

MUNDA ON ANOTHER PLANE

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PLANES have always fascinated me, so I naturally have a soft spot for plane wrecks. Over the years I have been fortunate to dive many wonderful plane wrecks, but on a recent trip to Munda I explored two amazing World War II plane wrecks that were simply on another plane!

Munda is a small town in the Western Provinces of the Solomon Islands, located on the western end of New Georgia and on the edge of the spectacular Roviana Lagoon. Over the last few years Munda has grown in popularity to be one of the top dive destinations in the South Pacific. The profile of Munda has been lifted thanks to the amazing diving in the area and the efforts of Belinda Botha, the owner/Operations Director of Dive Munda since 2016. With her boundless enthusiasm, and through a lot of hard work, Belinda has put Munda on every divers' bucket list.

I have wanted to dive Munda for many years, but never got around to organising a trip as I had already done several trips to other parts of the Solomon Islands. But a recent invitation by Tourism Solomons to visit Munda, Honiara and Gizo was too good to pass. The first part of the trip saw me diving Honiara and Gizo, exploring wonderful dive sites that I had visited before, but the Munda leg of

the trip was the part I was most looking forward to.

Most divers travel to Munda by plane, and with direct flights from Brisbane on Solomon Airlines, getting to Munda has never been easier. However, our group came by boat from nearby Gizo. This gave us a chance to dive on the way, with an afternoon dive on a very pretty reef called Munda Bar.

The sloping reef at this site is dominated by beautiful hard corals, but I also found gorgeous soft corals and gorgonian fans down deeper. Enjoying a gentle drift we encountered a hawksbill turtle resting on one ledge and found a painted crayfish under another. On the reef was a good population of reef fish and invertebrate species, including lionfish, nudibranchs, angelfish, sea stars and grofers. We also saw a passing procession of pelagics, including trevally, mackerel, fusiliers and a giant Maori Wrasse. It was a lovely dive, but knowing Munda is home to a number of plane wrecks I was hoping that the next day at least one would be included on the itinerary.

Finally arriving in Munda in the late afternoon, we checked into our rooms at the Agnes Gateway Hotel. Located on the waterfront, with Dive Munda as part of the complex, the Agnes Waterfront Hotel has been part of the Munda landscape for a very long time. The rooms may be a little basic, but they are roomy and comfortable, and with a new section currently under construction the hotel is going through an upgrade.

With a tight itinerary, the next morning was my only full day of diving, so Belinda planned a jam packed day. First up was the most

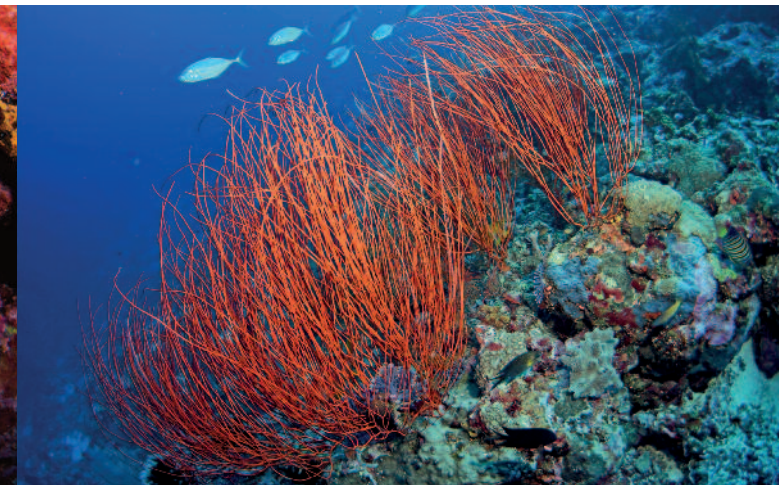
Above Left: A diver with the Douglas SBD-4 Dauntless Dive Bomber Plane wreck.

Bottom Left: One of my favourite dives off Munda was the US P39 Aircobra Fighter Plane.

Bottom Right: Bannerfish and sweetlips on the Aircobra plane wreck.



Divers with a resting hawksbill turtle at Munda Bar.



Beautiful whip corals decorate the wall at Shark Point.

famous dive site off Munda, Shark Point. This site has a wall that plunges to 600m; and washed by currents it is always busy with sharks and pelagics. Jumping in to be greeted by 30m visibility and a school of barracuda was a great start. Unfortunately it was a day off for the sharks, with only a couple of whitetip reef sharks bothering to show up. Usually there are grey reef sharks and the odd silvertip and hammerhead. However, there was plenty more to see so I wasn't too disappointed. For a start the wall is decorated with exquisite corals; soft corals, gorgonians, whip corals and sponges. Plus there were schooling fish like snappers, fusiliers and trevally to be seen. Peering out into the blue we saw mackerel, a green turtle and a passing mobula ray, while abundant reef fish darted around the corals.

Our next dive at Rainbow Wall produced more shark and fish action, but the visibility wasn't as good. In the strong current swirling

around this reef we encountered eagle rays, grey reef sharks, bumphead parrotfish, blacktip reef sharks, sweetlips and whitetip reef sharks. Once again the corals were beautiful, and we also saw a good variety of reef fish and invertebrate species.

For lunch we headed to the beautiful Lubaria Island, just one of the stunning islands that dot the Roviana Lagoon. Once a US Patrol Boat base during World War II, where former president John F Kennedy was stationed, the island has a small museum of war artefacts. The area around Munda saw a lot of heavy fighting during the war, with the loss of many of ships and planes. A number of which can be dived.

With lunch finished, I was very happy when we headed off to dive one of those lost planes, a US P39 Aircobra Fighter Plane. Only





A pod of spinner dolphins joined us between dives.

discovered in 2011, the history of this plane is still unknown, but it may be one of two planes lost on 6 September 1943.

This wonderful plane rests in 28m on a clean sandy bottom. Its tail section is missing and the port wing is folded back, but I still had a great time investigating the cockpit, prop, engine and fuselage, plus seeing a bundle of bullets for its machine gun. This plane is also an oasis for fish, including damsels, angelfish, sweetlips, bannerfish, hawkfish, rock cods and baitfish.

It was a great dive, but that wasn't all for this plane buff, as our final dive was to be on another plane wreck only a few kilometres away. Heading to this site we were suddenly joined by the resident pod of spinner dolphins. For five minutes we drove around in circles as the dolphins took great joy in riding our bow wave and surfing our wake.

My final dive was on an incredible intact Douglas SBD-4 Dauntless Dive Bomber resting in 14m. This plane ditched on 23 July 1943 after being hit by anti-aircraft gunfire while on a bombing raid on the Japanese base at Munda. The pilot and gunner survived the crash, and you can see the compartment where they got their life-raft from.

Although this plane sits on a silty bottom, and the visibility is not the best, it is a brilliant dive with so much to see. I had a great time investigating the cockpit and gunners compartment, inspecting the prop and engine, the massive wings (this plane has a 12.6m wing span) and the tail section. A carrier based plane, I also spotted the arresting hook under the tail. It was hard to leave this wonderful plane wreck.



Barney Paulsen with some of the artefacts he has collected for his museum.

The next day I was flying back to Honiara in the afternoon, so had a free day to see some of Munda's other sites. First stop was the colourful local market, which is conveniently located at the entrance to the Agnes Gateway Hotel. Then I did a tour to nearby Skull Island.

This sacred site contains the skulls of Rovianan chiefs and their wives in a timber casket, and smaller rock shrines with the skulls of warriors. The skulls are over a hundred years old, and were relocated to the site from Munda after missionaries brought Christianity to the area. It is a very humbling experience to be shown this sacred site and a wonderful insight into the traditional customs of the local people.

My final tour was to a museum on the outskirts of Munda. The Peter Joseph WW2 Museum features a collection of war artefacts gathered by local resident Barney Paulsen. Barney only started the collection in 2002, after finding a set of dogtags with the name Peter Joseph. He has since found more dogtags, machine guns, grenades, helmets and other artefacts, many in his own backyard. He now has a large shed packed full of fascinating items from when World War II came to Munda. Dive Munda also offer several more tours that take in war sites, local villages and ancient archeological sites.

I left Munda knowing that I would soon return, as Dive Munda have around thirty more dive sites waiting to be explored - more fabulous reefs, a dramatic cave, a Japanese shipwreck and also several more plane wrecks.

**For more information – www.mundadive.com
www.agneshotelsolomon.com**



One of Dive Munda's dive boats in the picturesque Roviana Lagoon.



One of the shrines at Skull Island.