



# Bokissa Island



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### **Beautiful Bokissa – Now there's a place to spend a dive holiday!**

Another early start, another dive trip, away from work for nearly two weeks, can we take all of this stress and pressure in our lives!? Well at least we are all Melbourne divers, so when we are told we must be at the airport by a certain time, no matter how early, we are there. Diving over many years in Port Phillip Bay on slack tides means we all know the importance of not being late. Not there on time, no diving. In this case not at the airport on time, no ten days of fun, excitement, relaxation, and fantastic dives. So as arranged we were all there one September morning at some too early to mention hour for our annual Vision Divers overseas trip. We were ready to start our day of flying on the way to Bokissa, an amazing eco island resort off Luganville on the larger island of Santo. There was certainly excitement in the air and even those amongst us who usually do not start functioning until mid-morning managed a smile!

After the usual ups and downs of flights, checking out the duty free and in many cases making purchases, we arrived at Port Vila ready to board the small plane to Bokissa. Now for those who do not take to flying that well this is real sweaty palm territory. Twenty passengers crammed into a small plane laden down with heavy dive gear and it's dark outside so we can't even see where we are going. Still at least we can see into the cockpit where the pilot and co-pilot are sitting. That should be reassuring as we can surely watch them to check they are concentrating on flying the plane. Well on second thoughts with the pilot taking out an old cloth to wipe the windscreen to see where the runway is so he can take off and then using a torch to see what he is doing and to check the dials, reassuring is not the first word that comes to mind. But we did all get there safely, transferred our luggage and ourselves into a ute and a bus and then headed for the shores of Santo to jump onto the Bokissa barge for the half hour trip over to Bokissa. There we were met at the barge by Tim, our host and dive leader for our time on Bokissa.

Off the barge, into our rooms, a quick wash and freshen up as they say, before heading to the bar for a drink, or several, and the first of our meals included as part of the package. And what a meal it was. The food was top quality, market fresh and plentiful. Hmmm was this just provided on our first night to impress, or was this the standard we could come to expect on a daily basis. Time would tell. After filling ourselves with the wonderful seafood, beef, vegetables, salads, desserts, and of course the occasional cocktail, we all headed off for a good night's sleep.

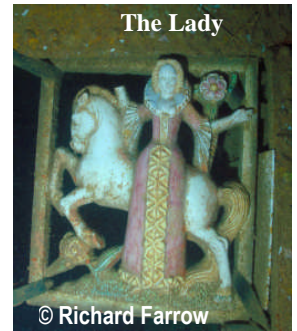
The morning brought more surprises. We had arrived the evening before in the dark so this eco-island had been a bit of a mystery. But wow, daylight revealed a paradise. Our separate farés complete with ensuites were located only metres from the fantastic blue waters of the ocean, that glistened in the morning sun simply begging us all to spend our days lazing around enjoying the place. But hey, weren't we here to dive? You mean we get this paradise to live in and we get to dive as well. What a bonus. And so started our days of diving with fourteen spectacular dives lined up.



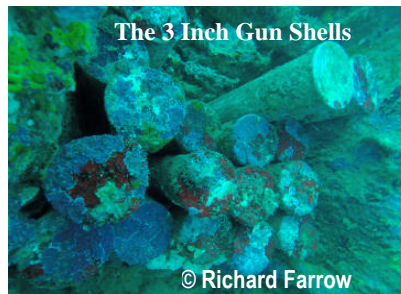
**Diving The Coolidge . . .** The dives were fantastic and the organisation and willingness to accommodate different interests and experience levels just as impressive. We dived the Coolidge exploring the bridge, engine room, the holds, the first class dining room and of course checking out the world famous “lady”. It is truly a spectacular vessel, immense in size and creating a majestic though mysterious presence under water. No wonder it has captured the imagination and interest of divers over many years. And what an ideal way to build up skill levels, especially under

the expert guidance of Tim and his highly experience team of dive leaders all of whom have been expertly trained as divemasters as well as being accomplished underwater tour guides.

For many on the trip it was the first experience of such depths combined with safe exploration of the inside of a wreck. And for one in particular, it was seven days of progressing from “I don’t really want to go that deep to see the engine room, I might go as far as the lady.” And after the lady “well okay perhaps I might manage the engine room but I am not going to the swimming pool cos that is at 55 metres” and after the engine room ..... well guess what “I might just check out the pool and while we are there – perhaps a little visit to the sand at 60 metres” (the deepest allowed on air). And then “okay, been there done that, so now can we do the famous ghost train”.



The ghost train is a fantastic dive where under Tim’s careful guidance we started towards the stern at 60 metres checking out the bullets Tim was showing us (yes some of us might have been marked but they definitely were bullets) and then worked up through the inside of the ship along narrow passages moving up and down and along until we exited around the 25 metre level near the bow. Wow that is a dive to remember.



And talking of dives to remember, there is another that lays down a memory trace forever. It is a dive that one could never describe adequately in words.

## Diving M.V. Henry Bonneaud

As well as the Coolidge, Bokissa resort provides access to the M.V. Henry Bonneaud, an old coastal freighter sunk off the island as an artificial reef. The wreck lies upright on a sloping sea floor. Diving the Henry Bonneaud during the day is impressive enough. The waters around Bokissa are invariably clear and provide up to 40 metres of visibility so descending on this wreck during daylight hours is a great experience as the entire wreck opens up before your eyes on the way down and the provides a fascinating dive combining the usual excitement of exploring a wreck with the interest of the reef it has become, albeit artificial.





However, it is the night dive that is the one to live in memory for ever. The Bokissa website describes it as "An excellent night dive with large numbers of flashlight fish present." Well as a complete opposite and in stark contrast to much promotional material we read on websites, this is truly an understatement of the highest order. For excellent, read "out of this world, amazing, indescribably extremely fantastic" and any other extreme descriptors you can think of. And for "large numbers" read "thousands and thousands".



We descended on the wreck in the dead of night by the light of the moon with no torches on. For some on the dive barge beforehand this seemed a strange challenge. "Hey, let's dive this wreck going down to 40 metres in the dark and not put our torches on"! But we did and were amply rewarded. As many will know, flashlight fish are very sensitive to light so disappear when there is light around. But in the dark they school in very large numbers congregating around the wreck and as they move around they are continuously flashing small dots of light which are the result of luminescent bacteria held in an organ located just below their eyes. The light flashes as the fish covers and uncovers the organ with a moveable membrane. As a result the diver experiences the silhouette of the entire wreck against a myriad of background dots of light. It is amazing and everyone simply hovers or rests on the surrounding sand in awe of the spectacle. For some dives half an hour is half an hour. For this dive half an hour seems like ten minutes at the most – that is how fantastic and mesmerising it is. The time is simply gone and sadly torches must be switched on for the slow ascent up the line.

## Reefs, sharks and serenity

And just before we leave the dives, we must not forget that Bokissa has some fantastic reefs surrounding it that cater for those who prefer reef diving or like to mix it with wrecks. These sites are located within five minutes of the jetty and in some cases provide the opportunity for the diver to simply drift along back to the jetty rather than getting back on the dive barge. There is plenty to see and divers certainly do see plenty with the vividly clear waters around the island. For our last dive we opted for one where we might see some sharks. The guides assured us that we would. This dive certainly provided excitement and challenges along the way. With the moon's cycle being in almost perfect alignment with the sun, the current was certainly flowing – no, make that raging!

It was one of those dives where you jump in, grab the line as you do, don't let go and literally drag yourself through the current to get to the bottom away from the current. But no such luck as the current is still as strong so from rock to rock it is a pull along the bottom until we found a suitable spot to wedge ourselves and wait for the sharks. There we all were sitting around when suddenly we noticed the guides had sticks. Did they know something we didn't. They never told us we needed sticks! Ah well, not to worry, here come the sharks. Three beautiful but powerful creatures on this day (often there are many more), that darted amongst the group having a close look at us all. Occasionally one would get a little too frisky and would receive a gentle tap from a guide. So that's why they have a stick but no harm done and they just kept swimming around us and between us, so much so that one of our group thought we might be stuck there with no way back to the boat. But of course it is a perfectly safe dive and again time ran away with us so it was back to the line, which with the current taking us there seemed much closer than when we left it. Sadly our dives were over.





**But back to that fantastic resort.** If after the first meal we were wondering if the high standard might drop, we were wrong. Breakfasts provided a range of freshly baked bread, cereals, and fruit. Lunches and dinners consisted every day of three marvellous courses always with plenty of choices. Across our eight days on the island we enjoyed soups, rock lobster, fresh fish caught the very same day we were eating it, a range of pastas and pizzas, some fantastic meat cooked in a range of interesting sauces and the desserts. Oh yes the desserts. Just as well diving burns up some calories though probably not as many as were being tucked away. After the fantastic food, if one could ever get past it there is plenty to do around the resort and it is easy to understand why approximately half of the visitors to this island are not divers. Even though it caters for divers at the most professional of levels, it is not solely dedicated to divers and that is a great advantage. There is the pool complete with its own bar, the pool table, the darts, the kava (but who needs it to feel soporific anyway given the atmosphere on the island), the snorkelling, the fishing, the canoe trips, and the lazing around in hammocks with a good book.

On our last day we took the resort's day package to kayak up the shallow freshwater Malo River on a neighbouring island. The river terminates in a large freshwater lake and is perfect for snorkelling. It is a great day, made so by the peaceful, indeed serene surroundings and the not so peaceful but tremendously enthusiastic, full-of-fun, and helpful crew who looked after us for the day. After the journey across to the island from Bokissa on the barge we had grown to love so much over the week, we all enthusiastically jumped into kayaks only to discover that most of us were better divers than kayakers. Still we all finally managed to paddle up stream amidst plenty of noise and shouting at each other – there went the peaceful part of the serenity – until we reached the lake. After a play around there including snorkelling, jumping in the water off tree branches and falling in from the kayaks we finally headed back downstream for a barbecue lunch prepared by the crew. Great food and great location. Here we had some more leisure time which included the somewhat new sport, at least to us, of hermit crab racing. With all crabs individually selected and placed at a stick in the middle of a circle the bets were on to see which one got to the edge of the circle first. Ah well simple things and all that – but we were relaxing and trying to make the most of our last day because sadly last day it was.



Next morning it was time for the early start home. After a quick breakfast we boarded the barge for the last time. And there are not many places that you leave at some early hour in the morning to start the journey home where the owners and key staff all come down to the pier to wave you goodbye and wish you well. The team at Bokissa including the owner Alan, his parents Jan and Dave, the resort manager and our intrepid dive leader Tim, and all the other staff including the boat crew, chefs, and dive guide, all give 100% and more to ensure that you have a great stay on the island. When Always Dive Expeditions organised the trip for us, as always, they knew what they were doing and set up the ideal itinerary in a paradise for divers.

As a result we all have many fond memories of our time on Bokissa and look forward to the opportunity to return. We thank all those who were involved.