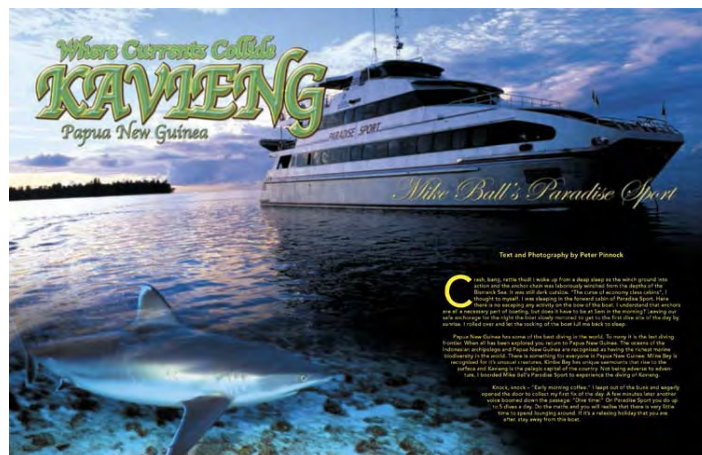


## Kavieng – Where Currents Collide by Peter Pinnock

Crash, bang, rattle thud! I woke up from a deep sleep as the winch ground into action and the anchor chain was laboriously winched from the depths of the Bismarck Sea. It was still dark outside. “The curse of economy class cabins”, I thought to myself. I was sleeping in the forward cabin of Paradise Sport. Here there is no escaping any activity on the bow of the boat. I understand that anchors are all a necessary part of boating, but does it have to be at 5am in the morning? Leaving our safe anchorage for the night the boat slowly motored to get to the first dive site of the day by sunrise. I rolled over and let the rocking of the boat lull me back to sleep.



Papua New Guinea has some of the best diving in the world. To many it is the last diving frontier. When all has been explored you return to Papua New Guinea. The oceans of the Indonesian archipelago and Papua New Guinea are recognised as having the richest marine biodiversity in the world. There is something for everyone in Papua New Guinea: Milne Bay is recognised for its unusual creatures, Kimbe Bay has unique seamounts that rise to the surface and Kavieng is the pelagic capital of the country. Not being adverse to adventure, I boarded Mike Ball's Paradise Sport to experience the diving of Kavieng.

Knock, knock – “Early morning coffee.” I leapt out of the bunk and eagerly opened the door to collect my first fix of the day. A few minutes later another voice boomed down the passage: “Dive time!” On Paradise Sport you do up to 5 dives a day. Do the maths and you will realise that there is very little time to spend lounging around. If it's a relaxing holiday that you are after, stay away from this boat.

Within seconds I hit the dive-deck and was kitted up and heading for Albatross Passage. This is a twisting scenic channel only 200 m wide separating a small





island from the mainland. The landscape on either side of the channel is draped with dense forest vegetation that falls into the mangroves in the shallows. On an incoming tide clean water is pushed through the channel by the might of the Bismarck Sea. This is the time to dive the channels of Kavieng. Strong currents bring with them nutrients from the open ocean. This in turn attracts fish like a magnet. The ledges of Albatross Passage are covered in rich coral growths that tumble to a sandy bottom. But this is not a scenic dive – this is a big fish dive. At the point where the channel narrows the current picks up. This is where the big fish patrol - we spotted schools of kingfish and barracuda gliding effortlessly into the current. Solitary dogtooth tuna and wahoo also made an appearance. One group of divers spotted a manta. And of course there are sharks. Many sharks. Grey reef and white tip sharks formed an ominous silhouette above us. Staying in one place to observe the action presents a challenge. Left in the current you would be sucked through the channel in no time at all. The best strategy is to find a convenient rock to hold onto and remain motionless as the action unfolds before you. Some divers choose to use reef-hooks. At the end of the dive we took an underwater roller-coaster ride over the lip of the reef. Landing in the serenity of the lagoon, scores of reclusive garden eels ducked into their holes as we drifted overhead.



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active earlier in the day now hung motionless in the shadows of the late afternoon sun. It was almost as if they were recovering after the madness of the day.

Kavieng is found on the northwestern side of New Ireland - a long finger shaped island in the northern reaches of Papua New Guinea. There are a myriad of small islands, channels, coral reefs and mangroves that separate the Pacific Ocean from the Bismark Sea. The protected coral gardens serve as a



sanctuary for juvenile fish while the channels attract pelagics and divers alike. The people of Kavieng are friendly and easygoing. There is not much to do in Kavieng but it is a very pleasant place to do nothing. Villagers living on the remote islands have an idyllic lifestyle. Their wooden houses built on deserted beaches overlook picture-perfect lagoons. It is not surprising that a boat the size of Paradise Sport attracts their attention when anchored in their front garden. The whole family paddle out to the boat in outrigger canoes. Vegetables are for sale but mostly the villagers are there to look. The dive deck is a hive of activity and the hustle and bustle is an ongoing fascination for the bewildered onlookers.



Soon after World War 2 spread to the Pacific, New Ireland was captured by the Imperial Japanese forces and Kavieng developed into a major Japanese base. The Japanese held the island until the final surrender. Although no attempt was made by the Allied forces to recapture Kavieng, it was the scene of fierce bombing attacks. Today the remnants of war remain - both above and below the water.

The Taisho Maru was an armed Japanese freighter that was bombed while anchored outside Three Islands Harbour. The force of the



explosion must have been devastating – the ship was torn apart as if it were paper. Lying in 20 metres of nutrient rich water it makes for a superb dive. The wreck is smothered with fans, sponges, whips and soft corals of any imaginable colour. This is the best selection of soft corals you will find in one place anywhere in the Bismarck Sea. The most interesting feature of the wreck is a mini submarine that is resting upright in the sand 50 metres from the wreck. It is still fully intact. Schools of glassies have colonized the twin counter-rotating propellers and on the bow the twin torpedo tubes are easily identifiable. The hatch on the conning tower is open offering a view into the bowels of the submarine. A small Japanese sailor could just fit through the hatch but certainly not a diver with scuba gear. Later, as the sun set, we slipped into the water for a night dive on the wreck. Pipefish sauntered lazily between coral growths; juvenile damsels nestled in the plumes of soft corals and a giant sponge crab lumbered into the depths of the wreck to escape the light from our torch. After the dive I sipped on single malt whisky. I drank a toast to life. I was grateful that I was not on the freighter when it was bombed. No one could have survived that terrible blast.



On the tip of Kavieng Island the Bismarck Sea collides with the Pacific Ocean. The two oceanic titans meet and flex their muscles. Host to the feud is Chapman's Reef – a small offshore pinnacle. Bait balls of fish bubble on the surface giving a hint of the fish life below. The current storms over the reef. It rips. The water boils on the surface. At Chapman's the current powers over the reef like a Cape south westerly – if you look into it with your mouth open your fillings will rattle and bounce to the back of your head. The local villagers who venture out to Paradise Sport have their work cut out for them paddling



against the current. The big-fish action is always found on the current-facing side of the reef. Getting there can be a challenge: A dingy drops you up current of the reef. Descending quickly you drift through clouds of fish before the dark shape of the reef appears. The current is virtually impossible to swim against. If you miss the reef, you miss the dive. If this happens you surface, get loaded into the dingy and try again.

Schools of barracuda slip gracefully through the current. Dogtooth tuna and sharks patrol the deeper water. Snappers, bigeye kingfish, fusiliers and batfish assemble at the drop-off. Occasionally a Spanish mackerel or dogtooth tuna would flash into the schools of fish. With a "whoosh" all the fish dive for the shelter of the reef. Attracted by the commotion, sharks instinctively appear out of nowhere looking for an easy meal. Slowly the reef returns to normality. Goldies emerge cautiously from crevices. Fusiliers regroup to flit in the current. The reef blooms again.



In the tense atmosphere of Chapman's Reef, it seems possible to see just about anything. At dusk we dived Chapman's Reef for the last time. On this dive I heard one of the most intimidating sounds I have ever heard underwater: 5 giant dogtooth tuna streaked past us in feeding formation. Like rolling African thunder they stormed over the reef. The accompanying noise was akin to being charged by a herd of bull elephants on a corrugated steel roof. In a flash they disappear. I shuddered and blinked in disbelief.

The coral reef is a beautiful place but sometimes it can resemble a battlefield.



Seven days and twenty-eight dives later it was time to leave Kavieng. Our last dive was on a 3 man Japanese bomber that crashed in a shallow lagoon – a final memory of a distant war. Anemones and false clownfish have colonised the starboard wing. Nonchalantly a poisonous banded sea snake sniffed for crustaceans in the surrounding rubble. A trip to Papua New Guinea is an adventure. It is a



country of beauty and enchantment – with the bonus of having superb diving. If it's adventurous diving that you are after, head north to Kavieng.

### Fact File

**Getting there:** Quantas flies to Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea, from Sydney and Brisbane. From there fly to Kavieng with Air Niugini.

**Grading:** Advanced.

**Visibility:** 15 to 40m.

**Water temperature:** 28° C to 30°C.

**Best time to go:** May to August.

**Visas:** Check with a PNG consular office. In countries where there is no PNG consular office, apply to the nearest Australian office.

**Paradise Sport:** A five-star 100ft twin-hulled vessel designed for dive expeditions. Operated by Mike Ball Dive Expeditions the boat has a photo and video lab, nitrox fills and dive instruction.

**Web Site:** <http://www.mikeball.com>



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