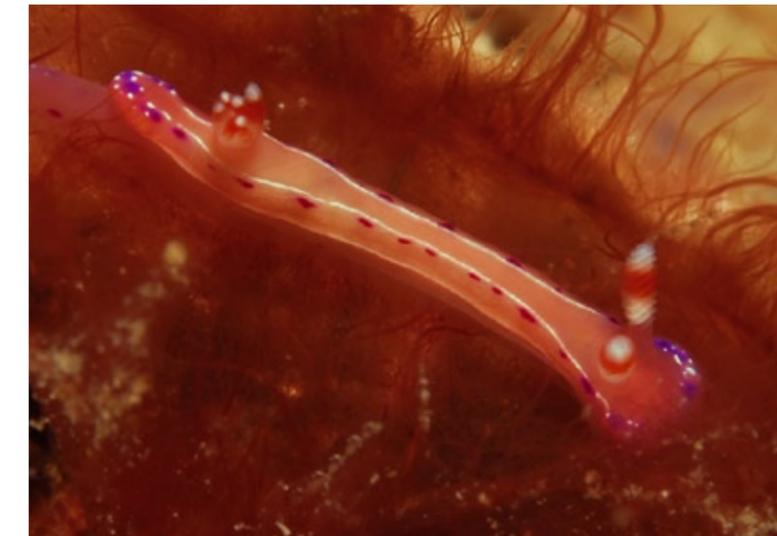
my computer indicated I'd gone into deco. After squeezing in a final few shots, I happily ascended to our safety stop. Mission accomplished.

A short, yet eventful week finally had finally drawn to a close. In my short visit, I'd barely scratched the tip of the iceberg in terms of PNG's wealth of undersea attractions. After all the wayward luggage and missed days, was it worth it? Absolutely! Would I return? In a heartbeat... Well, maybe with a tad less luggage. ■



PNG

A variety of corals create a rich tableaux at Loloata's reefs



fact file

Papua New Guinea



SOURCE: CIA.GOV WORLD FACTBOOK

History In 1885, the eastern half of the island of New Guinea, which is the second largest in the world, was divided between Germany which held the north and the United Kingdom which held the south. In 1902, the latter area was transferred to Australia. During WWI, Australia occupied the northern portion and continued to govern the combined areas until independence in 1975. A secessionist revolt on the island of Bougainville ended in 1997 after nine years of violence that claimed some 20,000 lives. Papua New Guinea's indigenous population is one of the most heterogeneous in the world. The country has several thousand separate communities, a majority with only a few hundred people. Over millennia, some of these communities divided by language, customs, and tradition, have engaged in local tribal conflict with their neighbors, which has been magnified in large part by the advent of modern weapons and modern migrants into urban areas. Government: Constitutional parliamentary democracy and a Commonwealth realm. Capital: Port Moresby

Geography Papua New Guinea is located in Oceania, a group of islands including the eastern half of the island of New Guinea between the South Pacific Ocean and the Coral Sea, east of Indonesia. Coastline: 5,152km. Its terrain is mountainous, with rolling foothills and lowlands along the coast. Lowest point: Pacific Ocean 0m. Highest point: Mount Wilhelm 4,509m. The country shares the island of New Guinea with Indonesia. Along the southwest coast, PNG has one

of world's largest swamps

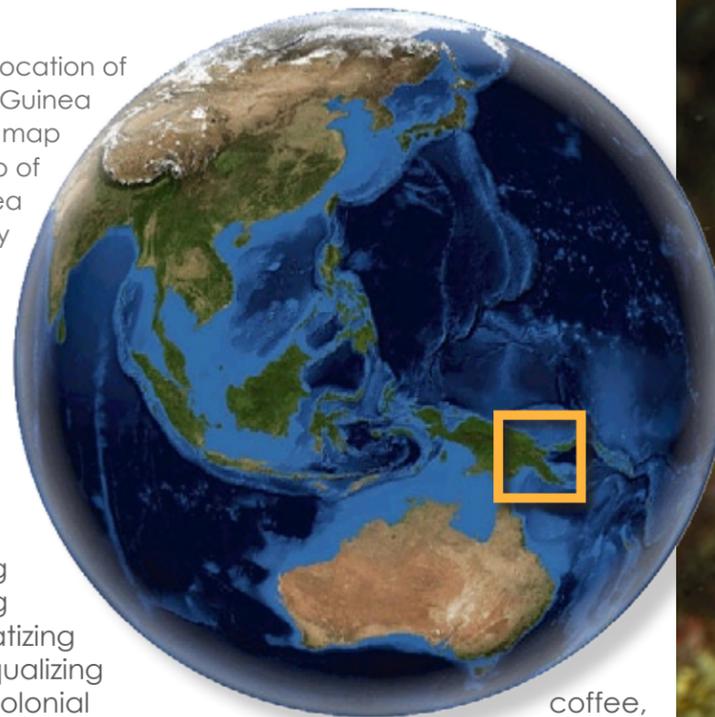
Climate Tropical. The northwest monsoon occurs December to March, the southeast monsoon, May to October. Slight variations of temperature are seasonal. Natural hazards: situated along the Pacific "Ring of Fire", PNG has active volcanism and experiences frequent and sometimes severe earthquakes, mud slides, and tsunamis.

Economy Richly endowed with natural resources, exploitation of these resources in PNG has been challenged by rugged terrain and expensive development of infrastructure. Three-quarters of the population rely on agriculture providing a subsistence livelihood. Two-thirds of export earnings come from mineral deposits, including copper, gold, and oil. Led by Prime Minister Somare—first to serve a full five-year term—much of the government's time has been aimed at just staying in power. The government's expenditure control has brought stability to the national budget, largely however, they eased spending constraints in 2006 and 2007 prior to elections.

Challenges include rejuvenating investor confidence, strengthening state institutions' integrity, nurturing economic efficiency through privatizing moribund state institutions, and equalizing relations with Australia, its former colonial



RIGHT: Location of Papua New Guinea on global map
BELOW: Map of Papua New Guinea
FAR RIGHT: Weedy scorpionfish yawns for the camera



coffee, cocoa, copra, palm kernels, tea, sugar, rubber, sweet potatoes, fruit, vegetables, vanilla; shell fish, poultry, pork. Industries: copra crushing, palm oil processing, plywood production, wood chip production; mining of gold, silver, and copper; crude oil production, petroleum refining; construction, tourism

Environment Growing commercial demand for tropical timber is leading to deforestation of PNG's rain forests. There is pollution from mining projects and severe drought. PNG is party to: the Antarctic Treaty, Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Endangered Species, Environmental Modification, Hazardous Wastes, Law of the Sea, Marine Dumping, Ozone Layer Protection, Ship Pollution, Tropical Timber 83, Tropical Timber 94, Wetlands



One of Loloata's resident wallabies

Population 6,057,263 (July 2009 est.) Ethnic groups: Melanesian, Papuan, Negrito, Micronesian, Polynesian. Religions Roman Catholic 27%, Evangelical Lutheran 19.5%, United Church

11.5%, Seventh-Day Adventist 10%, Pentecostal 8.6%, Evangelical Alliance 5.2%, Anglican 3.2%, Baptist 2.5%, other Protestant 8.9%, Bahai 0.3%, indigenous beliefs and other groups 3.3% (2000 census). Internet users: 120,000 (2008)

Language Tok Pisin, English, and Hiri Motu (official languages). In PNG, some 860 indigenous languages spoken, over one-tenth of all languages. Note: A creole language, Tok Pisin, is widely used and understood. English is spoken by 1%-2%; Hiri Motu is spoken by less than 2%

Health There is a very high degree of risk for food or waterborne diseases such as bacterial diarrhea, hepatitis A, and typhoid fever; as well as vectorborne diseases such as dengue fever and malaria (2009)

Currency Kina (PGK). Exchange rates: 1USD=2.74PGK; 1EUR=3.84PGK; 1GBP=4.45PGK; 1AUD=2.47PGK; 1SGD=1.95PGK

Time Zone UTC+10

Websites
Papua New Guinea Tourism
www.pngtourism.org.pg ■

