

UNDERWATER *Journal*

A Diving Adventure Magazine



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Isla Mujeres Whale Sharks
EEZYCUT Line Cutting Tool
Rangiroa: Life in the "Pass" Lane
SDI: Do Your Skills Need Refreshing?
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Book Review: *The Six Skills & Other Discussions*

Kingdom of the Whales

- Tonga's Humpback Encounters

This publication is
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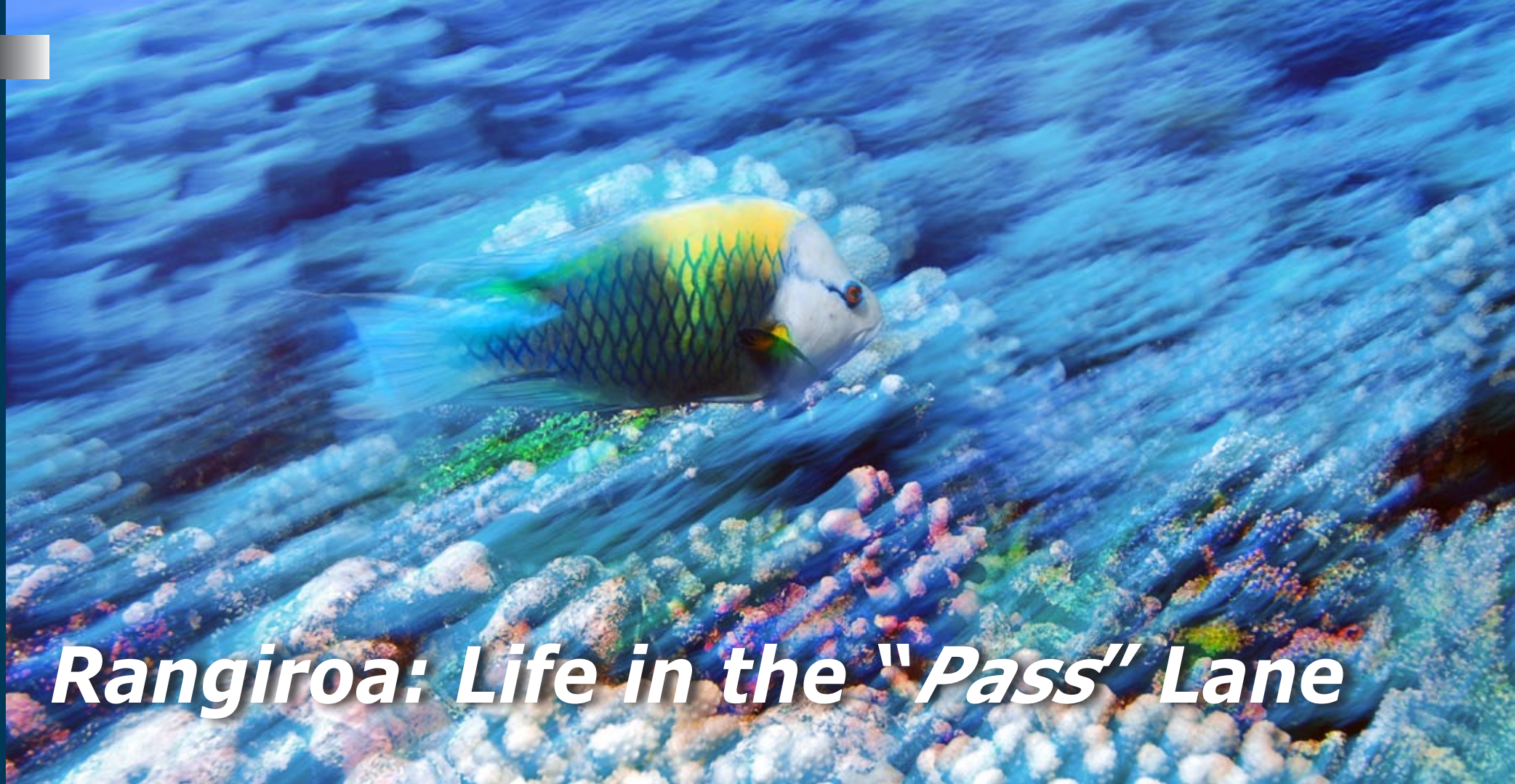
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Rangiroa: Life in the "Pass" Lane

*Story & Photos by
Michael Salvarezza &
Christopher P. Weaver*

Today was the day. We had traveled thirteen hours from New York to the main island of Tahiti, and spent three weeks exploring the many treasures of her diverse and beautiful islands prior to this moment. We dove with sharks in the shadows of the mountainous island of Moorea, marveled 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 were on overload when we experienced the beauty of the fabled lagoon of Bora Bora.

But now, after just over an hour in the air from Tahiti's Papeete Airport, we had been transported to the island of Rangiroa, a large atoll in the Tuamotu group. It was here that we came 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 measuring some 16 miles wide and 42 miles in length. It is the largest atoll in the Tuamotu Archipelago and the second largest atoll in the world. This sleepy atoll is known for exceptionally clear warm waters and abundant marine life, which makes it an underwater heaven for divers and snorkelers the world over.

With only a population of 700 people, it does not take long for visitors to completely forget about the bustling world they left behind. But for divers, the sight of the azure blue waters of the lagoon just steps away from the airport runway only serves to whet their appetite for the underwater adventures to come.

Initially, we made a few fantastic dives outside the pass along the reef wall where we encountered Blacktip Reef Sharks, Green Seas Turtles and large Manta Rays. As great as this was, it was time to focus on the main reason for our visit...the Tiputa Pass. In short, the pass 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, standing waves of 5 feet or greater are easily seen and one can only imagine the fury of the water below the surface.





Blacktip reef shark

It was into this cauldron that we intended to make our dive.

"Remember, the current is stronger the higher you raise off the bottom," cautioned the dive master 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 would anyone want to accelerate? "We only dive on the incoming tide," he continued, "so that if we get swept away, at least we will end up in the lagoon and not in the open ocean!" Of course, the lagoon is 42 miles long...not exactly a comfortable image as we contemplated the dive.

"Don't forget to look down after we enter in the water" he said in a 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 dinghy 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 synchronized count, we all rolled backwards into the warm, clear water and began our descent into the deep.

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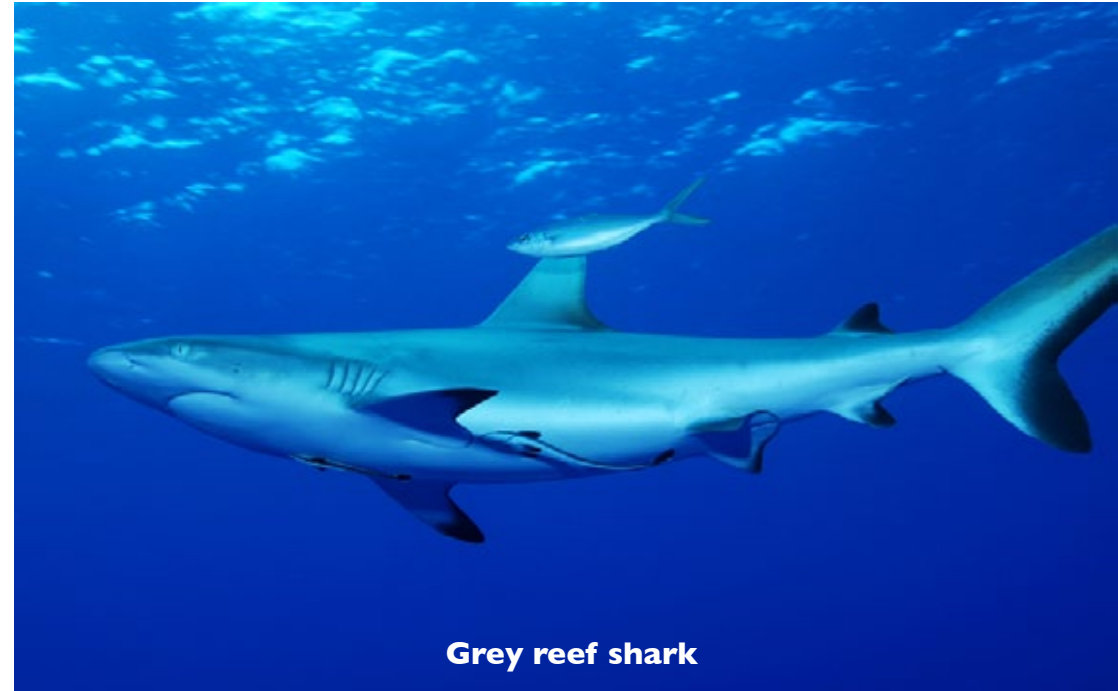
TDI



At the beginning, we were comforted by the stillness of the water. Of course, we weren't in the pass just yet and we were able to descend at a leisurely pace. Below us, though, were the sharks we had been discussing. Grey Reef Sharks, Silky Sharks and Blacktip Reef Sharks inter-

warnings from the dive briefing not to ride the current too far off the sea floor. With everyone now together, the dive master gave us the thumbs to take off! Within seconds, we all lifted off the bottom and began to fly!

With arms extended like the wings of an airplane, we savored



Grey reef shark

mingled in a strange grouping of the reef's apex predators. We continued deeper, down to about 120 feet, before we felt the first tentative tug of the water moving through the pass.

In a flash, the water swept us up and began to hurl us forward. Furiously, we descended to the bottom, mindful of the

the "flight" through the pass. The bottom, long ago scoured clean and stripped bare of coral and marine growth from the maelstrom of water, raced below us at an incredible speed. This was our only real point of reference as we raced ahead. Occasionally, we would spot a small shark or a small group



of fish facing forward into the current and appearing to remain stationary. This is a testament to how perfectly suited these animals are in the 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 gulley that provides some respite from the furious waters. Soon enough, we saw the small 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



Clockwise: Standing waves are almost always present during tide changes in Tiputa Pass. As for life in the pass, inhabitants like this large snapper (top right) and this hawksbill sea turtle don't seem to mind the strong currents that pour through the pass.

strength to pull ourselves hand over hand into the small depression in an effort to halt our flight, careful not to look sideways so as not to have the masks ripped off our faces. As we pulled ourselves down into the 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. On a synchronized count, we lifted ourselves off the bottom and once again we were back into the furious waters screaming overhead. It felt like we were leaves tossed into the wind as we immediately resumed our flight through the pass. Again, the bottom began to race by beneath us. Now, as we neared the exit point, we looked for an underwater communication cable that had been stretched across the pass along the bottom. The instructions were to grab on to this cable and then use it to pull out of the screaming current and into shallower water. We couldn't shake the image of a fighter plane landing on the deck of an aircraft carrier attempting to attach the tail hook to a safety wire before plunging off the ship into the ocean! If we missed the cable, where would we end up?

Soon enough, though, we had all reached the end of the dive safely. Exhilarated and exhausted, we were all secretly glad we had "survived" the Tiputa Pass. It was a drift dive like none other.



The feeling resembled narrowly escaping disaster and vowing to never repeat your actions again! Bobbing in the water waiting for the Zodiac to retrieve us gave us time to think about the dive...and we were pretty sure we wouldn't be doing that again!

Rangiroa is a fascinating destination and is home to some of the world's best diving. In addition to the nerve-rattling adventure in the Tiputa Pass, divers can come face to face with Silvertip sharks outside the Avatoru Pass and explore lush coral gardens filled with dense marine life in a place called "The Corner." Divers swimming along the coral drop-offs can usually encounter large Manta Rays and Green Sea Turtles as they explore the underwater terrain. Dolphins are commonly seen cavorting in the standing waves of the Tiputa Pass and will often come up close and visit

with divers as they swim along the walls near the entrance to the pass.

Rangiroa is a short flight from Tahiti's main airport, and with several colorful restaurants and luxury resorts, it is an ideal destination for adventurous divers.

As we walked back to the dive shop after our experience in the Tiputa Pass, a sly smile began to creep onto our faces. Tiputa had gotten into our blood! We walked calmly up to the dive-master and with smiles on our

A little camera advice:

For those those photographers with housed SLR type cameras be forewarned, water movement through Tiputa Pass, can be very swift and strong, making it a high adrenaline that may require having both hands free. You might want to consider leaving your camera on the boat for the first dive. Those with small cameras that can be stuffed in your BCD should be fine.

faces we asked: "When do we go again? Are you diving the Pass tomorrow? Sign us up!"

- MS & CW

Where to Stay

Hotel Kia Ora Sauvage - www.HotelKiaOra.com

Novatel Rangiroa Lagoon Resort - www.novotel.com

Dive Operators

Top Dive Dive Center - www.topdive.com

Blue Dolphins Dive Center - www.bluedolphinsdiving.com

Getting There

The only international airport is located on the main island of Tahiti. It is serviced with direct flights from Los Angeles, Hawaii, Paris, Auckland, Sydney, Tokyo, Osaka and Easter Island (Chile). Air Tahiti Nui, Qantas, Air France, Hawaiian AirLines, Lan Chile and Air New Zealand all service French Polynesia.

For flights to Rangiroa, connect with Air Tahiti, the domestic carrier within French Polynesia, which offers frequent service to all of the islands of French Polynesia.

Travel Documents

A valid passport is required for entry. For visitors from Australia, no Visa is required for stays up to 3 months. Visitors from the USA and New Zealand require a Visa for stays over 1 month in duration.



Baggage

Baggage allowances vary for each international carrier so check before you leave. For the domestic flights to Rangiroa, Air Tahiti imposes strict limitations on baggage: carry-on baggage may not exceed 3kg (6.6 lbs.) and standard class passengers are permitted 3 checked items not to exceed 10kg (22-lbs) each.

For passengers booked in the "Y" boarding class, 20kg (44-lbs) is permitted and passengers in the "Z" boarding class can check 50kg (110-lbs). Divers are permitted an extra 5kg (11-lbs) by showing their c-card at the time of check-in.

Currency: The currency used throughout French Polynesia is the Franc of the "Compagnie Francaise du Pacifique" usually called the French Pacific Franc. It is abbreviated as XPF or CFP. Its exchange rate with the Euro is fixed at 119.33 Pacific Francs per 1 Euro.

Electricity: Power voltage used in French Polynesia is 220 Volts (60 Hz). Be sure to double-check your appliance's compatibility before plugging them in. Converters / adaptors are usually available upon request at your hotel front desk.

Weather: French Polynesia's climate is defined as marine tropical (hot temperatures tempered by the ocean). Rangiroa and the rest of the islands in the Tuamotu Archipelago enjoy two distinct seasons: a Dry Season and a Humid Season. The Dry season runs from April through October, with July and August being the coolest. This is the Austral winter and temperatures range from 24-28 degrees Celsius (75-82 F). In the Humid Season, between November and March, more rain can be expected, along with higher humidity. Temperatures can range from 26-28 degrees Celsius (79-82 F).



Michael Salvatorezza & Christopher P. Weaver

Michael and Christopher head the New York based organization, Eco-Photo Explorers. It's mission includes promoting interest in protecting our ocean environment by creating awareness through the use of underwater photography.

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