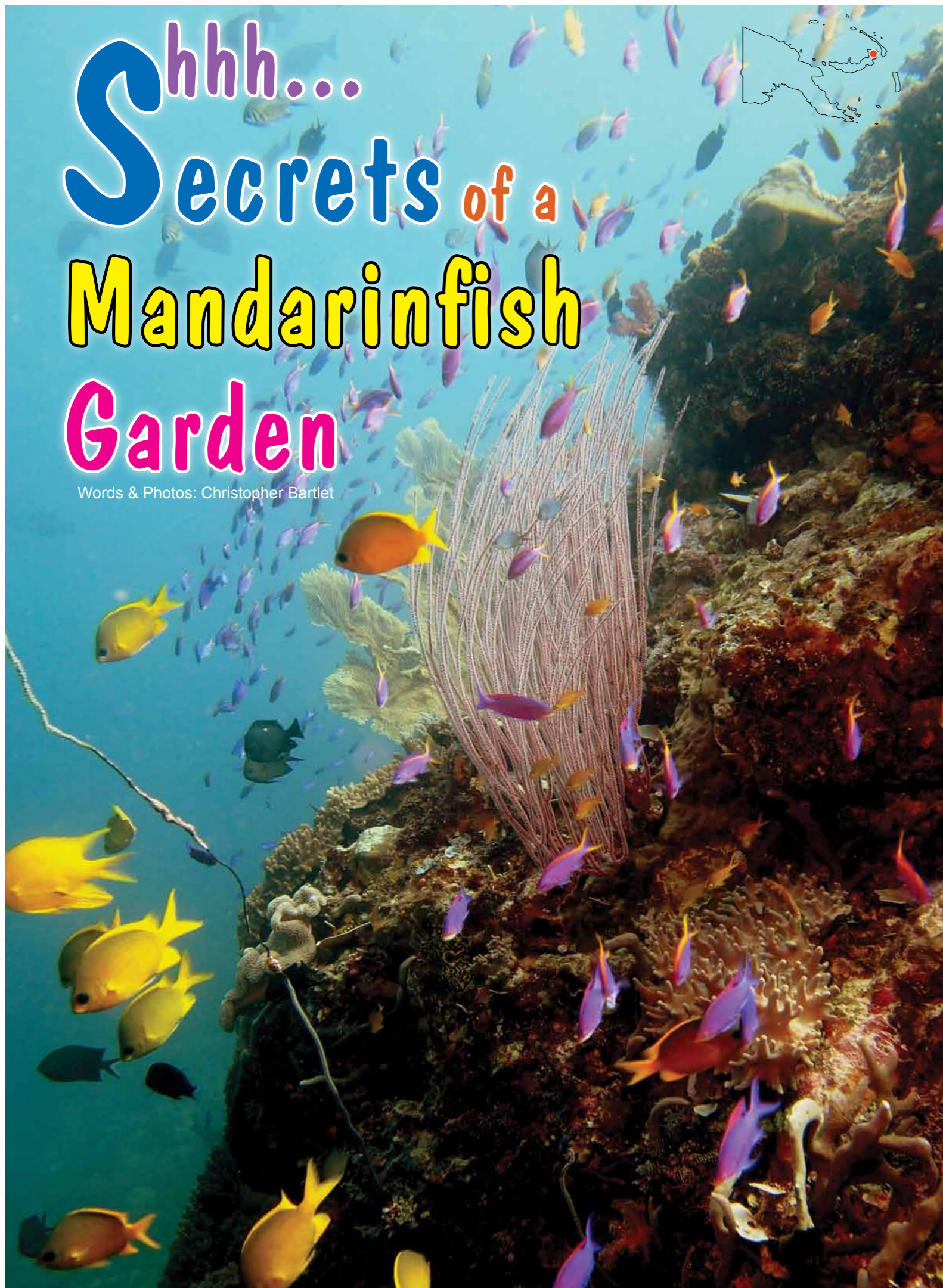


# Shhh... Secrets of a Mandarinfish Garden

Words & Photos: Christopher Bartlet



SECRETS OF A MANDARINFISH GARDEN  
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Not far from a sleepy New Ireland resort there's a dive site known only as Nozaki's Secret. It is listed on the dive site map but not shown. Why the secrecy? Mandarinfish. These impossibly brightly coloured creatures attain just 6cm in length and are a must-see for most divers and all photographers.

The thing is, they only really show themselves when the sun has gone down, not surprising given how well they stand out in daylight. Odd as it may seem, their Chinese Lord's gown motif is actually part of their defensive system. One of the few scaleless fish species, they are protected by a toxic mucous and their pattern is a good example of aposomatic colouration – where toxic creatures warn potential predators of their inedibility through the use of bright colours. The mucous also protects them from parasites. When a dive centre finds a mandarinfish site, it likes to keep it schtum, hence the secrecy. One day, just before dusk I headed north to this secret spot. Five metres below the surface, Nozaki – resident

instructor at Lissenung Island Resort and the dive site's namesake – set up two underwater torches on sticks to illuminate a head of finger coral and we settled in to watch the show. The males put on dancing displays to attract one of the less numerous females. When a female is suitably impressed she will rub up against the males' pelvic fin, the pair will rise 50cm from the coral head for 5 to 10 seconds, release a mixture of eggs and sperm, and then shoot back to the protection of the coral. Trying to get the camera to focus in the low light during one of these brief forays into the open proved to be quite a challenge, and we spent a good half an hour watching a succession of males dance and the

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subsequent egg fertilisation. Images of individuals were OK, but the grail here is to get a couple together, a sort of artsy underwater fish soft porn. Despite the warm water, after 40 minutes of trying to bag a winner, the shivers started to set in. Nozaki was patience personified but two of the other



Above: Nudibranch-shaped Lissenung Island; Below: Chromodoris Nudibranch



divers had already headed up to the boat. “Two more minutes?” I asked, tapping my watch, raising two digits and making a hands-together Oriental bow. And then two lovers popped up, right in front of me and did the deed. They stopped motionless for a few seconds as I shot off some frames and then they vanished. Back on the boat under the ink black sky, a quick view on the camera as we sped back to the resort confirmed I could have a couple of keepers. The aptly nudibranch-shaped Lissenung

Island is nestled halfway between the jaws of western New Ireland, a 20 minute boatripe south of Kavieng Harbour, and has coral reefs around two-thirds of its small shore. I say “aptly shaped” as, although New Ireland has a deserved reputation for big schools of pelagics, from bumphead parrotfish to silvertip sharks, owner and Austrian ex-engineer Dietmar Amon is an ardent fan of the ocean’s smaller, slower occupants. Nudibranchs, a sort of brightly coloured sea slug of which there are more than



*Velvety soft sand of an island paradise*

800 species, and cowries, marine molluscs, are among his favourite finds. Although they might sound like the underwater equivalent of spotting stationary trains, Dietmar has fascinating tales about their underwater feats. Who would have thought one of the deadliest creatures in the ocean is the Geographicus cone shell, also known as the cigarette snail, as smoking one last one is about all a human has time to do after being bitten by this mollusc. On our first day, we’d arrived for lunch,

and as we strode ashore and up the short beach to be greeted by our hosts Dietmar and his wife Ange, it was impossible not to break into a grin. The only shoes we’d be wearing for a week were fins as the path from the restaurant to our chalet was velvety soft sand. Straight after lunch we sorted our kit out, boarded the twin-hulled dive boat, and headed back to Kavieng Harbour for an afternoon muck dive on an upturned Pete WWII Japanese float plane (one of several plane wrecks in the area) as



Above: Magnificent partner shrimp; Below: A cuttlefish changes colours



well as around the wharf, where dwells a decent number of the marine world’s weird and wonderful inhabitants, such as ghost pipefish, nudibranchs and shrimps, octopus and pipefish. The harbour tends to be a bit murky, given its sandy bottom and protected nature, but the dive sites on the reefs between the islands are much clearer. The changing tides produce some strong currents that flush clear waters from the deep sea over the abundant reefs and through tiny passages. It is during

those currents that the pelagics pitch up: grey, blacktip, and whitetip reef sharks, tunas, mackerels, schools of jacks and barracudas are frequent visitors to the numerous dive sites to the north and the south. The following morning we headed south to Danny’s Bommie. Starting at 7m, it is connected to the island via a saddle down at 15m, and on the outside it plummets straight down into the inky blue depths. We dropped in and headed down to 30m where a school of 20 or



more large bumphead parrotfish were cruising. They didn't stop and I think the coral must have been very pleased. These 40kg fish look like they could do some serious grazing with their beaks (really teeth fused together) and, unlike most other parrotfish, are partial to live coral as well as the algae that live on them. Coming back up I spied a white-bonnet anemonefish, the eighth that I had seen of the nine species that live in PNG waters. Now only the panda or saddleback anemone fish was missing. We ended the dive among the schools of fusiliers adorning the top of the coral-covered bommie, gazing into the blue. After relaxing in the sun on the boat (there is plenty of shade but I get plenty



Top: Yellow margin moray eel; Middle: Map pufferfish and butterflyfish; Bottom: Longnose hawkfish; Right: Orange pygmy seahorse



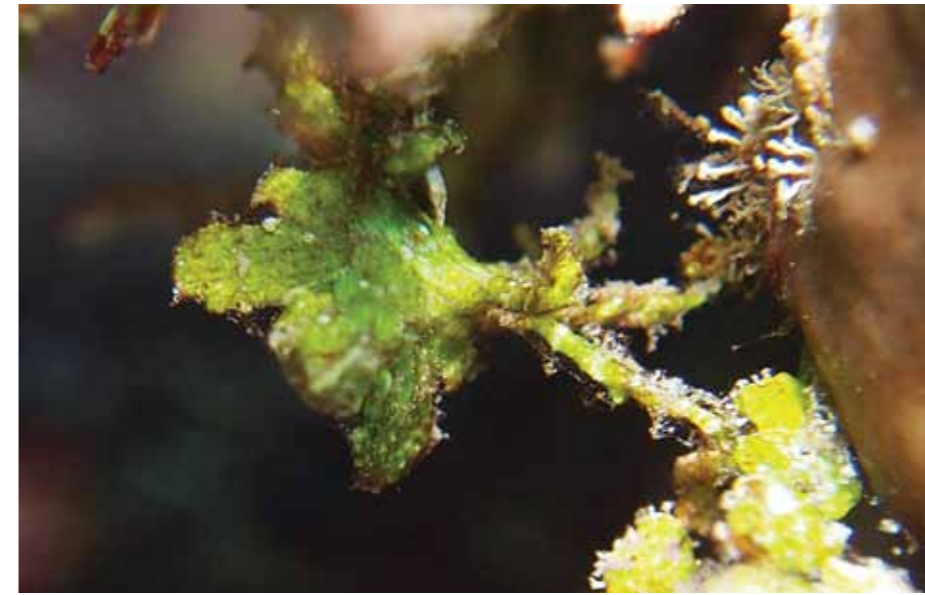
of that back home in the UK) with some fresh fruit, we headed over to Kavin II and its long wall for a spot of pygmy sea horse hunting on gorgonian fans. Nozaki soon gave me the underwater "look here,

“...I had to be able to find it for myself, otherwise it would be like getting someone to hunt trophies for you...”

small stuff” sign, and sure enough, right where she was pointing, was a miniscule centimetre-long, knobbly pink seahorse. Amazing.

I snapped a few shots off before thinking I had to be able to find it for myself, otherwise it would be like getting someone to hunt trophies for you. I turned my head away and looked back. Gone. I knew what it looked like, I knew where it was to within a square metre, but, try as I might, I could not find it. I searched for several minutes, my face centimetres from the fan, until I started to go cross-eyed and lose the ability to focus. Nozaki came back, waved her hand in front of the fan gently, and found it in less than 10 seconds, and left me to continue my challenge.

I tried the hand wave, more a flexing of the fingers than a regal Queen Liz special, and lo and behold something



tiny was swaying before my squinting eyes, its tail curled around a piece of fan. I was a pygmy seahorse hunter! I raised my camera and snapped away only to realise I was under the watchful eyes of a longnose hawkfish, whose presence I'd totally overlooked. So engrossed was I in my quest for one of PNG's dive grails, I'd almost missed this photographer's chalice. As I'd been down there for so long, it had got used to my presence and pouted for me until my dive computer told me it was time to ascend to shallower depths.

Closer to the surface my camera found little respite as Ange pointed out a leaf of seagrass that had legs and a pair of eyes. A superbly camouflaged halemeda crab was lurking on the wall. About 20m further along, one of his cousins – the slightly more conspicuous but equally small orangutan crab – was trying to hide in a crack. After 70 minutes we were unsurprisingly low on air, low on batteries, and pretty famished.

Over the next four days we dived the best reefs to the north and the south, and enjoyed them all. Matrix, for example, had fantastic hard corals in the shallows, and huge fan corals from 20m downwards created a beautiful underwater landscape. Drifting along on the current, the reef was a riot of vivid colours as anthias and butterfly fish danced around the corals. This is probably the prettiest drift dive around Kavieng.

Peter's Patch, at the southeastern tip



Top left: Halemeda crab camouflaged as a leaf; Top right: True clownfish; Middle: Colourful corals everywhere; Bottom: Orangutan crab





Clockwise from above: Cuttlefish; A diver hovers over a barrel sponge; Reef shark; Crocodilefish; Anemone shrimp

of a large reef system in the Steffen Strait, was great for batfish and pelagics, with tuna and barracuda aplenty. On the other end of the reef system lies Helmut's Reef and here we found leaf fish and white-bonnet anemonefish, one of the more rare of the nine species of anemonefish found in PNG. But the best site in the area, in my opinion, is the amazing Albatross Passage. On an incoming tide this narrow passage between two islands is like fish soup. As water comes in from the deep and approaches a shelf 9m below the surface, it speeds up and draws in a myriad of fish life from the

food chain. Schools of sardine-sized fusiliers and snappers looking for lunch brought by the upwelling waters attract dogtooth tunas and barracudas, who in turn attract grey reef, blacktip, whitetip and occasionally silvertip sharks. Eagle and devil rays are sometimes seen here and hooking onto the top of the reef and watching the action over the top of the wall is a spectacular experience. The wall itself is covered with big fan corals, black corals, soft branching coral and sponges and this is the home for small creatures like nudibranchs, leaf fish, and scorpionfish. At about 30m there is a sandy shelf that does

a good job of reflecting the light, and even when the current is pumping at the top, the deeper sections of the wall and the shelf are calm. On a foray to find more pygmy seahorses and long-nosed hawkfish, a large cuttlefish gave us a display of its ability to change colours. We dived this site three times and would gladly go there every day. Afternoon dives on the house reef that goes two-thirds of the way around the island are free and much of the best stuff is in 3m of water, making it ideal for snorkelling too. It doesn't take too much luck to get a glimpse of juvenile blacktip reef sharks around the far side



of the island but here I was interested in something a little more elusive. I had photographed eight of PNG's nine anemonefish species but was missing one; the panda or saddleback anemonefish. Wading into the water, past the seahorse lolling around like a seemingly listless drunk, I followed Dietmar's directions to the mooring buoy, turned right, and swam over the sandy bottom for all of 30 seconds. Lo and behold, in a small anemone was my prize. And they weren't alone. A couple of transparent anemone shrimp were out too and kindly posed for me. On our last day we couldn't dive as we were flying early the next morning, so we snorkelled around half of the island, where the shallow coral provides an excellent nursery for juvenile reef fish. After a visit to neighbouring Eruk Island, home to the resort staff and a school, we relaxed in the sun, had an afternoon swim with a turtle, and enjoyed a few cold SPs. After dinner the children came over and put on a singing for us, dancing on the sand with much vigour and delight, the bright red of their skirts and fresh green of the grasses they wore not dissimilar to the inhabitants of Nozaki's Secret. ■

Christopher Bartlett

Left: Snorkelling off the Lissenung beach; Below: Children perform a singing; Below left: One of the resort guest cabins

