

Dive into paradise

Award-winning marine photographer Tony Wu discovers the pristine marine treasures of Papua New Guinea



Pristine reefs and abundant fish life



An awe-inspiring herd of humphead parrotfish

PHOTOS: TONY WU

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My arms ached, the muscles in my neck were sore from maintaining the same contorted position for far too long.

After creeping along the bottom of a shallow bay for 30 minutes, I had remained nearly motionless for more than an hour, lying on my stomach, squinting through my camera's viewfinder at a fish 2cm long.

Most people would consider my activities a waste of time, perhaps even question my sanity, but I was nonetheless determined to outlast, outthink and outwit my diminutive nemesis, who seemed equally steadfast in its efforts to frustrate my artistic endeavours.

I had travelled to Papua New Guinea (PNG), specifically to the Milne Bay area, on assignment for a television programme, and I desperately wanted to capture an appealing image of the cryptic little fish in front of me — a yellowfin shrimp goby — as part of my effort to highlight the diversity and beauty of PNG's marine environment.

Covering an area of over 460,000 sq km, PNG has a population of around five million people. Partially owing to the low population density, PNG is a veritable Garden of Eden for nature lovers.

The country is home to a diverse range of exotic animals including over 700 species of birds, such as 38 of the known 43 species of the colourful and exotic bird of paradise, as well as the world's largest pigeon — the crowned pigeon



The waters teem with marine life

— which is about the size of a turkey! Other fascinating wildlife include kangaroos that live in trees, adorable wallabies and my personal favourite, the irresistibly cute cuscus.

Nowhere is the unspoiled scenery more apparent than at PNG's many world-renowned dive locations.

In addition to Milne Bay, destinations like Kavieng, Madang, Kimbe Bay, Rabaul and Tufi rank among the most sought-after spots in the world for divers in the know.

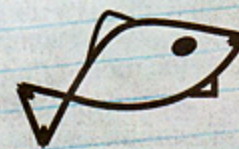
Even the waters around the capital city of Port Moresby are teeming with marine life and attract visitors from far and wide.

From enormous, undamaged coral formations to bustling, healthy fish communities, PNG waters are a paradise for dive enthusiasts.

Better yet, there usually aren't a lot of divers around, so there is the luxury of unfettered views of the seascape, and exclusive access to some of the best marine encounters available anywhere.

Which brings me back to the reason why I was lying in the sand, waiting for the fish to look my way.

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The yellowfin shrimp goby finally looks my way for that perfect portrait.

PHOTOS: TONY WU

Having successfully "bagged" sufficient images of unspoiled reefs and large animals, my objective was to aim the spotlight at some of the less flashy, often unnoticed residents of the sea.

Small, not yet officially described by science and exceedingly shy, my subject of choice wasn't awe-inspiring like a shark and it wasn't breathtaking like the sight of an enormous school of fish, but it was certainly cute, at least to me, and deserved some attention.

Hence, with a special high-magnification lens to bring the pint-sized critter into view, I waited patiently for just the right moment to capture the perfect portrait.

As time passed, I gradually felt that someone or perhaps something was watching me. I thought my travelling companions might have snorkelled over to stare at me from above and urge me to "hurry up".

I didn't, however, dare move a muscle to check, lest my coy quarry take flight and dash my photographic aspirations.

Silent and steady as a rock, I watched

as the goby went about its daily routine — gathering a bit of sand here, shifting a pebble there, making funny faces at other fish — doing entirely normal fish stuff.

Finally, when my endurance seemed all but exhausted, the fish turned and gazed directly into my lens.

Seconds later, with images at long last secured, I backed slowly away, stretched my arms, neck and everywhere else that hurt.

Only then, with much surprise, did I notice the mother and baby dugong lying in the sand next to me, watching me watch the fish.

My eyes widened reflexively, and the mother dugong's eyes widened too, no doubt in reaction to my reaction.

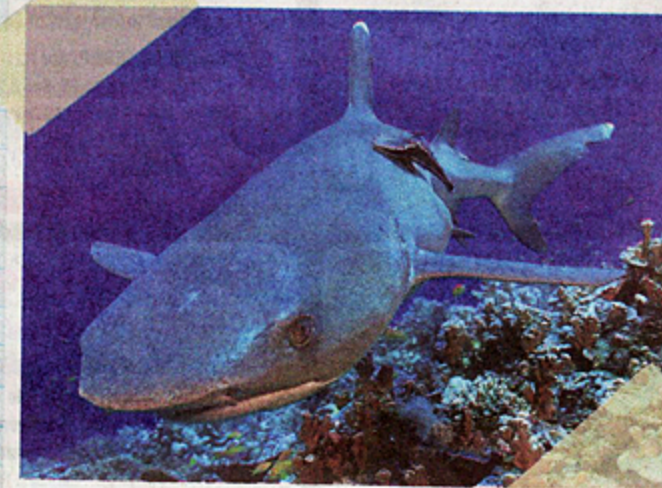
For a moment, I stared at the mother, the mother stared at me, and the baby glanced at both of us in turn.

I suspect that while the perplexed pair of rare and endangered marine mammals had been studying me, neither had foreseen the possibility that I might actually move.

Curiosity heightened, the newborn dugong swam circles around me, twisting and turning to get a better view, while mommy waited patiently.

Resigned to the fact that my super-close-up lens was entirely unsuitable to document this extraordinary encounter, I settled down to enjoy the unique experience, making a mental note that I'd have to return soon to try this unconventional, but clearly effective, method of attracting dugongs once more.

For more information, visit the Papua New Guinea Divers Association at www.pngdive.com



Friendly sharks are a sign of a healthy ecosystem.