

Night Dive at Tahiti: A Little Luck Does Not Hurt...

David Tuitou

When I used to live in Moorea, French Polynesia, from 2002 to 2006, every once in a while we scheduled a night dive at the peninsula of Tahiti, thanks to the logistics of my friend Michel Balleton. Michel being a lover of augers and numerous other families of shells (*Mitridae*, *Costellaridae*,...) partial to sandy bottoms, we often dived in the channel on the lagoon side.

As a matter of fact, in Tahiti there is a coral barrier that protects a shallow lagoon and from time to time a channel of some thirty metres linking the different bays is formed. This channel has two slopes: one that begins in the sea shore and another one beginning in the lagoon. The most interesting species are usually found on the lagoon side.

On such a night we anchored our boat very near the slope, in the coral forest in the lagoon. We dived at nightfall and proceeded towards the sandy slope. Once there, we began to descend along the slanting bottom of coral debris.

Numerous species of seashells are to be found in such a habitat. According to depth, in the *Conidae* family alone we can find *Conus pulicarius*, *C. eburneus*, *C. tessellatus* and *C. quercinus*. These are not very exciting species, except if one is looking for outstanding specimens. I, for instance, was looking for very dark or very big *C. tessellatus*. The habitat is certainly more favourable to *Mitridae*, *Costellaridae* or *Terebridae*. In the night I am referring to, we did find a dead *C. arenatus*, which is a rare species in Polynesia, where it never reaches large sizes, I do not know why.

We got to the bottom of the channel (30 metres) and among the coral debris I found several small *C. sugillatus*. This is not a common species locally, so it is always a pleasure to find some.

We carried on over the bottom, following the tracks of sand dwellers and I was particularly alert because in such a habitat one can find the rare *C. acutangulus*. My friend Michel did collect some from time to time in the same environment, so I was keeping my eyes open... This species can easily be mistaken for *Vexillum mirabile* whose tracks and depth of burying are similar, as is the actual colouration of the shell.

After about 45 minutes diving, no interesting cones at all... Every once in a while I saw that Michel put in his bag a few treasures he was finding in the sand.

We began to climb up slowly along the sandy slope. The same species always. We reached the 10 metres zone and I was ahead of Michel. We proceeded towards our boat. Just then, my HID lantern illuminated something shiny at a certain distance. It appeared to be an orangish cowry of a certain size, resting on the sand. Certainly dead.



I drew near slowly, seeing no cause to hurry. A fine layer of parasite algae appears to cover it. I picked the shell up and placed it under my light beam. Total awe! It is not a cowry at all! It is a cone! And what cone! A *Conus bullatus*! It is large, it is in GEM condition, not even drilled! It's amazing! I showed it to Michel, who actually roared under water. What a victory!

Not only was it an extraordinary find, because the species is very rare in Polynesia, except in the Marquesas Islands (where nevertheless the colour of the shells is quite distinct) but I even did not have to bother with extracting the soft parts! So, a double prize!

Size of the thing: 56.3 mm.