



escape

Today the dress code is a lot more casual but the ship has been dressed up
Australia finally has a cruise ship to call its own, page 74

Dive resort fits the (horn)bill

Beauty abounds in PNG'S blue water wonderland, writes **Cameron Wilson**

I'M STANDING by the bar at Tufi Dive Resort, where a Papua New Guinea hornbill has hold of my wrist in its clacking great beak. As the resort's guest relations and security officer, Coco is probably just doing his job. And to be fair, his prying and clamping is focused not on me so much as on what I'm carrying.

After examining my watch, camera, notebook and pen, Coco gives a satisfied ruffle of ginger neck feathers that seems to indicate I can go about my business. He does, however, keep a beady eye turned my way, which is hardly surprising — he's seen my tools of trade and has almost certainly figured out I'm a journalist.

Tufi itself occupies part of Cape Nelson, which is on the eastern fringe of Papua New Guinea's mainland, and nearly parallel with the northern tip of Australia.

Lava flows from three volcanoes solidified here into dozens of fingers of land that jut into the Solomon Sea, doing their best to look like European fjords. Fjords are the creation of glaciers, however, and the proper term for Tufi's geological oddities is "rias". It's worth the journey just to see this astonishing landscape, but I'm here because Tufi is said to offer some of the best reef and wreck diving and snorkelling anywhere in the South Pacific.

The resort's dive centre is on Tufi Wharf, where dive master Archie is ready to take a run out to Ritchie's Bommie (a coral bommbora).

Tufi was a base for American PT boats during WWII and the remains of two of them sunk during a Japanese air raid in 1943 are on the harbour bottom.

There's even a wharfside reef, which rewards divers who are patient with sightings of such whimsical creatures as the banded pipefish, ghost pipefish and mandarin fish along with some stunning nudibranchs — tiny miracles of aesthetic design, barely 3cm long and sporting smart stripes of pink, black, orange, yellow and royal blue.

A 30-minute boat ride away, Ritchie's Bommie rises from the ocean floor like a great coral mushroom, attracting marine animals to the safety of its crevices and crannies. We've barely begun our descent when I spot a white-tip reef shark patrolling the perimeter. Swimming hand-over-hand down the mooring line lands us atop the bommie, where we fan out into deeper water and begin the dive proper at 24m depth.

Flitting among the fronds of anemones and



Paradise: Fish in staghorn coral gardens, Coco the hornbill, an inland inlet and a pretty local

sea fans that cling to the coral wall are myriad tiny fish in electric blues and iridescent reds, greens and gold.

Besides bathtub-warm and impossibly clear water, the Tufi dive experience is characterised by the presence of numerous exotic species in identifiable locations. Cyclone Reef has its resident turtles and rhinopias — a rare and elaborately finned specimen of scorpion fish — as well as a large variety of nudibranchs. The snorkeller-friendly crown of Clancy's Reef is a riot of tiny colourful fish and stag-horn corals, while its outer edges in deeper water attract reef sharks and cruising hammerheads. Minor's Reef is colonised by bright yellow black-flecked minor nudibranchs, their rose-like eggs brilliant but challenging subjects for photography, as are its varieties of see-through shrimp.

Mulloway Reef is a classic heavy current drift dive where surging plankton draws hammerheads, reef sharks, manta rays and schools of pelagic fish.

Our fast boat ride back to the harbour

provides at first a wide-angle view of Cape Nelson, narrowing in on the extraordinary rias as we draw closer to Tufi. It's the tail end of the wet season and there are few people staying at the resort, so managers Simon and Sharon Tewson are able to join me for lunch. For Simon, a PNG resident for more than 40 years, fostering relationships with Tufi villages has been personally and commercially rewarding. The couple's special affinity with animals is apparent, too, as Sharon introduces me to those currently in residence: a pair of full-grown cuscus, plus a youngster recently orphaned and a newly arrived fluffy white dog which Sharon loves but Simon insists can only stay subject to Coco's approval.

An hour or two before sunset I'm invited to join long-time Tufi guide Kingstead for a hike along a muddy track to a spot where we're treated to a perfect vista of the rias fringed by mangroves and interspersed with shallow coral bommies.

On our 90-minute trek I ask Kingstead why,

need to know

Getting there: **Fly to Brisbane. Pacific Blue (pacificblue.com.au, 131 645), Qantas (qantas.com.au, 131 313) and Air Niugini (airniugini.com.pg, 1300 361 380) fly to Port Moresby. Airlines PNG (apng.com, 1300 002 764) flies three times weekly from Port Moresby to Tufi.**

Stay: **All 12 bungalows at Tufi Dive Resort have ceiling fans, air-conditioning and mosquito nets. From \$90 per person per night.**

Dive: **Best diving is during the May to November dry season.**

Information: **The resort website has detailed descriptions of all its dive sites as well as accommodation (tufidive.com).**

More: **pngtourism.org.pg**

given all the kilometres he covers in a week, he doesn't wear boots when he's guiding. Not for the first time while in PNG, I'm gently reminded that the nearest general store is two days away by outrigger canoe — a substantial shopping excursion, particularly when flip-flops do the job pretty well.

On our return we find a gathering of dive enthusiasts in the bar trading underwater tales over a few cold SP (South Pacific Brewery) lagers. The languid warmth and humidity that characterises an evening

in the tropics has settled in and Coco is in guest relations mode, cocking his head attentively towards one speaker and then the next.

It is undoubtedly not very grown up to covet the approval of a Papuan hornbill, but when this one sidles up alongside me and together we watch the Solomon Sea slowly turn a deep shade of purple, I have to admit feeling more than a little chuffed.




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