

January - March 2020

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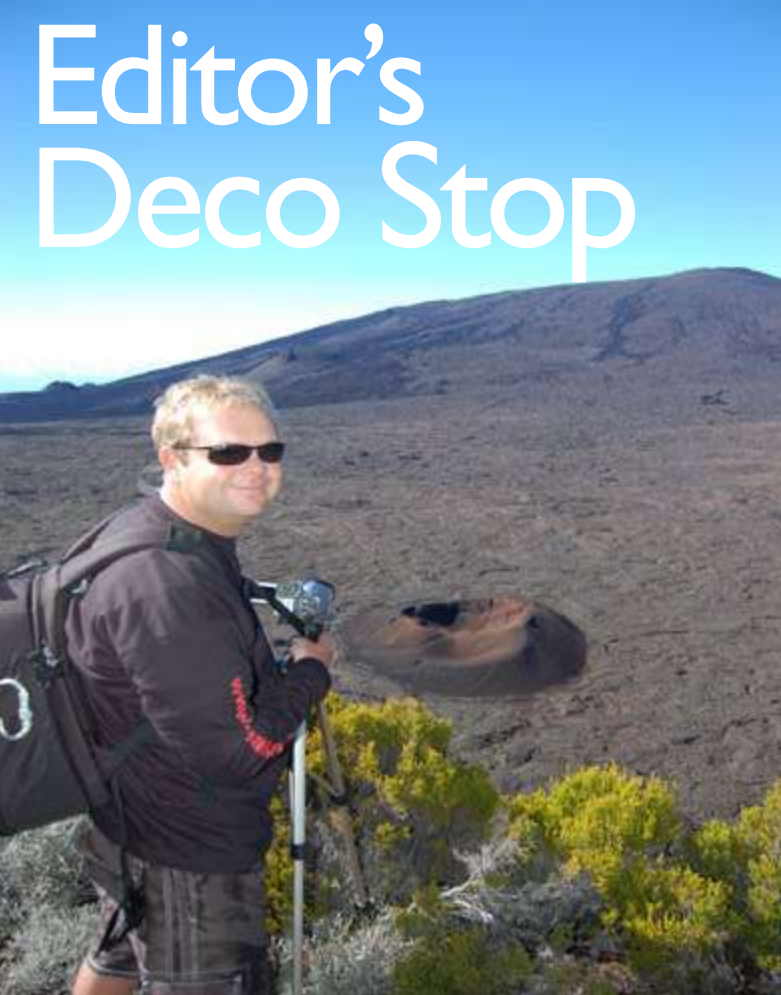


TRAVEL EDITION



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Editor's Deco Stop

One thing I learnt during the last year is that the human race is killing the planet! People don't think about tomorrow – they only care about today!

I think humans are the stupidest animals on the planet and we don't even realise that we are on top of the food chain. If it walks, swims or crawls, humans will put it on our plates and eat it!

Every living creature on Earth has its own place on the food chain. As we are on top, we decide on what we can and can't do. It was humans who decided to kill sharks, whales and every other type of animal in the waters and on land. It

was humans who decided to plunder our oceans!

Our world is dieing and most of us think there is nothing we can do to stop it. We are wrong! In the last year, I have helped stop the sale of shark fins and managed to get an observer on a boat for seismic testing.

Sure, being the editor of a magazine in the ocean industry helps open the doors, but if you don't complain about things that bother you, nothing will be done! I think that each and every one of us has a responsibility to do something that will help change our current situation.

I know we can't save the world overnight, but baby steps will get the ball rolling. Saving something small will lead to saving something a bit bigger. This will start growing until we manage to save whole environments. You need to have a look at where you can help out and then get involved.

Join a conservation group that carries through with their mission and stands up for what they say they believe in. there are conservation groups out there that can't provide any answers when asked what they did with their donation money. Always ask questions before joining any groups – educate yourself before educating others.

Editor in Chief & Publisher

Johan Boshoff

But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and... ☐

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Diving the Heart of the Philippines

Part II - Bohol

From mountain peaks to turquoise blue water, pristine coral reefs to unusual critters, the Philippines is home to some of the richest marine ecosystems on earth with more than 7000 islands to choose from. It is a diver's dream destination and it can be daunting to know where to begin to experience what this boundless country has to offer. A good place to start is the heart of the Philippines around an island just east of Cebu? Bohol offers some of the best diving in the country.



The Philippines consists of more than 7000 islands just north of the equator, of which approximately only 2000 islands are inhabited; in fact, more or less half of the islands of the Philippines are unnamed. It is a hidden gem that many travellers overlook, yet fortunately for all of us, over many years the Philippines has received so little publicity and is still a relatively secret destination among travellers and divers.

In the middle of the Philippines is the Island of Cebu, located in the Central Visayas region. It was the original capital of the Philippines until the 17th century. Just 15 kilometres east of Cebu you will find a pristine island with rugged rolling mountains and beautiful beaches.

Bohol is the tenth largest island in the Philippines and is surrounded by 75 smaller islands which shield it from the typhoons and heavy rains that occur in the region during certain times of the year. Bohol and its surrounding islands are covered with mountain peaks, lush green forests, rugged coastlines, white sandy beaches and turquoise blue

tropical waters.

And on the south eastern corner of Bohol is a diver's paradise. The Anda region offers spectacular dives spots and the reason for this is not just that it has seen few divers over the years, but that it is protected against the forces of mother nature and has protected areas because it is the start of the Coral Triangle.

The Coral Triangle is composed of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and East Timor and is the heart of the world's coral reef biodiversity. The area got its name for the staggering number of corals (nearly 600 different species of reef-building corals alone), and the region nurtures six of the world's seven marine turtle species and more than 2000 species of reef fish.

The tidal flow and deep water around the islands shapes the underwater landscape, forcing upwelling currents to bring nutrient-rich waters to the surface to create some of the richest marine ecosystems on earth.



By Johan Boshoff

When diving around the region of Anda you will see that the reefs are in pristine condition, and are in fact some of the best coral reefs that I have ever seen.

Around the south west section of Bohol the topography is mind-blowing where most of the dives spots have a shallow reef top at around 10 metres and a sheer wall that drops to around 30 metres. At the bottom of the wall, the sandy slope starts with coral outcrops that slope down in to the depths as far as you can see. With amazing visibility and the underwater landscape, it just blows your mind.

In the shallow waters close to the island, the stony hard corals and incredible soft corals grow with confidence, fighting for their spot on the reef. Anemones thrive nestled between the corals with thousands of colourful reef fish and marine critters all around.

Everywhere on the sandy patches, shy Garden eels retreat into the sand as soon as divers approach and dozens of Partner shrimp and Gobies combos are





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At Wakatobi, you don't compromise on comfort to get away from it all. Our private air charter brings you directly to this remote island, where a first-class resort and luxury liveaboard await. Our dive team ensure your underwater experiences will create memories that remain vivid and rewarding long after your visit is concluded. You need only ask and we will gladly provide any service or facility within our power. This unmatched combination of world-renowned reefs and relaxed luxury put Wakatobi in a category all its own.

"The reef systems here are some of the most pristine I have seen anywhere in my dive travels around the globe, and Wakatobi resort and liveaboard are second to none. The diversity of species here is brilliant if you love photography." ~ Simon Bowen



www.wakatobi.com

performing earthworks, refashioning the slope for community living. Gobies heads pop up all over the slope as they survey the landscape while their blind shrimp companions shovel sand and debris from their tunnels.

Everywhere there is something to look at. Several species of Nudibranchs, Ghost pipefish, many Anemones with a variety of Clown fish, small and big Frogfishes, Leaf fish, Gobies, Mantis shrimps and even the Mandarin fish who start their mating ritual when the sun sets over the reef.

As you start going down the walls you realise that there is so much colour on the walls; the stunning sheer walls are covered with hard and soft corals. Whip corals, towering Barrel sponges, multi coloured giant Gorgonian fans and Feather stars paint a rich canvas with photo opportunities at every turn.

Around the walls you will find many cracks, crevices, small caves and overhangs, which provide a suitable shelter for a wide variety of marine



life and you can expect to find an astonishing number of turtles swimming freely around the walls looking for something to eat or a resting place. As you get to the bottom of the wall where the sandy slope starts, the dives becomes very interesting.

An astonishing number of critters inhabit the sandy slopes and coral bomies that are scattered around, while the sand Anemones, Sea cucumbers and Sea stars are unable to escape closer scrutiny. As you start heading back to the walls you are overwhelmed by the astounding beauty of this reef with schools of Snappers and Fusiliers swimming just off the walls in the blue waters.

And in the back of your mind you know that at anytime a Whale shark or Eagle rays can swim past as they are known to be seen frequently in the Anda area. Bohol, and especially the Anda area, is blessed with pristine and overgrown coral reefs and walls. Expect to see Whale sharks, Eagle rays, Mandarin fish, Blue ring octopus, Turtles, Mantis shrimp, Banded sea snakes, Pygmy seahorses, Thorny seahorses, Ghost pipefish, several species of Nudibranchs, Sea moths, Dragonet's, Pipefish, Wonderpuss, Mimic octopus, Flamboyant cuttlefish and all kinds of frogfish.

It is a diver and photographers dream destination and was the best destination that I ever seen for the small and rare things in the world. It is home to some of the weirdest and most outlandish sea creatures you could expect to find.

With this spectacular dive spot you have to choose a place above the surface which is equal to the underwater world. Magic Oceans Dive Resort is situated in the heart of the Anda region. 16 well laid out bungalows are built to blend into the surroundings and are hidden in lush green forest right on the edge of the ocean far away from the busy touristic areas. Each bungalow is spacious and fully equipped with everything that you need for your stay, and all around the resort you can find a place where you can just sit back and relax overlooking the pool or the ocean.



The food is just as good as the view that you have from the restaurant, and they normally serve a mix of Filipino and European dishes with a menu made from the freshest ingredients which changes daily. With a wide selection of imported liquor as well as imported beers and an extensive cocktail list, you are sure to find a drink to suit you in the island style bar which is a popular choice for divers to spend time talking about all their diving adventures.

The dive resort has a super-sized dive centre that can comfortably accommodate many divers; every diver gets his/her own spot with their name attached which they keep their gear in for the whole vacation. In the dive centre they have three showers and five large rinse tanks for all the dive gear and cameras.

For the photographers they have a dedicated camera area with electricity, good light and airguns.

All through the resort, the staff are friendly and helpful and they even have a marine biologist on their dive team who will help you with all the unusual questions. He also gives interesting presentations to the guests to teach them more about the amazing underwater world around the Anda region.

Besides the spectacular underwater world, Bohol has so much more to offer than just diving, and Magic Oceans Dive Resort can arrange a number of different land adventures for you; you can visit the Chocolate Hills to see the Tarsier – arguably the world's smallest primate – you can go back in history and visit heritage sites and old stone churches; or if you are the more adventurous type then you can try the one-day Bohol adventure tour, a day that you will never forget.

The Bohol adventure tour is a full day of adventures where Magic Oceans Dive Resort will organise everything for you. From visiting the Chocolate Hills and Tarsier Sanctuary to catching a glimpse of the world's smallest primate in its natural habitat, seeing a troop of



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By Johan Boshoff

Macaque monkeys and enjoying a local buffet lunch and entertainment whilst floating down the green Loboc River. You can also ride a quad bike or a dune buggy around a dense forests, yet my favourite was the zip line that takes you from one mountain to another over 120 metres off the ground.

Flying over the lush green forests and a massive gorge was a once in a lifetime experience.

There are many places to visit, but this is one that you have to add to your bucket list – a place that mother nature has shaped to be a divers paradise.

Information

Traveling: Cebu City, the principal port and the second-largest city in the country, is the gateway for the region. Both Manila and Cebu city are serviced by international flights from many cities in Asia including Singapore, Hong Kong, Taipei, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Tokyo and Seoul.

To get to Bohol you can either fly to the



island with a local flight or you can take a ferryboat that will only take you about two hours.

Entry/visa requirements: Visitors from most countries may enter the Philippines for three weeks without a visa as long as they have a passport valid for six months beyond the period of stay and a return or onward ticket. For longer stays, visas should be arranged prior to departure. Extensions can be obtained within the country.

Currency: Philippine Peso (AUD\$1 = 35PhP)

Weather: Average daytime temperatures in the Visayas are 30°C. The rainy season lasts from July to October.

Water: The water is colder from December to February (26-27°C) and warmer in March to May (29°C) with the average visibility of around 20-25 metres.

Best time to dive: Diving is possible year-round, with the prime season being November to June. There is virtually no rain between April and May.

Magic Ocean Dive Resort: For more information or bookings go to www.magicresorts.online or email them on reservations@magicresorts.online



Lissenung Island Resort

a diamond in the rough

If there is one place that has always been on my bucket list, a place so remote that it feels like you are traveling to dive the edge of the world, it is Papua New Guinea. And if the world was flat, Kavieng, offering some of the best and exclusive diving on the planet, would be on the edge of the world map.

© Grant Thomas



© Peter Lange

Dive the World

Lissenung Island Resort

By Johan Boshoff

Just north of Australia and just south of the equator, Papua New Guinea is a name which conjures up images of mysterious cultures and landscapes. Magnificent islands with towering mountain peaks, smoking volcanoes, mangroves, coral outcrops, impenetrable forests and mysterious cultures are synonymous with this place which is rich in history due to the fact it played a part in the Second World War.

It was here where the Imperial Japanese forces were reportedly determined to take over the capital city Port Moresby and use it as a platform to isolate and possibly invade Australia, but that has never been proven.

Rabaul, on the eastern end of the New Britain province become one of the main Japanese army bases and allied forces were determined to stop them due to the fact that it became one of the foremost Imperial strongholds in the South Pacific.

A short distance north-east of Port Moresby in West New Britain, near the site of Papua New Guinea's last volcanic eruption, lies Kavieng.

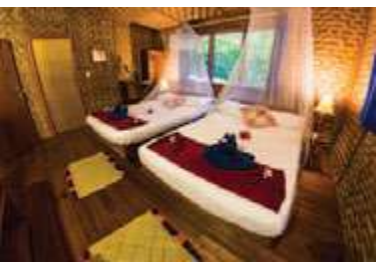
The landscape around Kavieng is spectacular with islands covered with dense forest and mangroves. Traveling through these islands is breath-taking with blue water and coral reefs as far as you can see.

But what makes this area even better, apart from the coral reefs and wrecks, is how exclusive it is here. Diving and exploring is done with no other boats or divers except the ones that are in your dive group.

The waters around Kavieng offer unique diving conditions for the beginner to the more advanced divers and you will find a variety of dive sites from walls and coral bommies to island channels and even wrecks from World War 2 with water



© Tobias Friedrich



Picture a small private island, with white sandy beaches, tall palm trees, beautiful tropical gardens, traditionally-built, comfortable bungalows, magnificent sunsets and fine food.

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Dive the World

Lissening Island Resort

By Johan Boshoff

temperatures between 28-30 degrees and visibility averaging 20-40 metres all year around.

Tidal flows and the diverse underwater landscapes contribute to the richness of the treasures below the ocean surface as Papua New Guinea sits in the centre of the world's Coral Triangle. The Coral Triangle is composed of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands and is the heart of the world's coral reef biodiversity.

The area got its name for the staggering number of corals (nearly 600 different species of reef-building corals alone), and the region nurtures six of the world's seven marine turtle species and more than 2000 species of reef fish.

The dive spots around the Bismarck Archipelago have stunning reef walls with many cracks, crevices and overhangs, which provide a suitable shelter for a wide variety of marine life. The area has a reputation of offering pelagic fish such as Giant Trevally, Spanish Mackerel, Mahi Mahi,



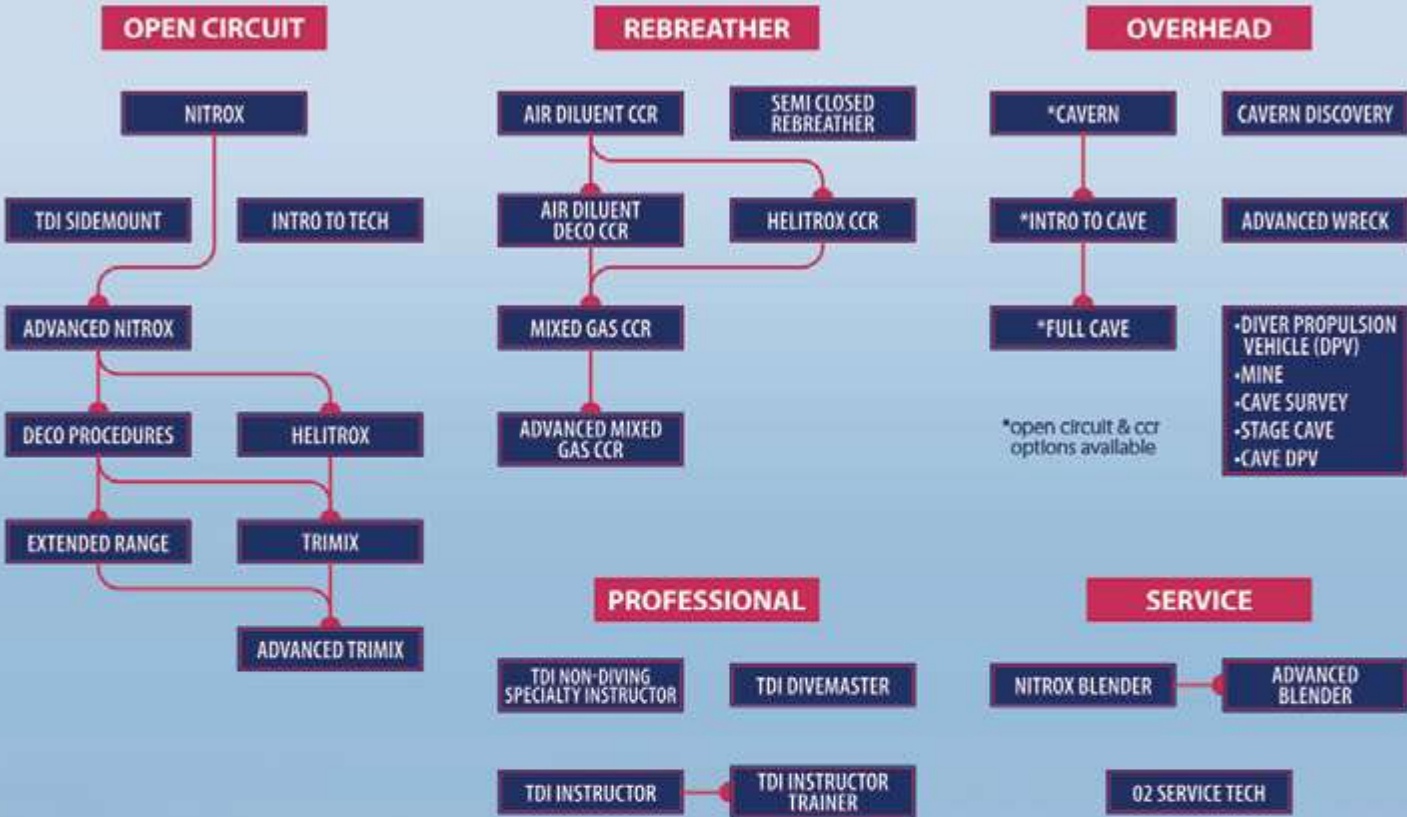
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Yellowfin, Barracudas, Dogtooth Tuna as well as rays and sharks swimming freely around the drop-offs.

Some of the walls drop to unknown depth and in many places are covered with soft and hard corals, hundreds of sponges and colourful sea fans. Large schools of reef fish are frequently spotted in the open and on the reef, and if you look a little closer at the walls, you will see an incredible variety of macro life. Encrusting the walls are over 300 species of hard and soft coral, and more than 1500 species of fish.

Because of the deep waters surrounding the islands and the steady currents that sweep through the Kavieng area, the waters are highly rich in nutrients.

Currents can sometimes be strong and make diving a little challenging, however, the experienced dive staff will look after you and ensure that you are rewarded with world class diving.

And if wrecks are your passion then the wrecks around this area will take you

back in time to World War 2 as Kavieng was an important supply base for the Japanese military, and the war resulted in the sinking of numerous sea planes in the area, most of which are still undiscovered.

The ones which have, however, been discovered by local fishermen make great artificial reefs for you to go and explore the wreck sites. For example, close to Lissenung Island you have the option to dive four different plain wrecks.

A single prop Japanese Kate bomber and an American Air Force B25s bomber lie in around 12 metres of water and are still in excellent condition, whilst only the engine blocks, props, gear and wing frames remain of an Australian Catalina flying boat with ammunition still scattered around the wreck site due to the plane exploding during take-off.

My favourite, however, is the Japanese Deep Pete biplane which lays upside down 40 metres below the surface on a sandy bottom. It has become one of the



© Juergen Freund



© Grant Thomas



© Juergen Freund

By Johan Boshoff

best planes and you get to experience it with big schools of fish that include jacks, barracudas, soldier fish and snapper. In the harbour you can find the remains of the Tenryu Maru, a 130 metre long armed freighter that ran aground on a shallow reef.

It is not often dived though because of the conditions of the wreck, but if you are looking for a great wreck then I would suggest the Korean fishing boat 'Der Yang', which can be found on the Echuca Patch reef.

The wreck lies on its starboard side close to the reef's drop-off in about 31 metres of water.

Daily boat trips runs from Lissenung Island Resort where you will normally go out in the morning to do two dives and then return to the island for lunch.

In the afternoon, you can go out for a third boat dive or do a shore dive at their fabulous house reef.



© Don Silcock



© Marino Brzac



© Perry Kuo



© Timo Dersch



TECH
DIVERS
TRAINED
HERE.



By Johan Boshoff

The house reef is also the spot to do night dives, with another whole bunch of different fish, molluscs and crustaceans coming out at night to feed.

Lissenung Island Resort

The resort, located a 20 minute boat ride from Kavieng, is a small, exclusive private, tropical island (only 350m x 80m) with a white sandy beach, tall palm trees and magnificent surroundings. The island has eight ocean-front rooms in four duplex bungalows, furnished with hardwood floors and spacious verandas that are all built in a traditional Papua New Guinea style.

The maximum number guests on the island is 16 and the bungalows are spread out over the island, ensuring maximum privacy for their guests.

The main house, or 'haus win', offers a relaxing area on a sandy floor and it is there where cold drinks and delicious meals await you. Fresh seafood such as



© Tobias Friedrich



© Grant Thomas



© Wolfgang Poelzer



© Takuya Nakamura

fish, crabs and lobster (crayfish) feature high on a daily-changing menu with friendly and helpful staff who will make you stay unforgettable.

Local artefacts and wooden art work around the island complete the picture to bring you the rich cultures and the amazing underwater world of Papua New Guinea

Travel Information

How do you get there:

There are a couple of flights from all over the world to Port Moresby, where you can get a short connecting flight to Rabaul and then to your final destination Kavieng.

Photographers:

Lissenung Island Resort has a very photographer-friendly setup. There is a separate freshwater rinse tank dedicated to camera gear, while in your room you will find a large work space in front of the window, giving you plenty of natural light to work on your camera equipment.

How do the visas work:

You can get a visa at Port Moresby but I would suggest that if you have a short connection then to apply for a visa before leaving home.

Currency:

Kina (1 Kina = \$0.40)

Language spoken:

English or Pidgin.

Depths on dive sites:

Between 10 to 40 metres

Water temperature:

28-30 Degrees Celsius

Best time to dive this site:

Papua New Guinea can be dived all year round but January to March is normally the raining season.

Lissenung Island Resort Contact Details

Phone: +675 7234 5834

Mail: info@lissenung.com

Web: www.lissenung.com



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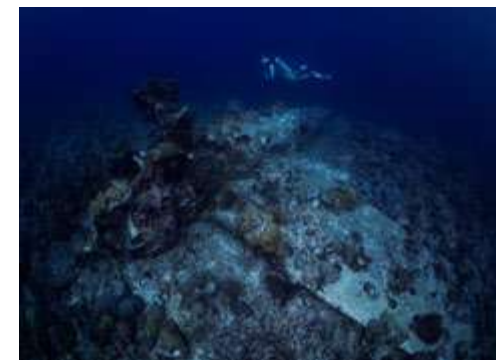
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Dive the World

Wakatobi

By Walt Stearns

Dive sites that offer unusual or dramatic underwater topography have always intrigued me. And from what I'd been hearing, the site known as Blade was a prime candidate to add to my "favorites" list.

During the boat ride to the site from Wakatobi Dive Resort our dive guides described the Blade formation as a series of small seamounts running in succession, with two of the summits rising to within five meters of the surface. Bridging these two structures is a very narrow, elongated ridge. The profile this creates when viewed from either side, and at a distance (the water is that clear), resembles the serrated edge of a knife; hence the name.

Blade is one of the most distant sites visited by the resort's dive boats. Unlike the majority of the sites that are within a few minutes of the dive center, this one required a boat ride of almost an hour. But as soon as I entered the water, I immediately realized that the wait had been well worth it.

Seen from above, Blade's profile almost defies description. I've had the

opportunity to dive a great number of pinnacle formations, but this was something entirely different. This impressive natural formation resembles a massive medieval battlement, averaging just seven meters thick while running several hundred meters in length. On both sides of the Blade, the walls drop precipitously into the deep blue. It was enough to take my breath away.

Rising above a vivid backdrop of chromatic blue, every facet of this grand rampart was covered in coral. Adding to Blade's unique and highly picturesque topography is a comprehensive collection of giant sponges, sea fans and soft corals, providing fantastic photo opportunities no matter which side you decide to swim.

Underwater Nirvana

While I might question the validity of Jacques Cousteau having actually called the Wakatobi islands a "Underwater Nirvana," what I am certain of is that the description does fit. The majestic formation that is Blade is just one of many within the largest barrier reef system in Indonesia – a place where pristine reefs teem with the most bio-



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By Walt Stearns

diverse collection of marine life in the world.

The reasons behind Wakatobi Dive Resort's ongoing appeal are obvious. Guests have access to pristine coral reefs and walls slightly more than a stone's throw away from a resort property providing sumptuous accommodations, gourmet dining, spa services and an attentive staff that know your name from the first day of your arrival. It's those special touches that go above and beyond what you come to expect that make this resort stand out.

When Wakatobi began welcoming guests some 20 years ago, the operation's infrastructure was more akin to a dive lodge than a resort. At that time, all aspects of operation from dive locker to kitchen, along with guest accommodations, were all housed in the Longhouse. Through the years, Wakatobi grew up, leaving such spartan amenities behind to become what could be described as a luxury dive resort that combines eco-friendly design with operating principles that continue to set

industry standards for guest service.

Accommodations now include what Wakatobi calls their Ultimate, Gold Standard and Essentials selections. The Essential category includes the resort's nine Palm Bungalows, which feature classic Indonesian design blended with a comprehensive list of amenities.

Located just off the beach amidst palm trees and other tropical plants, the Palm Bungalows offer comfortable air-conditioned rooms with large beds and furnishings hand-crafted from splendid hardwoods. From the veranda you can savor nature's music in the form of birdsong and gentle waves lapping on the shore, while breezes rustle through the trees. And, at the same time, have wi-fi internet access.

At the other end of the accommodation spectrum, are Wakatobi's four villas. Set on a low ledge just above the beach, each villa is more than double the size of the Palm Bungalow, providing the opulence and spacious comfort of a five-star retreat with an unobstructed,

yet private view of both the ocean and Wakatobi's spectacular sunsets.

Upping the ante, Villas One and Two are two bedroom, two bath models that feature a large deck with outdoor spa shower and plunge pool overlooking the ocean.

In between these choices are the resort's 15 Ocean Bungalows. Like the villas, these face the shoreline, and provide the same indoor amenities as the Palms plus a few additions. The most noticeable is a spacious Asian spa-style outdoor shower with tall privacy walls adjoined to the bungalow's indoor bathroom.

Creature comforts aren't the only area in which Wakatobi excels. Never before have I seen such a large and well-equipped restaurant kitchen in as remote a location as Wakatobi. Every meal is prepared by internationally-trained chefs with a talent for creating a blend of delicious Indonesian and international cuisines. And the deserts are, well, let me put it this way: don't count on your wetsuit getting any looser during the trip!

The "pool" is open

Wakatobi is first and foremost a dive resort, so its no surprise that the diving infrastructure is first class in all respects. The Dive Center is a full-service facility staffed by a diverse and highly professional group of instructors, dive masters and guides who together speak over nine languages, from English to German and to even Japanese. This group can provide everything from basic instruction and refresher courses to advanced and technical training.

The center offers a full range of Mares brand of equipment in their rental department⁴ and maintains a large cache of 80cu.ft/12L aluminum cylinders along with a fair number of 63cu.ft/10L and 100cu.ft./15L aluminum cylinders fitted with both DIN and standard yoke valves.

For basic diving activities, divers have the option of air or 32% nitrox supplied by two state-of-the-art nitrox membrane systems, fed by multiple water-cooled Bauer compressors. For the technical crowd there are higher nitrox blends available, including pure oxygen, along



with helium on special request for trimix. Wakatobi also caters to the silent diving crowd. They can provide rebreather divers with 8/12 grade (797) Sofnolime as well as enough O₂, dil and bailout bottles for up to 21 CCR divers at a time. Close to a third of these cylinders for rent are Faber 2 L and 3 L steels with inline rebreather valves, with the rest being 2 L/ 13 cu.ft. and 3 L/ 19 cu.ft. aluminum models fitted with DIN K-valves. For off board bail, options include 4.5 L/30 cu.ft. and 5 L/ 40 cu.ft. Aluminums. Divers needing something larger can choose the afore mentioned 80cu.ft/12L and 100cu.ft./15L aluminums.

Underwater photographers are provided with ample onboard storage space and dedicated rise tanks on boats, along with a climate-controlled room at the Dive Center with ample workbench space and numerous recharging stations in both 220 volt and 110 volt.

Daily diving activities begin with two-tank morning boat excursions that return guests to the resort in time for lunch. Guests have the option of making an additional single-tank afternoon boat dive, or enjoying unlimited shore diving on the house reef, with dawn to dusk taxi boat support. Night dives by boat are scheduled according to demand.

Each diver is provided with a dedicated storage and staging area. When the day's plan includes, for example, the two-tank morning and night dive, your gear will be there and ready to dive when you step on board. This goes for just about everything else, including camera equipment – why carry it when the staff will eagerly do it for you.

Another nice touch is that the boats typically return to the jetty between the first and second dive, giving divers a chance to stretch their legs, and allowing late risers to catch the second dive. This flexibility, combined with the House Reef, provides the opportunity for guests to create an almost custom boat and shore dive schedule.

In my book, the thing that can make or break a great dive experience is the boat. Wakatobi's core fleet of dive

boats consists of five enormous vessels measuring 23 meters in length. Locally crafted, each boat is designed specifically for diving with a copious amount with deck space with ample seating and ample space for camera equipment, no matter the size.

While they may not be fast, they are impressively stable on the water, providing an enhanced comfort level that is elevated further by a full roof that provides overhead protection from sun and rain. Though these boats could easily hold two-dozen passengers, Wakatobi likes to ensure that guests have plenty of elbowroom by limiting the number of divers and/or snorkelers on board from 10 to a maximum of 14.

While a few sites like Blade, Coral Hill and Fish Wall may require longer boat ride from the resort, the majority are less than a half-hour boat ride away. Conditions at the sites themselves are mostly benign, and even more timid and less athletic divers will enjoy themselves, as there are rarely big seas to contend with. Instead, a collection of surrounding



Dive the World

Wakatobi

reefs and sheltering islands create consistently calm to mild sea states at dive sites, and deliver brilliant visibility in the 30-meter-plus range.

There are more than 40 sights regularly visited, each engaging in their own way. Many offer profiles that start a few feet from the surface with abrupt contours toppling down into the depths. The most striking are the collection of totally vertical profiles on sites near Sawa Island.

Here, you will find walls that rise as shallow as knee-deep and plummet in vertical faces that reach well below 150 feet. With reef contours of this nature, it's easy to perform a series of extended multi-level dives without going into decompression.

Expect every boat dive to run 70 minutes in length, but you always have the option to end the dive sooner. Spending the latter portion of dives off gassing in the shallows can often be the most interesting part, as the tops of the reefs are just as vibrant as they are deeper

down. The shallows are home to a parade of macro-size critters – from blind shrimp with their ever-watchful guardian gobies, to more flamboyant subjects like nudibranchs and broadclub cuttlefish.

For those who are new to Indonesian waters, or who simply wish to see all the wonders of the reef, I would strongly advise you following the guides. The Wakatobi dive crew is especially adept at locating the more cryptic forms of marine life, including the four species of micro-size pygmy seahorses that live in these waters. In addition to being astute hunters, guides are always at the ready to lend assistance when needed.

One of the little personal acts I have seen the guides provide is to assist underwater photographers who are trying to shoot a subject in places where corals can be easily damaged. Guides will position themselves as human tripods, providing a steady grip that allows the photographer to focus entirely on the subject without fear of contacting the reef.



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Even if you're not a photographer, Wakatobi's dive guides are just as attentive, taking every step to ensure the quality of your experience both in and out the water. The dive staff is equally respectful of guests who prefer a bit more autonomy. Thus, if a buddy pair wants to explore at their own pace, they are allowed the freedom to do so within the safe range of their personal experience and training.

During the surface interval, in addition to snacks, water and beverages like coffee, tea or hot chocolate, guests are given a refreshing hand towel infused with water and lemon grass. Having one those offered at the end of a 70-plus minute dive on a beautiful, pristine reef affirms that life is good!

The House Reef

In addition to the boat dives, Wakatobi's famed House Reef is available to divers and snorkelers between 5 AM and 10 PM. Accessible from both the beach and the property's pier, which spans 80 meters from the shoreline to the reef's drop-off, the House Reef offers a topography ranging from inshore grass beds and shallow coral gardens to a drop-off with a precipitous face.

At the edge where these two interfaces meet, the reef takes a sudden plunge from snorkeling depths straight down more than 50 meters into the blue. Down the wall's face, divers will find a wall perforated by clefts and overhangs, decorated with a dazzling array of hard and soft corals. Between these two realms is a sufficiently large and diverse range of subject matter to keep even the most avid enthusiast captivated for hours on end.

Over the course of a single dive, without even needing to venture more than nine meters on either side of the pier, I have found up to seven different species of anemone fish.

The reef's two-meter deep plateau is also home to a healthy population of small bluespotted stingrays, pipefish, octopus, nudibranchs and more living amongst the finger coral formations and grass beds.

Macro photographers with an interest in invertebrates will be especially pleased by the diversity of animals that can be found on this reef during twilight and evening hours.

Divers with good air consumption will easily be able to make many of the dives here last for 90 minutes or more from the Pier and back again.

For buddy teams and single divers with solo diver certification, the resort also offers a taxi boat service to ferry divers to more distant portions of the House Reef. The taxi service operates during daylight hours, and will even take guests to the neighboring site of Turkey Beach for a truly memorable drift diving experience as you utilize the current to bring you back to the pier.

For all these reasons, Wakatobi's House Reef has received numerous accolades and awards from magazines and websites such as TripAdvisor, which has called it the "world's best house reef dive." I have even dedicated a piece exclusively to it on my own site, www.underwaterJournal.com. Yes, it is that good!

When you add it all up, you are looking at one of the most pristine and bio-diverse coral reefs systems in the world, home to more than 600 species of coral, 3,000 varieties of fish, with an even greater number of invertebrates, all just a stone's throw from luxurious accommodations and delicious meals. Would I come back here again? Well, I have been here three times already, if that tells you anything.

Ats land-based dive operations, Wakatobi Dive Resort manages a 36-meter luxury dive yacht, Pelagian. Unlike the typical live-aboard dive boat, Pelagian offers truly commodious accommodations and an uncompromising level of personal service. Aboard Pelagian, ten divers will discover the outer reaches of the

Visit www.wakatobi.com for full details and guest services information, or email office@wakatobi.com. 



Bahamas

As shark populations fall around the world, there are less and less places to observe these beautiful, graceful hunters. The world has its fair share of shark action, Fiji's Beqa lagoon has its feed, Guadeloupe has great whites, the Galapagos and the Cocos have hammerheads and white-tips, Papua New Guinea has healthy populations of reef-dwelling species, and a few Egyptian sites can be of interest, but nowhere guarantees such prolonged and up-close-and-personal encounters as a liveaboard off the Bahamas.



Dive the World

Bahamas

By Christopher Bartlett

After flying to West Palm Beach, Florida, I boarded the 12-berth Dolphin Dream II and met up with my companions for the next six days and our host, Captain Scott Smith. Initially attracted by its spotted Atlantic and bottlenose dolphins, Scott has been visiting the banks off Grand Bahama for the past thirty years and has an intimate understanding of the tides, currents and reefs.

I was sharing a room with Mike from Texas, a veteran of two Dolphin Dream expeditions, and the rest of the passengers were a single US female, an American couple, an Aussie father-daughter combo and a group of five Dutch divers. Over dinner a few shark stories were swapped, and there was a distinct air of happy expectation, possibly assisted by Captain Scott declaring that all beers on the trip were free. As soon as dinner was over we left our moorings for the night crossing to the Bahamas.

Once at Tiger Beach we moored up to a buoy. A steel drum with bits of fish carcass stood on the aft of the port deck, to which Scott added some fish offal and some tuna

heads before he started pumping the stinky grey gunk out into the sea. Plastic crates were filled with more carcasses and some fresh snapper the crew had caught, and were suspended aft of the dive deck and from a couple of buoys. Within 10 minutes dorsal fins appeared and lemon sharks dotted the bright blue ocean.

The pre-dive briefing was simple and succinct. We would be moored here for at least 24 hours, as the sand was 6m below the boat no buddy pairs were obligatory and the only limit on dive time was the rate we used our air.

"Don't hang around on the surface, don't fondle the sharks, do have fun. Pool's open!" The lemons cruised around the dive platform and we waited for a gap in the traffic to stride in. Travis and Connor of the crew handed our cameras down and we sunk down to the sand.

Five lemon sharks, all pretty much fully grown 3m specimens, one of whom was in the latter stages of pregnancy, glided around with much more grace than a human in the same state, checking out the bait boxes



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eños
on board

but pretty much ignoring us divers. Mostly they stayed close to the sand, occasionally resting and opening their mouths to pump water through their gills to breathe without swimming. I'd never encountered lemon sharks before and the thing that struck me was the number of remora hanging off them. One of them must've had over 20 suckered up to its browny-bronze skin. A 3m tiger shark put in a brief appearance and then moved on. Contrary to popular belief, tiger sharks are shy and wary; they don't grow so big and so old by blithely approaching anything new without much caution. The lemons, on the other hand, and a fearless loggerhead turtle, happily cruised around us.

At such a shallow depth and with very little finning to do, my first dive lasted over two hours as I lay on the sand and let the sharks swim around me, making the most of the light and shooting without my strobes and using manual white balance. After tea, cake and a battery change, I headed back down for more of the same. After another hour underwater a 3.5m tiger with a permanent, lopsided grin turned up and swam around in an oval pattern, coming up to one of the bait boxes, and then gliding away to reappear a couple of minutes later, over and over until I was low on air again and my stomach was rumbling.

We stayed moored up at Tiger Beach overnight, and after breakfast the lemon shark contingent had grown to 14, the smallest being over 2m long and around my age. Mature lemons can live an estimated 70 years, mainly living off a diet of slippery fish, hence their long and pointy teeth. The pregnant female was still around, and her bloated abdomen looked ready to release her litter of eight to twelve live pups. I wondered how that worked – would they just slip out as she swam around, or would she go through the same drama as human females?

I swam under the boat to beyond the bow and inspected the chain we were moored to. Running perpendicular to the boat, its wrist-thick links were adorned with coral growth. A small rock harboured an eel and cleaner shrimp and a school of cottonwicks decorated some finger coral in the early light.

In the afternoon we upped anchor and went to a spot where dolphins are regularly seen. With two lights dangling under the boat we slipped into the silent, otherwise inky black ocean as soon as curved fins appeared on the surface. Underwater the ocean was alive with high-pitched squeaks as the spotted Atlantic dolphins darted around us, teasing those of us with cameras. It was impossible to get a clear, in-focus shot, but was most amusing as the dolphins appeared like ghosts and whirled around as if to say to their fellow mammals "hey human, this is how to dive."

The next morning Scotty cruised around looking for his friends and within forty minutes had identified the unmistakable notched dorsal fin of Chopper, the alpha male of the area, who he had first seen thirty years before, and we jumped in. Scuba was impossible as firstly by the time we'd have kitted up and jumped in they would have gone, and more importantly, the dolphins were after some fun. The best way to prolong any interaction was to free dive down and twirl and spin in the most dolphin-like way possible. Travis used a UPV to keep one pod interested, as I followed another. Every time they seemed to be disappearing I'd dive down to five metres and spin/twist as much as I could and they would come straight back, chirping and chattering and shaking their heads in approval. Incredible.

After lunch we moored up at The Mountains, thus named due to the reef topography. The tops of the reef (or peaks of the mountains) were 13m deep, and the sides sloped down another 17m to a sandy bottom. The sides had small caves, overhangs and gullies with plenty of reef life and coral coverage. Connor placed a bait box on a ridge and soon more than a dozen Caribbean reef sharks had joined us. They were a mixture of juveniles and sub-adults, the longest being two-metres long. A nurse shark put in an appearance and was soon using her mouth, adapted to feeding from the floor, to suck bits of fish out of the crate. It was a scenic site, but for the time being was tiger-less and lemon-free. When my buddy and the other divers were low on air they ascended to the boat overhead. I was alone and sat on the bait box for five minutes of shark-petting. Some people say it's wrong to touch



By Christopher Bartlett

wild animals, I used to too. Then I learnt to put sharks into tonic immobility, and the only thing I now consider 'wrong' about it is how absolutely amazing it feels. It feels like being in love with a big fish.

For our third dive of the afternoon we visited the Sugar Wreck, a shallow wreck that has been broken open by successive storms but that is home to large schools of snapper, turtles, French angelfish and lobsters. Being a shallow site it was a good choice after the deeper dives of the afternoon. As the sun dropped and the moon began to shine, a lobster scurrying across the rocky bottom caught my eye and I stayed down so long watching it, that it ended up as a night dive.

At The Mountains I lay in the rocks next to the bait box, more like a sniper in dead ground than a diver. It did occur to me at one point that I was lying next to a box of dead fish and must've looked pretty deceased myself, other than the odd bubble stream. To a fish equipped with the unique electrical-field-detecting seventh sense that is the ampullae of Lorenzini, however, we

must have appeared very much alive and inedible as the two dozen sharks cruised merrily over and around our hideouts. There were plenty of lemons and reefies again, a nurse shark and a hammerhead, possibly the daddy of the family the great hammerhead, *Sphyrna Mokorran*, in the distance.

We headed to the sands where Connor was going to do a feed. As we knelt or lay in a circle the lemons cruised in along the bottom and started getting a little frisky. One of my strobes was given a sniff and a nibble and my grey free diving fins seemed to catch their eye. I was lying prone in the sand to get a lemons' eye view when I felt my fin being tugged gently. I turned to see a male lemon shark feeling my fin like a puppy with a new toy. I gently pulled it away and the curious chap moved on. Three shy tigers turned up and had a short mosey around before disappearing into the blue, and then it was time to head back to the boat. As I finned I felt myself kick something. Rather odd as I wasn't over any reef and was a few metres off the sand. I looked round and saw my fin-fancying male



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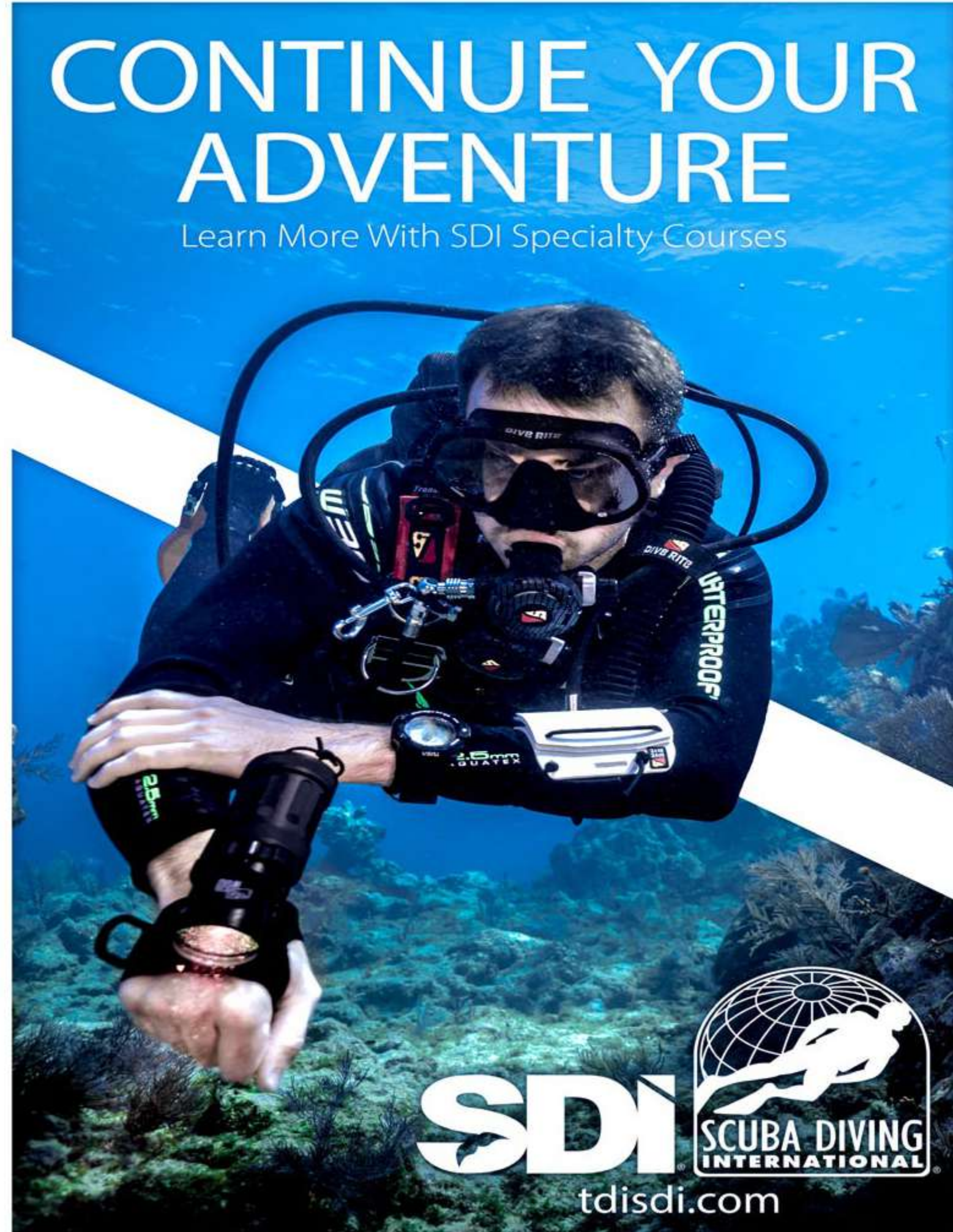
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Dive the World

Bahamas

By Christopher Bartlett
lemon shark friend again, sort of sniffing out my left fin again. As soon as he saw me looking at him he skulked off on a tangent like a naughty schoolboy.

The lemons and the Caribbean reef sharks hung around the boat though, and after dinner we jumped in and did a night dive – with sharks – an excellent if slightly unnerving concept. The two lights hanging from the stern and the dive platform lights cast a circle of light close to the boat, but a few fin kicks and I only had the light of my torch to rely on. It was pretty eerie. I sensed something behind me and saw two 3m lemon sharks coming up on my right shoulder. When I shone my torch on them they circled once and swam off to inspect some other divers. Good fun, but pretty creepy, and I found myself drawn to the lights of the boat. I wondered if a tiger would show up, and waited half an hour, but if one was there she stayed out in the darkness.


On the second dive Connor took down some bait for a feed, and the tiger was certainly keen. We were in a loose circle on the sand and Tigger was coming in close to each diver, sometimes head on, moving in calmly but assuredly. Sensibly divers let the graceful giant fish pass, moving out of its way or gently pushing it aside with a camera housing or dome port.

I wasn't sure whether I was imagining it or not, but I seemed to get extra attention, or maybe it was the white diffuser plate on my larger strobe. I moved behind a low rock encrusted with coral and an orange barrel sponge to compose images with a more interesting foreground, and held my camera for portrait shots, the smaller strobe positioned to the side to illuminate the foreground, the larger strobe up in the air. Tigger came in to the bait box and past Connor, and then went up and over my bit of rock and I snapped away, noticing her pause briefly and eye my strobe again.

On her second pass, just as I had got a good shot, she twisted her head back to the right. I saw her nictating membrane flutter over her right eye, and then my strobe was in her gaping maw. This wasn't a nibble like yesterday, she had a firm grip and was not keen to let go. As it was a four-day-old camera and wide-angle lens in the housing,

I wasn't willing to let go either. She was over the top of me, her mouth to my right, her underbelly above me. After four or five seconds I started to get worried about the state of my strobe, so I reached up and gave her a tummy rub with my left hand, manoeuvring my camera out of her mouth with my right, and thankfully she let go. I decided to stick to video and landscape format shots for the rest of the dive.

On the last dive of the trip we moved over to the reef and the bait was placed at a sandy crossroads where two gullies intersected. The tiger from the first dive was joined by a second of the same proportions, and just as we got out of the water, a third, larger female turned up. She was close to 4m long and had an impressive girth to match.

I hung in the water and savoured their graceful magnificence, the result of 400 million years of evolution, and thought what an amazing five days it had been. For anyone who wants shark action from dawn to dusk, with plenty of tiger shark time, this is the trip of a lifetime. 



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FIJI

Fiji offers a cornucopia of underwater vistas- an idyllic way to see as much as possible is to combine cruising with a resort based dive break.



By Melissa Rimac
Whatever it is you love to see underwater – be it nudibranchs, sharks, hard corals, soft corals, dainty colourful fish or mighty mantarays – chances are you'll find it in Fiji.

But with more than 300 islands, deciding where to focus your underwater exploration can be confounding. I recently made headway on this dilemma by hoping aboard a Captain Cook Cruises voyage that calls in at the islands fringing mountainous Vanua Levu, Fiji's second largest island. As the 4 Cultures Discovery cruise traces a path around Vanua Levu's craggy, convoluted shores, the landscape moves from the luscious emerald islands sprinkled near Taveuni, to the stark and sculptural.

When on land, we visited picturesque islands inhabited by people of Polynesian, Micronesian and Melanesian backgrounds, as well as the colourful Indian sugar town of Labassa. This seven night trip is a blissfully relaxing way to see a lot of Fiji – above and below the surface of the water – and gives an engaging peek into the lifestyles of people largely detached from the 21st century.

Whilst the diving on cruise ships can sometimes come across as catering to the lowest denominator, on this trip experienced divers had plenty to get excited about.

We were in the water twice each day, just about every day of the trip, on untrammelled reefs that varied with each new destination.

After breakfast, Verassa -our divemaster- would explain what we had to look forward to. The vibe is relaxed but professional, and having a Fijian divemaster who is intimately familiar with the region - we passed his home island on the voyage- gave us an insight into the culture of the islands

and the reefs, some of which are considered sacred.

Rabi Island is close to the hypergreen 'garden island' of Taveuni. In a region famed for its' soft corals, our experience certainly lived up to the reputation, with vast carpets of richly coloured soft corals and dramatic drop-offs.

Mantas are known to come in to this region between May and October, though they eluded us this time. Kia Island resembles a volcano leaping out of the ocean. The big buzz on our dive here was the spectacular and craggy topography, with massive bommies and lots of swim -throughs, overhangs and tunnels; populated by a myriad of colourful reef fish.

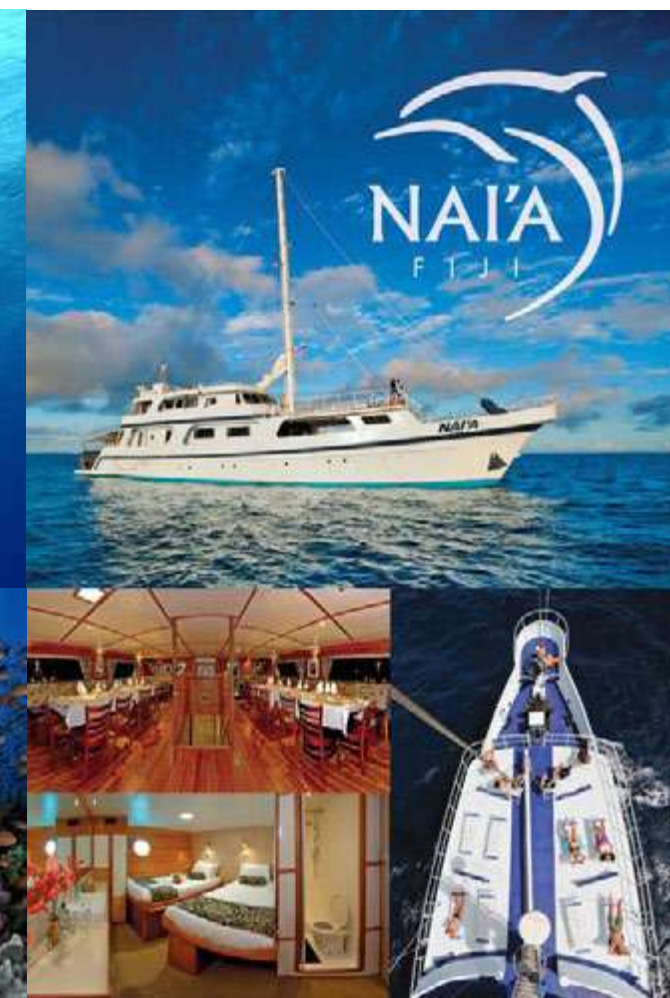
In crystalline waters with visibility of at least 30 metres, we feasted our eyes on a confounding arrangement of colours and intricate formations



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and large fans jutting out and overhanging at weird angles. Velvety soft corals were everywhere, sometimes ethereal and translucent, other times brandishing bold shades like canary yellow.

After a morning in bustling Labassa, we dived on nearby reefs tunnelled with spectacular swim-throughs. The Great Sea Reef, billed as the third longest continual barrier reef in the world, stretches for about 200km along Vanua Levu's northern shore. Home to 55% of Fiji's coral species and 80% of reef fish species, these largely uncharted reefs are also home to dolphins, whales and turtles.

On the last few days of the trip, we dived into glassy water with visibility of at least 40 metres. The reefs off south western Vanua Levu and a region called Nananu-i-ra are extremely intricate, a mesmerizing maze of swim-throughs, tunnels, pinnacles, gorgonian fans, and vast fields of bommies, with highlights being white tips, nudibranks and large schools of fish.

Unlike many 'small ships' the Reef Endeavour excels in its spaciousness, thanks to the profusion of lounging zones on each level. Staterooms are accessed by external walkways, providing a fresh bewitching scene as soon as I opened my door in the morning.

A casual vibe prevails and comforting touches, like being able to make our own coffee in the morning –ideally enjoyed in solitude on the top deck – create a homely feel.

The '4 Cultures' cruise makes for an intriguing, replenishing break and diving reefs we had all to ourselves made this trip worthwhile in itself. But a Fiji mindset is something you want to hold on to. Eager to spend more quality time underwater, we topped off the cruise

with a stay at Mantaray Island Resort, situated in the ruggedly beautiful Yasawa Islands.

Mantaray Island Resort fronts a marine sanctuary that's become a magnet to a kaleidoscope of fish that have no need to be afraid of humans - and they show it. Much of the time, I swim amidst a confetti of hundreds of fish in a single eye-full - often having to be careful not to touch them.

The dive boat typically goes out twice a day, with spectacular underwater terrain just a short boat ride away. Stunning underwater topography - think swim throughs, channels and layered reefs festooned with giant fans - and large numbers of pelagics make diving at Mantaray Island a treat for the eyes, with each site offering something different.

There are many rewarding dive sites about a 10 min boat ride away; revealing highlights such as pinnacles, walls, drop-offs ranging from 5-40 metres, cleaning stations, wrecks and lots of white-tips.

Because of the currents, this area unfurls sensational soft corals. I was particularly taken with the huge fans in resonant shades of orange brown and green and the purple whips. Low rainfall has seen the Yasawas dubbed the 'desert of Fiji', resulting in crystalline water with visibility of at least 15-50 metres. Thanks to vivid tides, the scenes are in constant flux. At a site called 'fantastic wall', we dived with turtles galore.

At Tavunillo Point- a cleaning station- we saw more turtles, lots of rays and big grey reef sharks who were extremely agitated and engaged in a bout of visually entrancing argy - bargy; testing each other and rolling about. Meanwhile 2 clownfish insisted on coming up to my mask and morays peeped out from under rocks.



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The dive groups were small and dive masters – who are long standing and knowledgeable -guided us through a series of exciting swim throughs and overhangs.

At Golden Gate, we saw dolphins, pipefish, blue ribbon eels, and lots of pinnacles.

Luckily, were able to get to a site called Brown Trousers - rarely visited due to prevailing and punishing South Easterly trade winds - where pelagics are the stars of the show.

I dived under corals aglow in luminescent shades of purple, tangerine and red, through a web of fans and alongside 2 remores. Pelagics are also prolific around the wrecks.

Our final dive here was remarkable for the fans – in rich shades of yellow, orange, brown , as well as giant clams,

morays, loads of fish and carpets of pastel hued corals of all types. We passed a cleaning station of white tipped reef sharks and just beyond a stunning drop-off, we chanced upon an octopus garden.

Later, 3 giant turtles swam alongside me over soft dusty purple corals.

Strong currents and tides around full moon bring in super plankton that draws the namesake mantas; with the most sightings occurring in June and July, just after full moon.

Humpbacks are also sometimes seen breaching just behind the house reef.

From December to February, the water is very warm, with 50-60 metre visibility and big schools of fish and sharks. In the cooler months, there are more pelagics to be seen.

Over dinner in the breezy and sociable

tree-house style dining area, our companion raved about the night - snorkelling on the house reef. It sounded tempting, however our lovely beachfront bungalow exerted too powerful an inertia.

Escape Routes

Cruising In Fiji:

Captain Cook Cruises have a series of voyages to distinct parts of the vast Fijian archipelago: the rugged and dramatically beautiful Yasawa group, the far – flung Lau islands, as well as a journey that visits the most extant colonial settlement in the Pacific – the moodily picturesque Levuka.

Diving on remote reefs is offered on all of these trips.

The range of activities - snorkelling, visiting fascinating islands, kayaking, paddle-boarding, just chilling out at untrammelled beaches -makes this trip

appealing for couples or mixed groups of family and friends.
www.captaincookcruisesfiji.com

Mantaray Island Resort:

Whilst resorts in the Yasawas typically veer towards the uber- expensive, Mantaray Island offers great value, a social, laid back atmosphere and flavoursome, hearty meals.

Our beachfront Reef Bungalow was a sensual haven, with a stone and timber open- to- the- stars bathroom that's popular with geckos and birds.

The dive centre here offers open water and advanced courses ;; all taught in ocean.

Free-diving is also taught here – courses run for 2 days and are as much about physical challenge as they are about pushing mental boundaries – the only place accredited to do so in Fiji.
www.mantarayisland.com



By Stef Mallaci

Panama



We dive the Bocas Del Toro archipelago to discover exactly why divers are swarming to Panama's warm Caribbean waters



Dive the World

Panama

By Stef Mallaci
When it comes to diving in Central America, most bucket lists don't normally start with Panama.

True, when compared with some of the more iconic scuba destinations in the region - including the likes of Costa Rica and Mexico - Panama, at least on paper, isn't in the same weight division.

However, there are whispers in certain circles that suggest the secret is now out. Despite not always being the first county to be circled on the gringo trail map, Panama can spar with the best of them because those who visit are finding untouched tropical reef and a growing number of likeminded divers intent on discovering this tiny country's underwater treasures.

Situated on the north east of Panama's Caribbean Coast, just 32km from the Costa Rican border, the Bocas Del Toro archipelago is fast becoming the country's premier dive spot.

Made up of seven densely forested islands, numerous islets and Panama's oldest marine park, Bocas - as it's affectionately abbreviated to - has been the subject of a tourism boom of late. Helping supply demand, several dive operators have sprung up on Isla Colon, the region's commercial center, over the past few years but none more qualified than Bocas Dive Centre, the only Padi 5 Star IDC rated training facility on the island.

Diving here is varied - from shallow reefs just minutes from shore to sites suitable for technical training - but most of the 22 sites that are easily accessible offer the opportunity to dive in easier-than-most conditions. It'll come as no surprise then that the year round warm waters (3mm shorty wetsuits are optional), minimal current, and shallow profiles make the whole area popular with Open Water students.

Amongst the archipelago's most popular



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By Stef Mallaci sites are Polo Beach, the unusually christened Mark 19 (named after a buoy line) and deep dive training site Tiger Rock, which offers the opportunity for tech divers to submerge to near the 70m mark.

Each site is different, not only in terms of their physical make up but also the marine life. From some of Tiger Rock's most sought-after pelagic residents - including mantas and hammerheads - to nurse sharks and moray eels common at Polo Beach and vast schools of black snapper found at other sites, there's something for most.

Encounters with lobsters, octopus, and various macro life, including nudibranchs, is the norm throughout though.

Add world class coral into the mix, plus the fact that new dive sites are still being discovered all the time (the most recent being in 2014) and you'll start to get a better understanding of why Bocas has recently started to attract a plethora of divers from all corners of the World. No doubt the year-round average visibility, guaranteed to be around 15-16m, helps too,

It's no wonder then that Bocas Dive Centre is currently in the middle of construction for a 25 room boutique hotel which will be attached to a state of the art Training Academy. Complete with two classrooms and the capacity to cater to some 30-40 students, from OW courses up, BDC is aiming for the new facility to be amongst the biggest anywhere in Central America.

For now though, the Bocas region remains pleasantly untapped so divers looking for a location that's off the beaten track but also offers that perfect cocktail of sun, sea and Caribbean chill factor could do far worse than making the trip to Panama before the secret really gets out. 🏊





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Bonaire

Lying in the southern Caribbean just north of South America, Bonaire is blessed with warm seas year-round, low rainfall, and an abundance of coral and sponge covered dive sites. With 67 of them accessible without a boat, Bonaire's specialty is shore diving, generally self-guided, though the island of Klein Bonaire has 20 sites that can be dived on guided boat dives, and the rougher East coast waters also have four dive sites and is definitely worth a visit.



The beauty of shore diving here is that there is no schedule to adhere to, you just pick up cylinders from the dive shop, stick them into the back of your rental pick-up and off you go for the day. There are numerous guide books describing the different sites and they are all well marked on the road side, the furthest ones being no more than a 20 minute drive from Kralendijk, the capital of this laid-back island of 15000 souls.

For solo travellers dive centres have boards that you put your name on to find a buddy for the day, or there are boat dives. On my first morning at the excellent Wannadive, after the mandatory check out dive to get my Bonaire Marine Park tag, I headed out for a boat dive near Klein Bonaire and found myself a buddy that way.

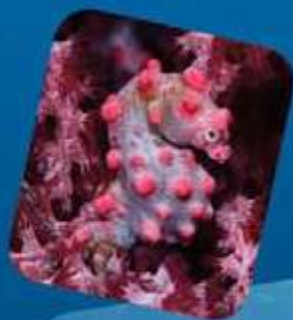
Not sure what the viz would be like, I'd put my macro lens on. Smart move, the viz was a clear 25 metres and the sea ferns and rope sponges swayed enticingly in front of me as I snapped blennies, arrow crabs and shrimps. In 10 days of diving the worst viz I had was 15 metres, so macro photography was a conscious choice rather than an enforced necessity. With lots of colourful sponges and fish, the 8mm fisheye got a lot of use.

The dive guides at Harbour Village Resort were very accommodating; those that wanted to be closely guided and supervised were well looked after, whilst buddy pairs who were happy to bumble around were free to do so. Around the island the sites are good for spotting turtles and eagle rays, and there is a reef manta that is quite often seen cruising around.

Most of the boat dives are around Klein Bonaire, but they also go to sites on the main island, most notably the wreck of the Hilma Hooker, and the Salt Pier to the south, and Town Pier



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MAGIC ISLAND

Moalboal, Cebu

Whale Sharks, turtles, the Sardine Bait Ball, beautiful reefs: Moalboal has it all! With only 10 detached cottages, a house reef that's open 24/7 and with more than 30 dive sites to explore, Magic Island Dive Resort should be added to your next list of dive destinations!



to the north. The dive centres make a point of going to each one at least once a week or you can arrange to go diving with East Coast Diving for a morning double-tank trip.

On the east coast the seas are pretty lumpy, but East Coast Diving's giant RIB with twin 250s is more than a match, and even has a removable pontoon section allowing a proper dive ladder to be used. It's a great place to see eagle rays, stingrays, and turtles. The dives here are well-named. I have never seen as many turtles anywhere in 1800 dives around the world as I did at Turtle City. There must have been 30 hawksbills on our route over the shallow reef. The White Hole was a 10-metre deep sand-filled amphitheatre home to several stingrays and a school of imperturbable tarpon. These silvery, metre-long armoured predators lazed unfazed by our presence.

The Hilma Hooker has a colourful past. Launched in 1951, the 70-metre long vessel sailed under five other names and owners before becoming the Hilma Hooker in 1979 under Colombian ownership.

In the summer of 1984, whilst under surveillance of drug enforcement agencies, she suffered engine problems at sea and was towed to Town Pier, Kralendijk, where local authorities boarded her. The captain was unable to produce any of the registration papers, a false bulkhead was discovered, concealing 25,000 lb (11,000 kg) of marijuana. The ship and her crew were detained while the local authorities on Bonaire searched for the vessel's owners, who were never found.

Under detention as evidence for many months she began to take on considerable amounts of water through general neglect of her hull. Fearing she would sink at the main dock and

disrupt maritime traffic on September 7, she was towed to an anchorage near the Angel City dive site. On the morning of September 12, water began entering through the lower portholes and at 9:08 am she rolled over on her starboard side and went to the seabed in under two minutes.

Now she lies in 30 metres of water, her open hold facing away from the reef. Her hold and superstructure have impressive sponge growth and barracuda like to hang around her stern. Her prop is still in place and is very photogenic, and is also an easy wreck as there is very little penetration.

Salt Pier is still a working pier, but cargo boats come to load infrequently. The site can be dived from the shore with a guide, but is best done from boat as a drift dive. The six sets of pillars are a favourite hangout for large schools of striped grunts, the occasional, well-hidden frogfish, French Angelfish, and a kaleidoscope of sponges, and should

be high on anyone's must-see list of Bonaire.

The southern end of the island also has an interesting double reef system that covers several dive sites. Angel City, so named for the numerous angelfish that frequent the two parallel ridges, Invisibles, were the fishiest that I tried, and one was the home of the friendliest trumpetfish I have ever encountered, allowing me to get so close with my fisheye that I could give it a gentle stroke.

1000 Steps is also right by the shore, but due to the vertical topography of the coastline, clambering down and back up again with cylinders is not a wise move, and the site is best visited by dive boat. Just next door is Karpata. The entry can be a tad precarious with a large camera when the sea is a little choppy, but is well worth the effort. The reef slopes down at a near-vertical angle, with a series of steep ridges



and gullies, again covered in a variety of coral and sponges, with schools of grunts, goatfish and creolefish. The site is big enough to occupy two dives, one going left, one going right after entry.

Harbour Village's house reef is arguably the best on the island, and is accessed from unquestionably the best beach on the island. In fact only Harbour Village and the neighbouring Eden Resort have a beach, the other resorts either have rocks or are built up to the water.

Straight off the Harbour Village Resort beach is a small wreck with plenty of macro subjects hosted by the decaying timbers. It's worth a look but the best part of the large site, aptly called "Something Special" lies to the south. Following a rope land across the sand at 12 metres down, you pass in front of the entrance to the marina until you hit the reef on the other side. I did the dive several times, with macro and wide angle lenses as there is a lot to see there between the arrow crabs and Pedersen shrimp in anemones, eels, and groupers getting a clean and the usual reef fish that are numerous here. The trick on this site is to make sure you have enough air for when you inevitably get distracted on the return.

Coming back at around six metres, in the mouth of the marina, you will encounter schools of blue surgeonfish, more angelfish, and often a giant barracuda. I even spotted a tarpon and a turtle. If you surface by the rocks, there is a fair chance you will be greeted by one of the local iguanas, or you can follow the sand in, cruise right up to the beach next to the bar, and order refreshments before you have taken your fins or BCD off.

The ship-shaped restaurant and bar is more than ship-shape, the location and views are perfect for sundowners and the food there is excellent and the full breakfast huge. along the seafront downtown there are plentiful options

too, and there is always somewhere with a special on every night of the week. The Dive Shack is the hangout of choice for dive crew and Thursdays they have a cheap BBQ. Wednesday night is DM night at the fancy French restaurant next to Harbour Village where gourmet burgers French-style (the best burger and fries anywhere) are \$8 and rum and cokes \$1.50 a drink. I had such a good time I'm going to have to Google its name..... (Bistro de Paris) or maybe I'll just have to go back.

Where to stay

Captain Don's Habitat

The pick of the cheaper resorts with a range of accommodation and room styles, on the sea front but with no beach (liken the vast majority of the resorts on the island). Pool and restaurant and dive centre on site. Vehicle required to get to Kralendijk.

Harbour Village Resort

The best resort on the island on the best beach. 40 well-appointed rooms and suites, with garden, marina, or sea views. Comes with an almost unused pool, excellent staff and service. Dive centre on site. Harbour Village Resort is excellent value for money. Also within walking distance of restaurants



in Kralendijk.

Rental cottages

With enough notice, it is possible to rent a cottage for a week or two, though the best ones are taken quickly, and none have a sandy beach frontage. If you do, then it is best to book diving and car rental separately.

Independent dive centres

I dived with Wannadive, who have several cylinder depots on the island as well as a full service dive shop, and East Coast Diving, who dive on the east coast – obviously. Indigo Safaris seamlessly put the trip together for me.

Indigo Safaris (www.indigosafaris.com, info@indigosafaris.com) organize tailor-made trips to Bonaire covering accommodation, dive packages and vehicle rental, as well as other Caribbean diving hotspots like the Bahamas, the Turks and Caicos, Mexico, and Dominica. 🇵🇸



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The Conflict Islands

Papua New Guinea

Located in the pristine waters of The Coral Sea, the Conflict Islands comprise of 21 untouched islands, boasting the most extensive biodiversity & coral reef in the world. With a third of the world's species of marine fish, the Conflict Islands are home to everything from the tiny ghost pipefish to huge manta rays & tiger sharks.

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Dive the World

Conflict Islands

By Terry Smith

Among the group of islands that surround a spectacular lagoon is Irai Island. This island was found "second-best coral in the world" with the greatest number of species noted in a single dive. This has led to the consideration for a World Heritage Marine Site!

The stepping-stone to the Conflict Islands and the Milne Bay area is Alotau. This bustling township is around a 1.15hr flight from Port Moresby. The flight takes you up & over a mountain range so can be susceptible to bouts of bad weather, so delays are possible. Upon arrival into Alotau, the airport is small but clean with an area for taxis and transporters.

If you're staying at a hotel on the first night, make sure you have let them know what flight you're arriving on so they can meet you. Each hotel has a free transfer service. I visited several hotels when I was in Alotau and I must recommend the Masurina Lodge.

Its located up on the hill but the rooms are clean and modern with great security. There is the Alotau International Hotel located on the waterfront but at the time of my visit, it was looking a little dated.

(They have been instances of security in this area over the past few months. This was not the case when I was there. The "Rascals" as they are called have been chased away by a police task force. Each resort and dive operation have their own security. The local community is fed up with these "rascals" and is working against them as well. Staying in the hotel or onboard a liveaboard there is no issue.)

From the airport, we were transferred by a taxi van to the Undersea Explorer departure point at the marina. (The infrastructure does need work in this area so expect to take around 30 minutes from the airport to the marina



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By Terry Smith

or hotel). For those that have been in the diving community for several years, you may remember the Undersea Explorer Dive Liveboard. Built in the 1990's she served her time as a marine exploration/research liveboard out of Port Douglas.

She has since been brought and re-located to the Conflict Islands. Although primarily as a supply vessel servicing the Conflict Islands she has been excellently maintained and recently refitted in Cairns. (In collaboration with the Conflict Islands Pelagic Dive Travel will offer charters on her to this destination).

After a 19-hour steam, we awoke to the arrival at Panasesa Island, which at 16Ha is the second largest of the Conflict Islands, with the resort located on her. We transferred over to the island and meet the managers Ed Cardwell & Hayley Versace. Both are avid scuba divers and been in the industry

for several years. The resort is well-appointed with bungalows located on the waterfront & its own dive shop. There is a communal dining area upstairs in the main building and an air-conditioned lounge area to relax. A beautiful setting. (At the time of writing this is a private resort only open to those invited by the custodian).

We were lucky in the sense that the custodian of the islands was also present - Mr Ian Gowie-Smith, an Australian based in the UK who grew up in Australia. Mr Gowie-Smith & his family are part of an elaborate plan to create a legacy of protected wilderness' around the world. With internationally renowned success as a global entrepreneur, Mr Ian Gowie-Smith is passionately dedicated to ensuring the centuries' long protection of the Conflict Islands.

Over the course of two weeks, we visited many sites each as spectacular as each other. They were never any "bad" diving



By Terry Smith

with only one dive with less visibility as the water was running out of the lagoon. The visibility dropped to about 15m in this instance with average visibility on every dive with over 30m. The water was a mild 26 degrees but with dives up to an hour, it started to get a little chilly at the end.

Each site was memorable, but several did stand out. One of these was Nicky's Fan Club. A drift Dive which saw use drifting into the lagoon between Panaboal Island & Ginara Island.

It wasn't very deep with a maximum of just over 26 meters, but what's was spectacular was the size & colour of the Gorgonian Sea Fans, each swaying, collecting nutrients from the currents. Such an array of colours & shapes was just such a joy to cruise over, you could hide behind one, then just stare in awe of this site. Truly amazing!

Beluga, off Irai Island, was another amazing site. With a ledge at around

18 meters and then sloping down into the depths it had fish life & colourful soft corals. You could swim up through cracks & around large boulders covered in corals & blankets of Sea Grapes. One such crack had a massive Gorgonian Sea Fan over 6 meters in size touching from side to side. Tuna visited us, as did Turtles.

Ian's Arch was another site located near Panasesa Island itself, with an arch swim through in shallower water. The clownfish & life in the shallow reef areas were so abundant. I sat and stared at several colonies of clownfish for what felt like hours... (I heard a whale shark visited this site two months after our visit).

But the site which left such an impression on me was the site off Panasesa Island. You follow the wall along to the end of the island reef then come up on to a ledge area which extends around the island itself. You had tuna & barracuda in the depths, then you come up & over onto the ledge, which has coral covering in "lawns". Soft corals, hard corals all



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By Terry Smith

healthy and thriving. It's such a pleasure to dive here. Turtles swim past (some fly past as they are not used to divers & get scared), all different sizes, with Green Turtles & Hawksbill the most common. They use the Panasesa Island & the surrounding islands to lay their eggs in the season from November through to late February.

To help the turtles, the Conflict Islands has set up the Conflict Island Turtle Conservation Initiative (CICI). They employ local rangers who go out at night to keep an eye on the nesting turtles. Turtle is still eaten in these islands & although protected they are still taken when nesting, as it's the easiest time to catch them. The rangers ensure their safety & keep a note of where the nests are dug.

They mark & monitor them to ensure that they hatch. If they are in an area susceptible to wash out from the sea, the eggs are relocated to Panasesa

Island into special nest areas and closely monitored. When the eggs hatch, they are guided to the water. If any are injured or deformed on birth they are taken to the nursery which is a facility on the island which cares for them until a suitable size, then they are released into the open ocean. This initiative is doing fantastic work!

Get out to Milne Bay, the Louisiades & the Conflict Islands, it's in pristine condition with absolutely, amazing diving. Visiting this area will create the awareness it needs to protect the area for the future.

Visit the Pelagic Dive Travel as we are offering special departures with the Conflict Islands, from Alotau into the Conflict Islands onboard the Underwater Explorer. This area should not be missed by any diver and must be added to any bucket list!

Pelagic Dive Travel

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Brothers

After six years of almost only diving from RIBs and spreading my clothes around my house, villa, or hotel room, I'd decided it was time to see if I'd enjoy a week on a boat with a bunch of strangers. As a frequent solo traveller, I wondered whether the close confines of a cabin with a random snorer would see me sleeping on the deck by the second night? The allure of remote dive sites, unreachable by day boat, was strong enough for me to give it a go.



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42 miles off the Egyptian coast, The Brothers Islands rise up from the floor of the Red Sea, 800m below, forming two small, flat tabletops surrounded by steeply sloping fringing reefs. The larger of the two sea mounts, the cunningly named Big Brother, is approximately 300m long, is one kilometre from its sibling, has a lighthouse, a 12-man army garrison and would be a great location for a back-to-basics series of the 'reality' TV show of the same name. As the only reefs around, and washed by strong nutrient-rich currents, I was attracted by their reported combination of soft corals, pelagics, sharks and two good-condition wrecks.

Arriving last at the harbour in Hurghada the night before departure, and after the other guests had gone to their cabins, I was greeted by the shining, wide smile of Mimo, one of the dive guides. Over a welcome glass of fresh fruit juice, he explained where to stow my dive gear, and gave me some even more welcome news: the 20-guest



boat only had 12 passengers and so I would have one of the eight below-deck twin cabins to myself. No sooner had I littered the spare bed with camera bits, books and t-shirts, I was introduced to Karim who kindly informed me that some dinner had been kept for me and was awaiting me in the dining area. Splendid.

Covering six metres of the eight-metre width of the MY Blue Pearl, the mid-ship dining area was an open plan affair adjoining the lounge that led onto the outdoor dive prep area at the stern. In the wall towards the bow was a magic hatch through which Karim or his brother Karemi, the other steward, would receive platter after platter of food from chef Wael in the kitchen. Before the bow on the 36-metre long main deck were the crew quarters and rope storage area, and a small deck used at prayer time.

After reading the safety notices and emergency action plans pinned up next to the flatscreen TV in the lounge, I went outside and up the stairs to the shaded rear 'chill-out' deck, did a circuit passing the portside double cabin, the bridge, the front sundeck, the starboard double cabin, back astern and then further up to the flybridge. Even if I had had to share, there was actually plenty of room to find some personal space.

As Karim enquired as to how I would prefer my breakfast eggs the next morning, I took in my fellow shipmates, all liveaboard veterans and mostly return customers. We were an eclectic, if slightly Germanic bunch.

A German-Dutch couple, two German father-and-son combos, an Austrian quartet made up of a father, his son, the son's wife and a friend. The 12th man was James, a Scottish, middle-aged, Libyan-based teacher and naturally my buddy.

Seated in the lounge, Pia, the trip leader and diving instructor, took us through the boat and dive safety briefings. Given that we'd be at

least five hours from the coast, the equipment was reassuringly plentiful and in good condition, the briefings friendly but to the point. Pia laid out the itinerary in her "best Bavarian English, Ja?" It was simple: today would be spent on the coast diving at Gota Abu Ramada to check our gear, buoyancy and to get to know our buddies, as habitually strong currents off the isolated Brothers would be no place for faffing, as well as to do a night dive before heading east overnight.

Gota Abu Ramada is a shallow site, no deeper than 13m, with a large Australia-shaped reef with two large bommies off what would be the Perth coast (to the WSW). It was ideally suited to its purpose with no current, clear waters, small schools of blackspotted sweetlips and spotfin squirrelfish, morays, crocodile fish and a large school of yellowtail barracuda and goatfish to get me reacquainted with the camera settings. An artificial shark stuck on a knife as part of



HEPCA's (Hurghada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association) shark protection awareness campaign, five metres below the surface, also amused the divers, who took turns to sit on its back during the safety stop once we had all demonstrated our ability to use an SMB competently.

The night dive was my first from a liveaboard and was enhanced by the deck lights on the boat creating a full moon effect underwater, illuminating the bommies and the shark, and thus providing visual markers. After a warming shower to wash away the goose bumps from a third hour-long dive in 24°C water, we were greeted by the aromas of a giant buffet. Once dinner was over, the captain set a course eastwards, as some sat on the top deck watching the stars, and Karim and Karemi did a few card tricks in the lounge.

I awoke to the sound of water lapping gently on the hull below my open cabin

portholes, the early-morning light peeping in. From the deck Big Brother and its Victorian lighthouse took on a red-brown hue as we boarded two RIBs and headed to the northern tip of the island. The legendary currents appeared absent from the surface, but we did a negative buoyancy entry and went straight down to 10m, meeting up above the beginning of the wreck of the SS Numidia, claimed to be one of the best wrecks in the Red Sea.

She certainly looked huge and in good condition, given that she had spent more than a century exposed in her current-washed resting place. Built in Glasgow in 1901, the 140m long, 6 400-ton Numidia was on her second voyage out of Liverpool bound for Calcutta with 7 000 tons of railway and general cargo when, in the early hours of July 20, Big Brother's lighthouse was sighted off the port bow and the Captain ordered a slight change of course to continue south passing alongside the island before retiring to his cabin.

Fortunately for us, his orders were misinterpreted and the ship ploughed straight into the northern tip of the island. No lives were lost, much of the cargo was salvaged, but the ship went down, her keel digging into a rocky ledge. Now she sits on a steep slope, her bow melded into the top of the reef, her stern some 72m below.

Hanging back, I let the others descend to try to add some scale to my pictures, capturing the lifeboat davits and the remains of the foremast in the centre of deck with a wide-angle lens as the group inspected the remains of the bridge and the engine room. Yet no image can convey quite how impressive this wreck is, dropping into the deep blue depths. Descending to join the group, going close to the wreck, I saw it was covered in soft corals and awash with burgundy and white striped Red Sea anthias and lionfish, accustomed to strong currents, sheltering inside. On this day there was no need, as with no current and good viz, conditions were ideal, and we spent the whole



dive there, ascending past some coral-encrusted rolling stock bogies at 10m, before being picked up by the RIBs and taken back for breakfast.

After catching a few rays on the sun deck, Pia and Mimo said it was time for a shark hunt on the southern plateau. As we were moored off the southern tip and in the absence of current, we would giant stride off the rear deck and return to the boat at the end. The plateau starts at a depth of 20m and slopes down to 40m, and is a hot spot for thresher sharks. As we reached 25m, Mimo's arm shot out, finger extended towards the unmistakable scythe-like tail of a thresher shark swimming through a school of fusiliers.

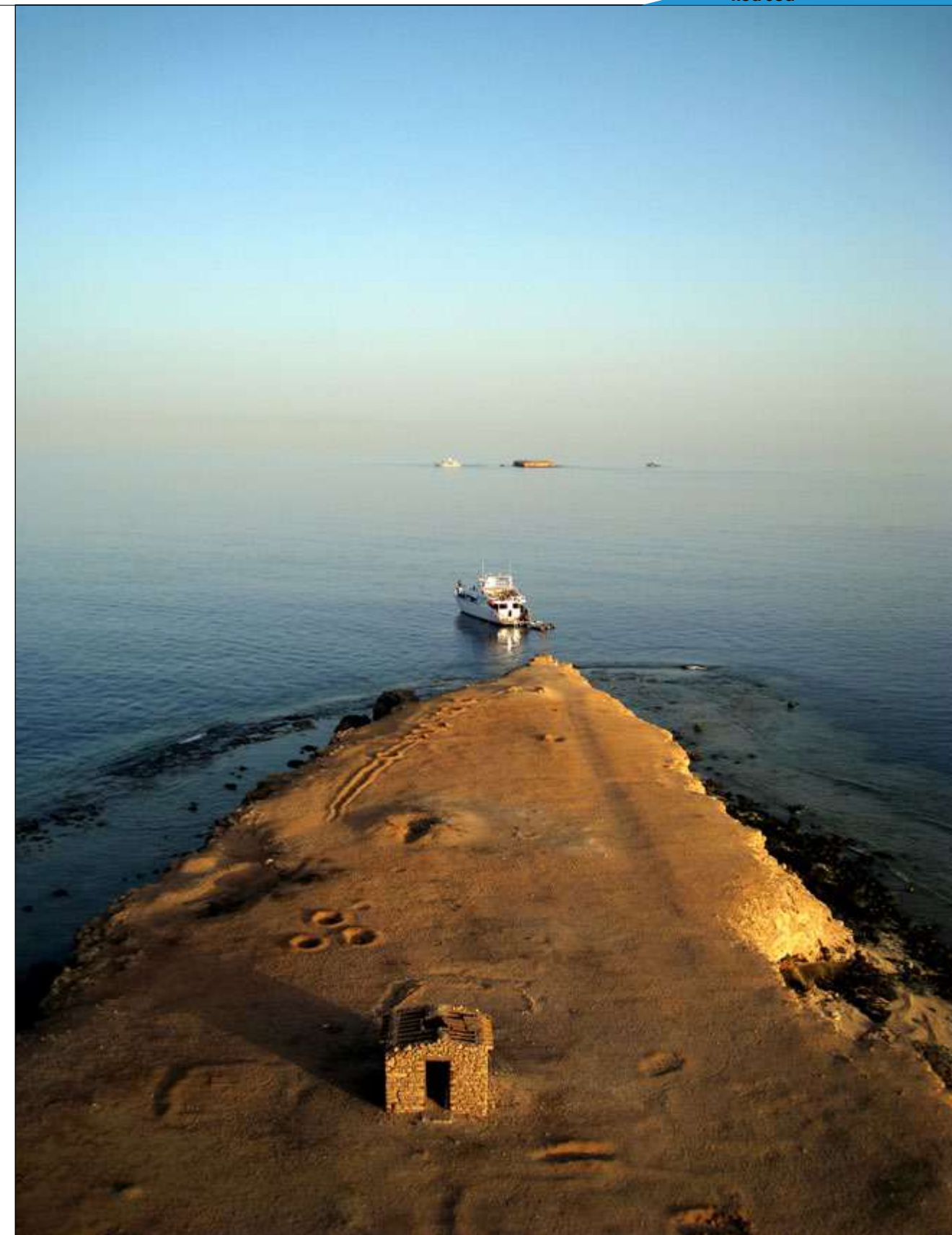
It stayed within view for a couple of minutes before we lost it. We hung around 28m as long as our 30% nitrox mix would allow us, spotting a distant thresher twice more, before ascending to the top of the reef and chilling out with the sohal surgeonfish, before being invited to stuff ourselves again. The next five days followed the same pattern: dive – breakfast – relax – dive – lunch – relax – dive – dinner – relax. Due to the normally strong currents, the isolated nature of the location, and the considerable presence of sharks, there is no night diving on the Brothers. In fact, on most nights we didn't need to get in the water to see them anyway. Whether you agree or not, it is accepted practice on liveaboards to throw organic waste overboard in the evening, and the sharks seemed to be in on it, especially at Little Brother. Leaning on the side rails with the crew after dinner, we often saw oceanic white-tip and silky sharks patrolling around the boat.

Big Brother's other iconic dive site is the wreck of the Aida, a 75m supply vessel built in France in 1911 that sank on 15 September 1957 when resupplying the lighthouse and Egyptian army garrison stationed there. Approaching the jetty in heavy seas, she was slammed onto the rocks and abandoned immediately.

After drifting north slightly, she went

down south of the Numidia, just past the end of the island. Her bows no longer exist, but from her midships at 25m to her stern at 60m, she is in excellent condition, adorned with purple soft corals and hard corals, anthias, morays and the usual reef dwellers. She was the last dive of the second day, and the first dive the next morning when a gentle current helped us onto the Numidia and then along the wall past a large school of black snapper hanging on the corner of the reef.

The walls of Big Brother were also home to a friendly, 90cm female Napoleon wrasse called Mousie. After another successful thresher-spotting trip over the southern plateau, Mousie and I flirted gently for a few minutes, as if eyeing each other across a bar, until she sidled up, posing, tilting onto one side like she wanted to be petted. Our 15-minute infatuation was sadly cut short by my dive computer and my buddy's air consumption, but I reckon I'd scored.





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Dive the World

Red Sea

By Christopher Bartlett

On our last Big Brother dive we had a slightly stronger south to north current, and no sooner had we dropped in we were greeted by a juvenile giant manta, approximately 4m across, riding the current and flanked by a barracuda, closely followed by three grey reef sharks. The action wasn't over; as we loitered expectantly a 1,2m male Napoleon came amongst the divers creating a scene akin to a publicity-starved celebrity (quite appropriate given the location), willingly posing for the paparazzi.


He left abruptly, diving fast, to chase off a small grey reef shark sniffing around his patch. Moving north slowly, cornetfish hugged our tanks, using us for streamlining and cover as they looked for prey to ambush amongst the schools of anthias whilst we found pipefish amongst the gorgonians. As we moved closer to the surface, a manta cruised along below to bid us farewell. Big Brother had been excellent – could Little Brother follow suit?

It had two days to outdo its sibling and did not disappoint. After an uneventful 15 minutes deep in the blue looking for sharks we moved closer to the wall. A quarter of an hour later we had seen a male grey reef shark, two threshers, a curiously un-shy silky shark, an obviously pregnant grey reef shark and had been entertained by an even bigger male Napoleon wrasse.

The last four dives were just as impressive. The male Napoleon wrasse was often under the boat waiting to tag along on a dive, the pregnant reef shark (*Carcharhinus amblyrhynchos*) seemed to live near the mooring site, threshers milled around to the south below a magnificent gorgonian forest, home to a longnosed hawkfish, round the corner from a section of wall festooned with broccoli-like soft corals. In the normally washing machine-like shallows, we off-gassed with black-tongue unicornfish having parasites removed by cleaner wrasse, pufferfish, moray eels, orangespine unicornfish, barracudas and an octopus, thanks to the remarkably still waters. The icing on the considerable cake was

provided by an oceanic white-tip and its accompanying pilotfish that came by to say hello.

It would've been unfair to expect the final day's diving in Safaga to compare, but Panorama Reef had interesting 7m high, mountain-like dome coral formations, anemonefish and two turtles. The snorkelling boats at Tobia Arba'a (a.k.a. The Seven Pillars) also provided much amusement from above and below the surface, and the shallow waters of the goldie-covered coral bommies were also home to blue spotted stingrays and lionfish. Rather than being a letdown, these two sites, two of the best in the area, served as a reminder of how spoilt we had been. The whole experience had been excellent. There was plenty of room on the boat and I spent so little time in my cabin awake that sharing would have been no problem. The constant sound of the ocean was soothing and we never had to share a dive site with another group. In fact, each buddy team often went at its own pace and James and I were frequently alone at the end of a dive, hanging out with the fish. In short, I can safely say that I am a liveaboard convert and would thoroughly recommend a trip to the Brothers.

Christopher travelled with Oonas Divers: www.oonasdivers.com and sailed with Blue Planet Liveaboards: www.blueplanet-liveaboards.com/eng/index.htm 

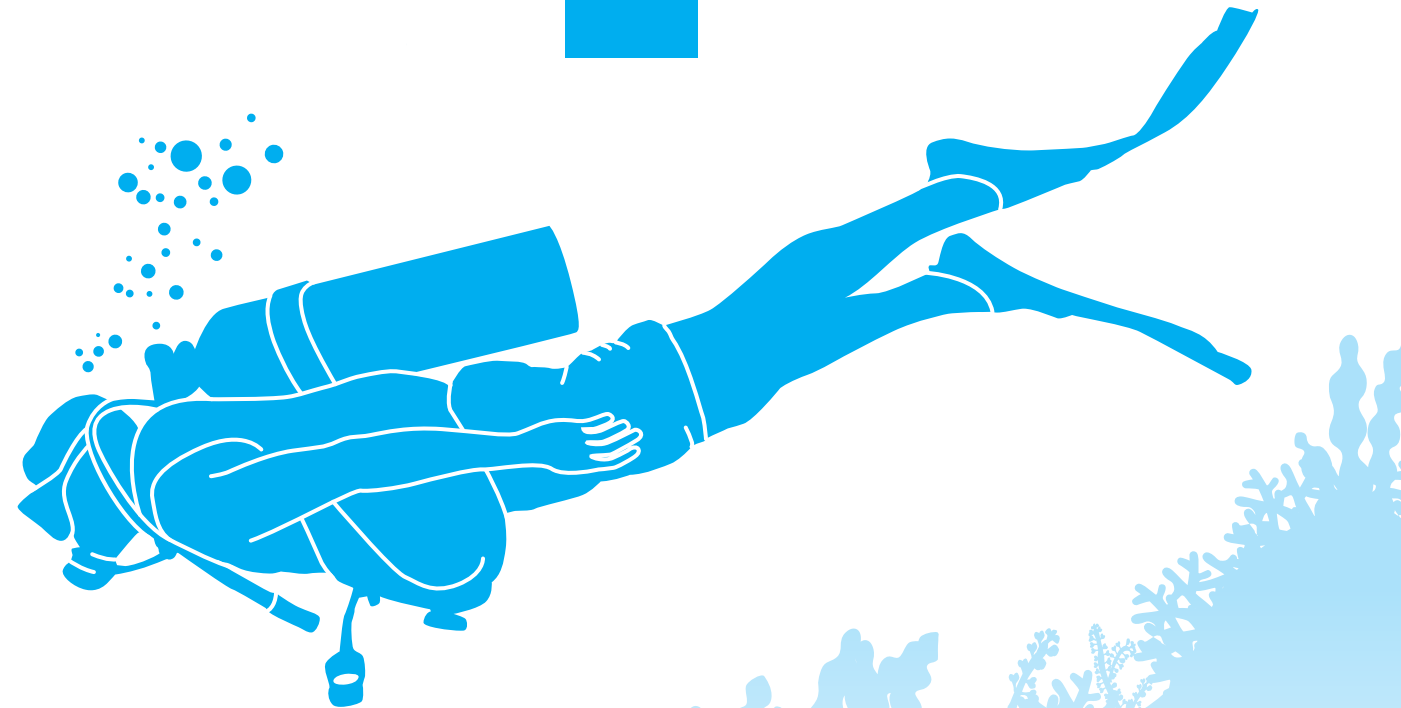


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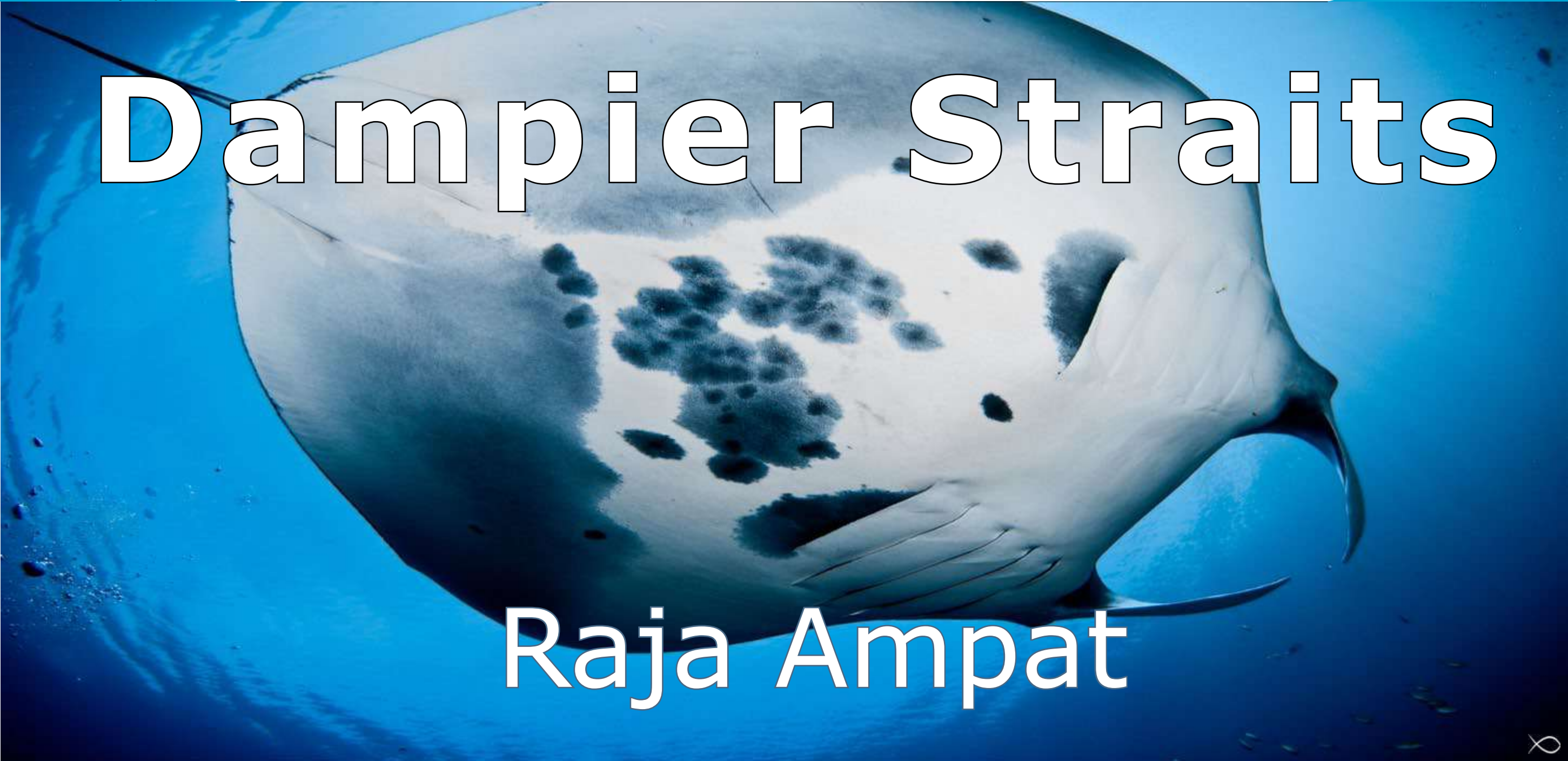
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By Christopher Bartlett



Dampier Straits

Raja Ampat



The morning birdsong was incredible. As the sun peeped over the horizon a hooded butcher bird, a dull black and white creature, dominated the choir with a tune that sounded like a fluorescent rainbow. I looked out of the window of my room, perched on stilts over the shallow azure waters of the Dampier Strait. A couple of juvenile blacktip reef sharks patrolled the waters below me with plenty of posturing, but keeping a distance from the giant barracuda sheltering in the shade created by my neighbour's room.

After a 50-hour journey from Paris to Sorong that involved four flights and a two-hour boat ride I'd arrived at Kri Eco Resort, a little travel weary but in time for lunch and some strong coffee before getting into the water. The dive boats were going out at 3 PM, as per usual, but I had a new housing and camera to test, and thought it wiser to opt for a quick and gentle shallow dive off the dive jetty to check out the fish congregating under there.



Given that my room was over the water, testing the empty Nauticam housing was a doddle, and I was soon in the water with a fisheye on my Olympus EM-5 testing the different settings on the school of big-eyed jacks lazing in the water in front of the dock. A fat stonefish sat at the bottom of one wooden pillar, and five batfish posed relatively unperturbed by my presence in front of some pink and white dendronephthya soft coral whilst the top of the dive centre appeared in a Snell's window framed by blue skies and fluffy clouds. A golden gorgonian fan shone in the shallow water as the sunbeams streamed through the plankton. My short test dive turned into a 90-minute session. With a jetty like this, I wondered what the reefs were like.

With a population of only 52,000 and a surface area 10% greater than the size of Belgium (has anyone else noticed how often Belgium is used as a yardstick for the size of a place?), the Raja Ampat Marine Conservation Area was a sparsely populated place. The majority of the inhabitants live in Sorong, leaving the myriad islands occupied only by tiny villages. Fishing by any means other than spearing and individual lines is banned, and the abundance of fish life is one of the Raja Ampat's big draws.

However, abundance isn't the only string to the area's bow. In 2012 Dr Gerry Allen, a renowned marine biologist and extremely well-published author broke his own dive site fish count world record. On the Cape Kri dive site, in front of Sorido resort (Kri Eco Resort's newer and more upmarket sibling), he counted 374 different species of fish in one dive. That's almost the same number of species that exist in the entire Caribbean (many times the size of Belgium) and close to a quarter of the 1432 species of fish found in the Raja Ampat area.

That evening, Bintang lager in hand, I sat on the chill out deck halfway along the jetty, ideally positioned to catch sunset and sunrise, and got to know

the eclectic bunch of fish fans that had made it to this far-flung diving outpost in the centre of the Coral Triangle. a retired English couple and an English doctor, two Australian conmen (I mean an insurance broker and investment banker), four French (another banker, a teacher, and two civil servants), two Spanish air-traffic controllers, a Namibian lodge owner and his Polish wife, a Chilean charity fund-raiser, and an Austrian hotelier.

The following morning the 16 of us were assigned a spot in one of three boats, each one diving one of the 30+ dive sites within 20 minutes of the resort. Teamed up with the two Antipodean friends and the southern Africans, we headed off to a site called Mios Kon in our twin-outboard, shaded banana boat with two boat crew and two dive guides. After the usual briefing and buddy checks, we backward rolled over the side in to the blue. It was a rather milky blue, with viz of 15 to 18 metres, due to plankton in the water. Whilst



this wasn't ideal for the wide-angle photography I'd had in mind, the reef was teeming with fish, all coming in for a chow. Mios Kon is a typical Dampier Strait dive site; starting at around 30 metres deep on a sandy bottom, the roundish reef slopes up to around five metres below the surface. We dived the side being hit by the current, dropping in where the current hit the reef. We entered at the point where the current splits, as this is where the fish action is, the fish at the lower end of the food chain feeding on the nutrients borne by the current, and the fish above them in the pecking order of who-eats-who coming in for their meal too.

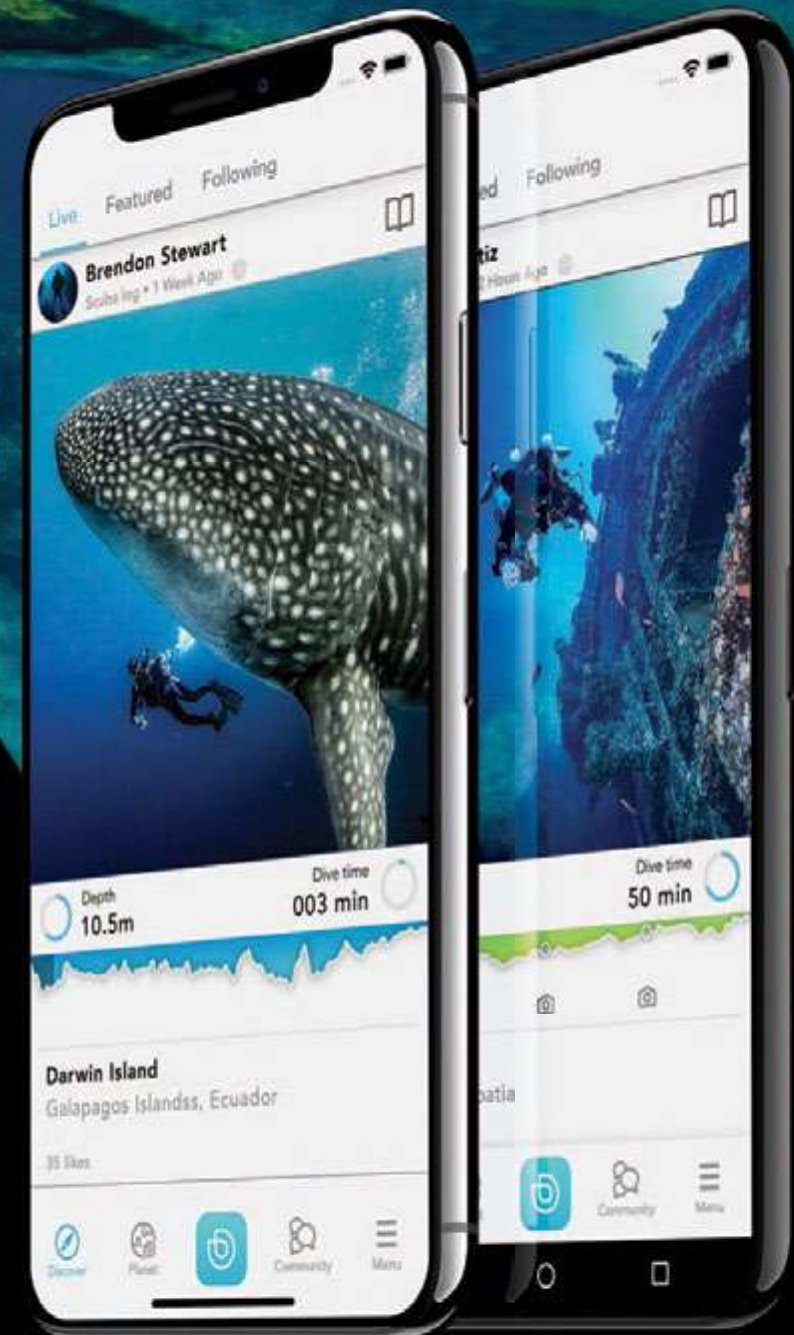
On a typical dive one first goes with the current from its centre point, then you swim into it a couple of metres higher, till you reach the centre point where it splits and stops and then goes in the other direction until the guide turn the group back into the current to return to the split line etc...In effect, you move up the reef in a meandering S-pattern, all the while surrounded by fish of

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various sizes, from schools of brightly coloured anthias, silvery fusiliers, horse-eyed and bluefin jacks, Spanish mackerel, batfish, and some solitary dog-tooth tuna. Whitetip and blacktip reef sharks patrol the lower areas and a resting wobbegong can often be found.

Other sites with a similar set-up are Chicken Reef (no feathered fish but regular schooling bumphead parrotfish sightings), so called as one of the but the Grey reef sharks that sometimes put in an appearance here scared a dive guide many years ago), Sardines, Cape Kri, and Sleeping Barracuda. One post-breakfast dive at Sardines was particularly fishy and I found myself spoilt for choice. Anthias swarmed around a bommy, moving to and fro like waves on a beach, until bluefin jacks cruised right through them. Batfish hung parallel to the reef top in unison in a perfectly lopsided formation, a school of barracuda lingered at the edge of my field of vision. A Napoleon wrasse showed



considerable interest in the smaller of the Aussies, and just out of serviceable range of my fisheye, but well within view, a blacktip and whitetip crossed heading in different directions, like two execs on their way to business lunch.

Whilst these sites and their abundant life were great for wide-angle photography, they also had plenty for the macro enthusiast, with some of the rarer reef weirdoes living here, such as Pontoh's pygmy seahorse, one of the smaller hippocampus species, which hangs out on hydroids. Not only are they smaller than their cousins the Barbigant and Denise pygmy seahorses, they are also even shyer, continually turning their back to the lens. These red-topped yellow tailed buggers are one of the most challenging macro subjects going.

The local sites are really quite varied in their underwater offerings and Mike's Point turned out to be a favourite. It's a tiny island in the middle of the straight, with current washing round either side of it. Starting off on the back in the lee of the current for a change, we swam alongside, in round, and sometimes though its crevices, overhangs, nooks and crannies. A blue-spotted ribbontail ray sought peace and quiet under one rocky shelter, Harlequin sweetlips stopped off for a dental clean from a cleaner wrasse, and a wrasse-mimicking fang blenny mistook my bare forearm for lunch, giving me quite a shock. The grinning, cheating little parasite didn't even bother to try and con me by disguising itself as a cleaner wrasse beforehand. On the current washed reeftops and on the sides, the coral coverage is pretty much 100 per cent, with a range of anemones too, patrolled by various schools from the fusilier family. Once halfway round, the shallows that get most of the stronger current are littered with stunning yellow and orange gorgonian fans with pretty anthias and damsels milling around them ditzily like living sequins.

Tuesdays are Manta Sandy days. Rather than return to the resort between dives, given the distance to Manta Sandy (around 30 minutes) the boats

stay east and do two dives before returning to the resort for lunch. On the first dive near the extra-picturesque island of Arborek, Ross, the client relations manager, saw me lining up some sweetlips posing and pouting under an arch before beckoning me onwards with a double-arm flap manta signal. They were sitting pretty going nowhere, and made me think of a David Doubilet shot from Raja Ampat, but we were here for manta, so I left them after getting a couple acceptable images. A minute later a colour-morphed, almost entirely black reef manta swooped straight over us in one low-flying pass so close she more than filled the frame of my fish-eye.

Post-dive we had our surface interval on the dock at Arborek with the two other boats and naturally those who had been to Manta Sandy already were extolling the joys of watching a pair of manta get cleaned for an hour. "Lovely sweetlips" I said to one of the Aussies. "It's his lip balm, mate" replied his mate. "Bah" said Ross, "I can show



you better than that tomorrow". "Fair dinkum, mate?" I asked, getting into the whole Antipodean vibe.

Before that of course was our dive at the cunningly named Manta Sandy, as it is on a large sandy patch home to two cleaning stations. It is so popular with divers that an NGO has marked out a line with dead coral blocks for divers to stay behind so as not to scare the manta. This allows for hour-long manta observation, though is too far away for decent photography. I ended up turning the camera off, sitting on the sand, and watching the ballet unfold. Manta Sandy and Arborek are not the only manta sites in the area.

Close by is Manta Drop Off, a current-swept corner reef on two deep walls. When we approached pre-dive I thought we were seeing mobulas cruising the ripping currents around there were so many. I was so gobsmacked by the numbers that I forget to take my reef hook. Oops. The current was pumping, but keeping very low and holding on

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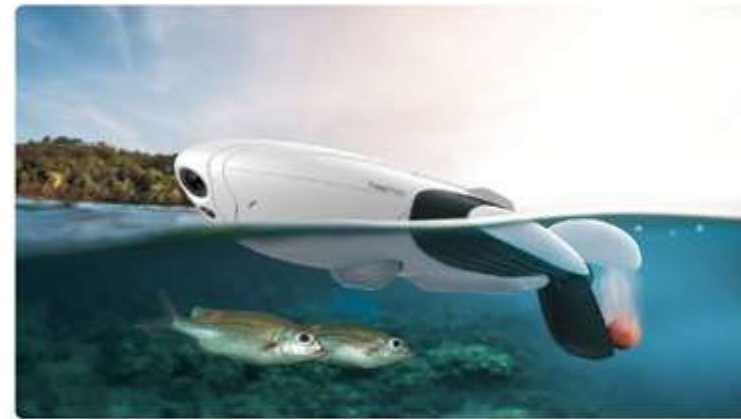
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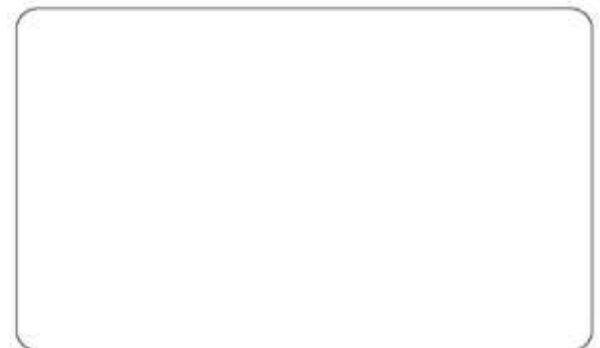
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By Christopher Bartlett

to substrate with my hand I could stay in position, and kicking hard with my freediving fins I could even move into the current, albeit it very slowly. This site was frequented by giant mantas, and there were droves of them. I counted at least fifteen at one given moment. But they were facing away from us, into the sun, and after 25 minutes I wanted to attempt something more than a distant arse-shot.

As I tried to move round the corner I could feel another, even stronger current come into play, but I was in a better place. Or so I thought. As I turned sideways to line up an approaching manta the new current caught me with its full force and I was ripped off the reef. I tried a couple of big kicks but I was going backwards at an unprecedented rate of knots, faster than ever in my 1600 odd dives. I just had the time to wave goodbye to Ross and give him the OK sign before my ears started to squeeze - I was also going down. A glance at the depth gauge told me I'd dropped from 15 to 25 metres in a matter of seconds.

Then I remembered the whirlpools I had seen from the boat. "OK F---wit" (my nice nickname for myself when I sense some self-created sub-optimal situation arising) "inflate a bit and fin like a demon". I got vertical, held my inflator and concentrated on the depth reading on my computer (also on my left wrist and importantly facing inwards) through the near horizontal stream of my bubbles breaking over it. I started to rise and dumped air to avoid a rapid ascent. I got to my safety stop depth and whizzed along on an exhilarating ride, passing at least another dozen manta gracefully cruising into the current as if it was not there.

But there it was, as when I broke the surface I was over a kilometre away from the boat, closer to a couple of liveaboards and most of the way to the side of Arborek. In the 10 seconds it took for me to get my bearings, I could already hear the twin outboards and saw the banana boat flying towards me. Two worried Papuan faces peered over at me, till I let out a raucous

pirate's laugh and their faces split with wide grins. I only had one half-decent silhouette shot, but I'd had a fantastic ride.

The next day Ross took us to Otdima. Nathan was going for more macro, but if this is where David Doubilet's sweetlips were, I was going as wide as I could. After finding some seahorses and shrimps to keep Nathan happy, Ross puckered up his lips and pointed "this way" till we got to an overhang covered in glassfish and pointed again. I gave him a nonplussed shoulder shrug more commonly seen in a Parisian bistro when you complain to a waiter. He pointed animatedly again, and then swam off, probably giggling. They were very pretty glassfish, so I swam closer to illuminate them correctly. And then they parted. Like the waves of the Red Sea before Moses.

Actually more like a strippergram removing her drab raincoat to reveal a full set of classic lingerie. It was the jackpot of sweetlips, a school maybe 100-strong, the crown jewels surrounded by a thousand glittering gems. I snapped away for 10 minutes, in bliss. The end results were not DD, but I really like them. Colourful, plump, sexy pouting fish.

But Otdima's visual delights didn't end there. A broadclub cuttlefish posed perfectly under a large table coral, presenting itself to best highlight itself, the coral, the reef, and the ocean, a magic combination of the rule of thirds and the use of diagonals. And then there were the hard coral gardens in the shallows, and more cave sweepers hanging around gorgonians, that I failed to fully appreciate at the time, being in a sort of visual and photographic overload

There are too many good sites to eulogise and wax lyrical about them all. Mayhem on an incoming tide was suitably named for the swirling reef fish and corals, Arborek had reef mantas, more sweetlips, and a cool surface interval promenade along its picturesque jetty,





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By Christopher Bartlett
or you could snorkel and spot the odd passing manta. The Passage is an ethereal, other-world dive site with moderate current gently taking you along a coral-strewn shallow wall, the trees above clearly visible and shafts of sunlight penetrating the canopy and illuminating dead tree trunks on the bottom of the narrow channel. It feels like diving in a river, until you glide past a large barrel sponge or gorgonian fan, or a blacktip reef shark cruises by.

The stand out site for me though has to be Blue Magic. In season, from December to April, this underwater hump is a giant manta magnet. If mantas wore leather miniskirts, this underwater hill would be a special edition Harley Davidson Fat Boy.

You can dive down to 30 metres and see Barbigant's pygmy seahorse (again), or another decent school of big-eye jacks, spot a wobbegong or two, but once I had been to the top of the site, on subsequent dives I just went to the reef top at 10 metres and stayed there, hanging back from one




of the cleaning stations. Within a few minutes, the giant cartilaginous gliders turned up and just kept circling.

When one was done, another pulled up, sashayed around for a bit like a model on a catwalk, often hovering over my bubbles for a tickle. After the first dive here, I just wanted to keep coming back.

I managed to dive it three times in the last two days, and would gladly have done more. It's the sort of place I just want a floating house over the top of with a surface supply of gas. I've spent a fair bit of time up close and personal with their toothier cousins, but this place was an almost extra-terrestrial elasmobranch experience, truly mantatastic, a must-do site for any manta fan.

nd being protected by several mountainous land masses. The equatorial weather makes for good diving all year round; however from June to August it is slightly windier which brings some larger swells.

Contacts:

Indigo Safaris organized this trip for us with a week in Komodo. They can also organize diving in Ambon, Maluku, Bali, and Papua New Guinea, and land tours in West Papua to meet different tribes such as the Dani in the Baliem Valley. info@indigosafaris.com 



Chuuk Lagoon

The tiny archipelago of Chuuk in Micronesia is a wreck diving mecca that you will return to again and again.



Dive the World

Chuuk Lagoon

By Fiona McIntosh

"If you can't dive Chuuk, you can't dive anywhere," insisted Captain Lance Higgs. "It's warm, there's no current and the viz is 90ft – like diving in a bath tub." The almost entirely British group looked somewhat confused, having never fathomed the North American preference for imperial measures, but we got the gist.

I'd always imagined wreck diving to be the realm of the macho, yet while there are numerous deep wrecks to amuse techies, many of the wrecks are well within open-water limits. Nonetheless, I wasn't so sure about the captain's diving habits as I rolled backward into the swell the next day and descended down the line – we were going deeper and deeper into a dark ocean and this was a bit more testing than he'd made it out to be.

The outline of a huge destroyer began to take shape after a few metres. It was the Fumitsuki (meaning, in true Japanese naming fashion, "month of rice ears".) It was sitting upright on the

seabed, almost as if it was floating on the sand. As we sank to the bottom of the mooring, the detail of the huge and coral-encrusted form became clearer. It was evident that we'd have to be selective – at 100m long and lying 30m to 45m deep, exploring the whole boat would clearly take several dives.

The scene was tranquil. The bow, though covered with marine life, was intact and majestic. There was no sign of any damage – no evidence of the cataclysmic events that had sent her to these depths over 60 years ago. But as we swam towards the stern, past a large anti-aircraft gun and torpedo launcher, the reason for her demise was quickly apparent. The bridge had been blown off, the conning tower lay broken in the sand. We swam along the decks, noting the massive guns and propeller, the intact rigging, the torpedo tubes, spent shell casings and a collection of gas masks, ceramic bowls, binoculars and other artefacts. We began our slow ascent with squadrons of batfish flitting silently among us as we hovered over



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By Fiona McIntosh

the world's most famous underwater graveyard. The ghost fleet of Chuuk is a chilling reminder of the carnage of war.

The coral reef surrounding Chuuk is the third largest in the world and makes for great diving already, but the presence of wrecks is what makes it legendary. Strategically situated in the middle of shipping lanes between Japan, Australia and Hawaii, Chuuk Lagoon is a huge, deep, reef-encircled natural harbour. The high, pointed islands, appearing as jungle-covered shark fins, are the tips of a vast volcanic pinnacle that thrust up from the deep seabed to create a giant ocean lake within a ring of living corals – a huge sheltered anchorage.

Prior to the outbreak of WWII, Japanese administrators employed nearly 30 000 Korean, Okinawan and Chuukese labourers to convert Chuuk into the second most important naval fortress in the Pacific. It was from this base that the Japanese military launched their main offensive against



Hawaii's Pearl Harbour in 1941.

Patrol boats, torpedo boats, submarines, tugs, landing craft, gunboats and mine sweepers maintained the sea defences, while five airfields provided complete protection over Chuuk's facilities. The fortified lagoon was the departure point for numerous Japanese war campaigns and a vital link in the supply line supporting the many island groups captured by Japanese forces.

At its height, it's estimated that 60 attack submarines, 250 merchant ships and 125 warships, including aircraft carriers, operated from Chuuk. By early 1944, Allied victories were forcing a Japanese retreat and Chuuk became a key target for the American military moving to recapture the Pacific. A series of attacks beginning in February 1944 completely demolished Chuuk's fortifications, sinking some 80 ships and destroying nearly 500 aircraft. Thousands of Japanese and locals were killed under ferocious bombing, but worse was to follow. With supply lines to the isolated lagoon destroyed, the remaining Japanese and Chuuk islanders struggled to survive in the rat-infested jungles and more than 15 000 Japanese starved to death before the war's end.

The first and most devastating of the attacks was Operation Hailstorm. US surveillance aircraft flew over the lagoon on 4 February 1944, revealing the location of the Eten airfields and the Dublon seaplane-base – and the fact that nearly all of the Japanese Combined Fleet was gathered in Chuuk. An attack planned for mid-April was brought forward. And although the Japanese Admiral, Koga, had correctly predicted a strike and had ordered the warships, various cruisers and supply ships to retreat, a large number of small combatant and supply ships remained.

A pre-dawn attack began at 4.40am on 17 February, with 350 US fighters and fighter-bombers taking off from twelve aircraft carriers. With a rising



sun shining into the eyes of Japanese gunners, the American bombers approached from the east, flying low under Japanese radar, strafing the airfields. The first bombs produced brilliant, blinding flashes as heat and light burst in a blazing flame. Operation Hailstorm was underway. The Japanese were caught by surprise. Desperate to save as many planes as possible, officers were ordering aircraft mechanics and technicians to take off and head north, while the pilots frantically swam to or leapt on boats headed for the airfields. Many aircraft were disabled by enemy fire as they taxied down the runway and countless dogfights filled the air. The Japanese lost 170 aircraft in aerial combat and literally hundreds on the ground.

As you glide among the stately wrecks, it's hard to imagine the scene on the water that day. Huge 500-pound bombs split the decks of destroyers and exploded amidships in a deafening, ear-splitting roar, creating hot balls of red, orange and black flames and smoke billowing skyward. Low-flying torpedo attack planes released deadly long cylinders that sped towards the ships.

The torpedoes ripped into ship's bows, buckling steel plates, collapsing bulkheads and tearing out jagged holes through which raging waters flooded in. Chaos prevailed with frightened crews trapped inside, trying to escape or find air pockets as the ships rolled and sunk. In no time the lagoon was full of stricken ships belching clouds of rolling black smoke. Those still afloat lined up in single file to escape through the only non-mined channel in the south as torpedoes streaked towards them. Many ships were downed as they fled.

The Fumitsuki is one of them and, as we floated over the decks, we recognised what must have been the belongings of the surprised crew scattered haphazardly amongst the munitions – a shoe, books, a torn jacket and a cup, still in good nick after all these years. A looting hold

was put in place during the late 60s, but evidence of some early staged pilfering is clear. These ships were "discovered" by adventure divers such as Jacques Cousteau, Al Giddings and Klaus Lindemann, and reliable sources report that in the 70s Cousteau shipped out many tonnes of artefacts, including nameplates, clocks, bells and other easily removable and potentially valuable items.

There are over 70 wrecks that can be dived in the lagoon. The classics include the Fumitsuki and Shinkoku Maru, a well-preserved tanker built in 1939 that took part in the Pearl Harbour attack. For a 60 year-old wreck, the Shinkoku Maru is in amazingly good shape. We started at the bow – a vast artificial reef of vivid pink, blue and orange corals. Big barrel-shaped sponges give way to delicate fans; whip corals penetrate eerily into the deep blue and vast clams display their speckled velvet bodies. We swam through the holds and lower decks, inspecting the contents of her bowels: the galley, the officers' quarters with its well-preserved array of cut glass decanters and glasses, sake bowls and officers' uniforms, and her operating room complete with medicine bottles, instruments and a pile of gramophone records – all part of the old infirmary.

But even from the outside the ship is mind-blowing, what with her big masthead jutting up to the surface, vast spare prop blades on her stern, well-preserved bow and stern guns, and a massive propeller. As you slowly explore, you'll see a solid brass bridge to engine room telegraphs, a box of bottles, a large brass chest and a telephone as well as numerous lengths of piping and rounds of ammunition. There was so much to see that even the presence of several black-tip sharks circling the bow couldn't divert our attentions. We dived her twice more that week – once at night when she was even more amazing.

As if we hadn't been spoilt enough for one day, our next dive was on the Fujikawa Maru, a massive aircraft



By Fiona McIntosh

ferry that's considered by veterans to be a top wreck in the Ghost Fleet. There are plenty of penetration dives through holds and spacious lower decks past endless cables, ladders, cans and shells. The sight of a bathtub sent shivers up my spine as I thought of the poor people entombed in the ship during those days of horror. The Fujikawa Maru was delivering its cargo of planes, and while most had been landed, there are still disassembled parts of Japanese Zeros in hold two. The long-range and easily manoeuvrable Zero was a superb weapon for offensive warfare, but these sleek fighters had little protective armour and when hit they'd burst into flames and burn like tinderboxes. Not that we spent too much time contemplating the fate of the combatants – a turtle swimming out of one of the upper decks soon dispelled any melancholy.

We finished the day with a magnificent dive on a Mitsubishi G4M bomber, foregoing the night dive for Christmas

Day turkey and festivities. The fairly intact G4M, or "Betty bomber" as it was known to the Allied forces, lies in 12m to 17m of water. Night was falling as we descended, but the wings and cockpit were visible from the surface. We swam through the plane, inspected the cockpit then checked out the engines and propellers about 50m away – a pleasant swim over undulating coral reef.

The pattern was thus set for the week: five dives a day if you had the stamina, comprising a deep dive after breakfast, a couple of colourful or dramatic shallower dives, followed by an aircraft or small vessel late in the day, and a night dive after dinner. We dived flying boats, fighter planes, bombers, transport vessels, destroyers, freighters and a huge submarine. We saw tanks, trucks, dramatic guns, munitions, towering gantries and masts as well as the living quarters, kitchens, urinals, sake bottles, teacups and personal belongings of the people fighting in the Pacific arena of WWII.



Sometimes it was the superstructure of the wreck that impressed; other times it was the detail as we penetrated the holds – the instruments of the plane, the ship's nameplate, piles of cartridge belts and bullets, or a haunting skull. At least once a day we were treated to a wreck barely recognisable from under the amount of marine life colonising it. These tapestries of nature challenge the most beautiful reefs in the world for colour and complexity.

We swam with squadrons of eagle rays and great shoals of barracuda, watched tiny clown fish, bright butterfly fish, striking blue-and-yellow damsels and other bright tropical fish. At night the wrecks were even more dramatic and their covering reefs took on a different sheen. Hydroids bloomed and we saw parrotfish encased in their nightly mucus cocoons.

Most of us settled for three dives a day, occasionally rising to a fourth when we had the energy or when one of the gems was dangled before us. The rest of the time we chilled on Thorfinn, reading and watching historical films about the wrecks, lounging in the spa or sunning ourselves on deck. It was the perfect lazy existence and the 22 crew members on board ensured that we barely lifted a finger during the trip. Our dive gear was kitted up for each dive, superb meals were served and the wine flowed.

So is Chuuk the ultimate wreck site? Well, in nine days we only touched the surface of the diving and everyday we were blown away. One day it was the tanks sitting at 50m on the deck of the upright San Francisco, the next day it was the instrument panel of an almost intact aircraft. The great ships, once mighty floating islands of grey steel now lying in state on the seabed, are incredible. But so are the corals, the vast molluscs and the number and diversity of reef and pelagic fish. There's even a shark dive for those who can tear themselves away from the wrecks. A testament to Chuuk's beauty and fascination is surely the fact that in our party of five couples one lot were on their eleventh visit, while another

had returned eight times. I was blown away by the place, in fact, I'd go a step further: I've been fortunate to have dived extensively throughout the world, but if I had to name my ultimate dive site, the dramatic Ghost Fleet with its bright corals and sponges, territorial sharks and turtles, colourful fish, warm water and great viz would certainly be it.

FACT FILE

What's in a name? You'll often see Chuuk written as Truk. When the Germans bought Micronesia from the Spanish in 1899, Chuuk was soon mispronounced as Truk with a long "u", due to the difficulty of saying "Ch" in German. With American divers arriving in the late 70's, it went a step further with the use of the short "u" as in "truck".

When to go: Equatorial mid-ocean diving conditions are nearly equal all year round. Sunny periods, punctuated by brief rain showers, are usual patterns each day.

Dive conditions: The water temperature is generally around 28°C and visibility is often over 30m. Most divers wore 3mm shorties or thin lycra suits.

Getting there: Chuuk is seven degrees north of the Equator, approximately 1 300 nautical miles southeast of Japan and about 1 000 miles north of Papua New Guinea. Whichever way you go, it's a mission – but it's worth it. You can choose many cities via which to go and they're all worth a visit. Basically, you need to get to Manila in the Philippines by way of Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur or Singapore, from where Continental Micronesia Airlines fly to Chuuk via Guam.

VHealth requirements: Chuuk is non-malarial. Cholera and typhoid vaccinations are recommended.

Language: Chuukese and English.

Currency: US dollar. 



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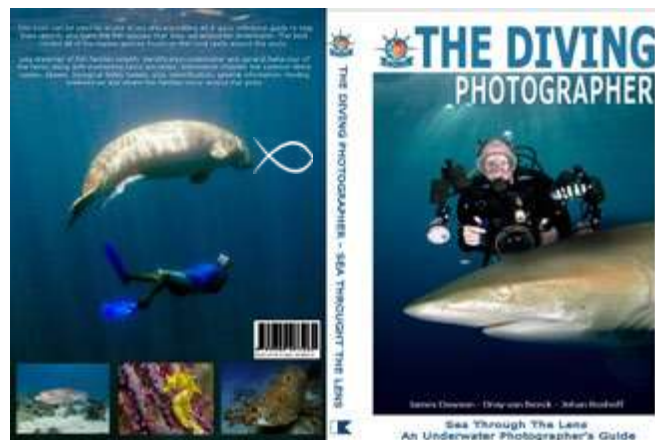
The Diving Photographer –

As scuba divers, we are not always the best photographers, but we do learn very quickly. And if we have a handy guide book, the time spent with our cameras underwater will increase rapidly.

This easy-to-use guide book for the diving photographer can be used by all levels of photographers. It helps you with choosing the right type of camera for your ability although with all the information presented you will learn so quickly that you will have to buy a better camera after working through the book! Preparing and setting up your equipment becomes a breeze with easy pointers on how to check and replace o-rings, quick tips on keeping your housing dry and other small things we usually forget to check.

The technical advice on how to perform manual camera settings, lighting techniques and editing the not-so-perfect shot was a great help. One of the main things I took from this book was learning to back up my photographs and then trying anything and everything with them in the photo editing programmes until it looks like the professionally taken shot that you have been aiming for the whole time. Some other topics covered are strobe positioning, ambient light, photographing wrecks, long exposures and equipment maintenance.

I must say that this book has proved to be a great help in improving my photographing and editing techniques. Photographer is available in all good scuba diving and book shops or online at www.thedivespot.com.au. Cost: \$15



Marine Species Guide –

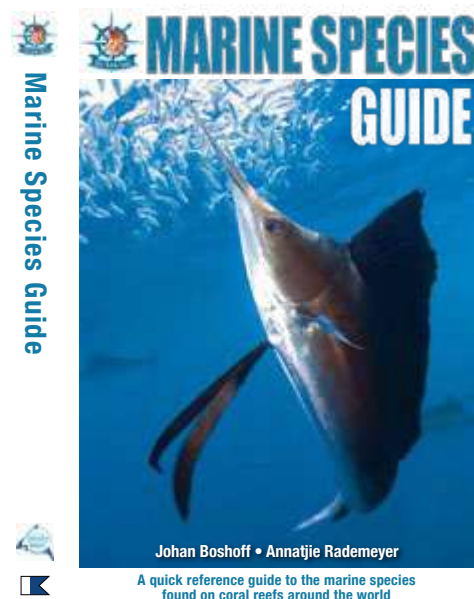
Yes, it happened...I had to buy a larger bookshelf. The latest book from The Dive Spot has landed on our shores – The Marine Species Guide.

A book for both scuba divers and snorkelers to identify and learn all about the different fish species they will come across under water. The book covers most of the marine species found within coral reefs around the world. Line drawings of fish families simplifies identification underwater, while general behavior of the family along with other interesting facts are listed.

Information include common family names, aliases, biological family names, size, identification, general information, feeding preferences and where the families occur around the globe. Photographs of the most common of the species found when scuba diving or snorkeling are included and the fish families are organised for easy reference.

The book works very well in accompaniment with the Marine Species Slate, which can be taken underwater to help with fish identification.

To buy your copy for \$ 25, visit www.thedivespot.com.au or email info@thedivespot.com.au



Marine Species Guide



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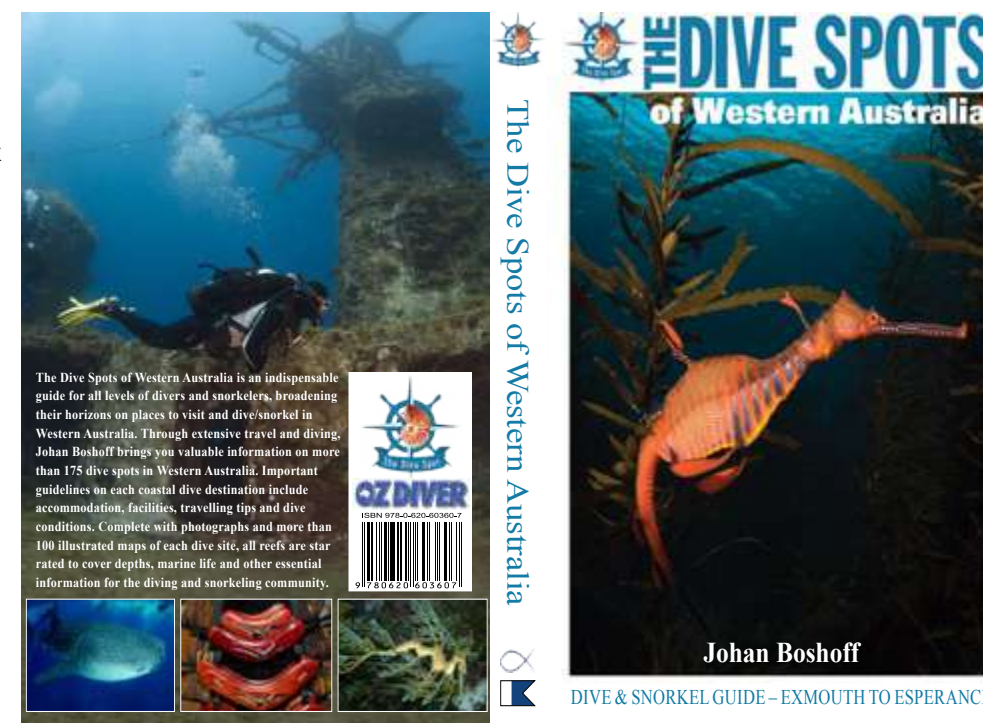
The Dive Spots of Western Australia

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broadening their horizons on places to visit and dive/snorkel in Western Australia. The book has more than 175 dive spots in Western Australia.

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The PowerRay and The PowerVision

Ever wondered what is happening under the water. Now it is possible without scuba gear using the new PowerRay. An underwater drone that allows you to go and explore the ocean secrets and to top it off, you can add the PowerVision so your underwater drone becomes a fish finder with so much more possibilities.

The PowerRay is not just an amazing good looking toy but for fishermen, videographers, photographers and underwater enthusiasts a great device to use to explore the surrounding waters.

This Underwater ROV can dive down to 30 meters in salt, fresh or even chlorinated water for up to 4 hours. With its amazing lights and camera that is situated in front of the unit the camera can capture 4K footage or 12-megapixel still photographs and stores them all on-board on its internal storage device.

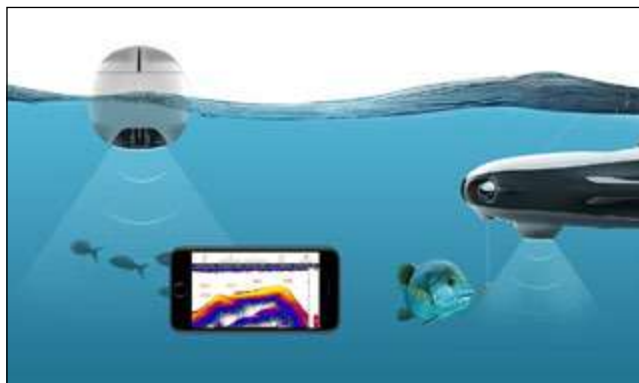
If you are a fisherman, you can add fantastic accessories like the PowerRay Angler package that was specifically designed for fishermen, accessories include Precision Remote Bait Drop which allows you to place the fish bait at a desired position and the PowerSeeker/Fish-finder can dock directly into the PowerRay or be used separately as a standalone device. This PowerSeeker provides you with detailed information on depth, fish distribution, underwater landscape and temperature. If you love fishing, you should certainly consider these added benefits to the PowerRay.

The PowerRay is really easy to operate with its PowerVision App Interface. PowerVision has included a unique live streaming. If you have an Android or iOS device you can connect directly to the PowerRay to live stream 1080P video at 30 frames per second by docking your smartphone into the remote controller that allows full range of motion and speed control.

The PowerRay also has an option to use a VR headset to have a first-person perspective of the drone and also impressive, you can connect to multiple goggles/devices simultaneously and switch between basic viewing mode and control mode. This allows you and multiple friends to all share the same first person viewing experience.

The PowerRay is a great underwater drone with so many features that gives you a spectacular real-time view underwater and allows you to capture just the right shot or fish.

For more information on The PowerRay or The PowerVision's visit: www.powervision.me 



Scubapro Everflex Steamer 7/5mm Wetsuit

As we all know, Scubapro have extremely good scuba diving equipment, and when it was time for me to upgrade my wetsuit there was no other option to go but Scubapro.

By Johan Boshoff

After many years of diving it was time for an upgrade as a standard 5mm wetsuit doesn't work for me anymore, especially when I do long tech dives. The one option was to use my dry suit, but as all dry suit divers know, a dry suit is high maintenance and it gets really hot in the suit before a dive.

There was no way I would be able to dive in a dry suit the whole year round...

So what was my next option? To switch to 7mm, but that's a lot of rubber and it makes it very difficult to move around, not to mention the buoyancy issues. Then I heard about the solution; a wetsuit that has a combination of 5mm and 7mm Everflex neoprene and best of all, it was made by Scubapro.

The new Scubapro Everflex Steamer 7/5mm Wetsuit is made of Everflex neoprene (I don't know what that means exactly, but it's a very stretchy neoprene that makes donning and doffing very easy and also offers outstanding thermal protection).

It was exactly what I needed, and as I know that the Scubapro designers work tirelessly to improve and restyle their wetsuits and try to expand the features of all their suits, I was confident that it would be what I was looking for. My mind was made up and I knew that I had found my suit for many years to come.

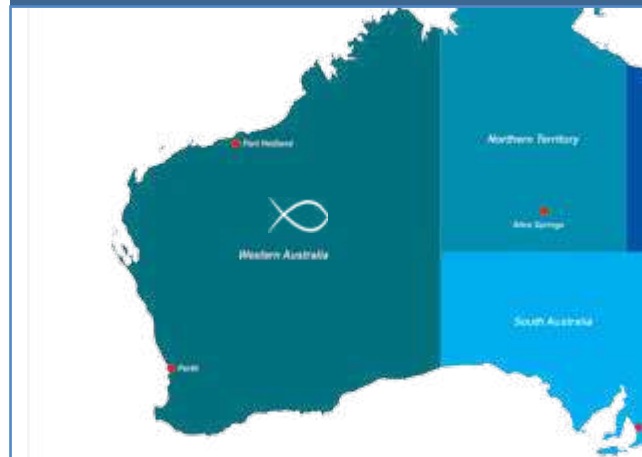
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South West Rocks Dive Centre



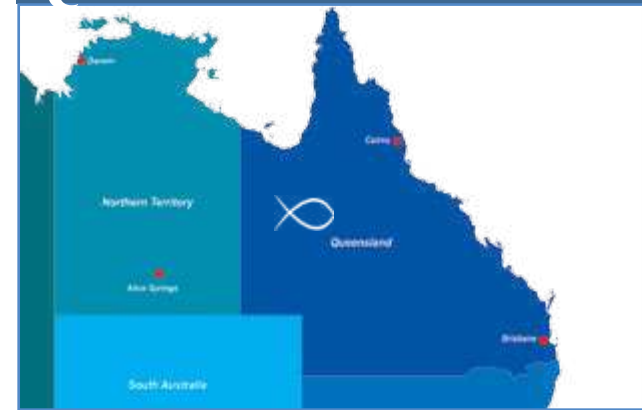
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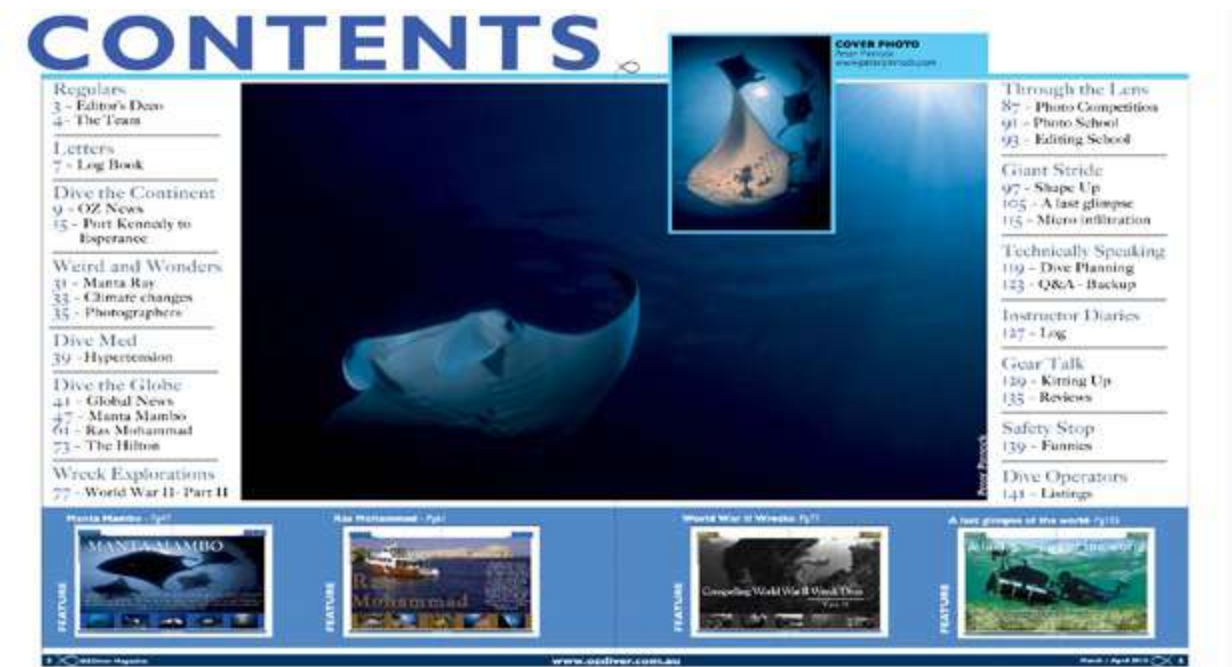
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