



THE BLUE

Don Silcock



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The south-east coast of New Britain is without doubt a very remote location – there are no airports and only one unpaved logging road penetrates the dense mountainous rain forest that separates the north of the island from the south. Basically the only access to the area is by sea and until quite recently, no live-aboard dive boats were working the area.

In 2005 I was able to travel to the south coast for the first time on board MV Star Dancer, captained by one of PNG diving’s great characters, Alan Raabe. Alan has been diving Kimbe Bay and the north-east coast of New Britain for over 20 years and bases Star Dancer, and his other live-aboard dive vessel Febrina, from Walindi Plantation in Kimbe Bay.

was one of the first to take passengers to the area. It was a truly memorable two weeks in total and one of the highlights was the journey up the Esis River to dive the Blue Hole.

The Esis is one of the many rivers carrying the heavy rains that fall on the mountainous hinterland of New Britain to the sea. The river mouth is located in Waterfall Bay, which is roughly a third of the way down the south coast and at almost the same latitude as Kimbe Bay on the north coast.

The wet and dry seasons on the south are the reverse of the north coast - when it’s raining on the north it’s dry on the south and vice versa – and a combination of geography, topography and climatic conditions make the south coast the second wettest place on earth.

The Blue Hole is located two to three hours up the Esis River from Waterfall Bay. Just getting there was an adventure in itself because we had to pass through dense jungle. The lush rainforest seemed to be alive with birds and animals that I couldn’t see but could hear above the noise of the boat engines.

We saw many villages on the river banks and the Esis is clearly part of their lifeblood, providing the villagers with everything from fresh drinking water and fish, to somewhere to wash and launder their clothes.

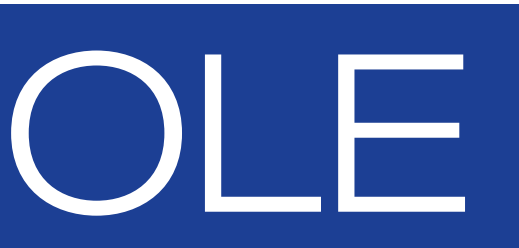
Alan Raabe has obviously built up a good relationship with many of these villages because the further we went up the river the more people we saw and the more we needed them to get us through.

As the river narrowed it became choked with long, weed-like grasses that were quickly ingested into the cooling water intakes of the boat’s engines, causing them to overheat. Several times we had to stop so that the crew could unplug the intakes, and the local villagers appeared to clear a path through the weeds for the boat.

It really was quite a sight to see boys as young as 10 or 12 holding machetes half their size and diving down into the strong river currents to hack away at the weeds. They were obviously used to the currents as they were able to clear our way quickly. Eventually Star Dancer got as far as she could go, and it took us just over two and a half hours to get to the Blue Hole after leaving her.

It is not actually possible to motor all the way to the Blue Hole - the closest you can get is about 250m from it, as there are a series of rapids that prevent all but the shallowest draft boat from crossing.

Transporting a large party of divers, their dive gear and cameras over the rapids is no small task, and this was accomplished by putting the heavy



Always looking for new and interesting dive sites, four years ago Alan started to seriously explore the south coast of New Britain and my trip



THE BLUE HOLE

Story & photo: Don Silcock

dive gear in to the small boat that accompanies the main boat on these trips – then hauling it up the rapids.

The rest of the equipment, including the delicate stuff like cameras, was carried through the jungle and waded across the calmer parts of the river until the Blue Hole was reached. The carrying part was made much easier by the appearance from seemingly nowhere of large numbers of village children, complete with huge smiles, who were very eager to assist their strange visitors! Finally, we arrived at the Blue Hole.

Kitting up on the muddy bank of

Clockwise from below: Two snorkellers enjoy a cool swim after their dive. Divers get ready to leave Star Dancer's tender and trek to the mouth of the Blue Hole with their gear. Crew and villagers probe the river banks on a small dinghi. Opposite: The author gazing through a jumble of fallen branches at the base of the Blue Hole.



the pool whilst surrounded by dense rainforest was a very different and quite exciting experience, because we all silently wondered what was actually in the Blue Hole. Thoughts of fresh water crocodiles and other such creatures were in all of our minds – but nobody was game to admit this till we were back on Star Dancer that evening sipping cold beer as the sun went down...

The Blue Hole is actually a sink hole, located two to three hours up the Esis River from Waterfall Bay, and apparently one of a number of other sink holes in the same general area which are part of a larger, unexplored cave system. It's the clarity of the water, compared to the browner waters of the Esis that surrounds it, that gives the Blue Hole its name and from a distance it seems to radiate light from deep down.

From the surface, the pool appears rectangular in shape and is about 50m wide and 100m long. Once in the water you realise that the hole is actually roughly conical, and the deepest, narrowest end of the Blue Hole is at a depth of 48m, where a natural spring emits a constant stream of cool, crystal clear water that creates the luminescent

blueness that makes the Blue Hole so special. This small fissure feels like a fire hose when you swim up to it.

The dive itself is quite surreal. The water is refreshingly cool and crystal clear, due to the very long filtration process the water goes through as it winds its way through the underground river system and back out again into the Blue Hole. As the dive progresses, however, you really start to feel the cold.

The walls of the Hole are rock and covered in algae. Being so deep and surrounded by rainforest, there is not a lot of natural light, and the many fallen tree trunks and branches create an ambience that becomes a little intimidating as you go deeper.

