



A diver floats above fans and sea whips at Suzie's Bommie

She's bright and colourful on the surface but deep and complex the more you get to know her. Her charms are numerous and sometimes mysterious yet she's always easy-going and welcoming. If she sounds like the ideal girl it's because she is - almost. Suzie is in fact a bommie and a dive site on the barrier reef outside Bootless Bay, Port Moresby. I'd heard of Suzie's charms over dinners in Paris, lunches in London, and coffee in Madrid. The few aficionados of adventure and connoisseurs of coral who'd witnessed her beauty recalled their encounters with misty, wistful eyes. I promised to myself on my next visit to PNG I would check her out.

Sometimes legends are created from little substance, exaggerations creep in, embellishments are made. To top it off, I would be spending my 40th birthday at Loloata Island Resort. Festive expectations are often raised, anticipation runs high, and then the party goes off with a pfffft rather than a resounding pop. Would Suzie be the same?

My party plans weren't in sync with the dive plan (although I was more than happy to just be getting back into PNG waters again). A group was in and had requested morning dives at Pumpkin Patch and Dinah's Delight with a postprandial potter around Lion Island. Being my first dive in

In Love With (a Bommie Called) Suzie

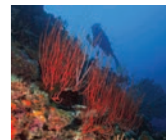
Christopher Bartlett

five months, I missed part of Pumpkin Patch readjusting my kit, getting used to my new BCD, tuning back in with the water and my camera. I did see the pygmy seahorse, the crocodilefish, and an olive sea snake, though with a not inconsiderable current my photos were never going to be keepers. Dinah's Delight, named after the wife of PNG diving pioneer Bob Halstead,

“..I'd heard of Suzie's charms over dinner in Paris, lunches in London and coffee in Madrid...”

was true to its name. The gorgonian fan-filled gullies were gorgeous and harboured my first ever sighting of a tasselled wobbegong shark; its mottled camouflage not evading the eye of our dive guide Roy. It was an unexpected birthday treat, and I marvelled at the elaborate fronds protruding from below its bottom lip. Within the mass of tassels are branched nasal barbels and grooves that channel surrounding water to the shark's mouth. The barbels are perfectly positioned to help these bottom-dwelling sharks detect a variety of bottom-dwelling prey such as crabs, lobsters, cephalopods, echinoderms and fishes. Wobbegongs have even been documented eating bamboo sharks of a length similar to their own. Although believed to be a rare occurrence with a jaw structure that can be dislocated, a large gape, and sharp, rearward-pointing teeth, wobbegongs can grasp a relatively

IN LOVE WITH (A BOMMIE CALLED) SUZIE
Story & Photo: Christopher Bartlett



Clockwise from above: Barbigan's pygmy seahorse; a lionfish at Dinah's Delight; Loloata dock at sunset

large prey before swallowing it whole. After a lobster-tail lunch back at Loloata we departed for nearby Lion Island. The island is the location of a couple of deliberately sunken fishing trawlers that host some interesting fish life and a shallow sandy slope interspersed with patches of seagrass that hide a myriad of small and interesting critters. A spinecheek anemonefish posed for a birthday photo, a porcelain crab modelled perfectly for me, a luridly coloured peacock mantis shrimp poked its bright blue eyes out of its tunnel in

the sand, and an egg-bearing shrimp that I had never seen before (turned out to be a Holthuis shrimp) hopped around the tentacles of her host anemone. All in all I didn't feel like I'd missed anything at all and was most content with the underwater birthday bounty I had received.

The next morning Roy and Raga gave us our daily diving menu: End Bommie, Suzie's Bommie, and the wreck of the MV *New Marine*. Three nautical miles out to sea on the outer barrier reef, End Bommie's abundant life is fed by the

tides that bring nutrients around and over it.

After mooring on a pin on the main reef we started finning across 40m of blue water. Before I was halfway across I could make out the wall opposite me. It was certainly well-nourished with gorgonian fans, pink sea whips, tubastraea and soft coral trees perched on its sides. The tide hadn't quite started to go out but there were still plenty of fish. Crinoids, also called feather stars, hung off gorgonians and sea whips with their limbs extended, feeding on plankton in the gentle current. The colours were beautiful.

On the way back I started sorting through the 100-odd images I'd taken, thinking that we were done, Raga led us off on a short diversion. We'd already been down for 60 minutes so it had to be something good. And it was. The largest congregation of bubble-tip anemones I have ever seen, playing host to over a hundred dusky anemonefish. Incredible. How was Suzie's going to beat that? An hour later the outgoing tide was in full flow, pulling nutrients from the inshore waters out to the deep and pulling in a lot of hungry fish. Big schools of deep-bodied and twin-striped fusiliers plunged down the walls, shimmering in the sunlight. We followed





IN LOVE WITH (A BOMMIE CALLED) SUZIE
Story & Photo: Christopher Bartlett

them down about 30m looking for pygmy seahorses in the plentiful fans. In terms of colour Suzie's matched End Bommie pink for pink, whip for whip, feather star for feather star and fan for fan. There was no luck on the pygmy front but there was so much else to take in I was glad not to be distracted from it. Raga pointed out a longnose hawkfish in the fan where he sometimes found seahorses. It looked quite chuffed to me, like it had just had a nice snack. Nearby a harlequin sweetlip was enjoying the attentions of a cleaner wrasse. I found it hard to pick a wide-angle shot to photograph. There was a plethora of possibilities and the best way to get a cracking image is to pick one and take it many times, varying the angle slightly, trying different settings, and seeing if a colourful fish might swim into the frame. I was a fat kid in a cake shop trying to fill my boots. At 30m my time at the photographic buffet was soon gone though, and I moved up the wall, conscious I needed to save some nitrogen credit for the top of the bommie 13m below the surface. Above me the dark silhouettes of hundreds of sweetlips swirled, looking for their lunch, and a large emperor darted into a pack of fusiliers. A few choice expletives of wonder passed through my mind as I marvelled.

My reverie was broken by Roy banging on his tank above me. Up at 15m, merrily sitting on a small shelf on the bommie, was one of a photographer's most sought-after subjects, and a Loloata special: the lacy scorpionfish (aka Merlet's scorpionfish, *Rhinopias aphanes*). Covered with skin tags that mimic the algae or soft coral and crinoids of its immediate surroundings, its colouring is a maze-like camo pattern with white spots under each eye. This decoy eye enables the predator to watch its prey without detection, lying in wait, ready to spring its ambush. The first few spines of the lateral fins have evolved into a sort of articulating toe with which they hook into the substrate and pull themselves along. By flopping about the bottom, other fish will discount the movements as flotsam or a wounded fish and come in close to investigate. The two white decoy spots below the eyes are distracting enough to mislead



Above: A longnose hawkfish; Below: Merlet's scorpionfish at Suzie's Bommie



the prey. And as the unsuspecting fish approaches to investigate, the *Rhinopias* carefully watches, gauges the distance, and then, all at once, drops its jaws and inhales the fish so quickly it actually pulls in a mass of water, creating a strong vacuum and making it impossible

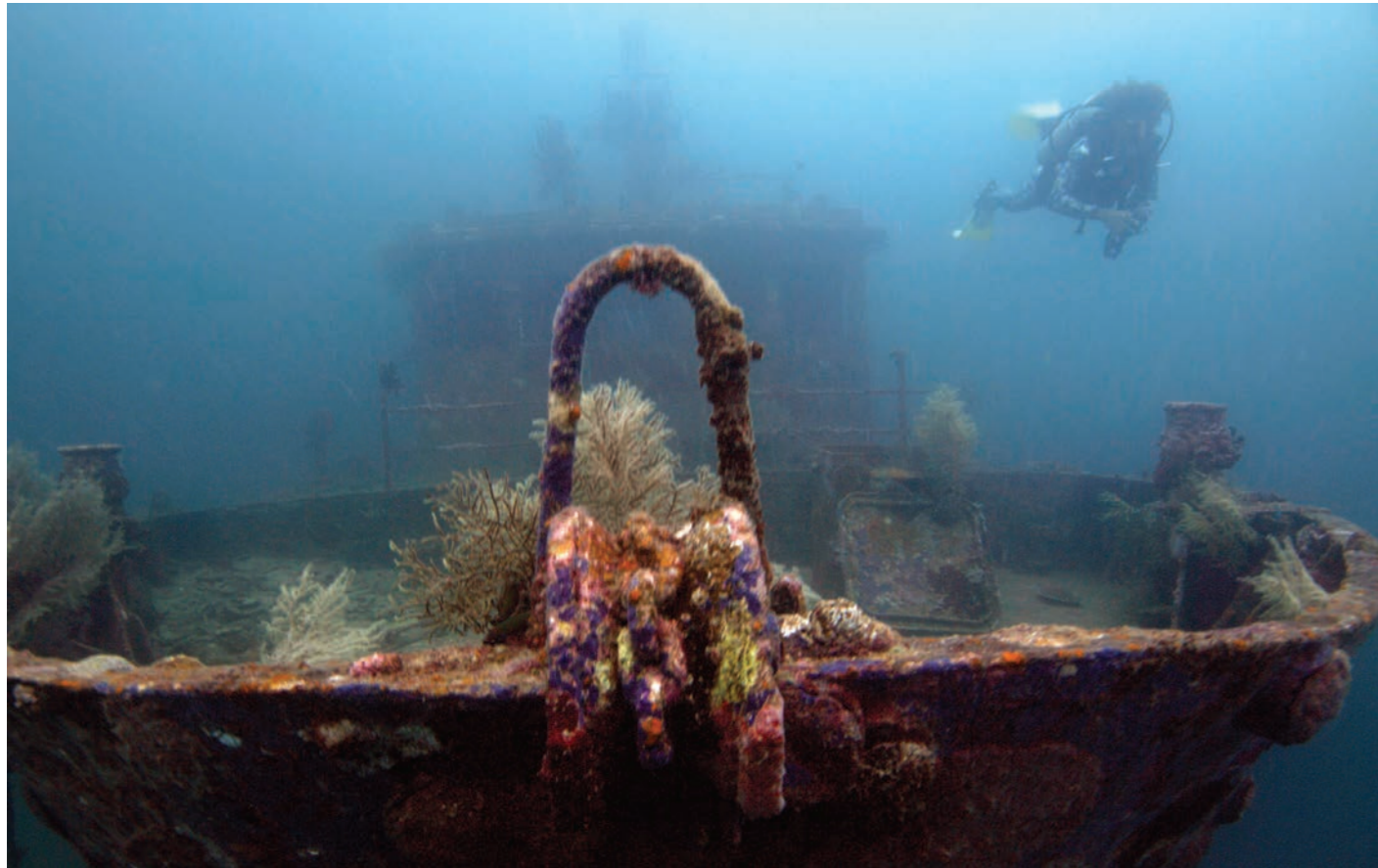
for the intended prey to escape. The *Rhinopias* safely captured on my SD card, I glanced at my dive computer. An ominous "1" stared back at me. Time to go shallower. I passed the throng of lined sweetlips and hovered 6m above the top of the bommie,

EVERYTHING FOR OUTDOORS



BRIAN BELL HOMECENTRES
WHOLESALE • RETAIL • EVERYTHING FOR YOUR HOME

PORT MORESBY Home Centre 325 8469 Boroko Plaza 325 5411	LAE Home Centre 472 3200 Top Town 479 1918	MADANG 422 1899 KOKOPO 982 9027 Email: bbsales@brianbell.com.pg	MT HAGEN 542 1999 GOROKA 532 1622
--	---	---	--



Clockwise from above: *MV New Marine*;
Holthuis' shrimp in an anemone; a
spinecheek anemonefish



frustrated at not being able to get close enough to snap the fish but enchanted by the action all around. On the other side of the bommie a large school of silvery batfish swept back and forth also looking for a feed. The place was buzzing. Loloata's dive site description for Suzie's says, "Superlatives cannot describe this dive site". I concurred and wanted to go back. I would have to wait however as Roy and Raga had more sites to show



me. The *MV New Marine* is a fishing trawler sunk as an artificial reef close to the resort that has swarms of juvenile barracuda patrolling around it and lionfish hanging around the winch gear. It makes for an easy afternoon dive, as does the wreck of a Boston A-20 Havoc

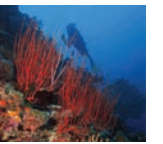
that crashed during World War II, and the great muck diving site in front of Lion Island. The signature wreck dive though has to be the *MV Pacific Gas*. A 65m-long gas tanker that was sunk in 1986, her bow sits at 15m, the top of the bridge is at

25m, and the rudder sits on the sandy bottom down at 44m. Descending the mooring line to the bow, the bridge and cabin section look massive with a diver to provide some perspective. The mast and bow have some great corals, including a small fan hosting ornate ghost pipefish, there are resident lionfish and leaffish, and barracuda are common visitors.

My pygmy seahorse photography fix had yet to be sated so a dive at Quayle's Reef was planned during which I spent my time with two fish; a Barbignant's pygmy seahorse and a rockmover wrasse - both difficult species to record. The latter moves around back and forth in an apparently haphazard manner as if washed by the current, and the pygmy seahorse presents a challenge due to the fact it is both rare and tiny. At up to 25mm tall, the knobbly, slightly pot-bellied Barbignant is the daddy of the pygmy seahorses but the individual at Quayle's was more like 15mm, shy, and probably a bit ticked off by the not so hot buoyancy control of the two divers who went before me. Still, with no-one else left in the queue, I could take my time and wait for the angle I wanted, a front-on view to show the mouth. I ended up watching this fascinating creature for 20 minutes, kneeling in the sand.

Pygmy seahorses are the only fish where the males become truly pregnant, nurturing the eggs in a brood pouch for at least 10 days while the female stays by their side for the duration of gestation. Males can even get stretch marks and although not mates for life a happy couple can re-mate within 30 minutes of the male giving birth to their young.

Having seen one of the smallest fish in the ocean, Raga thought I needed something bigger. Down on Big Drop we paid a visit to a big Pacific goliath grouper (*Epinephelus quinquefasciatus*). It reaches a length of 2.5m and can weigh as much as 360kg by feeding on crustaceans, other fish, octopuses and young sea turtles. Definitive study into their reproductive behaviour has yet to be conducted but it is believed that like the rest of the grouper family they are protogynous hermaphrodites where all juveniles are female and the largest



Above: A rockmover wrasse at Quayle's Reef



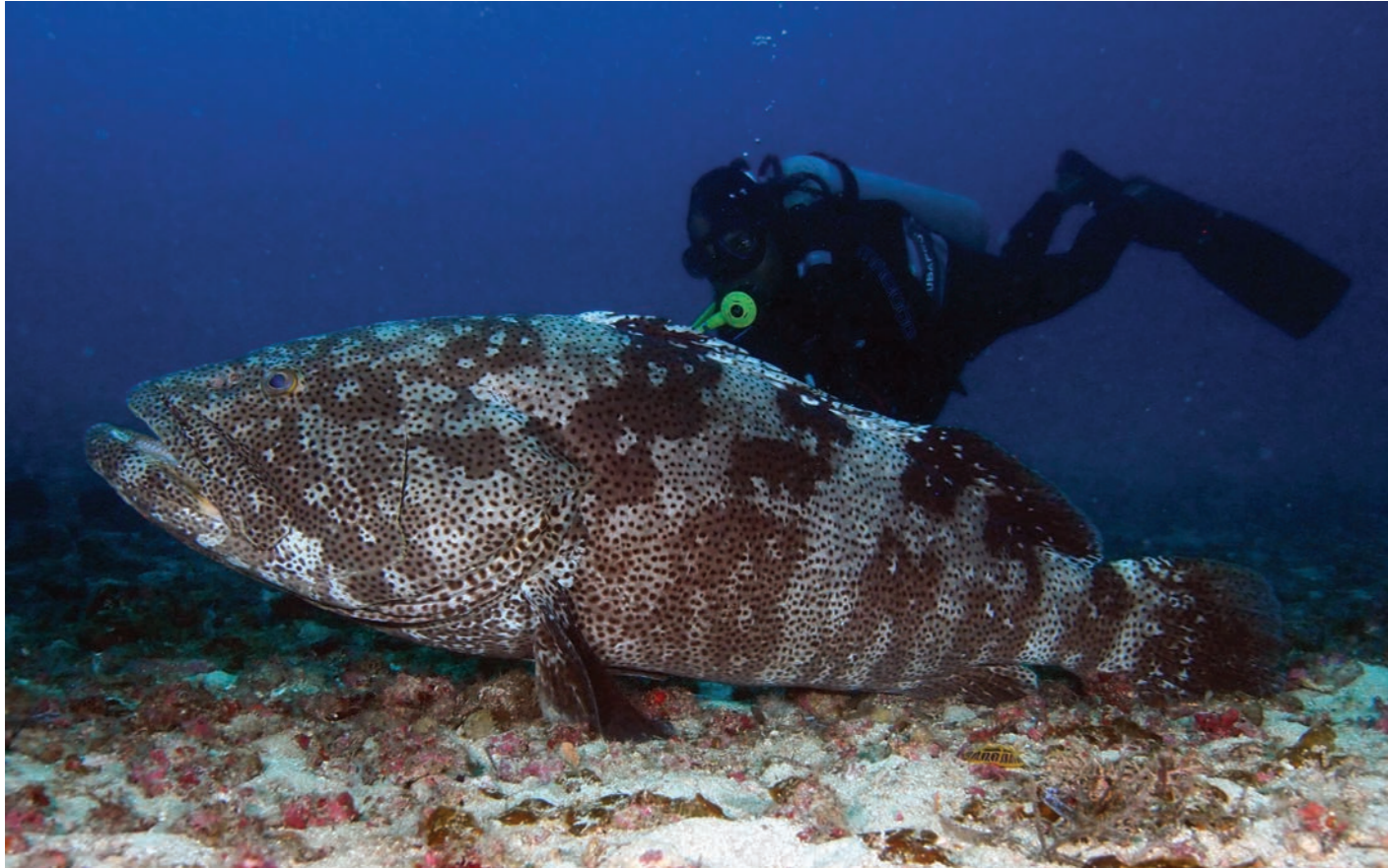
Above: A porcelain crab at Lion Island



Above: The head of a wobbegong shark at Dinah's Delight



IN LOVE WITH (A BOMMIE CALLED) SUZIE
 Story & Photo: Christopher Bartlett



Above: Raga with a Pacific goliath grouper at Big Drop; Below: A peacock mantis shrimp at Lion Island

“..The big Pacific goliath grouper can weigh as much as 360kg...”

female in a territory becomes male when the resident male dies. Being this big, the fish wasn't fazed by our presence and sat on the bottom as we pulled up alongside. Comparing it to Raga just behind it, our fella was around 2m long. Yet another very impressive find. On the last day we returned to Suzie. Or rather Suzie's Bommie. I no longer think of her/it as a large lump of rock covered in coral.

All the fish were still there with a couple of stonefish to boot and the corals were just as captivating. I have always been a diver who avoided "going into deco" (building up a level of nitrogen in the body that makes a safety stop compulsory), and had managed to be a good boy for more than 1500 dives



around the world. Suzie bewitched me and took my deco cherry. I did not want to leave her. In my mind the bommie has taken on her own persona and aura. She is an underwater goddess of marine diversity and health.

Sometimes I dream about her and I get a funny feeling in my chest. I'm in love with a bommie called Suzie. ■

Christopher Bartlett



Are *you* Export quality?



PNG'S
World-Class
 EXPORT