



DEACON'S REEF at Lauadi

A Personal Perspective

Don Silcock

Just over 22 years ago, I opened my mailbox to find the April 1988 edition of National Geographic magazine and an article that was to contribute to a significant change of direction in my life.

I was located on the island of Bahrain in the Persian Gulf, in the small town of Awali, where most of us who worked in the oil & gas industry lived. A daily ritual was to call at the post office on the way home from work to pick up mail.

Back in 1988, I was approaching a pivotal point in my life. I had been working in the Middle East for over 10 years and was coming to the conclusion that I needed a complete change in direction. I had recently applied for migration to Australia; a strange land down-under I had never visited, which

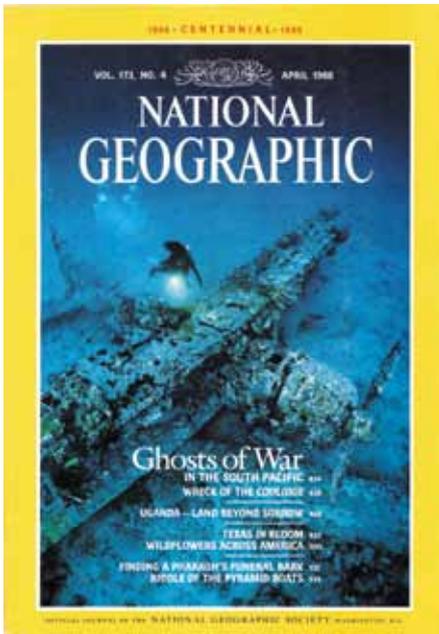
Main: Diver and rich sponge garden at Deacons Reef. Right: Diver and hard corals.

seemed to be full of all sorts of weird creatures on land and killer sharks just waiting off the beach...

My application was going well and it

looked like an approval was imminent, but should I really leave the expat lifestyle behind and move to a country where I had never even been?





Inside National Geographic was an article by renowned author, Peter Benchley (of *Jaws* fame), and the extremely accomplished underwater photographer, David Doubilet. The article was called *Ghosts of War* in the South Pacific and in it they documented their travels around Milne Bay and New Britain diving the wrecks of WWII on board Ron and Valerie Taylor's liveaboard, the *Reef Explorer*.

Doubilet's images were superb – the wrecks seemed to jump out of the page at you and the scenic shots of huge sea fans were unlike anything I had ever seen before, and were simply quite stunning.

I had to look on the map to locate where Papua New Guinea actually was, but soon realised that it was Australia's closest neighbor. A simple fact that helped convince me that if I really did want to follow my dreams, and dive some of the best locations in the world, it was time to pack my bags and head south.

MV Chertan

Fast-forward to 2003, my first trip to Milne Bay on Rob Vanderloos' liveaboard the *MV Chertan*. We had just dropped anchor at Lauadi on the Solomon Sea side of the peninsular that forms the north coast of Milne Bay. Rob was briefing us on Dinah's Beach and the critters we could expect to see there.

On board were the acclaimed



Australian underwater photographer Roger Steene and his mate Scott Michael, both of whom were really into critters.

At the end of the briefing, knowing my preference for coral reefs and bigger marine creatures, Rob turned to me and said "there's a nice spot around the headland if you prefer to shoot wide-angle".

So it was, that when we all jumped into the water, everybody turned right to explore Dinah's Beach, while I went left in search of what I later learned was Deacon's Reef.

Simply stated, what I found was stunning; huge gorgonian fans and green Tubastrea coral trees surrounded by what seemed like thousands of Anthias, bright red sea whips, and barrel sponges all in about 12 metres of water with a canopy of lush rainforest just above.

We stayed for two days at Lauadi and I spent most of my time round at Deacon's Reef, only putting in token

Clockwise from top left: April 1988 edition of National Geographic; Gorgonian fan and rich canopy of rainforest; Native canoe adds a great backdrop....





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Above: Rich sponges, Tubastrea coral tree & schooling anthias at Deacons . Below: Huge Gorgonian fans, my version of David Doubliett's original image!.

early morning and late afternoon forays to see the critters at Dinah's. I am pretty sure everybody thought I was somewhat weird, spending so much time around the corner when there were so many critters to be seen at Dinah's – but I did not care, it was just so special at the headland!

Unfortunately, when I got back to Australia and my many rolls of film from the trip had been developed, I was disappointed with my results at Deacon's Reef. The things that make Deacon's special; it's superb gorgonian fans and coral trees growing so close to the surface, and the intense rays of sunshine that penetrate the overhead rainforest foliage to produce shafts of light all combine to make it technically difficult to photograph. Plus it has to be said... I did not really know what I was doing with my camera back then.

However, disappointed as I was, Deacon's Reef left an indelible impression on me. I felt I knew it, despite never having been there before, and I was determined to get back there and capture its essence.

December 2008 - Tawali

Fast-forward this time to December 2008, and there I am back in Milne Bay on a *Niugini Blue* assignment to report on the Tawali Dive Resort. Very high on my list of priorities was a return trip to Deacon's Reef.

Day three at Tawali, we spent a full day diving at Lauadi, but due to untimely coral spawning the night

before, particulate in the water made Deacon's particularly difficult to photograph. Most of the time was spent at Dinah's Beach.

We decided to leave it for a few days and concentrate on the offshore reefs, where the water was clearer, so it was the second to last day of the trip before I actually got back to Deacon's Reef. This time the water was much clearer and I





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spent two long dives there, filling up the memory card in my camera.

I was really pleased with the images I took that day and felt that I had come full circle on my photographic failures back in 2003. The best part was to come when I got back to Australia and started research for this article.

Enter Bob Halstead...

Whenever I write an article associated with a diving location I always do as much research as possible on the place. This usually involves a combination of Internet searches and reading through the large collection of diving related books I have accumulated over the years.

Whenever possible, I also try to talk to experts on the specific location and Bob Halstead, one of the pioneers of liveboard scuba diving in PNG, has been really helpful.

I particularly wanted to get his input on this article, because he discovered and popularised the sites. So, I called Bob and he explained about taking

David Doubilet to both sites in 1987 and suggested I try locate a copy of the April 1988 edition of National Geographic.

I have to confess to being, like most men, somewhat of a hoarder, and in the large bookcase in my study is a collection of old National Geographic magazines that I have never been able

Below: Beautiful red sea whips.

to bring myself to part with. Sure enough, in among them was the April 1988 edition. I am sure you can imagine my intense delight when I realised its significance!

The first thing I did was bring up my images from Deacon's on the screen and compare them against the



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master's... and I can tell you that the beer tasted really good that night! But then I realised that my images had all the benefits of modern digital technology and Doubilet's had been taken on film 23 years ago, which quickly deflated my rapidly expanding ego.

Enter Kevin Deacon

In a further coincidence, Deacon's Reef is named after a good friend of mine, Kevin Deacon – himself a celebrated underwater photographer and the person who has probably done more than anybody else to help me with this black art.

I called Kevin to find out how the site came to be named after him and he explained that he was on one of the very first charters Bob and Dinah Halstead ran when they launched their liveboard,

Top left: Beautiful coral tree and Damselfish. Top right: Tubastrea coral tree & anthias.

MV Telita, in Milne Bay, back in 1987. One of the many sites they visited was the headland just round from Lauadi, which at that point, like many other sites in Milne Bay, was unnamed.

Kevin, who even then had dived a lot of places around the world, was so impressed with the site he suggested to Bob that it was possibly the best reef he had ever seen – to which Bob suggested christening it Deacon's Reef!

Diving Deacon's Reef

Diving Deacon's could not be easier, but just like nearby Dinah's Beach, you will need a boat to get there.

Usually, the Tawali dive boats will tie up to one of the large trees providing

the thick canopy over the site, so you will enter the water just down from the fun.

The maximum depth is around 18 metres, but most of the best things to see are at 12 metres and the site is very easy to navigate.

As you swim away from the headland, you will reach the slope that drops off very rapidly into the deep. The blue water is where the "big dogs" are sometimes spotted, so keep your eyes open. ■

Don Silcock
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