



Introducing one of Madang's favourite dive sites...

# Planet Rock

Jan Messersmith



Top: Spotted Porcelain Crab - *Neopetrolisthes maculata*. Above: Magnificent Anemone - *Heteractis magnifica*

Planet Rock is a local favourite for Madang folk. Anglers and divers alike partake of its bounty. Conditions in Astrolabe Bay can raise frustrations for the intrepid visitor. In the dry season, the wind might toss up seas that make diving an exciting affair and cause fishermen to wish they had not partaken of so many beers the night before.

During the rainy season, the outflow of the Golgol River can put as much as four metres of murky fresh water over the top of the seamount.

Oddly enough, we have had some of our best dives at Planet Rock under the latter condition.

The depths beneath the dark river water are often crystal clear. There also seems to be much less plankton in the water. If the layer is thick and murky enough, it will seem almost like a night dive.

Another problem can be currents. One must be careful anchoring. Careful

anchoring can preserve coral that takes a long time to regenerate and it pays to check the anchor for proper setting before going down. It is a long swim to land.

On one occasion we tied up to a floating tire arrangement instead of anchoring. It looked safe enough. It was attached to the bottom by a chain. At the end of the dive we were playing with a small octopus which had taken up residence in a concrete block that someone had used as an anchor. Suddenly, we noticed that the mooring chain was lying on the bottom and Faded Glory was nowhere to be seen. Surfacing, we saw that the boat was heading steadily towards Bilbil Island. If we swam as fast as possible, we could just barely see that we were catching up to the boat. Lesson learned.

The one thing that you can be sure of is that you will never know what kind of dive you are going to have on Planet Rock until you arrive there.

PLANET ROCK  
Story & photos: Jan Messersmith



From top: The Bluefin Trevally - *Caranx melampygus*, darts around the rock as if its tail were on fire. It likes to harass divers, but it is very difficult to photograph; Seen rarely is the Flat Rock Crab - *Percnon planissimum*; Planet Rock is nudibranch heaven. This rarely seen *Chromodoris kuniei* is one of many species.





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Right: This toothy nightmare is the Reef Lizardfish - *Synodus variegatus*.  
Below: These Blackfin Barracuda - *Sphyraena qenie* swim with Bigeye Trevally - *Caranx sexfasciatus* as if they were cousins at a picnic.



I wish I had a photo of a Hammerhead Shark, but sadly, no. They are rare here, but Planet Rock seems to be the most common place to see them. I have seen as many as twenty in a school – small by world standards, but a big deal for Madang.

We spotted a school of Hammerheads in very clear water on

the south side at about thirty metres approaching us from behind. We hunkered down on the reef and froze, cursing our bubbles. The group split about in half, each mob passing us with the closest monsters only a couple of metres away. We could see their eyes rolling as they examined us for potential edibility. I suppose that we did not

look tasty, because they passed without sampling.

Stunning anemones encircle 'the Rock' like a hairy halo. You can spy many colours of the Magnificent Anemone, each with its anemone fish that favour to occupy that colour. On the west side at about twenty-three metres is an incredible fluorescent red bulb anemone that has occupied the spot for more than ten years. It always has an unusually brightly coloured Spine-cheek Anemone fish tending it.

The south end is our favourite anchoring point. If the current is absent or very mild it is an interesting exercise to fin around the entire seamount. And it is a bit of exercise. If one does not exceed about fifteen to twenty metres, it is possible to circumnavigate in about forty-five minutes – if you keep moving! If there is a current and you are planning a circumnavigation, make sure you anchor on the down-current side of the rock so that on your return leg you will most likely have a current flowing behind you instead of fighting your way back to the boat.

One nice thing about Planet Rock is that it is impossible to get lost. If you can see the reef at all, you are not



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Right: This is the normal colouration of the Longfin Spadefish - *Platax teira*. Far right: When the Longfin Spadefish approaches a cleaning station, it becomes nearly colourless. Below: Cornered in a hole, this Blue Spotted Stingray - *Dasyatis kuhlii* didn't seem to mind posing for a closeup. Bottom: The brilliantly coloured Coral Grouper - *Cephalopholis miniata*.



far from your boat. Just go whichever direction is shallower, surface, and have a look around. I reckon that the entire seamount at the five-metre level is only a little over 150 metres in diameter.

You will see just about any fish that is found in local waters, except that there are usually a lot more of them. Blackfin Barracuda mix with Bigeye Trevally and swirl in a fishy cyclone. Anthea dart about in a startling storm of brightly coloured snowflakes. Morays lurk in dark holes displaying their toothy grins. Blue-spotted Stingrays try to hide their gaudy costumes under ledges of staghorn coral.

For the sharp-eyed diver, nudibranch hunting is the primary sport at the rock. We have spotted many of the rarer varieties there. We once observed a boatload of divers with very expensive looking photo gear spend over two hours hunting and photographing nudibranchs so small that we could hardly see them. They never went below about ten metres.

All around the rock there are cleaning stations where small cleaner fish hang about and wait for a meal to be delivered. Simultaneously big fish cruise around to find a helpful, hungry little guy to cure that horrible itch right behind the pectoral fin. Some fish undergo stunning colour changes when visiting a cleaning station. The most common reaction is a general lightening and brightening of colouration. This is the signal to the cleaner fish that the big



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fellow is not there to eat him. I think that cleaner fish are very trustful creatures. It is not unusual to see one swim into the mouth of the client like a tiny dental technician.

Planet Rock is a place of delights and the occasional dose of adrenaline. Under some conditions, it is not for the

faint of heart. New divers should be accompanied by those familiar with the rock. This is not bad advice for Madang diving in general. I still sometimes dream of chasing that boat towards Bilbil and wake up in a sweat. ■

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Top: Three buddies work their way around the southwest corner of Planet Rock. Above: The ever-popular and common Giant Moray - *Gymnothorax javanicus*. Left: Less common on Planet Rock than the fringing reefs, one may still spot the Fire Dartfish - *Nemateleotris magnifica*.