

southeast experiences



with Ken Hoppen

It's been several years since I did a live-aboard dive trip on the MV Taka, back when it was plying its trade on the reefs north of Cairns, and I always found it an excellent boat to dive from.

Taka's new Frontier

This fact hasn't changed, but there have been a few other changes since!

The boat hasn't changed much. The cabin layout is the same, and the large common area is brilliant for meals and socializing. The standard of food is excellent, and the diving deck is spacious and easy to gear up on. There are many areas around the boat to socialize, and the ride is smooth and steady.

What has changed is the location!

Solomon Island Dive Expeditions is the new owner of the boat, and now it is based out of the Solomon Island capital city of Honiara, on the island of Guadalcanal.

An three hour flight from Brisbane landed us in Honiara a short time after midday, where we were taken on a half hour drive to the Point Cruz Yacht Club to spend the afternoon at leisure awaiting the boat.

We were on a three day trip to the Russell Group of islands, some six hours steaming to the west of Honiara. Leaving in the dark to the lights of this small city, and steaming overnight, brought us to the mountainous vista of the Russell's in the morning, and our first dive.

We had moored for our first dive at a location called White Beach.

I'm told there was a small village some twenty metres from the beach, but I can't say this for sure, as the growth of the jungle was absolute.

White Beach was a muck dive, with a silty bottom sloping away to depth from the rocky foreshore in the shallows. There was a lot to see here, but for me the highlight was in a metre of water near the shore. Several archerfish were hunting amongst the mangroves. I had never encountered these before, and they were a bit bigger than I thought they would be, with one coming close to 25cm or so. With vertically orientated eyes, they peer upwards at the low hanging branches, hoping to spy a small insect that they can force into the water with a powerful squirt of water from their mouth. Whilst I didn't see the squirt, they were certainly looking for an opportunity! Deeper down the remains of jeeps could be found, as well as large sections that were once part of a floating wharf, remnants of the War in the Pacific some seventy years ago. This dive was worth doing twice!

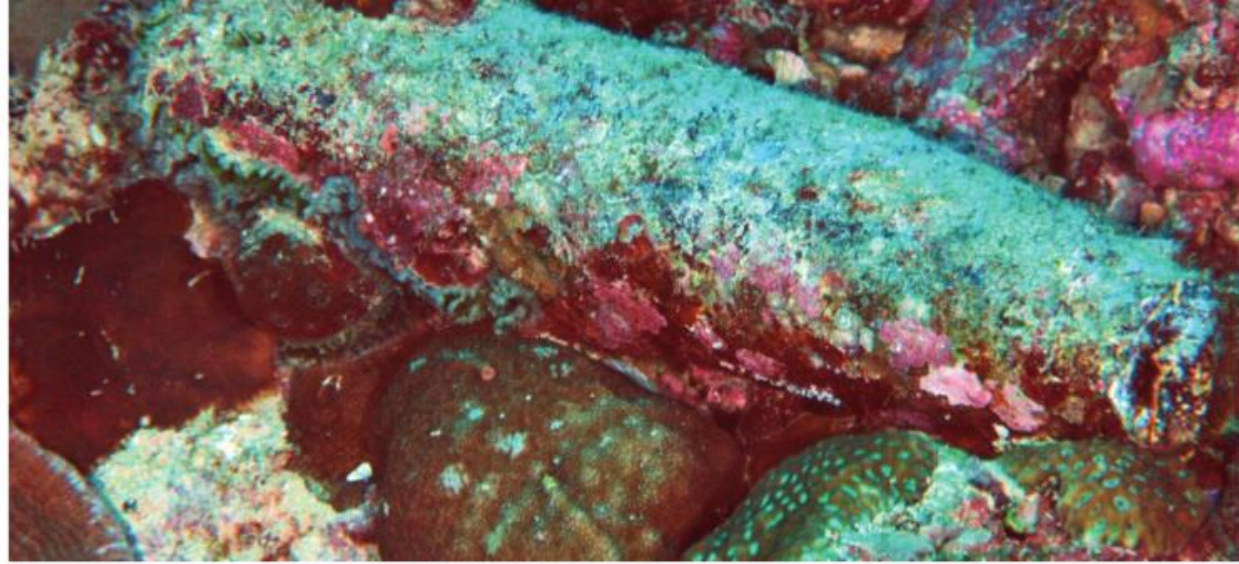
Next came Rainbow Reef. North of White Beach, this reef peaks at around the 20m mark with two small mounds at either end of the reef, with a shallow depression between them. On each side the reef sloped steeply into the depths. Making our way up-current, several grey reef whalers could be seen swirling in the blue, and schooling barracuda were proving a problem to the small reef fish that were darting out of the corals to feed in the current. A large anemone here had a huge patch of eggs that seemed like they were about to pop. This is an excellent dive site!

Tying up for the night, dives four and five (night) were done at Ta Island, with a nice sheltered drift dive taking us from the tenders back to the main vessel.

The next day saw drift dives again. Dropping into a mild current we were swept along walls, occasionally seeing grey reef sharks and white-tips out wide or below, with dog-tooth tuna sometimes flitting past. Several species of anthias coloured the walls, with grouper, butterfly fish, triggers and more adding to the kaleidoscope.



Look closely to the eyes looking back at you. These small Clarke's anemonefish eggs are nearly ready to hatch.



Watch for unexploded ordinances in the Solomon Islands. Look but don't touch!



The dives here are home to a wide variety of small cod. These fish are voracious predators and are



Remember to always look at the bottom of the tank and not at the fish.

The signature dive of the trip is Leru Cut. A 20m deep chasm bores straight into the island here, with vertical walls and a sandy floor. At the end of this 100m long cut an opening comes up into a village. Dark and foreboding at first, there is always a visible exit, and your eyes quickly adjust to the dim light.

Mirror Pond is another dive that involves swimming into the island, though shallower than the Cut, and finishes in a picturesque brackish pond on the inside of the island.

Day three saw us in another cut called

spectacular, but the Russell Islands are not the only trip that Taka takes. There are trips to the Florida Islands, where there are some WWII plane wrecks, and longer journeys to the west, to New Georgia and beyond. The areas here are remote and wild, and will provide a trip to stick in your memory.

Check Out:
Solomon Islands Dive Expeditions
www.solomonsdiving.com



The fish highlight of my trip was this archerfish. Several of them were floating in the shallows at White Beach. If you spent time here I'm sure you would see them shooting at insects in the mangrove branches.

