



PAPUA NEW GUINEA

SEAS OF THE UNEXPECTED

By Michele Westmoorland



Land and seascapes that put the “wild” in wilderness; diving in eastern Papua New Guinea is about being immersed in mystique, and surrounded by all creatures great and small.

As you approach from the air, clouds drape over the spine of the Owen Stanley Mountain Range, obscuring bits and pieces of the lush forests. Green fingers of land stretch out into the alluring waters of the Solomon Sea. Suddenly, there on a bluff is the beautiful Tufi Resort. The short flight is only one hour from the capital, Port Moresby, but the landscape could not feel further removed. Landing among this backdrop gets the excitement flowing for all the spectacular diving to come.

I have been to Papua New Guinea almost 30 times and never tire of the adventures that await me. In addition to the diving, the chance to see my *wantoks* (friends) in the surrounding villages makes visiting this location all the more special. Those who choose to come to Tufi for the very first time will discover experiences that will remain in their memory forever. The cultural interactions are rich, the landscape is breathtaking, and the marine life is incredibly diverse. Divers here are spoilt for choice.

A calm Solomon Sea allows access to the outer reefs where

1. Fingers of jungled land stretch into the sea, becoming richly inhabited reefs

pelagic creatures play. Sharks cruise the dive sites and for lucky divers, a rare white hammerhead occasionally appears. The Tufi area is also so full of unexplored wrecks and reefs that it is one of the few places where new discoveries and first dives (maybe with your name on it) can be made. For now, here is just a taste of some of the highlights of Tufi's diving...



The **HOUSE REEF** rivals some of the best muck diving in the world: mandarinfish in the rubble, and, below the dock, ghost pipefish, crabs, shrimp, nudibranchs and numerous other strange little creatures. Along the wall and away from the “muck”, an unusually marked species of percula clownfish can be found. The site is also a baby cuttlefish nursery, and these mini cephalopods can be spotted hiding amongst the corals.

2. Ornate ghost pipefish, *Solenostomus paradoxus*

3. A pair of mandarinfish, *Synchiropus splendidus*, members of the dragonet family



CYCLONE REEF is actually a small island that was formed from broken coral. As the name suggests, it was formed during a cyclone that hit the area in 1972. Today, it is a breeding ground for a variety of seabirds and a great mooring spot for a dive boat. The area has three distinct dive locations: Cyclone Bommie, Cyclone Wall and Cyclone Reef Outer Wall. Walls, overhangs and swim-throughs harbour everything from rare rhinopias to schooling fish. If you are willing to take your eye away from the blue and the chance of seeing pelagics passing by, scores of nudibranch species and other tiny creatures can be found in the cracks and crevices.

4. A thriving garden of scroll coral, *Turbinaria reiniformis*



Only discovered about a year ago, **HONEYMOON REEF** was one of the more memorable dives I have made. It started at the wall and I was initially unimpressed until we got a bit shallower. An incredible field of cabbage coral appeared in absolute splendour. Mixed into the healthy expanse were plenty of Acropora corals, clams and brilliant orange anemones with large spine-cheek clownfish interspersed. The beauty of Honeymoon Reef is unmatched. It makes me wonder about new reefs that will be discovered nearby in the future and fuels my desire to return to Tufi once again.

5. Spine-cheeked anemone fish, *Premnas biaculeatus*



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6. A silver tip shark, *Carcharhinus albimarginatus*, cruising the reefs

8. Juvenile cuttlefish can be found amongst the rubble at Tufi's House Reef

9. Villagers in traditional dress rowing a traditional outrigger canoe up the McClaren Harbour Fjord

MULLOWAY'S REEF is the resort's most famous. At depth, we experienced not only great numbers of batfish and barracuda but also a ball of brilliant red bigeyes. This was a photo I could not leave without.

Some of the best visibility in the area comes from the upwelling ocean current. It brings bountiful food for the thousands of fish, which, in turn, draw in the predators. Time was short at 33 metres but we managed to catch a glimpse of the great hammerhead that frequently cruises the wall.

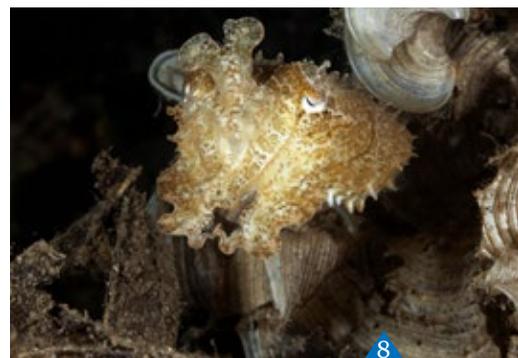
7. Schooling big eyes, *Priacanthus hamrur*



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There are historic wrecks too of course, the most famous being **BLACK JACK BOMBER**. It is for skilled divers only and although I personally have the credentials and number of dives to consider it, it still remains on my diving bucket list.

When the weather is wet and the wind is blowing, I've also found diving the shallow reefs in the **FJORD AREAS** to be fascinating. The fjords are excellent for macro diving with gobies, nudibranchs, shrimp and clams. These animals can be seen while diving, but conditions are also ideal for snorkelling. Because there is very little current movement in the fjords, many sponges and coral species grow prolifically and there are some very large sponges and shelf corals that are not common on the outer reefs.



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IMMERSED IN A TIMELESS CULTURE

I truly believe you cannot go to Tufi without learning about the people and culture. It can be experienced from the resort or you can choose to spend a day or so in one of the village guesthouses. For those who want a more hardcore adventure experience, try a trek on the Kokoda Trail. This is not for the faint of heart and training is necessary to complete it. Kokoda has significant World War II history and is deeply cherished by the Australian community. Anyone who completes it may walk away exhausted from the journey but with a sense of pride in completing the trek.

Immersing yourself in the culture begins with a trip up one of the peaceful fjords on a traditional outrigger canoe. Birds swoop overhead, alerting the forest to a human presence. Traditionally dressed villagers greet the boat with smiles full of pride. They are truly happy to share their lifestyle with others. From learning how they prepare their staple food, sago, to how and why the women tattoo their faces, visitors begin to understand just how connected the people are to the land – and the nearby ocean.

Tufi Dive Resort is, without a doubt, a treasure in the “Land of the Unexpected”. The charming lodge and bungalows provide excellent service, accommodations and food. The dive masters are among the best and can guide you to some of the most unique species of marine life from the comfortable dive boats. If there is any must-see for a diving enthusiast, this is it. *SDAA*

Michele Westmoorland is a freelance photographer from the United States. She has created a vast library of images from around the world over her 25-year career. A proud Senior Fellow of the International League of Conservation Photographers, Michele was also inducted into the Women Divers Hall of Fame in 2011. Much of her imagery has appeared in national and international publications. Her book *Ocean Duets* was published in 2006. In addition to underwater photography, Michele is known for her work capturing the diverse cultures of Melanesia. www.westmoorlandimages.com



NAVIGATOR

Getting there:

You can fly into Port Moresby with Air Niugini, Virgin Australia and Qantas. Flights leave Port Moresby three times a week. Tufi Resort can book these for you at great rates.

Best time to dive:

Late October to May, when the average water temperature is 29-31Celsius and the visibility is 40 to 50 metres.

Equipment and training:

An open water certification.

For more information:

Tourist visa on arrival is an option for most nationalities. Check with your local embassy or visit www.immigration.gov.pg/visa/visa-all.html.