



**DIVE WORLDWIDE**  
Papua New Guinea

A native outrigger





# For just ten minutes with Elvis

HE Sawyer had fantasised of diving Papua New Guinea's famous B-17 bomber for many years, and now he finally had the opportunity to make those dreams a reality

Photographs by HE SAWYER



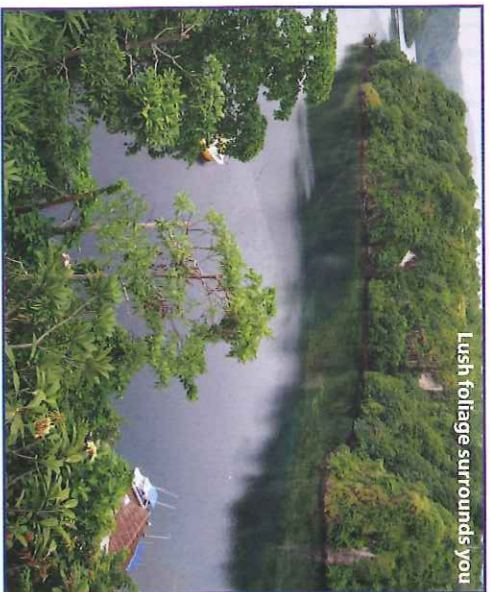
**S**tatistically, flying is still the safest way to travel, I know that. But not in a Twin Otter, not in the airspace over Papua New Guinea, not when there's blanket cloud cover, and definitely not when we're jerking around the sky like something out of Thunderbirds...

Patrick shouts, loud enough to encourage the pilots in the open cockpit: "They say if you can fly here, you can fly anywhere!" It's not so much the flying that bothers me. It's the crashing. Into Mount Big-Uh, or Mount Tallest, or whatever the locals call the unforgiving wall of rock that inevitably lies in wait for us; in the middle of this ginormous angry cloud. I can see it now, Post Courier, bottom of page five, under the item about a stolen dumper truck

Two crew, and three passengers; a couple from Australia, and one Briton. Why the outbound flight? Why not the return? Why can't I at least get to Tufi, have the dive of my life, then go out on a high, with my dirty laundry scattered over the mountain side? Patrick shares his safety card with partner Mario. I might be the one Briton, but I don't want to be the only idiot, so I surreptitiously grope under my seat to check I actually have a lifejacket. It won't save me on impact at 2,000 feet, but will annoy the climate-change soothsayers when they find my skeleton 1,000 years from now.

And if by some miracle we dodge the peaks, we're bound to end up in the drink anyway. I nonchalantly review my safety card, as if that will help. But it does. There's an amusing graphic of a bearded





Lush foliage surrounds you



The boutique resort can accommodate 38 guests

**"The nose had hit the white coral sand bottom first and crumpled under impact, but otherwise 'Black Jack' had landed intact on the seabed at 48m"**

Papuan, his red sputum crossed out (the chewing of betel nut prohibited onboard the aircraft), and another showing the lopsided plane (having crashed-landed on water), advising a sharp exit through the door illustrated above the waterline, rather than the door below it. The three of us find this highly amusing, and before you know it the sun is shining, and they're even sharing Tic-Tacs in the cockpit. The muddy ribbon of the Oro River puzzles its way to the sea as we descend over spectacular equatorial fjords, to a landing strip just long enough for a lawnmower. But a skip, a trundle, the roar of the engines, and there's at least 20 feet before the solid tree-line. Out on the strip I give thanks to the diving gods, not so much for our deliverance, but because I'm standing on the spot on the map I've been dreaming about for the past seven years.

Luggage is portaged into the boutique resort, leaving a leisurely stroll from the strip. There's the welcome sundowner on the deck to accompany a simply gob-smacking panorama over the fiord, with the Trafalgar range in the background. It's The Land That Time Forgot, Jurassic Park and The Lord of the Rings all rolled into one. The trees climb towards you, sea eagles wheel above. From your balcony on top of the world with a glass in your hand, you truly rule. Get your camera out.

The resort can accommodate 38 guests between deluxe bungalows, standard rooms, and some

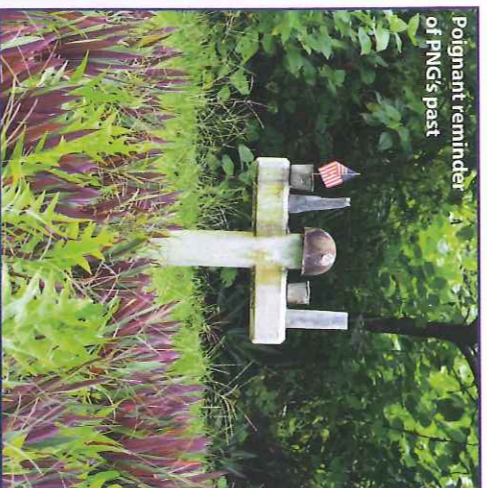
singles for those on a limited budget. There's en-suite with hot shower, a quality bed, a pool, manicured gardens, bar, tea, coffee and afternoon cake, even a TV to remind you, like you care, that there's another world out there. A former colonial outpost for the British, Tufi is physically isolated from the rest of PNG. There are no roads, so other than the three flights a week, the only access is by sea. Consequently, the area is sparsely populated and relatively untouched, even by PNG standards.

The reason there are no roads is because the peninsula is surrounded by a swamp, full of mosquitoes. Although the staff lay out smoking coils, it's advisable to wear socks, long trousers, long sleeve top and closed shoes from late afternoon. The dinner bell is eagerly awaited. Meals are served either on the veranda of the main roundhouse, or down on

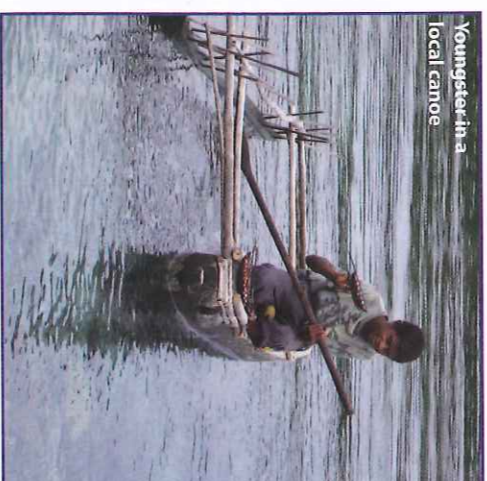
the deck. Cuisine is a blend of local, Western and Japanese dishes, beautifully presented on square plates with drizzled sauces, complimented with reassuringly heavy cutlery.

A spacious dive shop lies at the bottom of the very steep hill. Divermaster Glen sorts out the paperwork and a crate for my kit. I take the boat for a couple of dives to check my gear before "The Big One". All resorts talk up their reefs online, and Tufi is no exception, and yes, it's good diving, but 'unsurpassed'? I'd send you to Tufi in a heartbeat, but not for their reefs. I would have come for the wrecks of the P38 Lightning fighter, the B25 Mitchell bomber, or the much-acclaimed-yet-seldom-dived wreck of the merchant ship S'Jacob, but they're either out of season, out of range, or seemingly tied up in 'kustom fee' disputes. None of this really matters, because what I've really come for is the B-17.

The Flying Fortress B-17F-20-80 was assigned to the 5th Airforce, 43rd Bombardment Group, 63rd Bombardment Squadron on 7 September 1942, under the command of Captain Ken McCullar, a keen gambler, who nicknamed the bomber 'Black Jack', after the last two digits of the serial number (124521). A playing card motif of Jack and Ace of Spades was painted on the starboard side of the nose. But after McCullar was lost in another aircraft, it was Lt Ralph De Loach who took the controls for take off from Seven Mile (now Moresby's Jackson International airport), with an ad hoc crew for the bombing mission on the night of 10-11 July 1943. Thirty minutes from the target they started to suffer severe engine problems,



Poignant reminder of PNG's past



Youngster in a local canoe

www.sportdiver.co.uk





but pushed on to bomb Buna Canal, the largest Japanese airfield in Rabaul. On the return leg the starboard engine started to vibrate to the point where the crew thought it would detach itself from the wing, the second starboard engine only had limited power, and then they flew into a tropical storm and became lost. De Loach said every one of the ten-man crew had written themselves off. So many planes took off and never returned, the fate of their crews unknown - lost to sharks, the Japanese, the cannibals in the Highlands, or the jungle. Then they broke through the clouds and attempted to ditch on a shallow reef, but skipped over. The crew, braced for the impact in the radio room, escaped through the overhead hatch, while De Loach went out through the cockpit window. Three injured crewmen were placed in the life raft and the locals from nearby Boga Boga village, who had been on their way to church when the plane crashed, paddled out in their canoes to rescue them from the current. Black Jack sank in less than a minute. It would be 43 years before she'd be seen again.

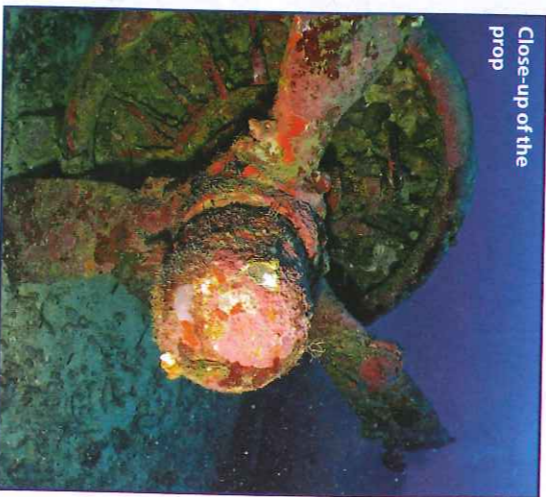
The expat divers from Moresby arrive on the afternoon flight. I've been made aware of their reputation, but when we meet for drinks at the bar



The tail of the Black Jack

**"Out on the strip I give thanks to the diving gods, not so much for our deliverance, but because I'm standing on the spot on the map I've been dreaming about for the past seven years"**

they're not scary at all. A relief, because my whole trip to PNG has been built around the dive on Black Jack. The resort offers it as a charter, but needs a minimum of six divers. Travelling as Billy-No-Mates I'd miss out, so Turfi arranged for me to tag onto the group. If you're considering a wreck dive trip to PNG, it's fundamental to nail details like this in place before parting with your cash. Consider not only the additional cost of the wreck dive, because the chances are there will be an additional cost (warranted or not), but also the possibility that a minimum number of divers may be required (as in this case), and where those additional bodies are going to come from. Of the five locations I dived in PNG, I was the only diver at three of them. Consider too the limited season when your wreck of choice



Close-up of the prop



The cockpit of the aircraft

is accessible. Don't just turn up and expect it to happen. Don't trust tour operators who don't care if you've come from the other side of the world (it's not their holiday, they've got your money, you won't get it back), and don't trust resort websites, even Turfi's, which is still rather vague with regards to some of its wreck diving.

So email well in advance direct to the dive operator and ask how much, what time of year, and how many divers they need make it happen. You can ask about nitrox, but you'll be diving on air. And it's invariably the last 50 miles from the dive shop to the wreck that is the problem, not the X-thousand miles getting to the shop from Pratts Bottom, Lucky Slap, or Birmingham. Let's face it, the diving industry in PNG doesn't get out much. They're not dreaming of diving the wrecks in Scapa or the Red Sea (or Stoney Cove, for that matter), in the way we dream of diving theirs. Consequently, the operators haven't considered UK divers as a viable market, so haven't had the foresight to ask the intrepid few why they're flying over other, closer, world-class locations, to come and dive with them. In short they'll give you diving, but it might not necessarily be the diving you've set your heart on. To avoid any frustration, plan, plan and plan some more. Naturally fastidious, overzealous, frankly obsessive planning will inevitably turn you into a Dive-Trip-Nazi: From-Hell, but it does mean that six months down the line you'll get that magical Sam wake-up call to go and dive the 'Black Jack'. Like I wasn't awake already.



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# WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW...

## Papua New Guinea



### How to get there

Papua New Guinea may be located close to Indonesia, but it is relatively inaccessible compared with its neighbours, having little tourist infrastructure. You can fly into Port Moresby via various routes, but through Singapore or Australia works best from Europe.

### When to go

The wet season is roughly December to March, and the dry season is May to October. June to September are cooler, dry and the best time to visit, but it is generally hot and humid all year round.

**"The propeller of number one engine is bent significantly more than the blades of number two, indicating the disparity in performance on impact"**

### Entry requirements

Visa with six months left to expiry. Visa available on arrival if required.

### Currency

Kina (£1 = 3.3PGK).

### Where to eat and meet

There are restaurants scattered throughout the tourist areas of Papua New Guinea, but you can eat cheaply - and well - by getting off the beaten track and going local. Relaxing with a beer in your hotel bar is a good way to see out a day of diving.



PNG offers a wealth of shipwrecks and downed planes, as well as decent reefs, but the 'Black Jack' bomber is the jewel in the crown.

Christmas 1986, Rod Pearce, David Pennefather and Bruce Johnson went looking for a large aircraft villagers said had crashed and sunk off Cape Vogel. The three fanned out as they dived over the reef, and Rod - diving on the right, pushed by the current - came through a field of sea whips around 40m, and saw 'a shape that didn't fit'. He came upon the huge tail, the fabric over the rudder rotted away. The nose had hit the white coral sand bottom first and crumpled under impact, but otherwise 'Black Jack' had landed intact on the seabed at 48m. Even the guns in the turret behind the tail still moved in their mountings.

And now I'm finning hard down towards her, and she is the most-magnificent sight I am in awe. The tail stands nearly seven metres high, dwarfing Glen, who watches us descend. The plane is just over 20 metres in length, the wingspan over 30 metres, and as I traverse the top gun turret I can see wing tip to wing tip. The glass is missing from the side window of the cockpit and it's incredible to think De Loach squeezed through that tiny space to make his escape. The wreck is covered in light coral and sponge, beautiful when illuminated by the strobes, although the nose art is now lost. I skirt across to the starboard side to the cause of the crash, the failure of the starboard engines. The propeller of number one engine is bent significantly more than the blades of number two, indicating the disparity in performance on impact.

Divers will debate the best shipwreck long into the night, using all manner of spurious arguments. 'Black Jack' will just sit there and be fabulous. It's the best plane wreck in the world, bar none. This is Elvis, no question, but sadly my gauge says that I have to leave the building. Right now. I confess, I lingered, which is why the hang tank secured on the reef exit line is a necessity. The Moresby divers brought nitrox ponies with them. It's their second dive on 'Black Jack' this year, and I can detect from the thin stream of bubbles escaping through holes in the top of the fuselage that they're still trying to work out how to get into the cockpit. If they'd watched 'Black Jack's Last Mission', the 1988 documentary by Steve Birdsall on the plane's history, they'd know that Bruce Johnson managed to squeeze past the bomb racks by removing his BCD and following that through, making him the first person to sit at the controls for over 40 years. Even as I ascend and can still just see the fading outline of the giant warbird below me, I want to go and dive her again, yet know I never will. I've had my audience with The King.

### Postscript

A couple of weeks after I returned home, I received an email from Justin Tayan, the founder of the Pacific Wreck database, who charts the stories of the US air vets, those missing in action, and the craft

Warm welcome from the local kids



they flew. "On Sunday I drove to Forked River, New Jersey, to see George Prezioso, the radio operator of 'Black Jack', whose birthday was on 24 May, for a party with his family and friends. Although I'd interviewed him previously, I enjoyed him reminiscing about the past.

"With the passing of so many veterans, it is amazing to share time with George. He is in excellent health for a man in his nineties. He wears no glasses, aside for reading, walks without a cane, and drives himself around, including Atlantic City twice a month to gamble. Yes, his favourite game is Black Jack. He still wears the 5th Air Force pin on his collar. "I showed him your photos from the dive. He was very pleased to see his B-17, and said it was the perfect gift and to pass along his 'thank you' to you."

The story didn't end there. Several months later I received an email from a lady called Rhonda in Australia. She'd never met George, having been born after the war, but he was a legend in her family. The US personnel came to Australia on the Queen Mary, and disembarked in the pouring rain by Sydney Harbour Bridge. George was initially billeted on a sack of straw at Randwick Racecourse, so jumped at the offer to stay with Rhonda's family in-between missions. Around the house he helped with laundry, changing nappies and fixing the family car. George left Australia in 1944 with nothing in his pockets and no belongings. He left everything he had with her family to help them out as the war was still going on. Rhonda had only just discovered that George was still alive, and was looking to get in contact with him. As it happened, I was able to reunite them through the miracle of email. George is currently planning a trip to Australia to meet Rhonda for the first time, and has declared an intention to return to the crash site. ■

**For a comprehensive list of tour operators, check out: [www.sportdiver.co.uk/operators](http://www.sportdiver.co.uk/operators)**

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