



Luxury Solomon Diving

(Photos Courtesy of Solomon Islands Dive Expeditions)

The vertical chasm at Leru Cut is a unique dive site.

By Ken Hoppen

A new dive vessel to Solomon Island waters

is now taking trips to diverse dive locations.

MV Taka is best known for servicing the northern Great Barrier Reef, but her new owners, Solomon Island Dive Expeditions, have relocated her to Honiara, the capital city of this island chain.

This 30m long vessel now journeys to remote locations such as the Florida Islands, the Russell



There are plenty of swim throughs to explore at the Russell Islands.

Islands, and even west to New Georgia.

Our trip was a three night adventure to the Russell Islands, some six hours steaming overnight from Honiara.

The sloping sands that make up White Beach became the location for our first dive. This sandy tract was once a landing area for allied barges during WWII, and some of the floating docks that were here can now be explored sitting on the bottom of the ocean. This is a muck dive. For those uninitiated in diving vocabulary, this means a dive on an area with a sandy or silty substrate. No beautiful reef here, but don't think that there is nothing to see! Pipefish, crabs, gobies, octopus, scorpionfish and other small and strange creatures are the staple here, but one unusual fish caught my attention. Right up in the shallows, near the rocky shore, and under overhanging mangrove roots, perhaps a dozen archerfish hunted the insects flying over their heads. Reflected in the still water, these fish have upwardly-facing vision, perfect for hunting in this shaded environment. Never having seen these fish before, I spent a lot of time watching as they scooted back and forth.

Rainbow Reef isn't far away. This is a magnificent reef that is about 20m deep at the shallowest, with two small peaks topping the reef with a shallow saddle between, and the walls sloping off into the depths on each side. Schooling barracuda cruised slowly in the gentle current, whilst grey reef sharks and white-tip reef sharks patrolled below. A highlight here were the hundreds of little eyes as the eggs of Clarke's anemonefish neared maturation just underneath the frill of a large magnificent anemone.

The best known dive site on the Russell Islands is Leru Cut.



Barracuda school over Rainbow Reef.



White-bonnet anemonefish are rare, and only found in Solomons and PNG.



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Majestic angelfish are one of the most spectacular reef fish in the world.

Located on an island of the same name, this cut is as it is named. A vertical chasm has seemingly been hacked out of the island with an imaginary massive cleaver. From close to the surface to 20m deep, it runs straight into the island for some one hundred metres or so. The bright light of the entrance can be seen for most of the distance into the island, and then for the rest a small exit throws light into the furthest recess of the cut. Surfacing here brings you into the local

village!

There are other caves in the area too. Mirror Pond brings you into a small, isolated pool where the water is still and calm. Bat Cave is as it sounds, with the residents of this cut flying just above you as you surface. Definitely a good place to keep your regulator in your mouth!

Many other dive sites around the Russell Group are drift dives on vertical walls, with massive gorgonian corals reaching out into



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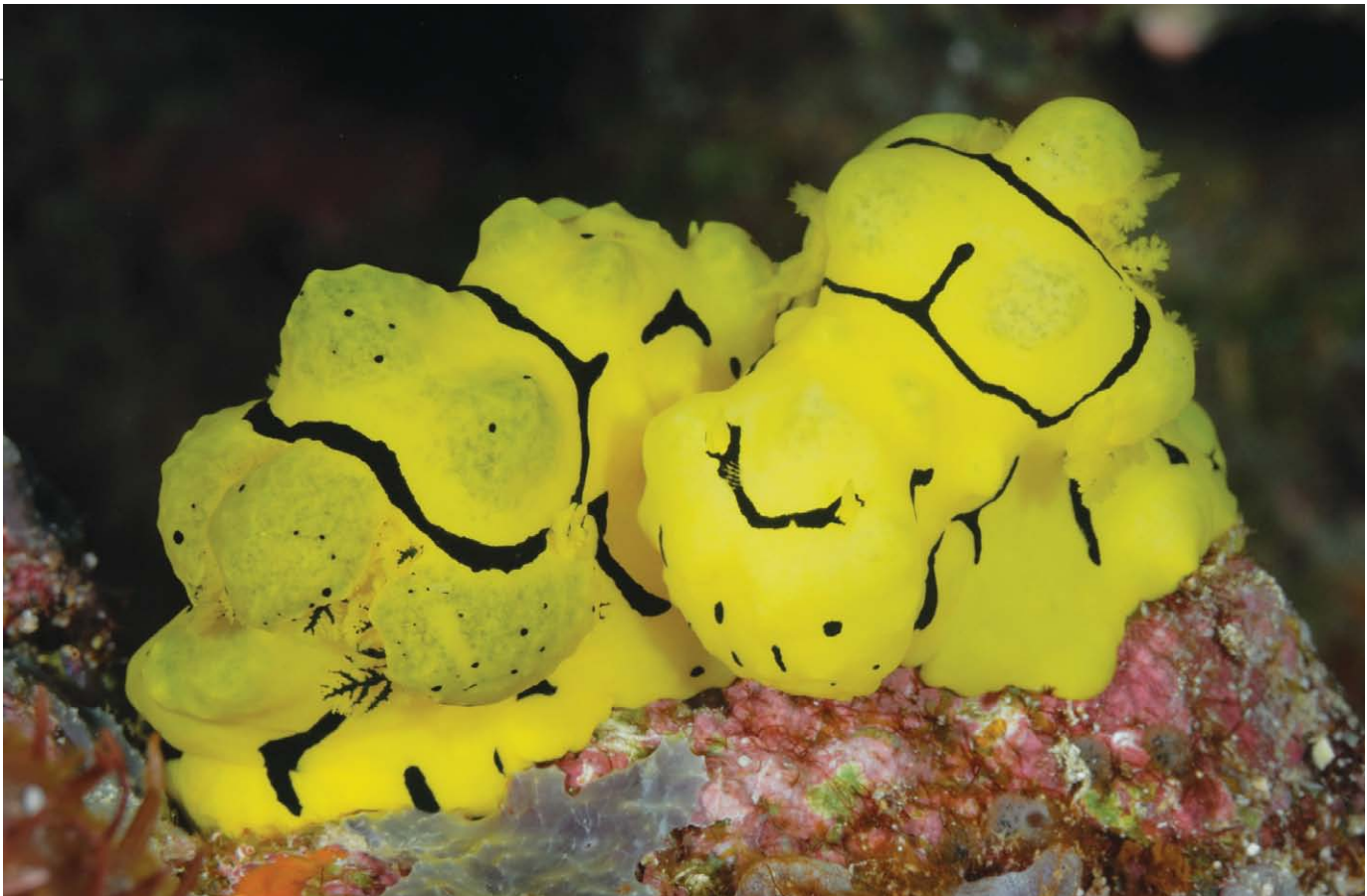
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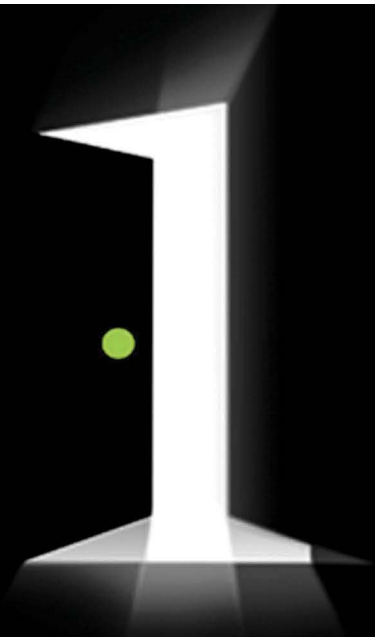
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There is nothing minor about these two Minor Notodoris. These large yellow nudibranchs can grow to around 15cm in length.



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The MV Taka is a large dive vessel, sturdy and capable of handling any sea conditions, yet nimble enough to navigate the intricate channels between the islands in the Russell Group.

the mild currents to feed on passing nutrients. The walls are full of colour, with small fish darting out into the blue adding to the growths on the wall itself, and the myriad colours of the wall's inhabitants, such as nudibranchs, sponges and gobies. Keep your eyes open and check out the anemones as you pass them. There are many species of anemonefish in the area, but one is special. The white-bonnet anemonefish is only found in the Solomon's and PNG, and can be spotted on these trips. These rare fish are thought to be a true-breeding hybrid of two other anemonefish species, making them the start of a new species.

On other trips, Taka takes divers out to the Florida Islands, where WWII wrecks are on the agenda with Japanese 'Mavis' seaplanes and the bow of the USS New Orleans on the dive agenda. Longer




The living area on board is spacious and friendly.



Clownfish inhabit a magnificent anemone on the top of a wall. At least eight species of clownfish inhabit Solomon Islands waters.

trips take divers and visitors further west to New Georgia, where they explore the pristine waters of Morovo Lagoon, and the many open ocean dive sites that can be found on the outer barrier reefs here.

Whichever trip suits, you can be assured that you are with a professionally run dive company, on an excellent vessel, with superb food, a dive deck that provides easy access to the water, and guides who know their stuff.

I could easily see myself coming back to check out all of the itineraries. 

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