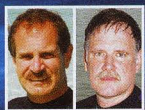


LIFE IN THE PASS LANE



It has to be one of the world's great drift dives, but the

ferocity of the current through Rangiroa's Tiputa Pass took MICHAEL SALVAREZZA and CHRISTOPHER P WEAVER by surprise. Pictures by JOHN BANTIN

TODAY WAS THE DAY. We had travelled for 13 hours from New York to the main island of Tahiti, and spent three weeks exploring the many treasures of her diverse and beautiful islands.

We had dived with sharks in the shadow of the mountainous island of Moorea, marvelled at the abundant marine life that danced along the coral reefs of Fakarava, cavorted with manta rays inside the lagoon at Manihi, and our senses had been on overload when we experienced the beauty of the fabled lagoon of Bora Bora.

But now, after just over an hour's flight from Tahiti's Papeete Airport, we had been transported to the island of Rangiroa, a large atoll in the Tuamotu group. We had come to dive one of the most famous dive sites in this region: the Tiputa Pass.

Rangiroa can best be described as a thin necklace of coral and rock circling a wide, expansive lagoon some 15 miles wide and 41 miles long. The largest atoll

in the Tuamotu Archipelago, it is also the second largest in the world.

This sleepy atoll is known for its exceptionally clear, warm waters and abundant marine life, making it an underwater attraction for divers and snorkellers the world over.

The population numbers only 700, and it doesn't take long for visitors to forget the bustling world they left behind. For divers, the sight of the azure waters of the lagoon, just steps away from the airport runway, immediately whets their appetite for underwater adventures to come.

We started with a few fantastic dives

outside the pass along the reef wall, where we encountered blacktip reef sharks, hawksbill turtles and large manta rays. As great as this was, it was then time to focus on the main reason for our visit – the Tiputa Pass.

This is a narrow cut in the atoll's circling coral ribbon. Twice daily, as the tides change from high to low and back again, massive volumes of water are squeezed through its relatively small opening, creating screaming currents and chaotic seas.

Standing on the shore along the sides of the pass, I can see standing waves of 2m or more. I can only imagine the fury

Above and right: "There will be dozens of sharks..."

Far right: The topside view of Tiputa Pass gives little due to the tumultuous conditions below.

of the water below the surface, but it was into this cauldron that we planned to dive.

“Remember, the current is stronger the higher you rise off the bottom,” cautioned the divemaster as he briefed us on the upcoming adventure.

“If you want to accelerate, just go up a few feet.”

With the water racing at up to 9 knots, why on Earth would anyone want to accelerate?

“We only dive on the incoming tide,” he continued, “so if we get swept away, at least we’ll end up in the lagoon and not in the open ocean!”

Of course, the lagoon is 41 miles long, so that was not altogether a comfortable image to contemplate before the dive.

“Don’t forget to look down after we enter the water,” went on the divemaster in his thick French accent. “There will be dozens of sharks below you.”

Great. Now we add sharks to the equation. As if we didn’t have enough to think about!

THIS CONVERSATION KEPT PLAYING over in our minds as we neared the dive site. The inflatable was bouncing severely in the waves, and we all laughed nervously as we crested the largest of the rollers.

Soon, it was time to dive. On a synchronised count, we rolled in backwards and began our descent.

At first we were comforted by the stillness of the water. Of course, we weren’t in the pass just yet and were able to descend at a leisurely pace. Below us, however, were the sharks that we had been discussing –

grey reef, silky and blacktip reef sharks, intermingled in a strange grouping of the reef’s apex predators.

We continued deeper, to about 37m, which was where we felt the first tentative tug of the water moving through the pass.

In a flash, that water swept us up and began to hurl us forward. Furiously, we descended to the bottom, mindful of the warnings in the dive briefing not to ride

the current too far off the sea floor. With everyone now together, the divemaster gave us the thumbs-up to take off! Within seconds, we all lifted off the bottom and began to fly!

With arms extended like the wings of an aircraft, we savoured our “flight” through the pass.

The bottom, long ago scoured clean and stripped bare of coral and marine growth by the maelstrom of water, raced below us at an incredible speed.

This was our only real point of reference as we shot forward. Occasionally we would spot a small shark or group of fish facing forward into the current and appearing to remain stationary. This is a testament to how perfectly suited these animals are to their ocean realm.

We, on the other hand, could barely control our movements in the tempest!

ABOUT HALFWAY THROUGH the pass, the dive plan called for us to dip into a small gully that provided some respite from the furious waters.

Soon enough, we saw the rise in the

seafloor approaching.

With computers screaming in the ascent over the crest, we reached out and grabbed for the bottom for dear life. Grasping the rocks along the ridge, we used all our strength to pull ourselves hand over hand into the small depression in an effort to halt our flight, careful not to look sideways and risk having the masks ripped off our faces.

As we pulled ourselves down into the

WITHIN SECONDS, WE ALL LIFTED OFF THE BOTTOM AND BEGAN TO FLY!

hole, we suddenly found ourselves out of the storm.

Large schools of soldierfish and butterflyfish swirled around us, all looking for the same thing – relief from the punishing currents.

The roiling water flowing up and over the ridge actually made a low rumbling sound. At times, you could see small rocks and boulders fly overhead as they were pushed forward by the tumult.

Gazing up, we could see other divers who were not quite out of the current, the exhaust from their regulators ripping off sideways into the blue!

After a few moments of rest, it was time to leave our sanctuary and finish the dive.

Again on a synchronised count, we lifted ourselves off the bottom. Once again we were back into the furious waters screaming overhead.

It felt as if we were leaves tossed into the wind, as we resumed our flight through the pass. The seabed began to race by beneath us once again.

Now, as we neared the exit point, we looked for an underwater

