

1. Stern propellers of the mini submarine, on the seabed at 22m.
2. Santo Maru attacked.
3. Puffer fish at rest.
4. Clem highlights the coral in the area behind the bridge.
5. Local transport.
6. Weighing sea cucumbers in Clem's Office.

IT'S NOT THE 8,665 MILES FROM LONDON, ENGLAND TO KAVIENG, PAPUA NEW GUINEA THAT'S THE REAL ADVENTURE. IT'S THE NEXT 50. H E SAWYER TAKES A LEAP OF FAITH IN SEARCH OF THE JAPANESE MINI SUBMARINE, AND DISCOVERS THE NIGHT DIVE OF HIS DREAMS.

HE SAWYER © 2013

Last year I was sensible. A cheap and cheerful package holiday to dive the Egyptian Red Sea on a liveaboard. Just me, and twenty one other equally sensible divers, each of us chasing our own little piece of underwater heaven. We moored over the wreck of the Thistlegorm with two other boats, and sensibly dropped everyone overboard at the same time, as if recreating a scene from 'Thunderball'.

Which is why twelve months on I find myself zinging over a mirror flat sea in a banana boat towards Three Island Harbour. The tiny staging post of Kavieng is lost somewhere over my shoulder, along with my sensibility, as we slalom seemingly suspended islands and race the flying fish. This is straight out of the pages

of the Boy's Own Adventure stories I grew up with. I'm Allan Quatermain, I'm Henry Morton Stanley, I'm Indiana Jones - well, no I'm not. I'm just a big kid in a hat

Clem turns, flashing his trademark smile. He offers a fist of dwarf bananas, and a bag containing fish cooked in batter from the kai bar in town. I wash down the decadent breakfast-to-go with a can of lemonade, lick my fingers and check my watch. It's not even 8am.

Before I met Clement Anton two days ago, when he was just a name scribbled sideways in my notebook, I imagined him as a crusty expat perpetually perched on a bar stool. How wrong can you be? Clem is a young Papuan entrepreneur who used to work the New Ireland live-

aboard, a position he was offered on account of his gleaming guest-friendly smile, having abstained from chewing the betel nut that turns the local's gums blood red.

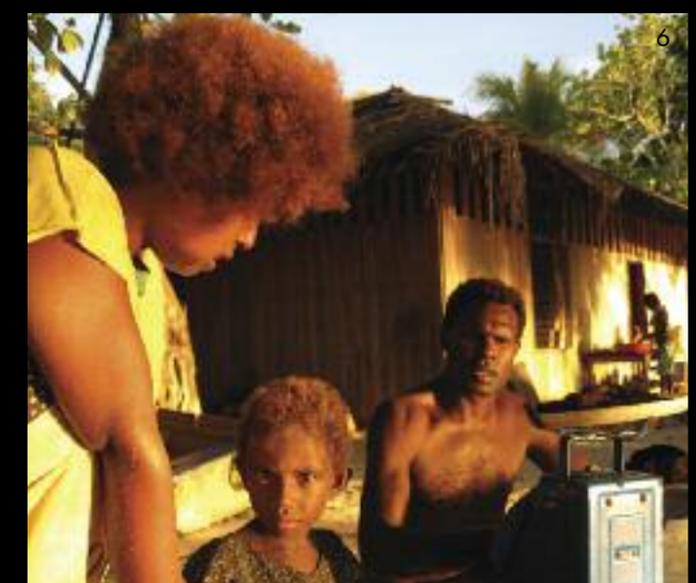
Now his own boss, he has his sights set on turning his home, Tunnung Island, the middle islet of Three Island Harbour, into an intimate resort.

We rendezvous with Clem's fishing boat. He acts as a middle man for the local islanders, buying their catch of fish, lobster, and sea cucumber, then transporting it to the fishery in town twice weekly. Last night his boat returned with the eight tanks and weights I've hired from the dive shop in Kavieng. There's no compressor or dive shop on Clem's island home.



# OUT THERE:

# THE SANKO MARU





Carefully we transfer the cylinders into our banana boat, then turn towards our destination, opposite the large island of New Hanover, which Clem refers to as the mainland. He has a house there where his kids stay during the week to attend school. They paddle their canoes back home at weekends. On the approach we slow to a crawl, passing over the wreck of the Japanese Navy transport, Sanko Maru, visible from the surface. It's a big wreck I estimate to be over a hundred metres long.

Tunnung Island is of course idyllic. The stereotypical South Pacific getaway. Slowly we navigate our passage through the shallow rocks and lush sea grass before the boat slides up onto the pewter sand, making one of the best sounds you're ever likely to hear, and the perfect acoustic accompaniment to one of the best sights I'm ever likely to see.

Four stilted beach bungalows sit under dappled shade amongst the palms just off the beach, with a long house for the kitchen and dining area set to one side. There's a separate bathroom block to the rear of the plot, with a manual flush toilet, a water butt for showers and a clam shell wash basin. Basic, but brilliant. Lush foliage rings the camp. My initial reaction is that I would have kicked myself all the way home had I chosen to stay for one night instead of two.

Within half an hour I've had the guided tour of the facilities, sorted my kit and suited up. We take the short hop back to the wreck, leaving Clem's electrician, bought with us from Kavieng, to fix a ceiling fan in my room.

Clem doesn't have a dive computer, so I lend him my spare.

"When I heard you were coming I bought myself some second hand equipment, because you are the first diver I've ever had to stay."

This really is an exploratory trip - for both of us.

The Sanko Maru lies on her starboard side flush with the seabed at 22 meters. First contact with the wreck is at only 6 meters, making it pretty much a perfect dive even with a basic scuba certification. The deck is festooned with a myriad of coral, but my priority is to the sea bed and the rope Clem has laid out across the

sand to guide us to the mini submarine.

Although the mini sub was reported sunk by US bombers, Japanese sources said the craft had in fact been scuttled by the crew after the attacks, and this version of events is supported by her pristine condition nearly seventy years on. The vessel sits upright on the sand with 430 mm diameter twin torpedo tubes at the bow, (empty), conning tower, open hatch, periscope and propellers at the stern. There are no human remains inside, and the sub lies covered with a smattering of coral growth.

Weighing in at some 46 tonnes, it seems likely that the mini sub was either towed to its area of operations, or piggy backed on a conventional submarine, ship derricks being unlikely to support its weight.

To me it's now a beautiful surreal toy and the ultimate underwater gadget, like something out of James Bond, not to mention a unique entry in my logbook.

The visibility is no more than 8 metres, and the average here is only 15, which explains why when divers salvaged the propellor and everything else of value from the Sanko Maru in 1971, they didn't find the mini sub, which was eventually discovered by Kevin Baldwin from the Telita liveaboard in 1987.

After finning along the submarine we return to the surface passing up over the masts of the freighter, and although I don't want to wish my time away, I can't wait for darkness to fall, because my research tells me it's best to 'see' the Sanko Maru at night.

We pass the afternoon at Clem's 'office', a bench on the beach looking out at his beautiful world as he weighs and pays the locals who bring him dried sea cucumber.

He discusses his plans. He might go back to work the liveaboards for a while to buy a few tanks, perhaps a small compressor. Although he can accommodate up to eight people he says he wouldn't want to take more than a couple of divers at a time. He appreciates the beauty of keeping his resort small and exclusive.

The tide is out as the sun sets in a spectacular blaze. We walk along 'Clem's Highway' the path cut behind the camp to the tip of Tunnung, and wade out to



7. Clem and the conning tower of the mini submarine.

8. Coral growth on the mini sub.

9. Coral on the Sanko Maru.

10. Clem explores the hold of the wreck.

11. Night time coral on the wreck of the Sanko Maru.

12. Coral at night.



deeper water where the banana boat is moored. Two minutes later we're back over the wreck. By the time we've kitted up, it's dark. I lend Clem my spare torch. Then there's that brilliant moment when your stomach goes tight, you hold each other's gaze, and even the boat boy dare not breathe. We nod "Ready?", and roll back in.

As we descend over the port side and drop down across the deck our torches reveal a wonderland of coral. Lush trees, heavy fronds and delicate lacy fans of every hue jostle and sway for nutrients, so show-off beautiful they're fighting for our attention like wannabe stars on a virtual coral red carpet that runs along the deck.

It's difficult to equate the scene now at night with the wreck this afternoon. It's completely changed. The colours are so vivid under our white light and the coral is in full bloom, obliterating the ship with a pristine rainbow of staggering quantity and quality.

As a wreck diver I'm not normally moved by coral. But this dive changes everything. Surely the vessel has never looked as beautiful as she does now?

I'm talking to myself through my regulator, my exhalations thundering in my head, heightened by the increasingly beautiful alien display. Instinctively I appreciate just how lucky I am to see this surreal son et lumiere. Even on the three minute safety stop I'm peering over the edge of the ship, playing the torch over the display below me.

We break the surface giddy and laughing in the moonlight. High fives in the water, Clem whooping.

"What - A - Dive!!"

Those aren't his exact words, but you get the gist.

"You know when my torch was flicking around all over the place?! I wasn't in trouble!!"

They weren't my exact words either ...

The pair of us are still buzzing as we wander back down the track to camp. I can't get over the coral, and why the wreck, certainly at night, hasn't attracted more recognition. Bob Halstead, a pioneer of diving in Papua New Guinea described it as "an excellent night dive". He wasn't kidding, but I can't help but wonder what else Bob might have seen after dark that would possibly top the Sanko Maru?

Dinner is a buffet affair garnished with lobster tails, which is as rough as it sounds, and I 'sacrifice' myself for seconds, to spare the others. I'm good like that. The electrician wants to know where the movie stars live in London, and is visibly crestfallen when I tell him I honestly don't know. And although his wife won't be thrilled, Tunnung Island is still one corner of the world where the name of England's favourite son and icon, footballer, 'David Beckham', draws blank looks all round.





# MAP

13. Three Island Harbour off New Hanover.

Next morning we explore the wreck's spartan cargo hold, and the large crack that lies just behind where the bridge used to be, above the engine room. Both cavernous spaces are impressive in their own right. Underwater grotto and cathedral respectively.

Sadly I'm now down to my last pair of cylinders.

On one hand there's the lure of the unexplored wreck beyond the Sanko Maru, which I speculate is what remains of the Japanese submarine chaser CH39, or alternatively we can wait until nightfall, and dive the fantastic hanging coral gardens once again. For a second I consider telling Clem he'll have to sit out the next couple of dives, but it's the shared experience as much as anything that's part of the joy. And furthermore, I'm just not that mean.

The sun sets in a blaze.

## GETTING THERE

Air Nuigini flies a Fokker F100 from Jackson International, Port Moresby to Kavieng daily, via Rabaul. The easiest way to do the Sanko Maru and mini sub is by liveaboard. Check scheduled departures and ensure they will do a night dive on the wreck.

[www.mvgoldendawn.com](http://www.mvgoldendawn.com)

[www.telitadive.com](http://www.telitadive.com)

You can get a message to Clem by email through Dani Smith, his contact in Kavieng.

[tikitu@adventuresinparadise.com.pg](mailto:tikitu@adventuresinparadise.com.pg)

For accommodation overnight in Kavieng whilst you are setting the trip up, try the Kavieng Club. If Clem still has no tanks or compressor, you will need to hire them in Kavieng. Try Dietmar on the nearby Lissenung Island, who can take you diving locally, and also accommodate on his island resort. [info@lissenung.com](mailto:info@lissenung.com)

Clem's return transfer from Kavieng to Tunnung Island is not cheap. It's over two hours each way, but he will also ferry the cylinders you hire, & the transfer is for the boat, not per person. You can pay with cash, in kina, or AUD\$, or pay into Clem's bank account. There are currently no credit card facilities on Tunnung.

## Dive Season: April - September

### The End of The Sanko Maru

The Sanko Maru was an armed freighter launched in 1939. My 'guesstimate' wasn't far out. She is in fact 120m in length with a beam of 16m. Once a 'Hell Ship', transporting POWs from Manila to Palawan, she met her end on the morning of 16th February 1944, in a combined action by USAAF B-25 "Mitchell" medium bombers; 41 strafers from the 345th, and three squadrons from the 38th Bomb Group, who were hunting a convoy reportedly heading for Kavieng. Six squadrons came round New Hanover from the west, and nine strafers from the 500th 'Rough Raiders' came along the strait between New Ireland and New Hanover from the east. They found the Sanko Maru, with a mini sub partially submerged alongside, guarded by a submarine chaser. The freighter was hit by numerous 500lb bombs setting it ablaze. The submarine chaser tried to escape but was strafed repeatedly and, out of control, ran aground on a nearby reef. Disabled and helpless the escort was bombed until the magazine went up, leaving it a shattered hulk. The Japanese sailors tried to make it to shore, but were gunned down. Returning aircrews reported the shallows red

with blood, and the Americans were branded "blue-nosed butchers" by Tokyo Rose in one of her propaganda broadcasts.

Source material: 'Warpath Across the Pacific' by Lawrence J Hickey  
Dimensions of the Sanko Maru - Ned Middleton. Photo of the Sanko Maru under attack - Maurice J Eppstein collection. Kit Bag. Diving at Tunnung is done on air, and with the nearest recompression facility at Port Moresby, a dive computer on a conservative setting is highly recommended. A 3 mm wet suit will be adequate and will protect you from coral abrasions and the occasional stinger in the water. A sunscreen and hat are mandatory. Clem's banana boat has no shade, and it is a long crossing. A suitable anti-malarial to ward off the mosquitos should be a given. The electrical sockets are compatible with Australian plugs. There is no kit for hire on Tunnung. You will also need to take any alcohol or cigarettes you need.