



RELIQS of the PAST

Don Silcock

A “house reef” to a dive operation is like a “house wine” to a restaurant. Most times, they’re just not all they’re cracked up to be, unless you’re staying at Tufi. The house dives at Tufi offer a surprising amount of interest so close to the resort. Careful... you might not want to go any further after you check these out!

A “house reef” to a dive operation is like a “house wine” to a restaurant. I tend to think of house reefs as a little bit like next door neighbours – I mean, most people have them, but how much time do you really want to spend with them?

So when I hear that the next dive is on the house reef I usually take it to

mean that the best diving is over for the day. Contrary to this theory, the house reef at Tufi is one of those sites where, despite the number of times I have dived it, I always seem to find new and interesting stuff to see and photograph.

The house reef is in the main Tufi fiord, encompassing the area around the dive shop wharf, the nearby public

wharf and the reef that stretches out on either side. This entire location has been the loading and unloading point for the settlement and the surrounding area for a very long time which means that around the two wharves is very much a “muck dive” - commonly defined as a dive that takes place where there is no beautiful scenery. Scattered around is the flotsam and jetsam of several decades, including a variety of WWII debris from 1943 when the fiord was a forward base for US Navy PT Boats.

Two PT Boats were destroyed and sunk in a spectacular refuelling accident while moored at the jetty in March 1943. Wreckage from that incident can be found on the slopes of the fiord, and what is left of one of the boats lies nearby on the bottom of the fiord at a depth of nearly 50m.

Away from the wharves there is a little bit of everything – from sea grass

Main photo The remains of a Landrover parked at 35m on the slope in front of Tufi Wharf.: Left: Beautiful Tufi fiord.





in the shallows around the bay, to hard and soft corals through to elephant ear sponges on the headland.

Critters

The area around the wharfs is a great place to find critters, particularly during the dry season from July to September, and in the peak diving months of October and November when the water is cooler and the critters come up into shallow water.

As all dives start from the dive shop wharf you can easily spend an hour or more poking around it and the nearby public wharf, because in amongst all the rubbish and debris are the nooks, crannies and hiding places that critters love. Although the sides of the fiord are quite steep and go down well in excess of 50m, most of the critters can be found

Top right: The remains of the main machine gun on what's left of a PT Boat at 50m depth in Tufi fiord. Below: Japanese underwater supermodel Yuko Kuramoto poses perfectly by the remains of the main machine gun.
quite shallow which usually means



hunger, rather than lack of air or deco time, will get you to the surface.

My usual routine, if I am looking for critters, is to spend 10-15 minutes around the dive jetty wharf, head south to the public wharf and then onwards to the wall area that leads out from the small bay into the main fiord.

Most of the critters and things to see are in less than 15m of water and it takes around 30 minutes or so to reach the point where the bay becomes the main fiord and it's time to turn back. Along the way you will find pipefish, ornate and robust pipefish, dumpling squid, twin-spot gobies, crocodile fish and lots of nudibranchs!

The Tufi guides know the area intimately and where to find the critters, so ask for a guide if spotting is not your forte.

The Golden Hour

The area to the north of the dive wharf, which forms a small bay, can be particularly good in the late afternoon as the sun goes down and creates a wonderful "golden hour" effect as the sun's rays hit the water at a shallow angle and create cathedral lighting underwater.

When I know the conditions are right



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Above: A superb, but very small, bobtail squid prior to disappearing in to the sand! Right: Japanese underwater supermodel Yuko Kuramoto hovers above the PT Boat hull: Bottom left: Yuko poses close, but not too close, to the live PT Boat torpedo still in it's launcher.



I set up a wide-angle lens on my camera and head for the area. The last time I was at Tufi I was fortunate enough to spend some quality time with both the resident school of razor fish and a cooperative cuttlefish, both of whom I managed to get in position to make the most of the superb light.

I could have stayed there for hours, but when the sun disappeared behind the nearby ridge, it was game over – but I got the shots to prove it!

The area is in less than 6m, so it's a great place to head at the end of the dive and let the nitrogen release, particularly if you have been deep to see the PT Boats.

Further round on the eastern side of the bay there is a nice hard coral reef with a lot of fish life, but you need to dive this area in the morning to see it at its best, as it's usually in the shade of the ridge in the afternoon.

Night Dives

Most night dives at Tufi are conducted from the dive wharf. After dark the area around the two wharves is even more of a "target-rich environment" as many of the critters that were asleep during the day come out to feed.

The area to the south of the wharves

also takes on a different persona at night and there is also much to see there that you won't see during the day.

I always make a point of calling in on the resident pair of clown fish that live on the slope at about 12m, to see them tucked up for the night behind the mucus membrane that acts as an early warning trigger in case a predator tries to sneak up on them in the dark. I have often seen the porcelain crab, that usually hides under the skirt of the anemone during the day, tucked up with them!

PT Boats

Tufi Fiord played a small role in WWII when in 1942 the US Navy selected it as an advanced base for the PT Boats that were supporting the campaign to turn back the Japanese invasion of Papua New Guinea.

PT (Patrol Torpedo) boats were small but fast vessels designed to attack and sink the enemy's major capital ships by using their speed and manoeuvrability to get close enough to launch their on-board torpedoes.

Tufi fiord offered an excellent location for the boats to operate from because the site chosen was the small bay where the government station jetty had been built. The bay, which is the site of the current dive and public wharves, provided good cover from enemy planes plus an area to store gasoline and a supply of fresh water from a nearby small waterfall.

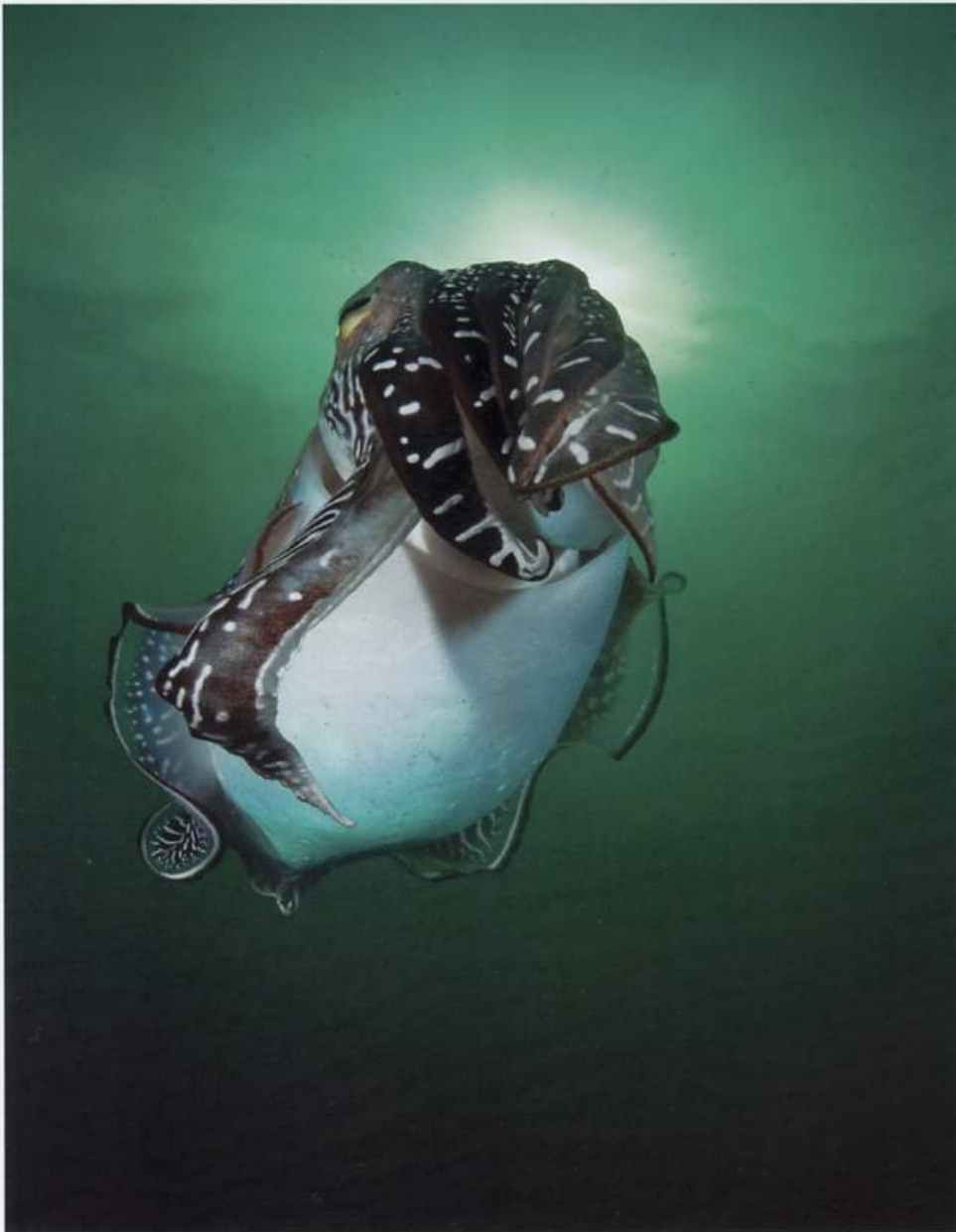




From Tufi fiord the PT boats operated regular patrols all the way up to Buna, and on occasions further north into the Huon Gulf, and were credited with the sinking of one Japanese submarine and at least 18 armoured barges.

The most common urban myth associated with the sinking of PT Boats 67 and 119 was that they were attacked by Japanese fighters while at anchor in Tufi fiord. But according to "At Close Quarters" by Robert Bulkley (the authoritative history of PT Boat service in WWII), the actual story is that they sunk as a result of an accident during refuelling.

It happened on the afternoon of the 17th March 1943. A refuelling operation



Top: Crowded house... A pair of clownfish and fellow anemone resident, a porcelain crab, cuddle up for the night. Above: One of the many beautiful nudibranchs to be found around Tufi Wharf. Left: A cuttlefish poses elegantly against the afternoon sun.

at Tufi Jetty had just been completed when a sheet of flames erupted between the two boats. The fire spread so rapidly that the boat crews had no option but to dive into the fiord to escape the imminent explosion of the on-board gas tanks and stored ammunition.

The fire and subsequent explosion sank both the boats and the AS16, a small Australian cargo ship, which had also been moored at the jetty as it unloaded supplies. The flames spread quickly to the dock and the nearby gasoline and ammunition stores, resulting in further major explosions and fires, which burned well into the next day.

Amazingly, given the size and intensity of the fire and explosions, there was not a single death or injury and a subsequent investigation concluded that



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the fire probably started when one of the local villagers lit a cigarette and threw his match into the water, igniting some split gasoline that was on the surface.

Diving the PT Boats

Diving the PT Boats is a very straightforward exercise because the former fishing boat that is moored in the fiord is anchored right above them, so entry into the water is from the dive wharf and then it's about a five-minute surface swim. As you descend down the mooring line, at about 35m you can see the wreckage spread out below on the sandy floor of the fiord.

Near to the mooring is one of the original torpedo tubes which is still loaded with a live torpedo, and about 10m away down into the fiord is the hull



Above: Another beautiful nudibrancs to be found around Tufi Wharf. Below: An inquisitive pipefish I found right underneath Tufi Wharf.



of one of the boats, the bow of which is still intact and clearly recognizable, as is the mounted machine gun just behind it.

The gun's mounting rails are lying in the sand, together with the gearing that allowed it to be turned and aimed, but there is not much left of the rest of the hull – probably because it was burned in the fire that sunk the boat back in 1943. Scattered around in the sand are numerous old 45 gallon fuel drums which must have been on board the two boats and used for refuelling while on patrol.

Dive time at this depth is obviously quite limited, but because most of the boat wreckage is in a fairly small area, there is usually enough to see everything before heading back up the side of the fiord and shallower water. On the way you will pass more 45-gallon fuel drums and another torpedo tube, complete with its loaded torpedo.

As you ascend up the sloping sides of the fiord at 35m there is an old Land Rover parked amongst more wreckage from the PT Boats, including one of the engines, and then you will pass a large number of beer crates. Hard to say if they were deposited when the PT Boats sank, or if they are part of the explanation of why the Land Rover is in the fiord....



Above left: A pair of very photogenic clownfish pose for the camera. Right: A robust ghost pipefish I found underneath the public wharf at Tufi Bottom left: A hermit crab blending in perfectly...

Photographing the PT Boats

Personally I rarely dive greater than about 35m because I think the best things to see and photograph are usually in shallower waters, so it's either a wreck, or some other very specific thing to see, that gets me into deeper waters. Unfortunately this means that I have very little tolerance of nitrogen narcosis - or as Jacques Cousteau so eloquently put it, "the raptures of the deep".

As every trained diver knows, the deeper you go the higher the partial pressure of nitrogen you are breathing, and once you go past the 30m threshold, the so-called "Martini effect" kicks in and a significant increase in over-confidence occurs, coupled with a marked decrease in the ability to rationalize things and do basic calculations.

This was all brought home vividly to me when I embarked upon the task of photographing the PT Boats. I had figured it would all be a fairly straightforward exercise as I could set my camera up for wide-angle photography the night before, use it on the offshore reefs in the morning and then once back at Tufi wharf, go for a mid-afternoon dive on the PT Boats without having to change anything around. Too easy...

But nitrogen narcosis and underwater photography are words that should not

really be used in the same sentence, never mind practiced, and it took me five attempts to get the images. Simple camera and strobe adjustments that are made without even thinking at 20m become major philosophical judgment calls at 50m, and it was with an increasing sense of shame that I had to report to my Japanese underwater "supermodel" and Tufi dive master, Yuko Kuramoto, that each day's attempts had failed.

That was until I realized that Yuko was suffering from the "narcs" possibly as much as I was when, despite all my pleas about not disturbing the sandy bottom, the visibility would suddenly reduce to about 2m, or she would forget

to turn on the torch... There is a great saying in Tok Pisin that Yuko and I came to use, as it kind of summarized the impact of narcosis at 50m: Het i no gud.

But I am glad to say that by attempt number five we were both comfortable at 50m and the seven minutes we had allowed ourselves at that depth went completely to plan. I was able to use the 23 minute decompression stop near the Tufi wharf to review some decent images! ■

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