

From Mandarinfish To Midget-Submarine

Exploring New Hanover, Kavieng, PNG

Following the success of the last two years, we organized another exploratory trip for June this year. Bookings came in fast and early, but unfortunately, 2 people had to cancel later due to work commitments and our friend Jean-Luc couldn't make it either, but not for want of trying. That left only three divers: Aussies Gail and Andrew, third-time repeat guests, and Larry from Chicago. They had all booked in to arrive a day before the official start of the trip, but thanks to Air Niugini, they actually arrived a day after the start date and spent two lovely nights in Port Moresby! At least Air Niugini booked them into the Airways Hotel, so they didn't want for anything.

The divers finally arrived at Lissening Island Resort on 7 June at 5.30am, having left POM at 4.15am. This didn't deter them, though, so after some breakfast, they headed out on the boat for two dives around Lissening Island. Our signature dive, Albatross Passage, lived up to its reputation, with stacks of Barracudas, Spanish Mackerel, Grey Reef Sharks and even a Silvertip Shark. Danny's Bommie, right next door, is also a very spectacular dive, with a bommie coming up to about 7m from who-knows-where. There are always lots of fish around here and that day, the divers saw a school of Trevally, the usual school of Batfish and a Maori Wrasse. The first day was already a success and there was more to come!!

The next few days saw us diving at Helmut's Reef, Matrix, Planet Channel & Judy's Reef as well as our secret little spot where we can find lots of Mandarinfish.

On Wednesday, we set off for the boat trip to New Hanover, with our first dive at Martha's Shoals, approx. 25nm from Lissening. We had dived the other end of this large reef before, but not this side and we weren't disappointed. The visibility here was incredible at more than 40m and a slight current brought in a few Black and White Tip Reef Sharks as well as 3 Turtles and lots of smaller stuff.

Back on the boat, we kept moving along and arrived at Tunnung Island, 3 Islands Harbour, New Hanover, for a late lunch at Islands Escapades Guesthouse. This was going to be our home away from home away from home for the next 2 nights. After the long morning trip we were greeted by our hosts Clement and Sophie who showed us to our beautifully appointed bungalows. We didn't spend too much time admiring the guest house, but scuffed our late lunch down and headed out for what we had been looking forward to for days: The "Sanko Maru".

Time for a bit of history lesson, or you can skip the next bit, if you are not interested: The "Sanko Maru" is, or rather was, a 5461-ton Japanese tanker, which was anchored in shallow water with an unidentified submarine sitting partially submerged next to it on 16 February 1944 when it was hit repeatedly by 500-pound bombs set off by USAAF 38th and 345th Bomb Groups. The nearby "#39 Subchaser", which was there to guard the "Sanko Maru" and the submarine, was also badly hit, went out of control and ran aground on a shallow reef,



burning slightly from the bomb damage. Some of the Japanese sailors tried to get to shore, but were strafed repeatedly and none of them survived. The “Sanko Maru” and the subsequently identified Japanese Type C midget submarine sank on the spot and make awesome dive sites these days, with over 60 years of coral growth on the two wrecks.

The next day, the 500th Squadron returned to the area and found a 1500-ton freighter anchored in shallow water less than one kilometer from where the Subchaser had been sunk the previous day. They bombed this freighter, which may have been the “Kashi Maru”, in a quick attack, which split the vessel in half and sank it. Both the “#39 Subchaser” as well as the 1500-ton freighter sit in two adjoining bays off the mainland of New Hanover in 2 – 14m of water.



Okay, back to 2009 and our dive on the midget sub and the “Sanko Maru”. The tanker lies on its starboard side, is split in half and has the most amazing coral growth covering the entire wreck. Beautiful soft corals and large Gorgonian Fans cover every single bit of the wreck and between them we found lots of nudibranchs and colorful flatworms. Multitudes of little reef fish swam around everywhere and a massive school of Trevally was hanging around the big gap where the Sanko Maru broke in half. The midget sub, similar to the ones that entered Sydney Harbour during the war, sits upright about 30 meters off the main wreck and is an interesting addition to the whole dive. The front of the sub consists mainly of 2 torpedo tubes on top of each other which are home to a couple of Coral Trout. The hatch of the conning tower is open with the periscope visible next to the hatch cover. The long hull, which is covered in some hard corals

and several whip corals leads to the stern of the sub where one can see the single shaft with the two counter-rotating propellers. Back on the main wreck, we finished our dive with a safety stop along the top of the wreck, which is also covered in soft corals. Larry, who has dived dozens of wrecks in his 30+ years diving, reckons that the Sanko is one of the most beautifully overgrown wrecks he has ever seen.

After a five minute boat ride to Tunnung and a short stroll along the beach we relaxed for a bit while we waited for the sun to go down. And guess what? It was straight back to the Sank Maru for a night dive. With all these soft corals and colorful fans a night dive there is truly spectacular. Sleeping fish everywhere, from little Butterfly Fish and wrasses to huge Bumphead Parrotfish, it was all there. Flatworms and cowries, crabs and shrimps, the wreck was teeming with life. The short trip back to Tunnung included an unexpected fresh (read “rain”) water shower and after getting cleaned up under the real shower at the guesthouse, we enjoyed a well deserved dinner. Sophie and her helping hands in the kitchen spoil us with a mountain



of crayfish, fresh fish and really tasty vegetables followed by a beautiful fruit platter. Another couple of cold beers and we were off to bed after an amazing day of diving.



The next morning was the typical South Pacific Island setting: Postcard style blue sky, flat seas, white sand beach with palm trees and tropical flowers everywhere and a delicious breakfast waiting for us with everything from cereals to eggs and fruits. After breakfast we took off towards the western-most tip of New Hanover with Clement as our guide. Apart from being a perfect host Clement is also a certified Divemaster with several years experience on liveaboard dive boats such as FeBrina, Paradise Sport and Pelagian. One thing he definitely

learned on these boats: Telling stories to keep one's expectations high. On the way to our dive he told us about a 6 meter Whale Shark that he had seen twice in the last few weeks at Chapman's Reef. After about an hour drive, we reached our first dive spot of the day, located just off Ao Island.

Chapman's is a small pinnacle starting in about 7 meters with the walls disappearing into the abyss. On the southern end is the spot that Clement calls 'The Amphitheater', which is home to probably the only known aggregation of Queensland Groupers in this area. We saw six of these VW-sized fish hanging around the 30 meter mark and occasional one of them, surrounded by a cloud of yellow and black striped juvenile Golden Trevallies, would come a bit closer to check us out. Who needs a Whale Shark when you can see these guys close up? With our no-deco time disappearing quickly we had to swim back into the shallower part of the reef where we were greeted by a massive school of Barracudas. Due to all these big fish there wasn't much time to admire the amazing coral growth, but during the safety stop I managed to find a nice little Scorpionfish trying to blend in with the coral.



Decisions, decisions, decisions. Where was our next dive going to be? Could there be another spot that was better than what we've just seen? Should we stay here and hope for the Whale Shark? But since we were on an exploratory mission and none of us has ever been in this area before, we decided to move on and dive Taun Reef. A 15 minute boat trip south brought us to Taun, which is similar in shape to Chapman's,



but lacks the strong current. Absolutely untouched with massive staghorn corals in the shallows and huge gorgonians a bit deeper, this reef also had schools of fish, but this time some smaller varieties. Fusiliers and Redtooth Triggerfish, clouds of Anthias and a big school of Moorish Idols gave us plenty of opportunity for good photos. We saw several species of Nudibranchs and on a soft coral, Dietmar spotted a population of our very own Ovulid shell *Archivolva lissenungensis*, first discovered by Dietmar at Albatross Passage in 2004. Of course we also saw several Grey Reef Sharks cruising in the distance, but they weren't all too curious and didn't come close enough for good pictures. All the diving must have gone to Andrew's head, as he kept asking if this was Chapman's Reef! It became the joke of the trip, with someone asking at each new dive site "... and this dive site is called Chapman's, right?"

Back on the boat we couldn't believe our luck with the weather and the dives. However, we had to get moving and after a quick stop at Ao Island to say hello to the villagers, we took off for Tunnung. Sophie once again had prepared a gorgeous lunch for us and after the meal everybody disappeared to their bungalows for a Nanna nap. 6pm came faster than we thought and once again we took off for a night dive on the Sanko Maru. This dive is just too good to do only once. Similar to the previous night, we saw lots of basket stars, decorator crabs and shrimps, sleeping fish and nudibranchs and even a sleeping turtle. Once back at the surface, it was also similar to the previous night with another big rain shower. But thanks to the invention of GPS we made it back safely to the island and could enjoy a beautiful dinner. More fresh fish, a delicious chicken dish and some excellent pastry filled with veggies were served followed by more fresh fruits. Another glass of wine as a night cap and everyone disappeared once again to their rooms.

Another day in paradise! A hearty breakfast with homemade scones and the usual tea and coffee filled us up for the morning and after our goodbye to Sophie and the crew, we took off once again with Clement on board. Just opposite Tunnung Island is the wide bay which is the resting place of above mentioned Japanese freighter and #39 Subchaser. Our first dive of the day was the wreck of the freighter, resting now on a reef slope between 1 and 14 metres. The ship has definitely been hit hard by American bombs, with hardly a space left for penetration. Lots of artifacts can still be seen including tiles from a former bathroom or galley as well as lots of ammunition. Around the stern of the wreck are several black coral trees and amongst the debris hard and soft corals have settled. Within this multitude of growth are the usual reef fish mixed with interesting critters such as Twinspot Lionfish and a pair of pipefish.



Since the visibility on the freighter was quite good and it was a very shallow dive, we decided to move to the other side of the lagoon and dive the Subchaser as well. A bit of driving around in circles and we found the remains of the Japanese ship. We thought the freighter got hit hard, but the subchaser really got hammered. Stretched out over the reef and down a slope is a dense field of debris, with the only easy recognizable pieces being the sharp pointed bow and the 16-cylinder diesel engine block. There wasn't much happening in terms of fish and coral, but many artifacts were lying around which made it a very interesting dive. We found something that looked a bit like a camera, but it missed things like a shutter button and a view finder, so it was obviously something completely different, but no one in the group had any idea what it could be.

Back on board we took off towards Lissenung with a quick stop at mainland New Hanover to drop Clement off who was visiting his children at boarding school a few islands down from Tunnung. We continued driving south and after about an hour we stopped somewhere off the Tsoi Island group at a series of reefs. The dive there wasn't as spectacular as the ones we had the previous days, but there was still a lot to see. On the reef we found amongst plenty of other things four different species of Anemonefish including the rare Whitebonnet Anemonefish, endemic to PNG, some bright blue shrimps on star fish and a pink Hairy Sponge Crab. While looking out into the blue, we saw a couple of Blacktip Reefsharks, some Spanish Mackerels and a large Maori Wrasse.

After three dives and a cruisy boat trip we arrived at Lissenung at about 3pm for a late lunch, early dinner and a good night's sleep.

The last day was spent diving the "Der Yang", a Korean fishing vessel that sank close to Echuca Patch near Kavieng town, "The Bottleshop", the best muck dive in Kavieng, and a "Kate" Bomber from WWII. This is where Larry left us to move on to Vanuatu, but Gail and Andrew stayed on for some more diving.

This was my first time on one of our Exploratory trips as the previous times, I had to stay at the resort to look after things there. This time, however, our Japanese instructor Nozaki and her partner Fraser offered to take over for 2 days, which meant I could join. What a fantastic trip it was! I cannot wait to get back up there and explore the area some more. We think there may be another mini sub up there, but we only found out about this after our return to Lissenung. However, we have another trip lined-up for 3 – 11 December, so we will definitely have a closer look then! There are still 6 spots left, so if you would like to join us, you better be quick.

A big Thank You goes to Sophie, Clement and their staff. We have stayed at other guesthouses previously, but none of them come close to the service, warm atmosphere and excellent food they offer. Thanks also to Gail, Andrew and Larry for being so much fun, both Dietmar and I enjoyed their company immensely. Last but not least, thank you to our boat driver Silas and dive guide Igua, for always having our tanks readily set up for the next dive, for handing out tea and biscuits and for driving us everywhere, including balmy!

"Where are we diving today?" "CHAPMAN"SI!!!!!!"

For enquiries and bookings please see your preferred travel agent or contact us at info@lissenung.com

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