

Left to right -
Tavurvur volcano
Cockpit of the Kokopo Zero
Lloyd on the bi-plane
Zero fighter



RABAU

: H E SAWYER

IN SEARCH OF TIN BIRDS

The last of the minibuses laden with locals crawls away. That's the public transport gone, and it will be pitch black before long. Standing in the same clothes since Saturday, I wipe a hand under my arm. Bit of a hoy. I've arrived in Papua New Guinea. My mobile's useless. No network. Dragging myself back inside the now deserted terminal, I approach the biggest bloke still working there, and he gets on the blower for me. Pidgin chatter. "They're expecting you. You arrive tomorrow." We laugh. Oh, I've definitely arrived in Papua New Guinea...

Seven years on, and I'm back in Rabaul. Stephen Woolcott of Kabaira Dive picks me up in his battered Hilux and drives me through the lush scenery to his Beach Hideaway Resort on Ataliklikun Bay, just an hour from the airport.

Laid back, but not lacking in enthusiasm, Stephen started Kabaira Dive in 2003, providing a year round dependable service, reasonably priced, with genuine hospitality. Beach bungalows come with fridge and en suite, electrical sockets, and an inclusive laundry service that borders on the fanatical.

I'm the only guest, so have the luxury of picking the sites I wish to dive, and as I've flown for three days, passing over world class reef systems, it's the wrecks I'm here for.

> YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF THE PLACE, IT COSTS A PACKET, AND TAKES THREE DAYS HARD SLOG FROM THE UK TO GET THERE, PROVIDING THE AIRPORT IS OPEN. THE AUTHORITIES' ARE TRYING TO EVICT THE LOCALS FROM THEIR POST APOCALYPTIC WASTELAND ON HEALTH GROUNDS, AND IF MALARIA OR THE RASKOLS DON'T GET YOU, JESUS PROBABLY WILL. WHY WOULD YOU GO? AND WHY ON EARTH WOULD YOU GO BACK?

That's not to say the reef dives of Kabaira should be overlooked. There are some splendid experiences to be had here; a bit of drift, a bit of wall, big fish action, and some macro, including the 'Door Step' house reef, with seahorses and harlequin ghost pipefish, and Johnnie's Jetty, now restricted to a night dive, due to its popularity with the local fishermen, their massed ranks reflecting the rich pickings between the pylons.

Stephen is also pioneering 'survival' safari diving, camping out under the stars on the remote, beautiful, and rarely explored Talele Islands for those seeking something different from their diving.

But I'm an anorak, and under my anorak I wear a wreck diver's T-shirt. I've returned to Rabaul for the rust, specifically for the rust I missed last time around. And yes, of course I've got a list.

A concentration of wrecks like this doesn't just happen. During WWII the Japanese were looking for a base for their push

south into the Pacific, and Rabaul, with its perfect harbour, formed by an extinct caldera, was tailor made. The Japanese launched bombing raids against the token Australian garrison of Lark Force in January 1942, and quickly eliminated the few Wirraway aircraft sent against their overwhelming air superiority. The full blown invasion came in the early hours of 23 January, and in spite of heroic resistance by the heavily outnumbered defenders, Rabaul was taken by dawn. Those who weren't killed or captured faced the ordeal of retreat, battling starvation, disease and the unforgiving jungle. Miraculously, some made it to safety.

Rabaul was quickly fortified by its new occupiers, but when Allied forces launched their sustained bombing raids of 'Operation Cartwheel' in November 1943, the Japanese were forced to dig a network of tunnels in which to sit out the war. Their ships in the harbour were bombed and sunk, and with the base effectively neutralised, the conflict moved on.





Left -
Soft coral on George's
Wreck
Bi-plane cockpits

Above from left -
Steel floats in George's
Wreck

One of two tanks in just five
metres of water
Mitsubishi F1 M2
Machine gun on the Iwate
Maru



With so much sunken shipping, Rabaul was a wreck diver's paradise. Indeed Monica Foster and Peter Stone produced an immaculately researched wreck bible with their 1994 publication, *Rabaul's Forgotten Fleet*. Unfortunately in September of that year, Tavorvur and Vulcan volcanoes erupted simultaneously, totally destroying both town and airport, creating the surreal, apocalyptic landscape we see today.

The wrecks in the harbour lie under heavy ash fall too, and although a few are still dived today, the visibility is very poor. The trip from Kabiara to Simpson's Harbour takes 90 minutes, and it's sad to say that wrecks such as the *Italy Maru* are not the rewarding dives they once were.

Now you might think I'm hardly selling Rabaul as a wreck destination, but there is still much to see here, and let's face it, the world, his wife and her fat best mate are at Chuuk Lagoon.

Using your best puppy dog eyes, ask Stephen if it's possible to make the two hour crossing over to the picturesque Duke of York Islands. Not only does this give you the thrill of racing dolphin and seeing where the flying fish live, but a pair of Japanese tanks lie upright in just five metres of water in Makada Harbour, just to the left as you approach the Digicel phone mast.

Much closer to Kabiara is the beautiful freighter George's Wreck, given the moniker after George Tyers, the first European to dive her. General consensus is that this is a minelayer, indicated by the cable laying rollers on the bow. You'll be there in half an hour by zippy banana boat. The bow lies close to shore in only eight metres, but then the carcass slopes away to the seabed at 60 metres.

Distracting soft corals lace the railings and winches, and with much of the deck missing, it's possible to peer into the exposed compartments through the ribs. To optimise your dive it's wise to fin down to your maximum depth first, then work your way towards the surface, zig-zagging across the wreck. The aft hold at 45 metres contains large steel floats, some fractured. Under the torch beam it's reminiscent of the creepy scene from *Alien* when John Hurt discovers the cache of eggs, and the parasitic facehugger leaps out. But don't let that put you off.

And so to the signature dives. The two beautiful aircraft wrecks. The Tin Birds. There's a certain surreality about seeing a superaqueous machine flying on the sea bed, and Rabaul has two world-class examples.

The Mitsubishi A6 M2 Zero is a good swim off the beach on the Kokopo road, and you won't make many shore dives where you can enter with an active volcano smouldering away in the wings. The fighter lies at the end of a gentle slope at 30 metres, wings flush with the

TOP SIDE IN RABAU

If you have a dry day before flying out, Kabiara's tour of Rabaul is a must, focusing on the town's WWII history and volcanic nature. Starting from the volcanic observatory overlooking the panoramic Simpson Harbour, it takes in the eclectic artefacts at both the Rabaul Club and the excellent Kokopo Museum, as well as the Japanese tunnels where the rotting remains of landing barges still lie. A small gazebo in the well-maintained ground provides shade to eat the packed lunch provided.

The highlight of the tour is the off road drive through the surreal ash wasteland of what was once Rabaul, towards growling Tavorvur volcano and the stoic community of Matupit Island, where the kids give you their usual enthusiastic welcome. Trinkets are for sale, so your girlfriend will be thrilled. For the blokes, the skeletal remains of a Mitsubishi 'Sally' bomber lie partially buried off what was once Lakunai air strip, prior to the 1994 eruption.

Alternatively there's a local golf course just a few miles from Kabiara. Stephen has clubs, but golf balls are at a premium so bring some with you. The course is well maintained, but the greens lack pins. Improvise by hiring the kids who hang round looking to caddy and find your ball in the potentially hazardous undergrowth.

KIT BAG

Diving at Kabiara is done on air, and with the nearest recompression facility at Port Moresby, a dive computer on a conservative setting is highly recommended. A 3mm wetsuit will be adequate and will protect you from coral abrasions and the occasional stinger in the water.

Sunscreen and hat are sensible precautions against the sun, even when overcast. (Kabiara boats are shaded.) A suitable anti-malarial to ward off the prevalent mosquitos should be a given. The electrical sockets are compatible with Australian plugs.

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE ZERO...

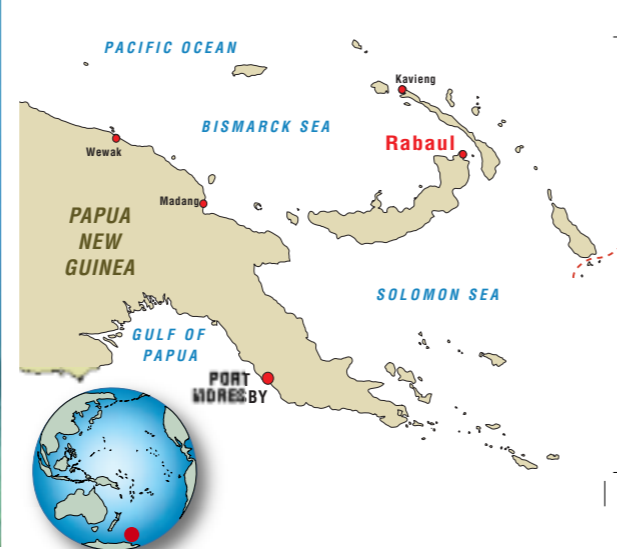
For Rabaul I took a 3mm pre-formed Scubapro Everflex suit with Glideskin seals to neck, wrists and ankles. It's a great suit, but if, like me, you're more like Wannie than a butter-basted Kylie, you'll find it easier to suit up by using plastic bags on your hands and feet.

But at this point I was introduced to Erman, the elderly landowner from whose beach the Kokopo Zero fighter is dived. Admiral Yamamoto shook hands with Erman, aged eight, when he came ashore. I suggest you make sure you've removed the plastic bag from your hand before he shakes hands with you. Luckily the sea soon swallowed me up...!

RABUL



Tank at the Duke of York Islands



sand, encrusted with coral, two blades of the propeller exposed. Local legend has it that the pilot swam ashore after ditching and walked away.

And the best is left until last, just west of Cape Tawui. Down over a fringing reef there's a slight current, but good visibility on the Mitsubishi F1 M2 'Pete' biplane, which lists slightly to port at 28 metres. The main float of the 12 metre seaplane is slightly askew, the machine guns and radio have been souvenired, but other than that it's intact, with a beautifully preserved propeller. Even the wires criss-crossed between the wings are decorated with soft coral. To find such a delicate aircraft intact suggests it sunk at its mooring. It's like a model toy,

and I almost want to pinch myself. You won't find another intact biplane at the bottom of the sea at Chuuk, or anywhere else for that matter.

Time to go, so flick the silt with a fin and hang back for a chance to watch it fly through the clouds once again. Having become ever so slightly obsessed about this unique wreck over the past seven years, I think I'll come back and dive it again tomorrow...

For more information and bookings
www.diveadventures.com.au
www.kabairadive.com.pg

