



FUVAHMULAH ISLAND
ANDREW NIEUWENHOF
SHOWCASES INCREDIBLE
TIGER SHARK ENCOUNTERS

SIMPLY SOLOMONS
DON SILCOCK DISCOVERS
AN ISLAND PARADISE FAR
FROM THE MODERN WORLD

SHOOTING IN THE DARK
ANDY TORBET DISCUSSES
THE CHALLENGES OF FILMING
IN OVERHEAD ENVIRONMENTS

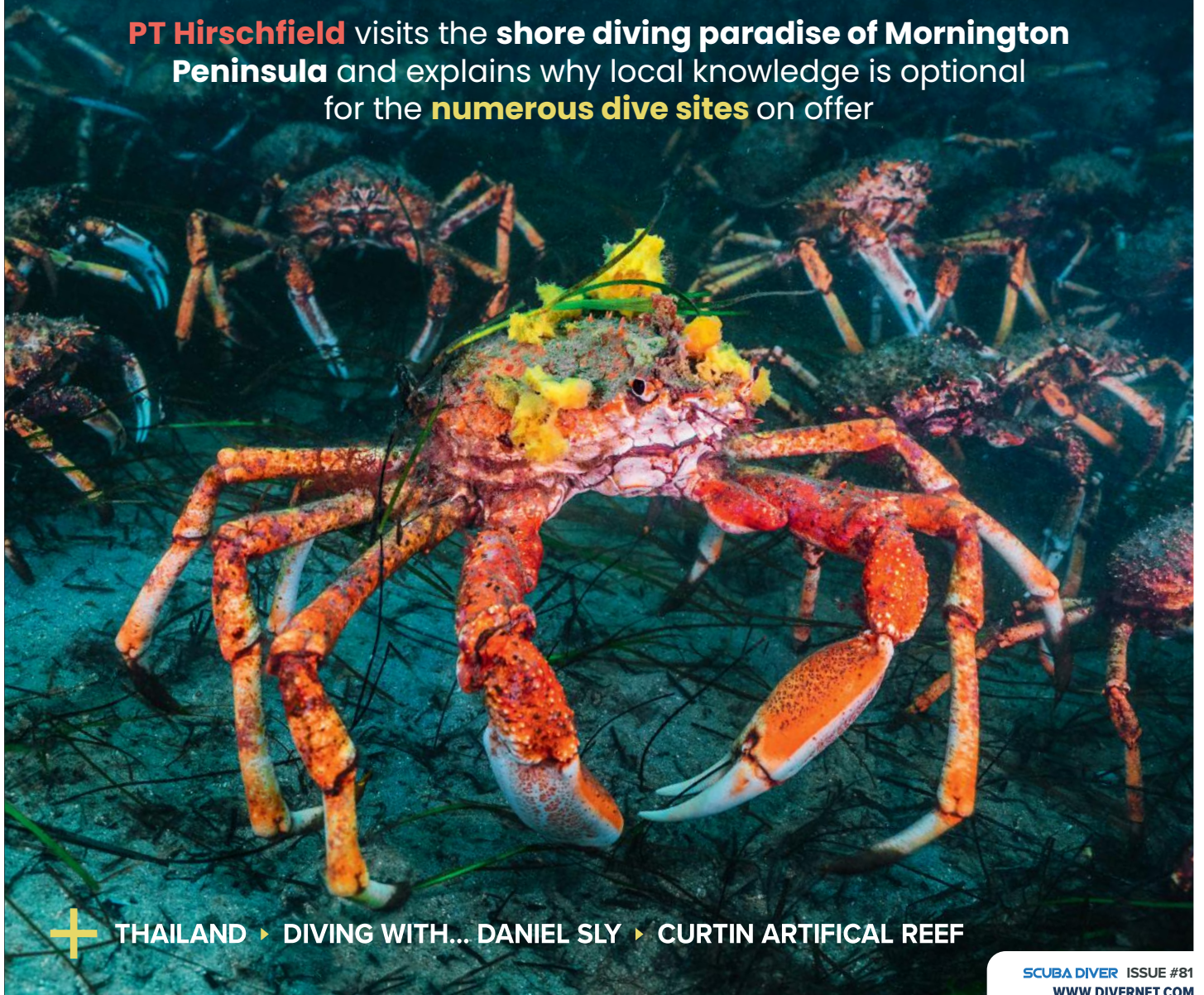
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Memorable **MELBOURNE**

PT Hirschfield visits the **shore diving paradise of Mornington Peninsula** and explains why local knowledge is optional for the **numerous dive sites** on offer



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**EDITORIAL DIRECTOR**

Mark Evans

Email: mark@rorkmedia.com

CREATIVE DIRECTOR

Matt Griffiths

Email: matt@rorkmedia.com

CONTRIBUTORSNigel Marsh, Deborah Dickson-Smith,
Dr Andrew Nieuwenhof, PT Hirschfield**PUBLISHING DIRECTOR**

Ross Arnold

Email: ross@rorkmedia.com

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT MANAGER

Penney Evans

Email: penney@rorkmedia.com

**AUSTRALIA/NEW ZEALAND AND
SOUTHEAST ASIA TEAM**

Adrian Stacey

Editor

(Australia and New Zealand)

Tel: +61 422 611 238

Email: adrian@rorkmedia.com

Don Silcock

Senior Travel Editor

www.indopacificimages.com

MAGAZINETo stock Scuba Diver in your centre,
email: subscriptions@rorkmedia.com**PUBLISHERS**

Rork Media ANZ Pty Ltd

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HMAS Brisbane bears the brunt of Alfred

Cyclone Alfred caused widespread damage across Southeast Queensland and Northern NSW, and this punishing weather event has been felt on land and underwater. Many businesses have been impacted, especially those who rely on the ocean for their livelihood. One of the most-notable casualties was popular dive site, the HMAS Brisbane, which sits just off the Sunshine Coast at Mooloolaba. The powerful swell created by the storm has torn off the forward superstructure, and it now sits upright on the seabed next to the wreck. I, for one, am eager to see how this new makeover looks! It is hoped that the wreck will be reopened to divers from 12 April. Initially, only diving around the wreck's exterior will be permitted until a proper interior inspection is conducted and it is deemed safe to enter.

In NSW, just off the central coast near Sydney, the HMAS Adelaide has also been closed to divers due to storm damage. No date has been set for its reopening, and there is a growing concern among the diving community in this region that the wreck will remain closed indefinitely!

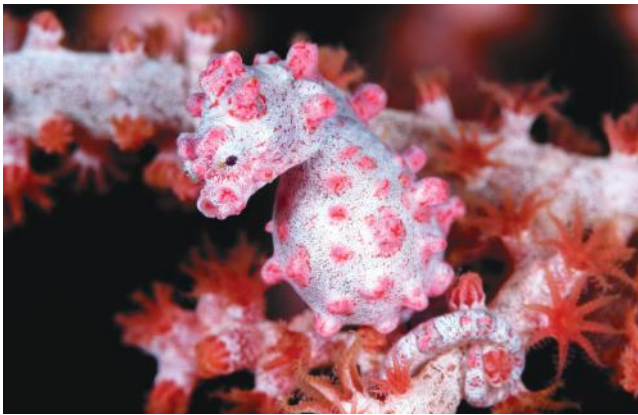
While ensuring the wrecks are as safe as possible is essential, it would be a shame if they were to become permanently off-limits. The Adelaide, in particular, was only sunk in 2011, so it is disappointing that a ship that has only been underwater for 14 years is no longer diveable while plenty of wrecks from World War Two are still open. Diving does come with risks which divers are well aware of, and we accept them as a part of doing what we love. Hopefully, both of these wrecks will soon be fully open to divers again.

Speaking of wrecks, Nigel Marsh shares his pre-Alfred experiences on Curtin artificial reef. This Morten Island dive site boasts 30 wrecks, including barges, tugboats, a yacht and much more. PT Hirschfield explores the unique and diverse waters of Port Philip Bay, Melbourne. For your international destination inspiration, Deborah Dickson-Smith delves into the diving delights on offer in Koh Lanta, Thailand, Don Silcock goes off the beaten track to explore the Paptuara Region of the Solomons, and Dr Andrew Nieuwenhof goes on an adrenaline-fuelled adventure with tiger sharks in Fuvahmulah, Maldives.

Adrian Stacey, Editor (Australia & New Zealand)



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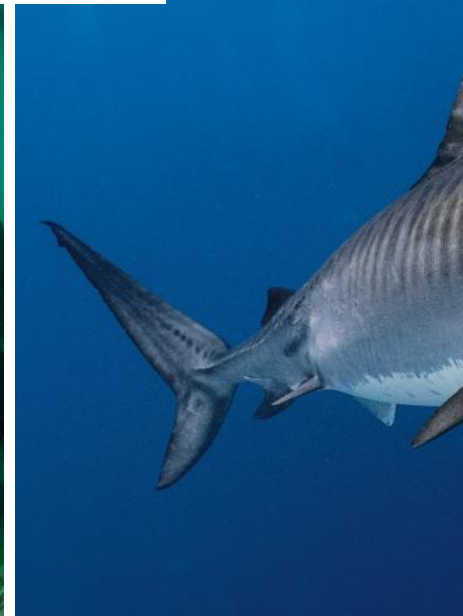
Memorable
MELBOURNE

PT Hirschfield visits the shore diving paradise of Mornington Peninsula and explains why local knowledge is optional for the numerous dive sites on offer

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PHOTOGRAPH © PT HIRSCHFIELD



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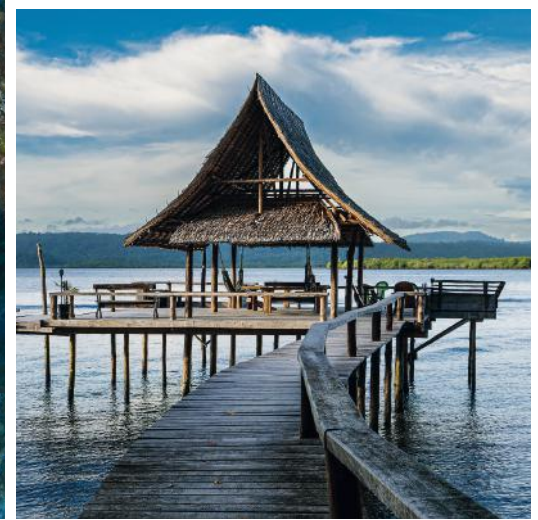
In Melbourne's shore diving paradise of the Mornington Peninsula, local knowledge is optional for a number of dive sites, as PT Hirschfield explains.

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It's a romantic notion most of us have, but very few realise... Find an island paradise, far from the modern world, and then transform it into a desert island dream. But where would you do it? And, more importantly, how? Don Silcock finds out.



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Fuvahmulah is just a speck in the Indian Ocean, but this tiny equatorial island in the far south of the Maldives is earning a big reputation, thanks to its resident population of tiger sharks, as Andrew Nieuwenhof showcases.

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In 1967, the members of the Underwater Research Group of Queensland had a novel idea of creating a dive site in Brisbane's Moreton Bay, and a year later, they sunk an old dredging barge, thus creating the world's first artificial reef built by divers for divers, as Helen Rose and Nigel Marsh explain.

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GLOBAL EXPERTS UNITE AT SONEVA FUSHI

Leading scientists and finance experts convened in the Maldives to develop innovative solutions for restoring and safeguarding coral reefs

Recognising the urgent plight of coral reefs in the Maldives and around the world, the Soneva Foundation Coral Restoration programme convened a landmark dialogue from 9-12 January 2025 at Soneva Fushi in the Baa Atoll UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

The event brought together leading coral scientists, marine conservationists and innovative finance experts to chart transformative solutions for reef restoration and regeneration on a global scale.

Co-facilitated by Professor Callum Roberts from the University of Exeter and Karen Sack, Executive Director of the Ocean Risk and Resilience Action Alliance (ORRAA), the three-day Soneva Dialogue on Coral Reef Restoration and Resilience explored the impact of climate change on coral ecosystems and highlighted groundbreaking restoration techniques being trialled at Soneva Fushi and beyond.

The Dialogue culminated in a joint declaration, emphasising the critical need for swift and large-scale action. International experts proposed innovative financial mechanisms, ranging from blue bonds to insurance models, to unlock the resources necessary for coral reef regeneration. The declaration underscored that without bold interventions, the world risks losing the majority of its tropical coral reefs within decades.

Professor Callum Roberts commented: “Scientific research and practical experience tell us that now is the time for a shift in emphasis from restoration to regeneration, pairing resource-intensive local projects with large-scale ocean management and protection to promote reef recovery and resilience. Coral restoration has been largely backward-looking, aiming to put back what has been lost. It must now pivot to being future-focussed, searching for and developing mixes of corals and other marine life that will keep reefs functional and resilient under changed future conditions.”



The ORRAA’s Karen Sack said: “Corals are in crisis worldwide, and if we are to have any chance of saving reefs at any scale we must rapidly advance regeneration efforts. This requires the urgent scaling up of finance to fund these

INDUSTRY NEWS



vital natural treasures. If we want coral reefs to survive, we are going to have to find novel ways to pay for them. The ORRAA looks forward to working with our members, partners and the scientific community to take the ideas developed at the Soneva Dialogue forward.”

The Soneva Foundation Coral Restoration programme’s lead scientist Dr Johanna Leonhardt added: “As a coral biologist, I see the tragic impacts of marine heatwaves first-hand with bleaching leading to substantial coral degradation here in the Maldives. However, we are not about to give up on this paramount ecosystem – we have a coral spawning lab, outplanting efforts and coral nurseries, and are fully focused on regenerating resilient corals so that they are not lost forever.”

The Soneva Dialogue declaration reaffirms that in recent years reefs around the world have lost half their living coral cover, and failing to limit global warming to 1.5°C will accelerate this loss. However, it also offers hope, calling for bold and innovative approaches to sustain reef resilience in the face of climate threats. Financing on a scale never before attempted will be vital to regenerating these invaluable ecosystems.

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NAUTILUS SCUBA CLUB CAIRNS 2025 UW PHOTOGRAPHY COMPETITION



The Nautilus Scuba Club Cairns supports the local diving community and promotes scuba diving in Far North Queensland. The club has around 400 members, making it one of the largest recreational scuba clubs in Australia.

The Annual Underwater Photography Competition is the major event on the Club’s calendar. It includes photo and video categories and is judged by renowned and independent professional photographers. The competition and accompanying exhibition are sponsored by local and regional dive operators and supporters, including some of the biggest names in the Australian scuba diving industry. In 2024, over 5,000 people visited the exhibition at the Cairns Tanks Arts Centre, where over 500 high-quality photographs and videos were on public display.

The 2025 contest will be open for entries from financial club members from 1-13 May, with the exhibition to be held at the Tanks Arts Centre for an extended period from 18 July to 10 August. Entry to the Tanks Arts Centre is free and the exhibition is popular with locals and visitors alike. Winners of the 2025 competition will be announced at an Awards Night at the Tanks on Saturday 2 August. Visit the Club webpage for further information and updates on the competition: www.nautilus-scuba.net/whats-on/photo-competition

NEW CHAPTER FOR HMAS BRISBANE AFTER CYCLONE ALFRED

Australia’s renowned dive site, the HMAS Brisbane, has been transformed by the powerful swell from Cyclone Alfred, which has torn the forward superstructure off the wreck. Remarkably, the section now rests perfectly upright beside the main hull. This fortuitous alignment has created two distinct structures for divers to explore, along with a natural gutter that creates an attractive sanctuary for marine life. This dramatic reconfiguration not only preserves the storied past of the ex-navy warship but adds a fresh chapter to its legacy. Divers will now experience the thrill of navigating between the main wreck and its detached companion, discovering hidden nooks and flourishing habitats that have quickly become a haven for marine biodiversity. The newly formed gutter is already attracting vibrant schools of fish and other sea creatures, offering a living exhibit of nature’s resilience and beauty.

“Cyclone Alfred has added to the already exciting and curious narrative of HMAS Brisbane,” said Jonny from Sunreef. “We’re just blown away by the power of the ocean and how much of the wreck was relocated, it’s really incredible and now this weather event is eternalized in the story of this already famous wreck.”

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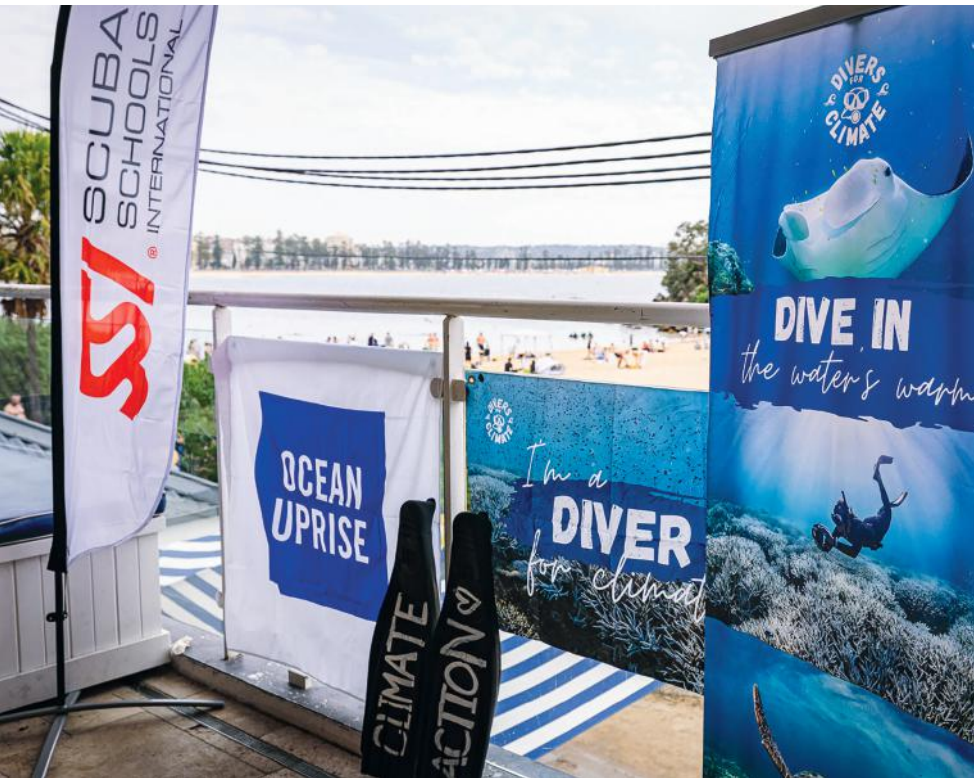
DIVERS UNITE AT AUSTRALIA'S FIRST SNORKEL-OUT FOR CLIMATE

On 16 March, over 100 passionate ocean lovers gathered at Shelly Beach, Sydney, for Australia's first-ever Snorkel-Out for Climate, a vibrant show of community spirit and ocean advocacy. Organised by Divers for Climate for Climate Action Week Sydney, the event brought together divers, snorkellers, and marine scientists to raise awareness of the changes unfolding beneath the surface.

With rising ocean temperatures and events such as coral bleaching becoming more frequent, the dive community is witnessing the impacts of climate change firsthand. A recent national survey of almost 1,000 divers across Australia revealed that 91% have personally observed climate-related changes in the ocean and support stronger government action, with many feeling direct effects on their well-being and livelihoods. "Divers and snorkellers see the beauty of the ocean every day, but we also see it changing before our eyes," said Dr Yolanda Waters, CEO of Divers for Climate. "We are on the frontlines".

As Australia heads toward a federal election, the dive community is rallying behind the I'm a Diver for Climate campaign, calling on candidates to prioritise ocean protection. Their message is simple: we love our oceans and want leaders who will help protect them. The event was a powerful reminder that collective action can make a difference. For more, visit: diversforclimate.com





ESSO/EXXONMOBIL PULLS PLUG ON GIPPSLAND BASIN CARBON POLLUTION DUMPING CCS PLANS

The Australian Marine Conservation Society (AMCS) has welcomed the withdrawal of the controversial South East Australia Carbon Capture and Storage (SEA CCS) proposal by US oil giant Esso/ExxonMobil, labelling it a win for coastal communities, marine life and climate action. The proposal, which sought to dump carbon pollution from the Longford gas plant beneath the seafloor of the Gippsland Basin using ageing oil and gas infrastructure, was scrapped before reaching approval under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act. AMCS Fossil Fuel Campaign Manager Louise Morris said: "This is a significant victory. Gippsland coastal communities have fought hard against this proposal, and for the marine life that would have been impacted by dumping carbon pollution under our oceans."

"Carbon dumping CCS under the ocean using old and rusting rigs has proven to be an unviable and unsafe approach across the globe. Esso/Exxon's plans would have repurposed outdated oil and gas rigs in the Gippsland Basin to dump carbon pollution from the Longford gas plant in old, disused wells under the seafloor - an approach riddled with risks, including potential leaks into the ocean and atmosphere."

"The failure of this project highlights the global shortcomings of ocean-based CCS, particularly when used by fossil fuel companies to prolong the life of polluting infrastructure and avoid full decommissioning responsibilities. "Taxpayers should not foot the bill for risky, ineffective carbon dumping schemes. In this coming federal budget, AMCS calls on the Australian Government to end public subsidies for carbon pollution dumping CCS proposals in our ocean, and instead invest in proven, clean climate solutions."

"AMCS is also calling on both the Government and the Opposition to commit to banning all forms of ocean-based carbon pollution dumping, protecting our marine environment and coastal communities from this dangerous and failing technology."



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NIUE RECEIVES MORE GLOBAL RECOGNITION



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© Hunter Malcon



© Roxy Damseaux

Time Magazine has named Niue on their World's Greatest Places 2025 list. Niue Blue is the only dive operator in Niue and is also about to become the latest Eco Centre of PADI. It will be one of only three dive hubs in the South Pacific with such a prestigious certification, which is awarded to operators promoting marine biodiversity and community resilience in their own backyards.

"Niue is a really unique South Pacific island because there is no surrounding barrier reef and [it] is made up entirely of limestone, which allows for the migrating humpbacks to come closer to shore than anywhere else in the Pacific Ocean," says PADI Regional Manager Robyn Vincent.

This most-recent award comes off the back of Niue also being named on the CNN Best travel destinations to visit in 2025. Niue was the only Pacific Island to gain a mention on either list.

More specifically, Niue Blue Island Experiences was highlighted on the list. "To be named on the Time World's Greatest Places 2025 list is a reflection of the collaboration of many amazing passionate people and organisations and NGOs within Niue that are all working together" says Niue Blue Manager Evan Barclay. "The common theme is the desire to see Niue better than it is today. From the unique flora and fauna above the water - to the huge marine protected area (Niue Moana Mahu), Niue is a special place on the planet and leading the way in sustainable tourism".

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It's a February Friday morning on Melbourne's Mornington Peninsula. The sun's streaming over the bay, with as many interstate and overseas dive tourists entering and exiting the shallow shorelines as there are locals. The water's 20 degrees C.

Today the gentle ebb and flow of dive tourists hails from South Australia, New Zealand, Portugal, Colombia, Seattle and beyond. While some have spontaneously teamed up with or hired local guides, others are comfortable diving solo beneath the peninsula's many popular diving piers. Or with buddies they've brought from home.

Some arm themselves with essential hints about the tides of Flinders or Portsea from one of several local dive shops. But perennial pier favourites Rye and Blairgowrie (affectionately called 'Blair' by locals) are rarely undiveable.

They can typically be dived with little more than a full tank of air and a wish for critters - dive buddies and local knowledge optional. There are no steep steps, rocky ledges or cliffs to navigate water entry and exit beneath Melbourne's piers. Just long, gentle baptisms where a 12-litre tank has been known to last for two hours or more, usually in 2m-10m depth.

The parameters of the dive sites are quite literally signposted by tall pier structures that stretch out over the water. There aren't many places in the world where visiting divers might jump in to explore quite safely, without so much as a site briefing. Just keep in mind that Blairgowrie is a working marina with boat traffic. There's signage at the start of the pier clearly indicating areas that can and can't be dived.

There's nothing stopping suitably qualified and experienced recreational divers from jumping in solo and navigating their way out between the sponge-encrusted pylons and back again. Because marine life loves structure, there's usually plenty to see, especially if you know where to look. Substrate, pylons, sea walls, water column and surface each provide a separate treasure chest to explore. Only with expert local knowledge can you consider exploring safely beyond the pylons. As divers share all the piers with fishers, be mindful of fishing line, hooks and squid jigs from above.


Located on the 1,930 sq km Port Phillip Bay rather than on open ocean, the water on the western coast of the Mornington Peninsula is largely protected. Melbourne's notoriously changeable weather is a bonus for divers, as unfavourable conditions are rare and tend to pass quickly.

Even on the worst day, diveable conditions can almost always be found within half an hour's drive. Several of the most popular sites are less than ten minute's drive from each other, providing ample dive options.

There's nothing difficult about shore diving in Melbourne. It's generally considered easy for divers of all skill levels and is frequently rewarding, with or without a local guide to assist you. ▶

Did you know?

There are benefits to diving here in both seasons. Winter's cooler waters bring great visibility (April–July offer the best visibility due to low plankton growth) while the warmth of summer attracts more critters and make diving all the more pleasant.



“ Several of the most-popular sites are less than ten minute’s drive from each other, providing ample dive options. There’s nothing difficult about shore diving in Melbourne. It’s generally considered easy for divers of all skill levels ”

THE LAZY DIVING DAYS

In Melbourne’s shore diving paradise, local knowledge is optional for a number of dive sites, as PT Hirschfield explains

Photographs by PT Hirschfield or as credited

Maria from Portugal and Kevin from Colombia

Maria is on a Work and Holiday Visa from Belgium, while her partner Kevin from Colombia is studying and working in Melbourne. They've hired dive gear plus the services of local dive instructor Warren through Extreme Watersport in Capel Sound to guide them at Rye Pier.

Both are new to diving, with 14 dives between them. Maria says: 'We thought we'd have to go far away for diving. The water was kind of cold, but we were distracted seeing the fish. My favourite was the pufferfish and Kevin's was the seahorse. We were lucky to see an octopus!'

'Kevin was always with the instructor Warren, who is very nice. We like him a lot. The dive felt super safe. The water is not deep, and there are so many things to see.'

Their chosen dive shop Extreme Watersport provides courses, fun dives and services to novice and experienced divers visiting from interstate and overseas. They also run dive trips and boat dives, with a steady stream of keen local and visiting shore divers visiting the shop for air fills, gear purchase and servicing.

Close encounter with a beautiful Maori octopus



© Diana Fernie

Daisy and Amanda from South Australia

South Australian divers Diana (better known as Daisy) and Amanda are exiting the water at Blairgowrie Pier. Like many local and visiting divers, they're carting dive gear and hefty camera rigs in beach wagons to save their backs as they transit between flat, spacious carparks and dedicated divers' pontoons and platforms. It's all very civilised.

Like many dive tourists, this is not their first trip to Port Phillip Bay piers, which become very easy to navigate after an introductory dive or two.

Daisy and Amanda have left their beloved leafy seadragons at home, 'looking for a bit of variety and some weedy seadragons'. During Melbourne's shallow pier dives, weedy seadragons are easily found in less than 5m depth at Flinders (on the peninsula's slightly wilder Westernport side), and at Portsea, one of the more-challenging pier dives on the bay side due to surge.

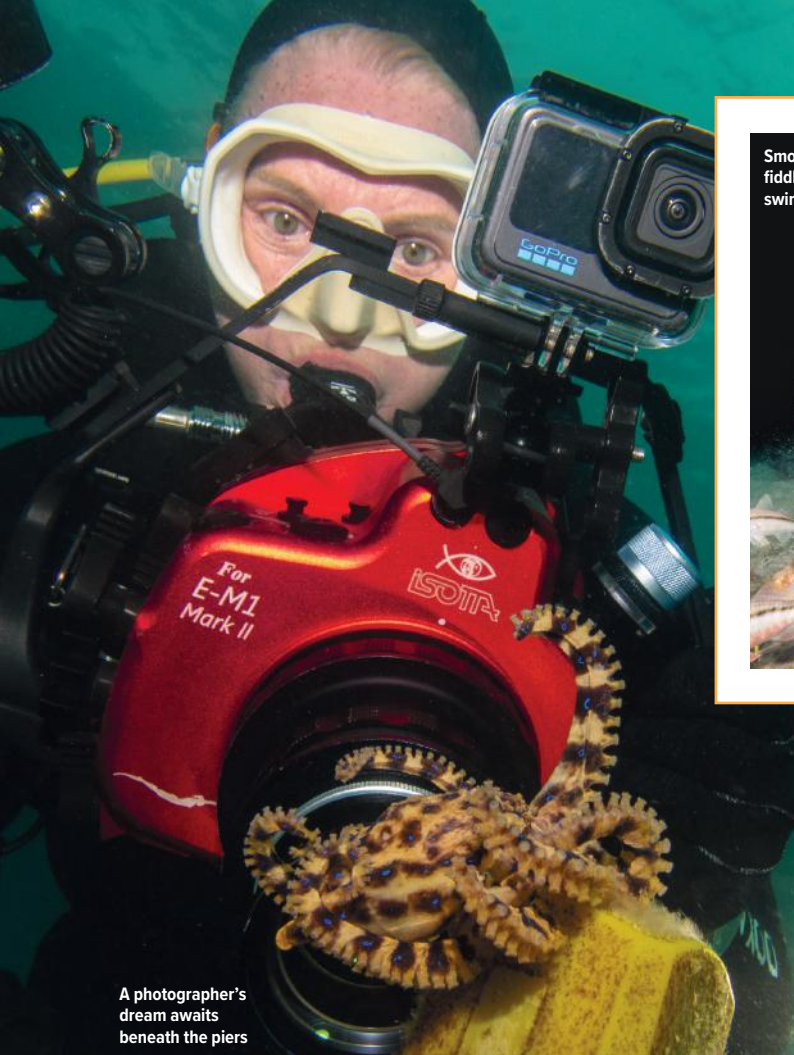


Spider crab clan

Did you know?

In a unique twist on nature, male seahorses, not females, become pregnant, incubating eggs in a specialized brood pouch on their abdomen, similar to a uterus, until they give birth to fully developed babies!

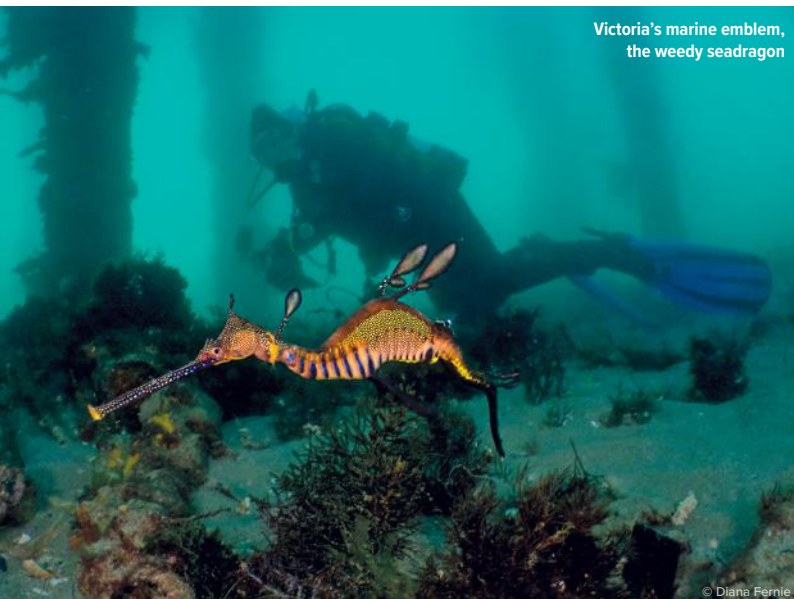
A seahorse beneath the pier



A photographer's dream awaits beneath the piers



Smooth ray eats a fiddler ray as goatfish swim past



Victoria's marine emblem, the weedy seadragon

© Diana Fernie

While there's plenty of boat diving options in Port Philip Bay and dozens of wrecks to explore, the ladies prefer diving under the piers at their leisure, opting for a 'long slow potter with no-one bugging us.' The dive they've just finished is a 'shorter one' from their week-long divecation at 'just' 85 minutes. They've been aiming for two dives each day, between 90 minutes and two hours bottom time, exploring Blairgowrie, Rye, Flinders and Portsea.

While night dives can be rewarding, Daisy and Amanda prefer day diving. With good sunlight, they nominate Blairgowrie as their favourite. Though Flinders can be a bit tricky to navigate the tide, swell and wind direction, they

sought local knowledge for the best outcomes: 'The viz was around two metres at 10am. We were told by a dive shop owner to wait til 11am. So we waited, it cleared up and we went in.' Daisy remarks: 'We saw a lot more seahorses when we dived here in April than we did just now.' It's not that the seahorses weren't there. You just have to know where they like to hide.

Judy from Wellington, NZ

As Daisy and Amanda return from their latest dive through the Blair carpark, doctor Judy is assembling her underwater camera at her rental car, straight from her luggage. She's just landed at Melbourne airport after a 6am flight from Wellington. She's driven straight to the Mornington Peninsula for a couple of dives, before heading back into the city for weekend work commitments.

This is her third visit to the Mornington Peninsula: 'I'd always associated Melbourne with coffee culture and shopping. The piers in Port Phillip Bay are seriously underrated. I'd never heard of them until I met Jules Casey (aka Peninsula local legend, One Breath Diver) during an overseas liveaboard.'

'Even when she was saying how wonderful these piers were, I was still dubious. Until I dived them. While I've tacked my dives onto work trips, I could easily spend a week or longer just diving the piers.'

'It fascinates me that there's so much to see, so close to shore, in built up urban areas. Access is generally easy and the shallow diving means I'm not worried about no fly times. These depths allow for long, slow dives. The piers are a photographer's dream!'

Peninsula dive site carparks are friendly places. Having previously dived these piers solo, Judy unexpectedly finds herself with an expert local dive buddy who offers to help her locate the critters. ▶

“ Substrate, pylons, sea walls, water column and surface each provide a separate treasure chest to explore ”

'I'm comfortable navigating the dive myself, but having a local who knows where to look for things was invaluable. I would never have seen the octopus trail or so many adult and baby seahorses on my own.'

In terms of hiring a specialist local guide, Judy says: 'It comes down to the individual and what they want to see and their comfort level. I saw things I otherwise wouldn't have. Though diving on your own allows you to go at your own pace, and I've never been short of things to see. I guess if you are after something specific like weedy sea dragons, then a guide would help.'

Natalie from Seattle, USA

Natalie has been planning to dive in Melbourne with her Aussie friend for almost a decade. By day two of her long-awaited week-long adventure, Natalie declared: 'If I had to go home right now, I would do so completely satisfied!'

Having a local dive buddy to share and guide the underwater adventures elevated Natalie's experience to the aquatic equivalent of an African safari. Her first dive at Blairgowrie Pier had shown her pale octopus, baby seahorses, massive smooth rays, banjo sharks and more. Her local dive buddy showed her many baby cuttlefish as well as adults, hidden beneath the concrete matting along the back seawall.

Natalie's second dive day at Flinders was hand-picked using local knowledge for optimal conditions. With abundant weedy sea dragons and a gentle cuddle initiated by an enormous Maori octopus (bigger than many of the Giant Pacific octopus she'd seen in Seattle), Natalie proclaimed this 'one of the best dives of my life!'

By day three, she'd crossed 'blue ringed octopus' from the top of her 'bucket list', locating one for herself during a morning dive, hunting across Rye's sea floor. On a subsequent night dive here, Natalie encountered big belly and shorthead seahorses, marvelling that there were 'too many to count!'

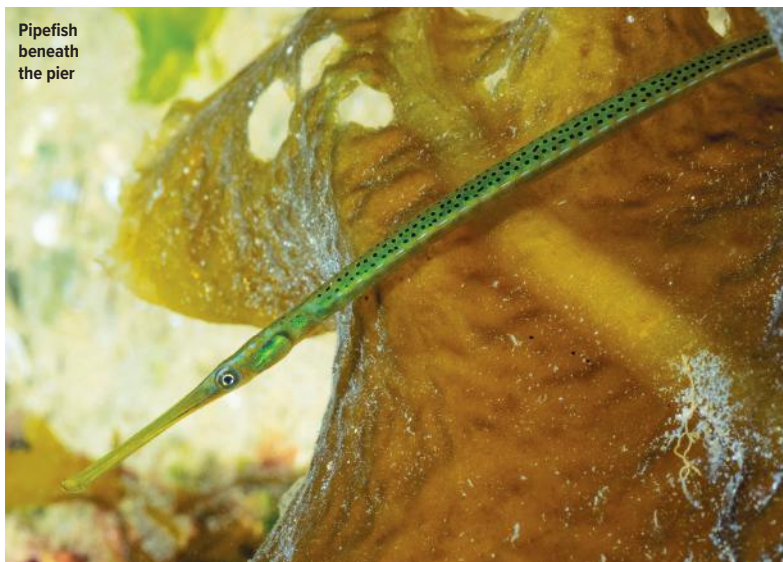
Travelling from the much-colder waters of America's Pacific North West to shore dive in Port Phillip bay is a massive journey. Natalie considers this one of the most epic adventures of her dive life so far. ■



Octopus on wheel on the Mornington Peninsula



A rare elephant shark on a Blairgowrie night dive



Pipefish beneath the pier



The fabulous spider crabs of Port Phillip Bay

Keen to shore dive in Melbourne?

Natalie chose to hire dive gear too heavy for the plane from Extreme Watersport. Contact them for local knowledge, dive guide services, and all your dive rental, gear purchase and servicing needs on (03) 5982 3432.

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DIVIN

Koh Lanta

The island of Koh Lanta is the closest jump-off point for some of the best dive sites in Thailand's southern Andaman Sea, the best known of which are Hin Mueng, Hin Daeng and the islets of Koh Haa

Photographs by Pete McGee and Lanta Diver

Did you know?

There are around 200 species of moray eel in the planet's oceans. They are fish not reptiles despite their snake-like appearance and lack of pectoral and pelvic fins. They are a shy animal but sightings are common in Thailand.

IG

The region can be dived by liveaboard on the Southern Thailand itineraries and if you prefer to be based at a resort, there are also several dive centres on Koh Lanta.

Hin Daeng and Hin Muang

These twin pinnacles are among the most-famous dive sites in Thailand and are known for their deep drop-offs and spectacular marine life. Hin Daeng (Red Rock) is covered in red soft corals, while Hin Muang (Purple Rock) features stunning purple-hued soft corals. These giant pinnacles offer dramatic underwater scenery, with steep walls dropping right down to 60m and more.

Both sites are known for their strong currents and nutrient-rich waters, attracting large pelagic species, including leopard sharks, manta rays and the occasional whale shark, gliding through the blue. The steep walls, which plunge to depths of over 50m, are surrounded by schooling fish - snapper, jackfish, barracudas, rainbow runners, fusiliers, longfin batfish and trevally. Colourful reef fish dart among the vibrant soft corals, including unicornfish, angelfish, butterflyfish, parrotfish, anemones and moray eels. ▶

Did you know?

Koh Lanta is perfectly located close to many of Thailand's best dive sites, including the six coral-fringed islands at Koh Haa, the beautiful Koh Rok islands, and Thailand's deepest wall dive, the two pinnacles at Hin Daeng and Hin Muang.

Koh Haa

Koh Haa (meaning 'Five Islands') is a fantastic dive site for both beginners and experienced divers. Stunning above and below water, this group of tall, jagged limestone karst islands boasts a variety of dive environments, including caves, caverns, and coral gardens.

One of the highlights is the Cathedral, a breathtaking site featuring two large underwater caverns illuminated by beams of sunlight filtering through the water, creating a mesmerizing light show. The sandy bottom of the caverns provides a home for blue-spotted stingrays, while the soft coral gardens and forests of whip corals outside are teeming with clownfish, moray eels, lionfish, and nudibranchs. Schools of barracuda and trevally often pass by, making for an exciting dive.

Smaller caverns and swim-throughs are covered in bright orange, yellow and pink soft corals, populated by colourful damsels, anemone fish, anthias and chromis. Look out for ornate ghost pipefish, frogfish, nudibranchs and various shrimps, including harlequin and peacock mantis.

Bida Nok and Bida Nai

Located near Koh Phi Phi, these limestone islets offer some of the best marine biodiversity in the region. Bida Nok is famous for its vertical walls that drop to 30m, covered in colourful soft corals and gorgonian sea fans.

Beneath the surface the islands form steep coral walls, rocky outcrops and swim-throughs. There are also a lot of colourful soft corals and giant Gorgonian fans. Look for octopuses and cuttlefish swim-throughs and crevices, and you're likely to also see moray eels, sea snakes, ribbon eels, ornate ghost pipefish, seahorses and nudibranchs in the coral rubble and sandy areas.

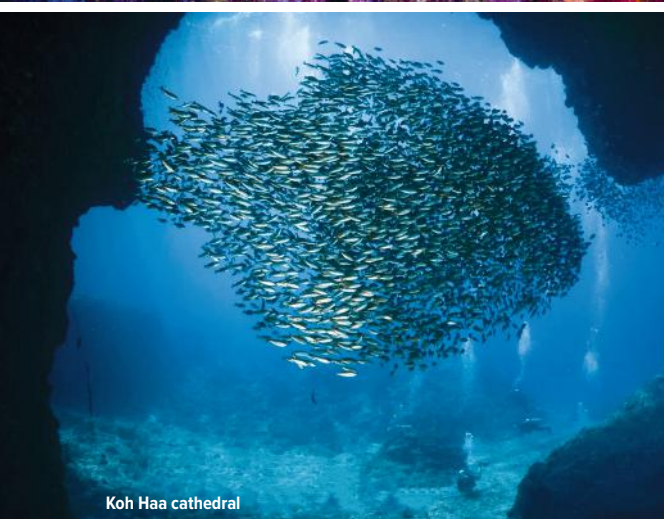
Bida Nai, slightly smaller, offers a mix of coral slopes and sandy patches, where leopard sharks and blacktip reef sharks are frequently seen resting. Schools of fusiliers, snappers, and batfish swirl around the coral formations, making every dive a vibrant experience.

Did you know?

Koh Haa, meaning 'Five Islands' in Thai, is a stunning archipelago in the Andaman Sea. It is a popular destination for diving and snorkelling, well known for its crystal-clear waters, diverse marine life and dramatic landscapes.

“Stunning above and below water, this group of tall, jagged limestone karst islands boasts a variety of dive environments, including caves, caverns, and coral gardens”

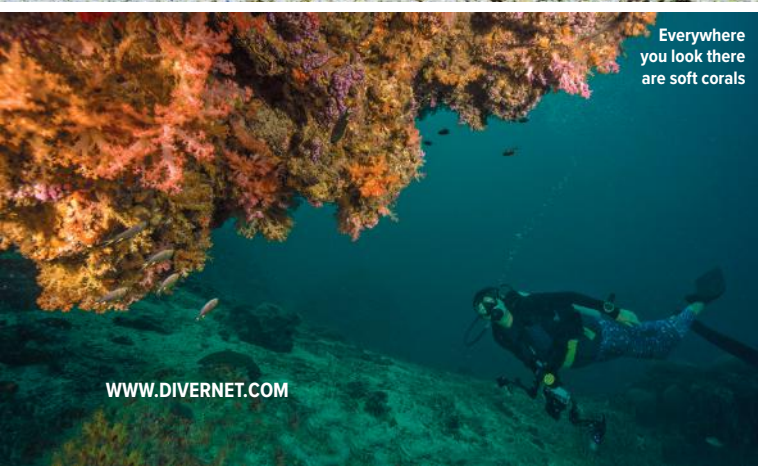
The corals are teeming with life and colour



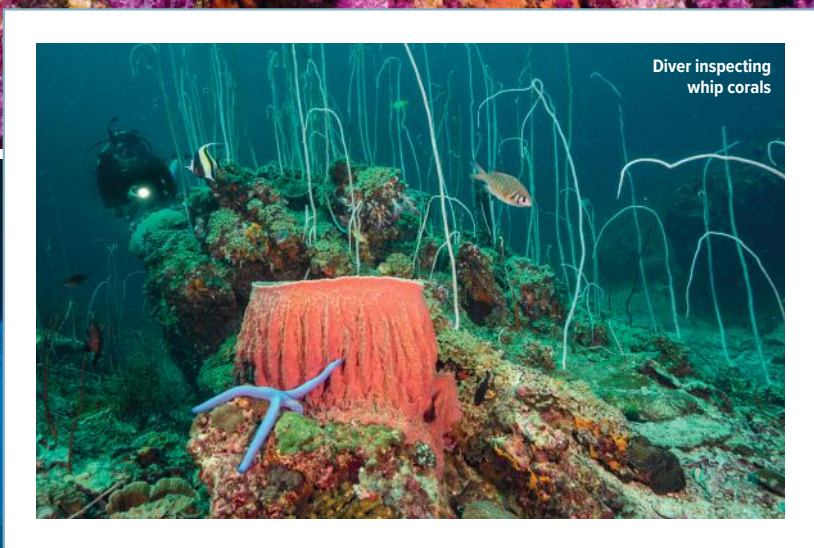
Koh Haa cathedral



Leopard shark



Everywhere you look there are soft corals



Diver inspecting whip corals

Shark Point

Shark Point, a protected marine sanctuary, is named after the frequent sightings of leopard sharks resting on the sandy bottom. The site consists of three pinnacles covered in pink and purple soft corals, attracting an array of marine life. Schools of yellowtail barracuda and trevally circle the pinnacles, and turtles are often seen. This site is particularly popular with macro photographers, as seahorses, nudibranchs, pipefish, and frogfish hide among the coral formations. The gentle currents make for a relaxed yet visually stunning dive.

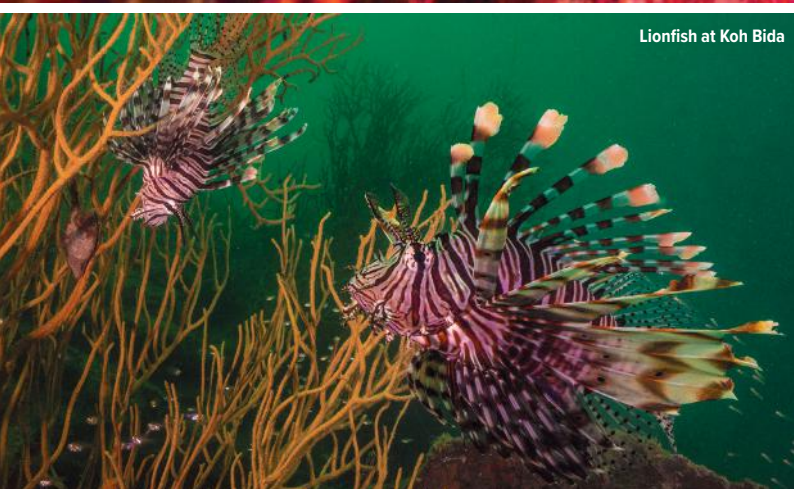
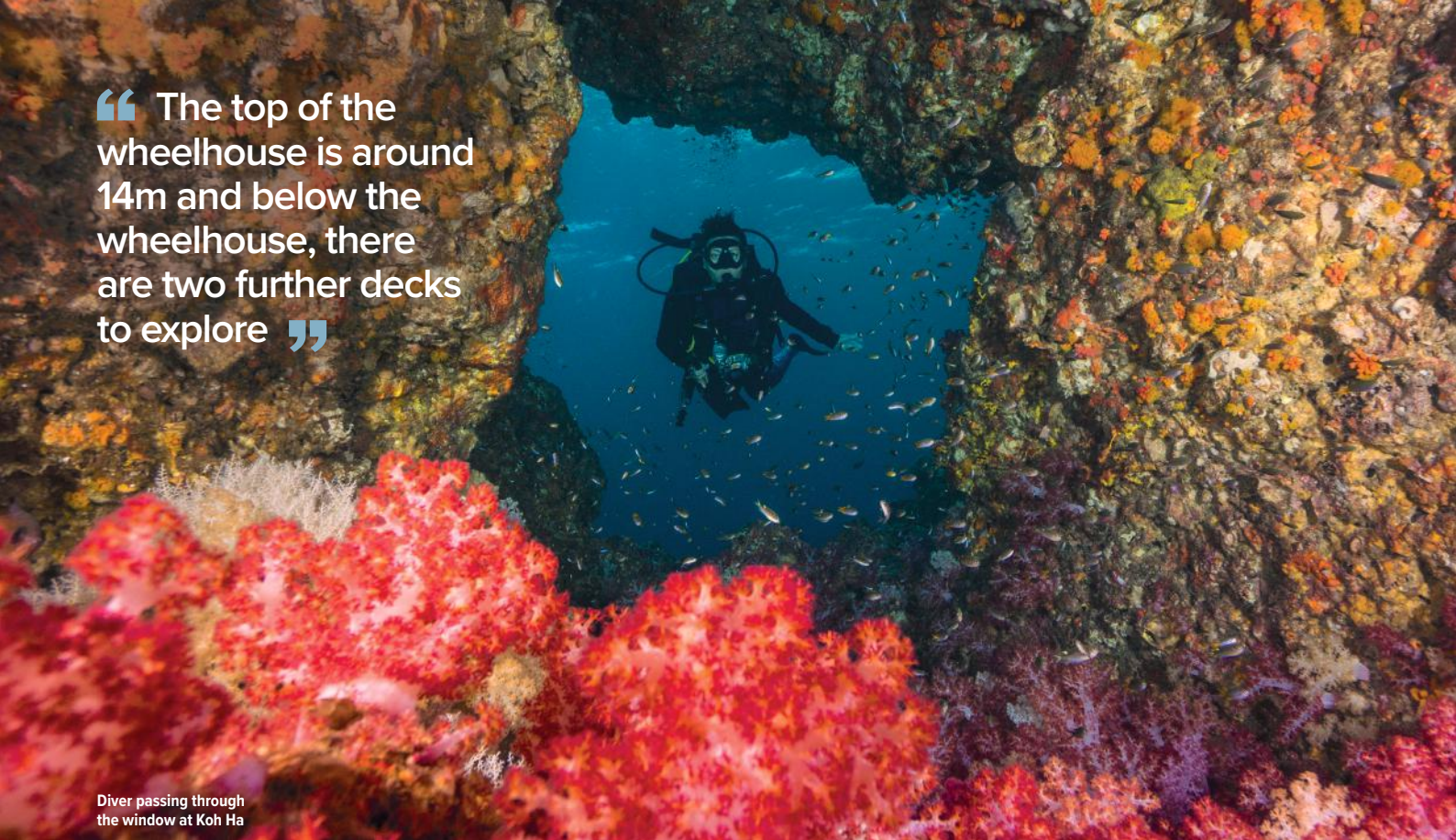
King Cruiser Wreck

This sunken passenger ferry provides an eerie yet exciting wreck dive. The King Cruiser sank in 1997 after hitting Anemone Reef and has since become an artificial reef teeming with marine life. The wreck is now encrusted with colourful corals and sea anemones, attracting large schools of trevally, barracuda, and snapper.

Explore the outer decks and peer into the remnants of the cabins and corridors, where lionfish, scorpionfish and the odd pufferfish shelter. The wreck sits at a depth of around 30m, and there can sometimes be strong currents, so this dive is better for advanced divers. The wreck's structural integrity has deteriorated over time, making penetration dives unsafe, but the external exploration still provides an unforgettable experience. ▶

“ The top of the wheelhouse is around 14m and below the wheelhouse, there are two further decks to explore ”

Diver passing through the window at Koh Ha



Lionfish at Koh Bida



Divers passing an overhang flush with colour

Kled Keaw Wreck

The Kled Keaw Wreck sits between Koh Lanta and Koh Phi Phi Leh. Originally built for the Norwegian Royal Navy in 1948, it was later acquired by the Royal Thai Navy and the Coastal & Marine Resource department to create an artificial reef. The wreck is 47 metres long and eight metres wide and sits at a maximum depth of 26m. The top of the wheelhouse is around 14m and below the wheelhouse, there are two further decks to explore.

Sunk in 1948, Kled Keaw is an oasis in the middle of the ocean, teeming with marine life both big and small. Schools of pelagic fish gravitate towards the wreck in search of an easy meal, while smaller tropical fish find refuge in its many nooks and crannies and macro species cover the structure. Expect to see lionfish, porcupinefish, grouper, rabbitfish, snapper, damselfish, trevally, squid, and barracuda, schools of bright yellow snapper, glassfish everywhere, and colourful rabbitfish, damsels and fusiliers.

Contact the team of experts at Diveplanit Travel for recommendations on dive resorts on Koh Lanta, and liveaboards that visit the region's dive sites.

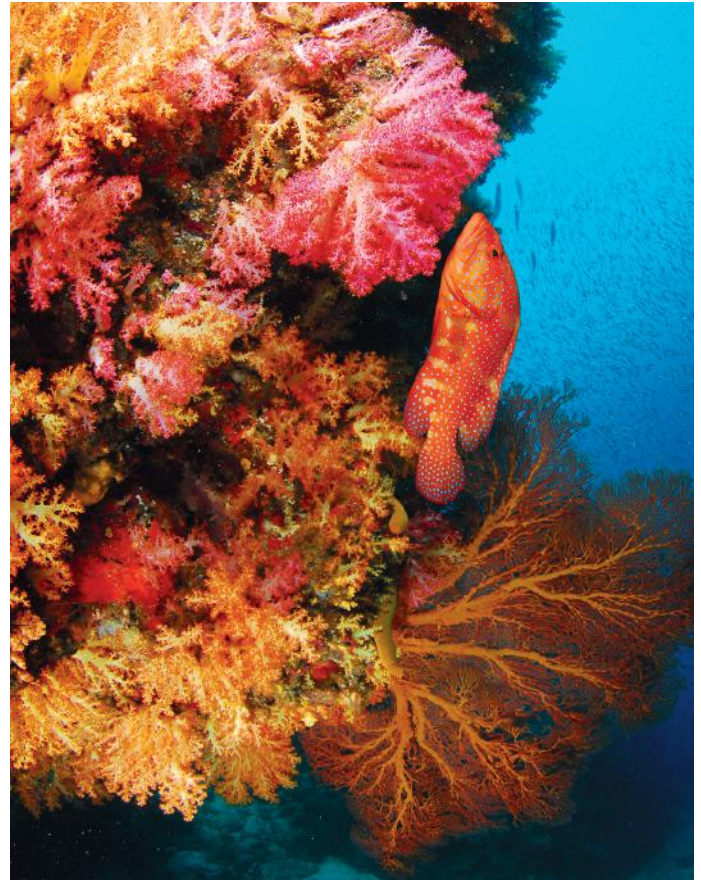
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A whale shark cruising past

DIVE THAILAND

GEMS OF THE SOUTHERN ANDAMAN SEA



Dive the vibrant soft coral reefs and stunning caverns of Thailand's southern Andaman Sea

Koh Ha (5 islands), Hin Muang (Purple Rock) and Hin Daeng (Red Rock) boast some of the most colourful soft coral reefs in Thailand - if not the world. The two giant pinnacles of Hin Muang and Hin Daeng offer dramatic underwater scenery, with steep walls covered in soft red and purple corals (hence the names). Koh Ha is stunning above and below water, a circle of five tall limestone karst islands jutting up from the sea, and below, a labyrinth of caves and swim-throughs including the massive Cathedral Cave. Explore them in luxury, with a dive/stay package at Pimalai Resort & Spa on nearby Koh Lanta, choosing from a wide range of accommodation, from Deluxe Suites to Private Plunge Pool Villas.



For more information about diving Thailand's Andaman Sea, contact the team of experts at Diveplanit Travel.
diveplanit.com phone: 1800 607 913 email: enquire@diveplanit.com

PAPAPA

For Marg and Pete Blanche, the first step in this journey began in the 1980s when they visited the Solomon Islands for the first time. They fell in love - not just with the stunning tropical landscapes, but with the warmth and genuine hospitality of the people. Over the years, their visits became more frequent, each trip fuelling their dream of finding an island of their own. But they weren't looking for just any island; they had a clear vision, and they knew it had to be just right.

Between them, they identified six essential criteria - six boxes that had to be ticked before they would commit. And despite the nearly 1,000 islands that make up the Solomons, finding one that met every requirement proved to be an immense challenge.

Some islands were remote but lacked fresh water. Others had pristine reefs but were too far from an airstrip. A few came close, but weren't quite right. The search continued for years, with each promising lead ultimately discarded for falling short of one crucial element in their plan. Their long search finally came to an end in 2007 when, while exploring Santa Isabel, they stumbled upon Papatutura Island. It was everything they had been searching for. Not just beautiful, but practical. Not just remote, but accessible. And, most importantly, it met all six of their carefully defined criteria.

First, it had its own natural source of fresh water - a non-negotiable requirement for sustainable island living. Second, it was far removed from established tourism hubs, offering the untouched serenity they longed for. The third box was for waves, and Papatutura delivered with consistent surf breaks. The fourth requirement - excellent snorkeling and diving - was fulfilled by the island's vibrant coral reefs and crystal-clear waters. ▶

Did you know?

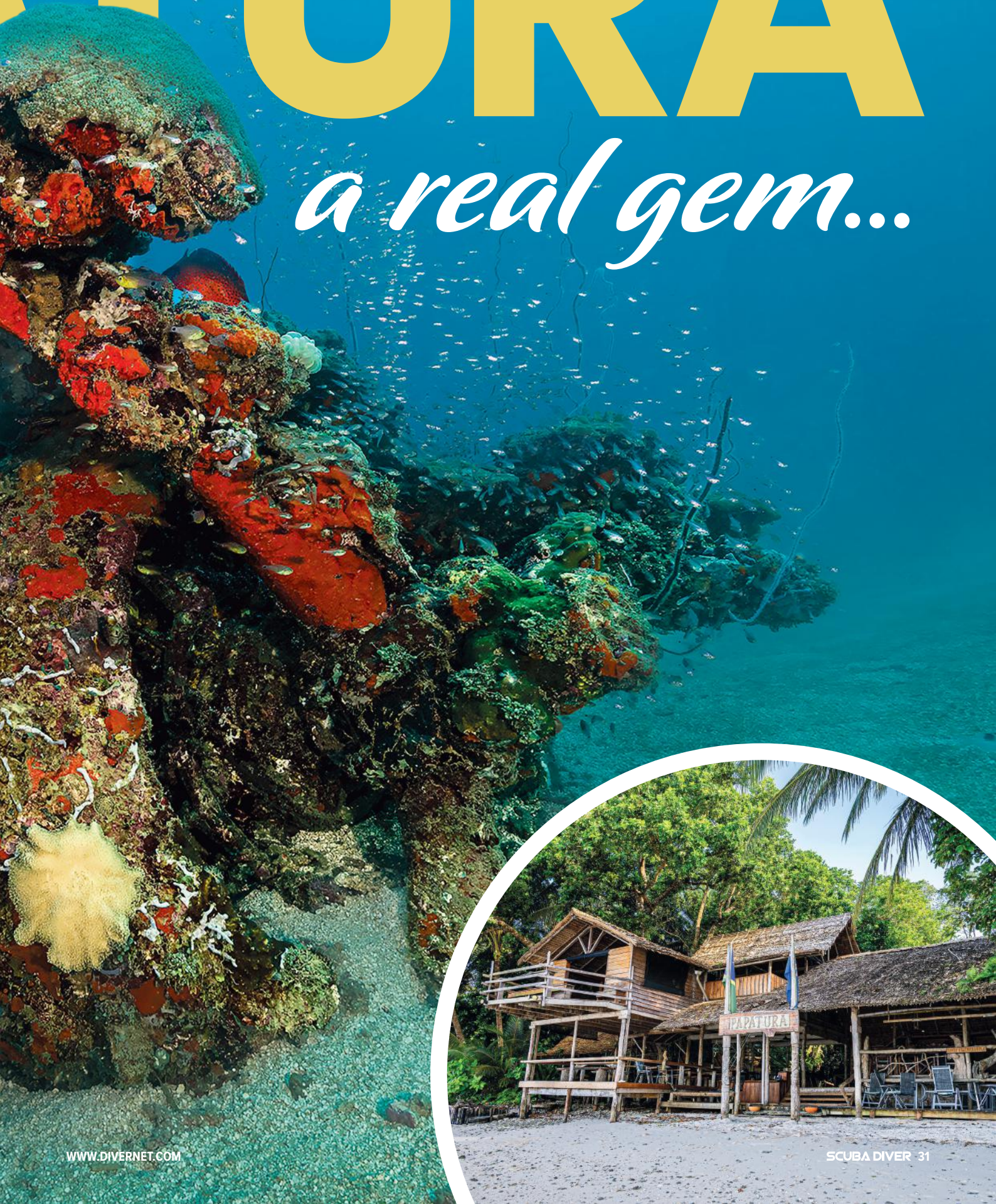
The SBD Dauntless, nicknamed 'Scout Bomber Douglas' was the primary dive bomber for the US Navy and Marine Corps at the start of the Pacific War. The Dauntless is known for its role in the Battle of Midway, a landmark battle of World War Two.

It's a romantic notion most of us have, but very few realise... Find an island paradise, far from the modern world, and then transform it into a desert island dream and live off the grid, surrounded by nature. But where would you do it? And, more importantly, how? Don Silcock finds out

Photographs by Don Silcock

PAPATURA

a real gem...



Fifth, it was close enough to a local airstrip for convenient access. And finally, they found a welcoming local community eager to be involved in sustainable tourism. With excitement and determination, they knew they had found their place.

But finding the perfect island was only the beginning and a year of negotiations followed with discussions at the provincial government level, consultations with local chiefs, and careful planning to ensure their presence would be mutually beneficial. Finally, when all the agreements were signed, and a 50-year lease was secured, the real work began!

Hard yakka...

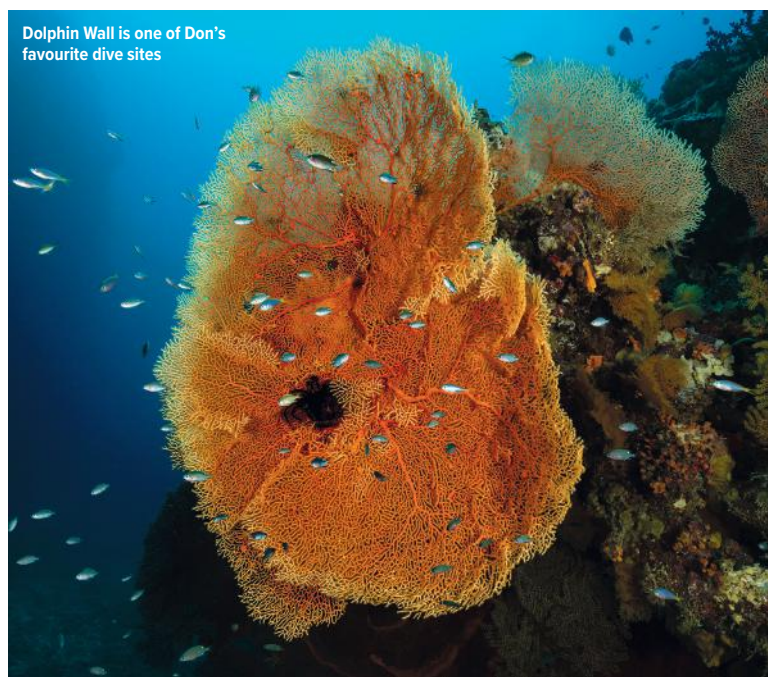
Pete Blanche was 68 at that point in time and, as a retired builder from the Gold Coast, was no stranger to hard work. But, transforming Papatara into a sustainable, off-the-grid retreat was a challenge like no other he had faced. Everything would have to be built from scratch - accommodation, water systems, power sources - all while respecting the natural environment and integrating with the local culture.

It started with preparing and packing two shipping containers on the Gold Coast with 17 tonnes of resort equipment and essential supplies needed to build the private island retreat they had envisioned. This included everything from a generator for power to the tools necessary for construction. Getting those containers to Honiara was the easy part - transporting them from there to Papatara and safely above the high-water mark on the beach was another matter entirely. The only way to achieve that was by barge from Honiara in good weather, followed by sheer manpower to get everything ashore. But they did it. Those containers, combined with strongly secured tarpaulins to keep the monsoonal rains at bay, served as the base camp and communal kitchen for several months as the retreat slowly but surely took shape.

It took over 12 months of relentless hard yakka – through rain, heat, and countless challenges – to bring Papatara Island Retreat to life and turn Pete and Marg Blanche's dream into reality.



Turtle posing for a photograph



Dolphin Wall is one of Don's favourite dive sites



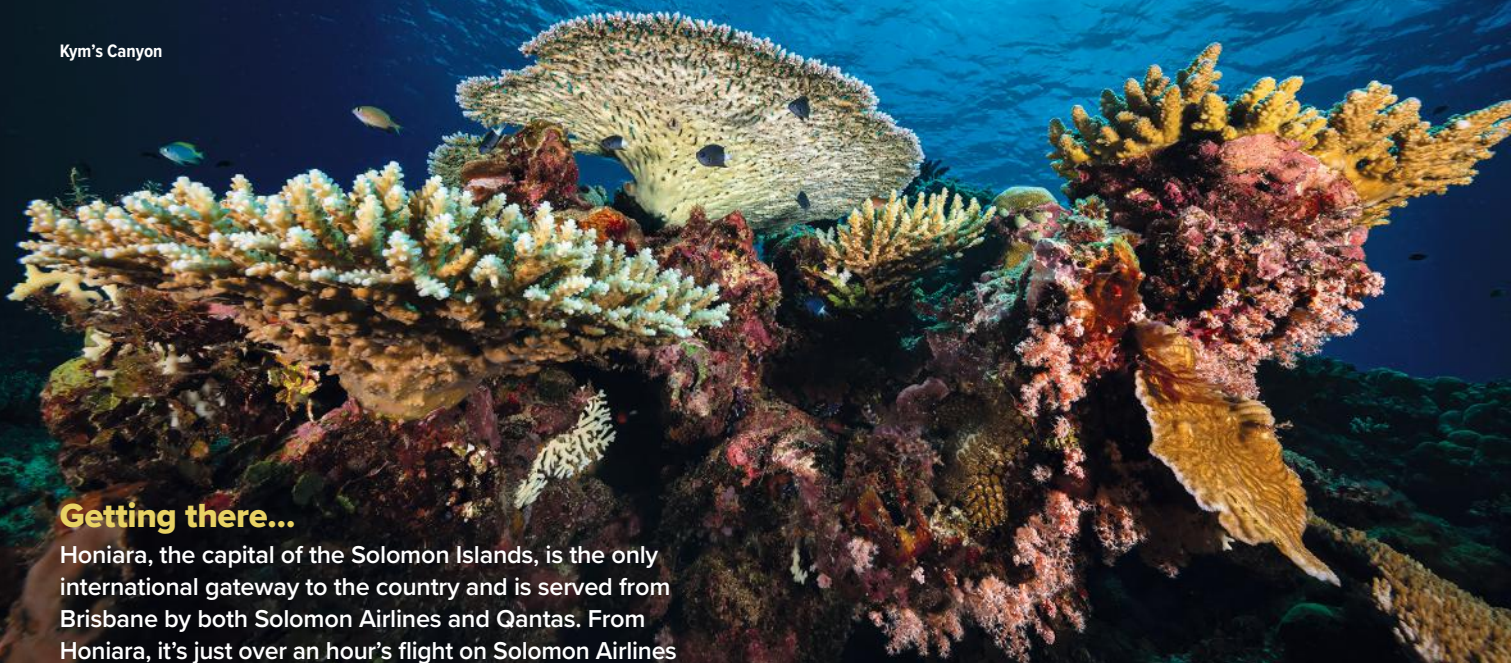
Boats ready to launch from the beach

Don Silcock

Scuba Diver's Senior Travel Editor Don is an Australian underwater photographer and photojournalist from Bali in Indonesia. His website has extensive location guides, articles and images on some of the best diving locations in the Indo-Pacific region and 'big animal' experiences globally.

www.indopacificimages.com

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Getting there...

Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands, is the only international gateway to the country and is served from Brisbane by both Solomon Airlines and Qantas. From Honiara, it's just over an hour's flight on Solomon Airlines to Suavanao airstrip, followed by a short, scenic five-minute boat ride to Papatutura Lodge.

“ It was an absolute delight to watch their eyes light up as they answered my many questions and laid out the many twists and turns their adventure had taken ”

Diving Papatutura

When it opened, Papatutura primarily catered to surfers, fishing enthusiasts, and travellers seeking an authentic off-the-grid experience and over time, it developed a loyal following. As Pete and Marg decided to step back and enjoy their well-earned retirement, they handed over the reins to their son, Nick, and daughter, Kym, who now share the running of the resort between them.

Kym, a keen diver, saw an opportunity to expand Papatutura's offerings to include diving. Recognizing the underwater potential of this part of the Solomon Islands, she pursued instructor training and led the resort's investment in a compressor, tanks, dive gear, and a dedicated dive boat.

With the necessary equipment in place, Kym trained some of the Papatutura staff to dive and set off to explore the local reefs and nearby islands. The more she dived, the more convinced she became that the area had something truly special to offer. This is where I entered the story - when Kym invited Scuba Diver magazine to send someone to explore, photograph, and document the dive sites and wrecks she had discovered.

Papatutura's reefs

Located as it is on the north-west coast of Santa Isabel Island in the central Solomons, Papatutura is part of a group of islands that sit on the edge of the vast Pacific Ocean.

And because they are just south of the equator, that location means those islands are swept by the equatorial currents and counter currents.

Rich with nutrients from the deep basins to the north-east, those currents have helped create extensive fringing reefs that form natural protective barriers around the islands and build diverse ecosystems. The shallow reefs provide a nursery for juvenile fish and thrive with hard and soft corals, anemones, and schooling snapper, fusiliers, and parrotfish.

The walls of the islands form dramatic drop-offs and those touched by the equatorial currents are richly coated in marine life, including black coral trees, sea whips and colourful sponges. And often patrolling those walls are reef sharks, eagle rays, schooling barracuda and trevally.

I was able to dive several of the main reefs around those islands and found them healthy and in good overall condition, with lots to see and photograph. Malole and Kym's Canyon stood out as exceptional dives, while Blanche's Coral Garden, located in the small bay right in front of Papatutura Lodge, amazed me with its dense clusters of enormous sea fans – the kind you could spend hours exploring and photographing.

But, by far my favourite reef dive was Dolphin Wall and the large bommie at the end of that wall down in about 30m that sits to one side of the wall, out in the current. ▶



“ Overall, the bommie reminded me of some of the magnificent ones to be found in the Misool area in the south of Raja Ampat – an area that I believe has the very best tropical diving in the world! ”

Located just five minutes from the lodge, Dolphin Wall is a standout dive in itself and is richly coated in dense marine growth, together with beautiful arrays of sponges and bright red sea whips which all add a wonderful touch of vibrant colour. But the bommie is truly next level and sits right in the path of those equatorial water flows, which have created a dense arrangement of superb sea fans, soft corals and huge elephant ear sponges.

Overall, the bommie reminded me of some of the magnificent ones to be found in the Misool area in the south of Raja Ampat – an area that I believe has the very best tropical diving in the world! I did several dives on the bommie and asked to go there so much that Kym suggested renaming it ‘Don’s Happy Place’.

Papatura’s wrecks

There are two known World War Two aircraft wrecks that are easily dived from Papatura and the first one, an RNZAF Hudson, is just five minutes from the lodge. Located in about 10m of water the distinctive main wing and engines of the plane are easy to spot and explore, but much of the fuselage was destroyed when the plane came down. Although it’s not a stellar wreck dive, it’s unusual shape and shallow depth make the Hudson a great choice for an afternoon dive.

On the other hand, if like me... you enjoy diving and experiencing World War Two aircraft wrecks, the Douglas SBD Dauntless is a must-do!! Located on the slope just off from a fringing reef about 25 minutes from Papatura, the plane sits upright and largely intact in around 30m of water.

The SBD (Scout Bomber Douglas) was the US Navy’s main carrier-based scout/dive bomber and is best remembered as the bomber that delivered the fatal blows to the Japanese carriers at the Battle of Midway in June 1942. Those attacks earned the Dauntless its nickname ‘Slow But Deadly’ (SBD). The plane is believed to have come down on 17 October in 1942, but very little else is currently known about the plane, it’s pilot or the circumstances surrounding its watery grave.



Cockpit of the SBD Dauntless



Papatura Jetty

Papatura – in summary

The idea of going off the grid holds a romantic allure for many of us – but actually doing it, as Pete and Marg Blanche did, is a whole different story. I spent a very pleasant afternoon sat on the porch of their house just down the beach from the main lodge chatting to them about their incredible adventure. True blue Aussie to the core, they are both an inspiration and still full of life in their 80s!

It was an absolute delight to watch their eyes light up as they answered my many questions and laid out the many twists and turns their adventure had taken. That story, combined with exploring the remote, beautiful and yet largely untouched reefs and bommies of Papatura, are what stayed with me, along with Pete’s parting words on my last day - ‘When I go, I want someone to spread my ashes out there over the reef - I never want to leave this place’. If you are looking for somewhere interesting and different for your next dive adventure, you may just have found it! ■



Underneath the jetty is full of life

Topside is equally stunning





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BETTER BOAT DIVING

Some of the world's best dive sites are accessible only by boat. Here are a few tips to make your boat dives safer and more fun

Pay attention

The crew should brief you and your fellow divers before or soon after you board the boat. During this briefing they will cover hazards particular to the boat as well as appropriate places to sit, stand, and stow your gear. This is important for minimising the risk of slips, trips, and other mishaps while the boat is leaving or approaching the dock or otherwise manoeuvring. This briefing will also cover emergency procedures and include the location of the oxygen unit and first aid supplies. It's entirely appropriate for you to ask questions about the emergency procedures or to ask to inspect the oxygen unit. A dive operator who prioritises safety will be glad to show that their oxygen and first aid supplies are clean, organized, and in working order.

The dive staff should also present a briefing of the sites that you will dive. In addition to covering points of interest on the sites, site briefings will also cover entry and exit protocols, depth, expected visibility, descent and ascent protocols, and possible hazards such as currents. Importantly, they'll also cover the recall system, which the vessel will use to signal all divers that an emergency has arisen and to return to the boat. Common recall systems include revving the engine or banging the ladder with a wrench.

On board

One general piece of advice that's useful on boats is 'one hand for yourself and one for the ship'. This serves as a reminder to maintain three points of contact with the vessel. In general, it means holding on or having a free hand to grab a rail in the event of an unexpected bump or slip.

If you are prone to seasickness, be prepared to manage it. Use anti-nausea medication according to the package directions or your doctor's instructions, but make sure you've taken it successfully on land in the past before you go diving with it. You'll want to know that it controls your symptoms effectively and doesn't cause any side effects that may impair your ability to dive safely.

In the water

If you ascend from a dive using a mooring line, look for barnacles, stinging hydroids, and other potentially hazardous growth. Avoid grabbing those parts of the line or be sure your gloves are up to the task. If you do a free ascent (without a line), use a reel and a surface marker buoy (DSMB). This will alert the crew of your dive boat to keep tabs on your location during your ascent. This is especially



important in currents and choppy seas, which may separate you from the boat or make you harder to see. In addition, a DSMB will alert other boaters to your presence, giving you some measure of protection against a boat strike injury.

If the vessel uses a live-boat pickup (in which divers board the boat from the water while the engine is running), be sure you understood the crew's instructions during the briefing, and follow them carefully.

The end of a dive involves hazards including moving ladders, heavy seas, spinning propellers, and divers slipping back into the water on top of the next diver waiting to exit. The crew may ask you to hold onto a tagline as you wait to board the boat, especially if there's a current. Doing so will prevent the divers from being spread out all over the place. As you exit the water, give the diver in front of you plenty of space. Take a moment to look at the ladder and identify hinges and pinch points, and place your hands carefully to avoid them. Keep your regulator in your mouth until you are safely back on board. Keep these tips in mind and enjoy many years of diving from boats. ■

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From the DAN Medical Line

DAN medical information specialists and researchers answer your dive medicine questions

Decompression recovery

Q: I received eight hyperbaric treatments for DCS six weeks ago. An hour after diving I experienced numbness and tingling in my left arm, hand, leg and foot and felt very weak and fatigued. After my treatments all my symptoms resolved and four days later, I flew home without issue. However, in the last two weeks I've had a return of some of the tingling in my left arm and foot that comes and goes, but doesn't completely go away. Is this a normal side effect? Do I need further treatment?

A: According to DAN's Report on Diving Accidents and Fatalities, slightly more than 50 percent of all decompression illness cases that received hyperbaric oxygen therapy were successfully treated without residual symptoms. The remaining cases had some neurological symptoms or pain for several days or weeks after hyperbaric therapy was completed. On average, 16 percent of injured divers will still have symptoms for up to three months after they have been treated.

Original symptoms sometimes reappear during this three-month recovery period. Divers have reported the recurrence of symptoms after a series of long days at work, decreasing amounts of sleep, sitting in one position for long periods of time or after drinking too much alcohol. The most often mentioned symptom is numbness and tingling.

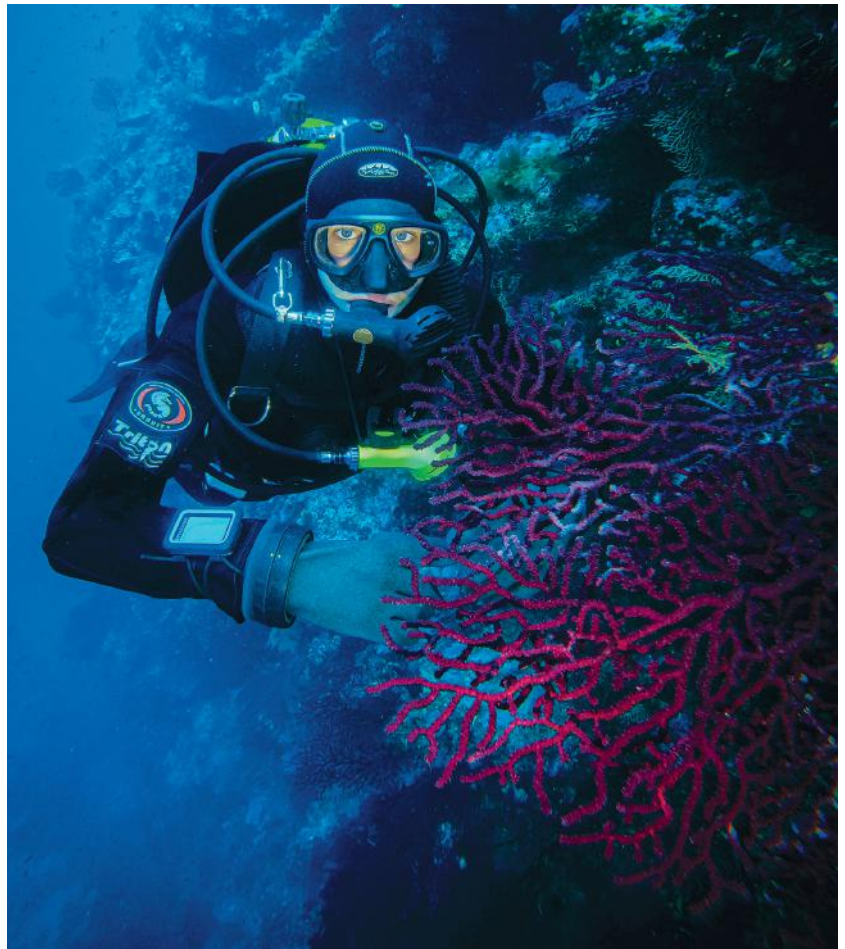
In general, recurrence of symptoms can occur, but this is not necessarily normal. It most likely relates to the severity of the original injury. There are three important issues to remember regarding recovering from decompression illness:

Length of time between onset of symptoms and recompression

In many cases of decompression illness, the response to therapy is related to the time between symptom onset and chamber recompression.

Prompt oxygen first aid

Divers must do everything they can to assure rapid first aid measures, which includes the use of 100 percent oxygen, and evaluation leading to chamber therapy. It is



also important to note that hyperbaric oxygen therapy is a treatment and not always a cure. Divers can suffer mild numbness in a hand or physical impairment that is life-long.

Time to heal

Thirdly, as in any other injury, some recovery time must be expected before an injury can completely heal. Unlike a traumatic injury that is obvious to the eye, injuries caused by gas bubbles are internal. The tiny bubbles associated with decompression illness, in sufficient quantities, can do more damage than being hit by a car. Never underestimate the potential for a serious injury when symptoms first appear and always seek immediate medical evaluation.

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Mustard's MASTERCLASS

Alex Mustard showcases the photographic potential of the Maldives

Photographs by Alex Mustard

The Maldives have long been one of the world's classic dive destinations, with the celebrated central atolls thrilling divers with reefs packed with tropical fish and plentiful big animals. The equatorial location means that they are great year-round, but by happy coincidence, when many feel that time is right for a spring escape, the Maldives are regularly at their peak with their optimum conditions of glass calm seas and blue skies.

Plenty of folks get their initial taste of tropical scuba diving here and create indelible memories of seeing their first turtles, sharks, eagle rays and more. It is where I gained my first scuba qualification before I'd collected any GCSEs, and the popularity of the season saw me overlapping this year with the Editor, Mark, and Go Diving Show crowd-thriller Steve Backshall, among others.

The scattered castaway islands attract the tourists, but for divers the draw is the richness of the marine life. Curiously, we underwater photographers have a more-complex relationship with the Maldives. While most experienced underwater photographers will have visited, most return far less regularly than they do, say, to the Red Sea or Indonesia. For us snappers the reason is that shooting in the Maldives is often less reliable than other places. The main reason for the richness of these reefs are the strong currents that pump water (and plankton) in and out of the atolls. This means that while often conditions are perfect for pictures, they can quickly switch to uncooperative. Still photographers need time with subjects to conjure the special shots. I've never heard a UPY winner's acceptance speech start with 'we were hooked in...' or 'we were drifting along and I snapped this as we flew past'. Moreover, outgoing tides often suck surprisingly murky water onto a dive site, or when you least expect it the current shuts off, the soft corals droop, the neat schools disperse and the photographic potential drains away.

Every dive briefing in the Maldives concludes with the guides saying that they won't know the conditions until they make a current check. Like other places, they will know the state of the tide, but the current

in any one spot is far too unpredictable, because of the way the main tidal flow interacts with the highly complex reef topography with farus, kandus, giris, thilas, haas, badhis and gaas (all Maldivian words for different reef structures). For the underwater photographer this makes planning and preparation tough and even simple things like lens choice become a lottery.

But recent years have seen change, not in Maldivian diving, but in underwater photography gear. Over the last decade underwater photography has been revolutionised with the proliferation of specialist, water-corrected underwater lenses, that feel bespoke for this destination. So suitable are lenses like Nauticam's WWL, WACP and FCP to the Maldives, that I really think it is time for photographers to reassess how productive this destination can be. The Maldives is no longer a place where we can sometimes get great images, advances in gear now make my trips there as productive as anywhere, dive on dive.

For those not yet familiar with jumble of acronyms I spewed in the previous paragraph, what you need to know is that they represent a family of revolutionary underwater lenses introduced over the last decade. Each is designed to work with a standard zoom lens on your camera, converting it to a wide-angle zoom, that can zoom both wider and tighter than any existing wide-angle lens, and because the underwater lenses are specifically designed to work in water, they achieve better image quality across the whole of the frame. It is win-win-win for photographers. We can cover more subjects, create more types of images and maintain excellent image quality with a more open aperture - ideal for those more distant passes.

If you had to distil Maldivian diving into one adjective it would be fishy. And these wide-angle zooms are perfect whether it is a small cluster of butterflyfish, or a giant ball of blueline snapper. I always start by making the schools themselves my subject of choice, and there is a wide selection in the Maldives, including oriental sweetlips, several species of snapper, jacks, bannerfish, and hordes of fusiliers. Throughout the dives we should always be looking ▶

Small neat schools
are better than large
messy ones



You can't think of
the Maldives without
thinking of mantas



“ Over the last decade underwater photography has been revolutionised with the proliferation of specialist, water-corrected underwater lenses, that feel bespoke for this destination ”

out for pleasing formations, with the fish all lined up in the same direction, for the strongest images. Some species are more cooperative than others, and even certain species like blueline snapper vary greatly in their photographic potential, from site to site and dive to dive. When it comes together you have to work it!

I also look to use this fishiness in the backgrounds of wide-angle photos, to give my images more visual depth and a greater feeling of a reef thriving with life. Schools of redtooth triggerfish and fusiliers are often helpfully positioned up in the Maldivian water column for the perfect fishy backdrop!

The Maldives is equally famed for big animals, which are also perfect for the wide-angle zoom, because a fisheye alone is usually too wide. Hawksbill and green turtles are pretty ubiquitous and many reefs have healthy reef shark populations. At quite a lot of spots sharks will come in close enough for a portrait with a zoom – open your aperture a few clicks and speed up your shutter speed similarly to help get more strobe onto them, to stop them looking too blue.

But I can't say Maldives without thinking of mantas and there are many manta dives across the atolls, most are at cleaning stations, where the giant rays come in for their spa treatment.

Great photos here owe far more to how you dive, than any photographic secret. The best encounters give the best images, so resist the temptation to push too close, let the rays get settled into cleaning and the rewards will come. Personally, I find the best shots aren't those when the mantas are really close. When they are right overhead, it feels like you are getting the shot of a lifetime, but often these images are unflatteringly distorted, and these preceding shots often look stronger. Again, this is where the zoom comes to the fore.

It is an interesting time in underwater photography, advances in camera high ISO capability have transformed the photographic potential of deep diving and darker cold water destinations and now lens tech is making exciting destinations that used to frustrate photographers some of the most productive. ■

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The striped marlin (*Tetrapturus audax*) is a formidable predator that sits near the top of the marine food chain. Don Silcock explains how, as a member of the billfish family, it is distinguished by its spear-like upper jaw, which serves as both a hunting tool and its most prominent feature

Photographs by Don Silcock

Easily recognized by their striking appearance, their bodies are dark blue-black on top which fades to a silvery white underside and adorned with vertical blue stripes that give them their common name.

Fully mature individuals can reach up to four metres in length and weigh as much as 200kg. Those impressive dimensions, combined with their intense resistance when hooked and their acrobatic leaps, make them highly sought after by sport fishers.

They are epipelagic and inhabit the upper 100m of the tropical and subtropical waters in both the Pacific and Indian Oceans, but spend most of their time near the surface, where they hunt schools of sardines, mackerel, and anchovies.

Although they are capable of long-distance travel and can reach speeds of up to 80 km/h, they are not the fastest among marlins. That title belongs to the blue marlin, which can hit speeds of 130 km/h, followed by the sailfish at 110 km/h. The marlin's speed and agility are attributed to its streamlined, torpedo-shaped body and elongated tail lobes, which extend into undisturbed water beyond the turbulence generated by its movement.

Striped marlins can live up to ten years and reach sexual maturity between one and two years of age. During their summer spawning season, females release batches of eggs every few days, producing an estimated 120 million eggs over the season in a process known as serial spawning.

Where to see them

Baja California, Mexico, is widely considered the top destination to observe striped marlins in the wild, with the waters offshore from Magdalena Bay - on the Pacific side of the peninsula - offering some of the very best encounters.

The Baja Peninsula is situated at the convergence of the cold, nutrient-rich California Current and the warmer waters of the Pacific Ocean. This mixing of those water masses creates nutrient upwellings along the continental shelf, producing massive plankton blooms that attract large schools of sardines and mackerel - the striped marlin's food of choice. Sport fishers have known about all this for many years and have made that area and, to a lesser extent the waters around Cabo San Lucas, very popular locations for striped marlin game fishing. But in recent years that phenomena has become known as the 'Mexican sardine run' and each year it attracts many underwater photographers.

In-water encounters on the Mexican sardine run

The catalyst for the sardine run is the annual spawning of

Pacific sardines, which occurs in the deep offshore waters out from Magdalena Bay from mid-October through to late-December. Incredibly prolific breeders, one female sardine can spawn 65,000 eggs at once and up to 200,000 eggs per season.

Little is known what happens to newly hatched sardines except that they don't stay with their mothers. But as they get older and bigger, they aggregate in large, dense schools near the ocean surface and migrate up the Pacific coast. Those schools are like super-magnets to both birdlife and Californian sea lions, striped marlin and mahi mahi, which treat them like an all-you-can-eat buffet - attacking and eating the sardines till they are all gone!

It's hard to adequately describe the sheer intensity of those 'bait balls' - but nature at its most raw will probably give you a degree of insight! The sardines are in almost constant and synchronized high-speed motion as they dodge and weave to try and avoid the never-ending attacks.

The sea lions tend to hunt as a pack to isolate and restrict the bait ball, or parts of it, before attacking, while the large numbers of mahi mahi charge into the bait ball in an uncoordinated, random, but very aggressive manner.

The striped marlin also seem to coordinate with each other as they closely circle the bait ball and then attack at incredible speed. Compared to the blunt tool of the mahi mahi or the more strategic and energetic sea lions, the marlin are like rapier swords used with amazing precision.

With so much going on at the same time it's easy to get in between the hunters and the hunters... Those hunters are intently focused on their prey, so getting in the way of a charging mahi mahi will get you whacked as they seem unable or incapable of dodging round you.

The sealions, although much bigger, are more agile and spatially aware and able to avoid you quite easily, albeit at the very last moment...

The striped marlin are in a class of their own and are so fast you have to rely on them avoiding you, because you are too slow to avoid them. Their long and sharp bill is a lethal weapon in itself, but they seem very protective of it - which saved me on one very close encounter! ■

Don Silcock

Don is Scuba Diver's Senior Travel Editor and is based from Bali in Indonesia. His website has extensive location guides, articles and images on some of the best diving locations in the Indo-Pacific region and 'big animal' experiences globally.
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BIG ANIMALS

AND WHERE TO FIND THEM

STRIPED MARLIN

THE TRAVEL EXPERT

Each month dive travel expert Deborah Dickson-Smith of Diveplanit Travel offers hints, tips and advice to help you plan your next trip!

HAVE YOU DIVED THE 'HAMMERHEAD TRIANGLE'?

The Hammerhead Triangle is a region in the eastern Pacific Ocean, an area triangulated by the Galapagos Islands, Cocos Island, and Malpelo Island, and it's known for abundant hammerhead shark populations. Here's what you need to know:

These three remote archipelagos each lie at least 500km from the mainland, in close proximity to deep open ocean, creating the perfect conditions for powerful currents which act as an underwater superhighway for marine megafauna.

They also share a similar underwater environment, with cool water temperatures between 16-25°C and craggy reef systems. The islands are also all volcanic in origin, and the stone and lava outcroppings are an ideal habitat for small grazing and cleaner fish, who wait patiently for sharks and other large wildlife to arrive for a spa treatment.

Why do hammerhead sharks gather here?

The main scientific theory is that the sharks are drawn to the region's cold upwellings. Within the Hammerhead Triangle, two vast oceanic ecosystems combine – the Costa Rica Thermal Dome north of the equator, and the Humboldt-Galapagos system to the south. Both systems draw cold water toward the surface, allowing marine life to flourish in the shallows where the nutrients meet the sunlight.

Without these nutrient-rich currents, the eastern Pacific would be nothing more than a vast blue desert, unable to support such a wide variety of species. The cold upwellings create blooms of plankton, which in turn support larger animals, and eventually lure sharks, pelagic fish, and marine mammals to feed – a complete food chain.

How to dive the Hammerhead Triangle

While some diving areas in the Galapagos can be visited via day boat, the most-impressive sites are too far-flung for that approach. And visitors to Cocos and Malpelo are not allowed to stay on land, making liveaboards the only way to dive here. It's also important to note that diving here isn't for beginners. This region is prone to harsh open-ocean surface conditions like wind and waves, as well as powerful currents.

Galapagos

- **When:** January through May
- **Dive Sites:** Darwin and Wolf islands
- **We recommend:** Galapagos Master, Galapagos Aggressor



III, Galaxy Diver II, Humboldt and Tiburon Explorer, Galapagos Sky

The Galapagos Islands are home to dozens of incredible dive sites, but the islands of Wolf and Darwin are easily the two most famous. At these isolated rocky reefs, lucky dive groups can spot schooling hammerheads by the hundreds, often joined by eagle rays, seals, Galapagos sharks, silkies, and other powerful pelagic species.

Cocos

- **When:** July through September
- **Dive Sites:** Bajo Alcyone, Dirty Rock and Punta Maria
- **We recommend:** Oceanus Aggressor, Cocos Aggressor, Sea Hunter

Large schools of scalloped hammerhead sharks can be seen here, as well as white and blacktip reef sharks, Galapagos sharks, silkies, tiger sharks, and silvertips. The island is also home to vast shoals of bigeye trevally, snapper, and jacks - a paradise for pelagic lovers.

Malpelo

- **When:** Visit between July and August or January and March
- **Dive Sites:** Freezer, Castaway and Monster Face
- **We recommend:** Ferox and Vivax, both operated by Colombia Dive Adventures

In total, Malpelo is home to around 20 sites packed with tuna, sailfish, and a wide variety of sharks. Schooling scalloped hammerheads are spotted in the hundreds, as well as large schools of silkie sharks, sand tiger sharks, and nearly a dozen other shark species. ■

Ask the experts at Diveplanit Travel to help book your bucketlist Hammer Time dive trip! Diveplanit.com
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DIVE PHOTO GUIDE



DIVING WITH... DANIEL SLY

PT Hirschfield chats with the Irradiation Engineer with a talent for capturing stunning marine life portraits

Photography by Daniel Sly or as credited

When he's not underwater crafting impressive macro and wide angle underwater images, Daniel Sly is a Silicon Irradiations Engineer at Australia's only nuclear facility. Or he's bushwalking or swimming at the beach near the two-bed unit he shares with his partner and dive buddy, Hayley.

Daniel nearly didn't complete his Open Water in 2018, almost cancelling the course he'd booked to do with his mother and sister after he came down with a flu: 'Eventually I convinced a friend to join me for the course. I couldn't imagine my life now if I hadn't rebooked and completed the course.'

Now more than 760 dives later, Daniel finds that his AOW and Nitrox certifications allow him to undertake the majority of the dives he's keen to do: 'I'm mostly interested in marine life which tends to be in the first 30m of depth.'

The recent addition of a solo diving certification has aided his underwater photography goals: 'It's nice not to feel guilty about boring your buddy while trying to find the perfect lighting and shot angle on a subject!'

Learning to dive shortly before the pandemic means that Daniel's international dive opportunities so far have been limited. He's enjoyed a two-week macro intensive in Anilao, the Philippines and a honeymoon trip to Raja Ampat and Lembeh. When conditions cooperate closer to home, he aims for three to four dives a week at one of a around a dozen shore diving sites he dives regularly: 'This gives me great freedom as I'm not tied to a boat schedule. I can plan the dive to exactly what I'm after.'

Daniel tries to get a night dive in at the Sydney muck diving site Clifton Gardens once a week after work: 'Then I try to squeeze an early morning dive in throughout the week.'



Australian fur seal close up



Donut Nembrotha with emperor shrimp



Grey nurse shark in a cave

Being able to dive close to home has given Daniel some helpful familiarity with the marine life in the area: 'This allows me to plan shots or behaviour that I would like to capture and dive specifically to capture them.'

'Due to most of my dives being in an area where the visibility isn't always the best, I tend to stick primarily with macro subjects. While I do shoot the occasional wide angle shot, my main focus is on smaller critters and their varied personalities.'

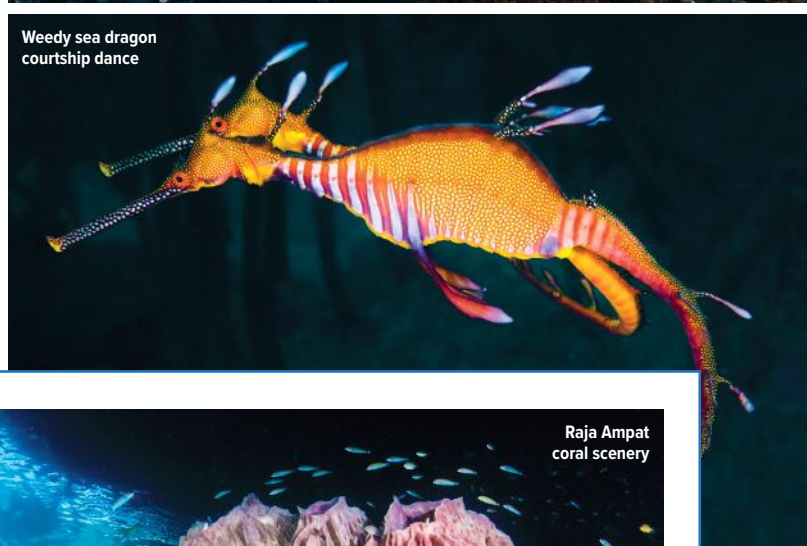
Daniel's dived the coast of NSW (including Julian Rocks-Nguthungulli, North and South Solitary Islands, South West Rocks, Nelson Bay, Jervis Bay and Narooma) extensively. It's a dive zone he believes is 'absolutely under rated internationally'.



© HAYLEY BARKER



Diver exploring the SS Yongala



Weedy sea dragon courtship dance



Raja Ampat coral scenery

He's also dived Whyalla's cuttlefish aggregation (plus 'all the other fantastic pier diving in South Australia'). Additionally he's done a trip out to the Coral Sea, and further down to the SS Yongala in Queensland.

Reflecting on the biggest lessons the ocean has taught him so far, Daniel starts with humility: 'No matter how much we prepare for a dive and assess the conditions, the ocean has its own agenda. A recent example of experiencing a large set of waves rolling in as I attempted a rock shelf exit was quite humbling. Especially if it is a site that you think you are a hundred percent familiar with.'

Next he cites patience: 'This is especially applicable to the photography side of my ocean experience. In particular, sitting with a subject I'm trying to photograph in an attempt to capture a certain angle or behaviour.'

That patience has definitely started to pay off: 'So far my biggest success was having my photograph of two duelling male giant cuttlefish featured on the front cover of Australian Geographic in late-2023. It was a surreal feeling, walking past news agencies and seeing my image in print.'

His growing list of accolades includes medals, finalist positions, shortlistings and commendations in photography competitions such as Australian Geographic Nature Photographer of the Year, Australia's Top Emerging Photographers and the ReFocus Photo Annual.

His images have also been published in major newspapers and featured in many exhibitions, including the 2023 Australian Geographic Nature Photographer of the Year Exhibition. When asked what advice he might offer others wanting their images to be successful in competitions, Daniel says it's important to consider what kind of competition it is.

'Your image selection can differ depending on this. Judges of general wildlife competitions often aren't as familiar with common underwater subjects as competitions specifically relating to underwater content.'

He adds, 'Your images will most likely go through several rounds of judging. For your image to succeed, it will need to stand up to multiple viewing sessions. Having 'depth' to your image can aid in this, with judges finding new things in your image with each round of analysis.' Daniel believes it's important 'Not to lose confidence if your images do not perform well in a particular competition. ▶



Duelling giant cuttlefish



Great white shark

The judging process is inherently subjective. What may not perform well in one competition may excel in another.' Daniel's dive 'bucket list' of marine animals he's keen to photograph, like many other areas of his life, is organised into an Excel spreadsheet.

'At the top of my list is Ambon, to try to find the psychedelic frogfish. Then, Banda Sea for schooling hammerheads. Also, French Polynesia for humpback whales.' From a conservation perspective, Daniel believes that conveying the importance of preserving marine ecosystems presents unique challenges: 'Terrestrial animals are easier for people to connect with and understand due to their relatability and familiarity.'

'By contrast, marine life can seem distant and abstract to many. This can make it harder to engage the public in conservation efforts aimed at protecting these vital ecosystems.'

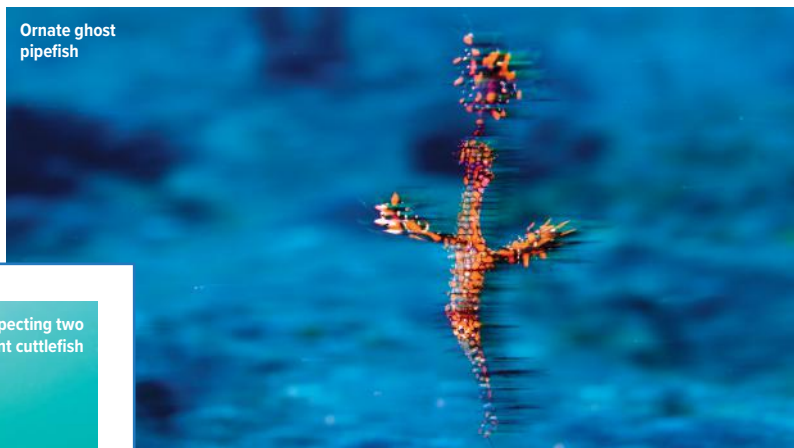
'It's here that showcasing images of oceanic landscapes and the creatures that inhabit them can play a crucial role in bridging the gap.'

From his diving at Kurnell, Daniel highlights the disconnect between the site's status as a national park and the allowance of line fishing from its shores: 'This highlights a gap in conservation efforts, where terrestrial areas receive protection while adjacent marine ecosystems remain vulnerable.'

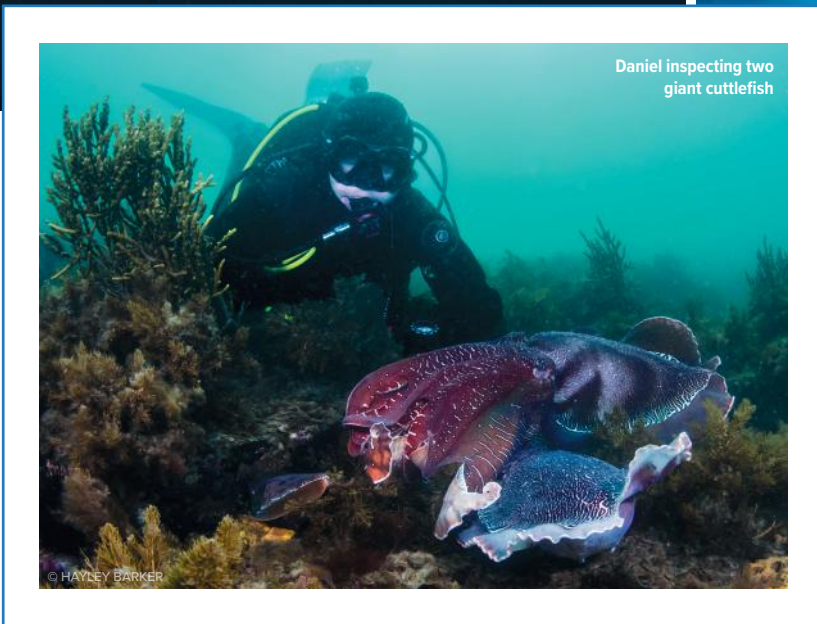
He believes underwater imagery can foster broader understanding and spark 'curiosity, appreciation, and ultimately, a deeper sense of responsibility towards conserving our oceans'. ■

You can see more of his underwater imagery on Instagram [@daniel.sly](#)

Ornate ghost pipefish



“ His images have also been published in major newspapers and featured in many exhibitions, including the 2023 Australian Geographic Nature Photographer of the Year Exhibition ”



Daniel inspecting two giant cuttlefish

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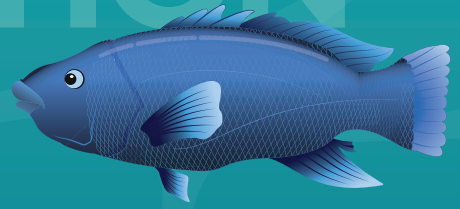


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CONSERVATION CORNER



Blue groper thrown lifeline in NSW

NSW Agriculture Minister Tara Moriarty has given the state's declining eastern blue groper population some welcome relief by extending trial protections, the Australian Marine Conservation Society (AMCS) said recently.

Spearfishing for blue groper has been banned in NSW since 1969 and commercial fishing of the species stopped in 1980, but they could previously still be caught and killed recreationally using line fishing. Under a 12-month trial beginning in March last year in response to public outcry over a series of illegal spearfishing incidents, the blue groper was protected from all forms of fishing and had to be released alive if accidentally caught while line fishing.

The recent announcement to extend these trial protections for another three years comes just after the NSW fisheries department released research showing eastern blue groper

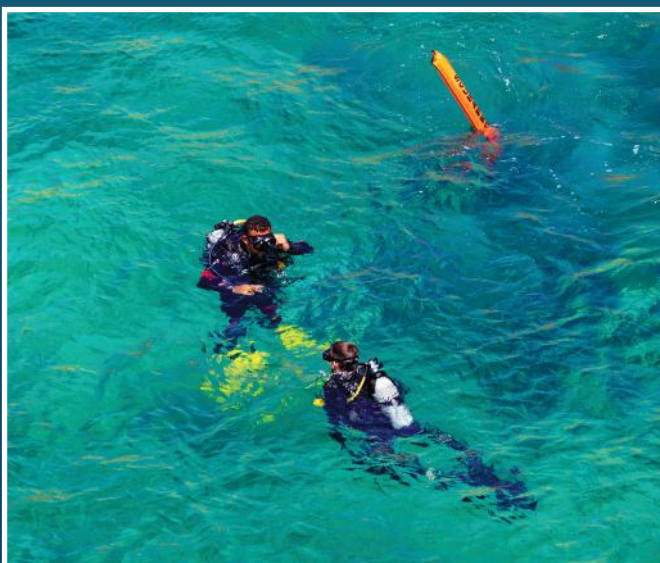


“ Spearfishing for blue groper has been banned in NSW since 1969 and commercial fishing of the species stopped in 1980 ”





“ The recent announcement to extend these trial protections for another three years comes just after the NSW fisheries department released research showing eastern blue groper populations have plummeted by at least half around some of the state’s most-populated areas, including Sydney ”



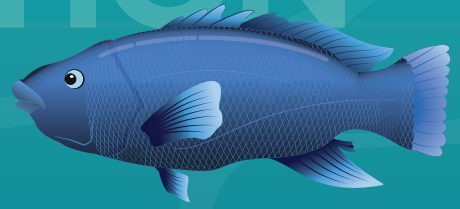
populations have plummeted by at least half around some of the state’s most-populated areas, including Sydney.

AMCS Marine Parks Campaigner James Sherwood said: “We are pleased to see the NSW Government has listened to overwhelming community support and scientific advice, throwing a lifeline to the state’s beloved blue groper.

“Since blue groper are long-lived, slow-growing, late to mature, and live in social groups, they are highly susceptible to fishing pressure. Even low levels of recreational fishing impact can still decimate local populations.

“Extending these protections for a further three years will give the government sufficient time to conduct more research and create a monitoring programme that will aid blue groper recovery and should give us a better idea for how their populations are responding along the coast. It’s a great first step, but protecting this iconic species through a permanent ban on all forms of fishing would be preferable given their recent declines. ▶

CONSERVATION CORNER



“ The blue groper is a keystone species that helps control the abundance of their prey, including long-spined sea urchins that have become problematic in some parts of the NSW coast ”

“The blue groper is the state emblem of NSW. They are loved by swimmers, snorkellers, divers, photographers and nature lovers, are economically valuable to the dive industry and hold high cultural and social importance to coastal communities. The public outcry following recent illegal spearfishing incidents demonstrates the deep community connection to this species.

“The blue groper is a keystone species that helps control the abundance of their prey, including long-spined sea urchins that have become problematic in some parts of the NSW coast. Only the large blue male groper have the ability to tackle the urchin populations. These large individuals are often targeted when recreational fishing is permitted.

“This decision also creates consistency in the rules for

all fishers and brings NSW temporarily into line with Victoria and Tasmania.

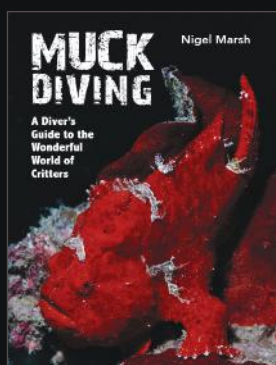
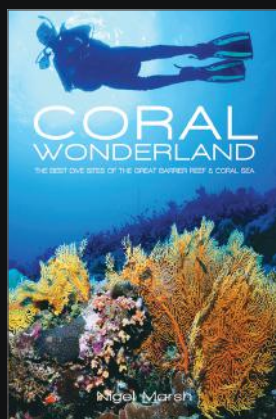
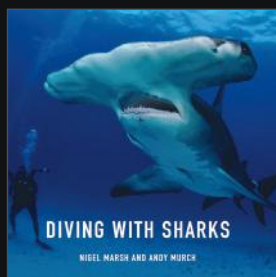
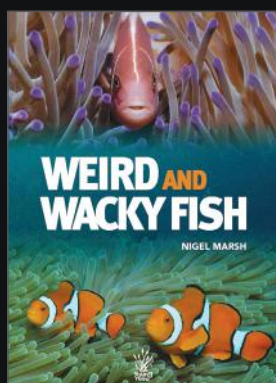
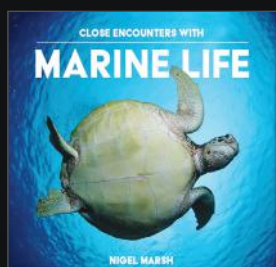
“While it’s a great outcome for the blue groper in NSW, protecting a single species from fishing impacts alone is not enough. Even accidental catch and release also regularly ends in injury or death for blue groper, which tend to wedge themselves into a cave or crevice when hooked and respond poorly to the experience of being caught.

“So we need to ensure that blue groper and their habitats are protected through the creation of marine sanctuaries. Currently, only around 7% of the NSW coast is adequately protected by marine sanctuaries and the NSW Government urgently needs to increase this to ensure that our marine life thrives into the future.” ■

NIGEL MARSH

Photography

Nigel Marsh is an Australian photojournalist, underwater photographer and author. Working with New Holland publishers, Nigel has produced a number of guide books for divers and snorkelers, and also a series of children's books with marine related themes.



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THE NEXT GENERATION

DARIA GROSS

At age 12, Daria Gross travelled to Bonaire with Kids Sea Camp, where she was immersed in an ocean adventure. Here, she was certified as a Junior Open Water Diver and got to dive for the first time alongside her dad, her biggest diving inspiration. Following this initial certification, Daria travelled all over the world to explore new diving destinations, such as Turks and Caicos, Dominica and Belize. She went to these destinations with Kids Sea Camp, allowing her to dive with other youth divers. This factor added to Daria's love for diving. Now 19 years old, she looks back on these first dives and reflects that getting certified to dive so young was the best thing she could have done as she was far less fearful and more enthusiastic about learning.

Following her initial certifications, Daria began to climb the ranks through Advanced Open Water, Rescue Diver and is now fully certified as a PADI Divemaster with over 130 dives! She currently works in the industry as a Divemaster at a university in Florida, where she studies communication. With her future degree in communication, Daria is exploring ways to incorporate diving into journalism, specifically through raising awareness about the health of our oceans.

The topic of ocean health especially interests Daria and is what she focuses her diving around, looking to keep herself aware of how divers and non-divers affect the ocean and what we can do to help. While she is grateful that she started diving at 12, it is in the last few years that she has found her personal 'driving force' to keep her interest in diving and allow her to continue learning. Daria looks forward to continuing her diving alongside her studies. She remains a fantastic role model for aspiring ocean-based journalists and youth divers! ■

Written by Holly Wakely, PADI Course Director and Blue Horizon Diving travel business co-owner.

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My inaugural piece of professional filming in cave-diving came in 2013. The BBC had commissioned me to dive a flooded mine system in mid-Wales. The dive endeavoured to film some of the artefacts, machinery and even graffiti left by the miners in the late-1930s before the mine was closed, the pumps disabled and the lower levels flooded. The diving footage would become a vehicle to unpack pre-World War Two mining in Britain, the decline of the industry, and to allow viewers to visit a world that would otherwise be out of bounds to them.

In this situation you can't follow the usual regulations for media diving operations. Careful consideration had to be given to the personnel, where we'd site them and what equipment we'd use to both capture the footage we needed in the single, two-hour dive, and to make sure we were safe and adhered to all the Health and Safety At Work criteria. It's often more complicated doing these types of dives for work than recreationally, as there is a duty of care over everyone being employed. You're there to get the right shots, but it's more important to get everyone out. After all, and I have had to remind people of this, it's only telly and it's not worth dying for.

In cave diving sometimes less is more, and inserting extra divers into a confined space is not necessarily safer. The cameraman, Rich Stevenson, and I have been cave-diving and filming together for years, so we work well as a buddy pair. It helps, when you only have one dive to capture all the footage in some testing conditions, to be in tune with your partner. ▶

Did you know?

Underwater caves have very little light, food or oxygen. Because of these unique conditions, they're teeming with life that humanity doesn't see often. Cave divers have discovered new kinds of bacteria that are helping us safely study antibacterial resistance.

“ These dives are opportunities to show your audience something few people, even divers, will ever get to see, but if you can't come back with the right shots, then there was no point going in the first place ”

Did you know?

Ojamo lime mine is situated 38 miles west of Helsinki and is a popular destination for cave divers and explorers alike. The deepest part of the mine is the bottom of the main mining shaft, estimated to be 250m down...

Let there be
LIGHT

Filming in a dark, submerged world doesn't come without its challenges, as TV adventurer extraordinaire Andy Torbet explains

Photographs courtesy of Andy Torbet

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Lighting is all-important in caves

“ In the utter blackness of a cave or mine, it is easy to bring a torch or three, but when filming it can be difficult to deal with the extreme contrast of the bright light against the utter dark ”

And these were testing conditions. The depth was only 30m so we were only using air as the diluent gas on our rebreather. The choice to go closed-circuit would give us sufficient time from our single dive and also produce no bubbles. There have been cases where bubbles, from the exhaled breath of a diver on scuba has caused the fragile roof of a mine, supported by the relatively dense water, to collapse.

The visibility is generally good in mines and minimising team numbers also helped with this. But in the absolute darkness, the biggest problem we have is light. In the utter blackness of a cave or mine, it is easy to bring a torch or three, but when filming it can be difficult to deal with the extreme contrast of the bright light against the utter dark. Even the best camera can't deal with contrasts as well as the human eye. By dropping lights in specific places, me keeping my personal torch on the lowest setting and Rich using two specialist underwater filming lights with wide beams on a low power setting, we managed to pull off some stunning images.



Prepping for a cave shoot

The images were augmented by a small action camera mounted on my helmet and wrist. When you are constrained to a single dive and only one cameraman, you need to take every opportunity to grab footage, even if some of it is relatively low quality.

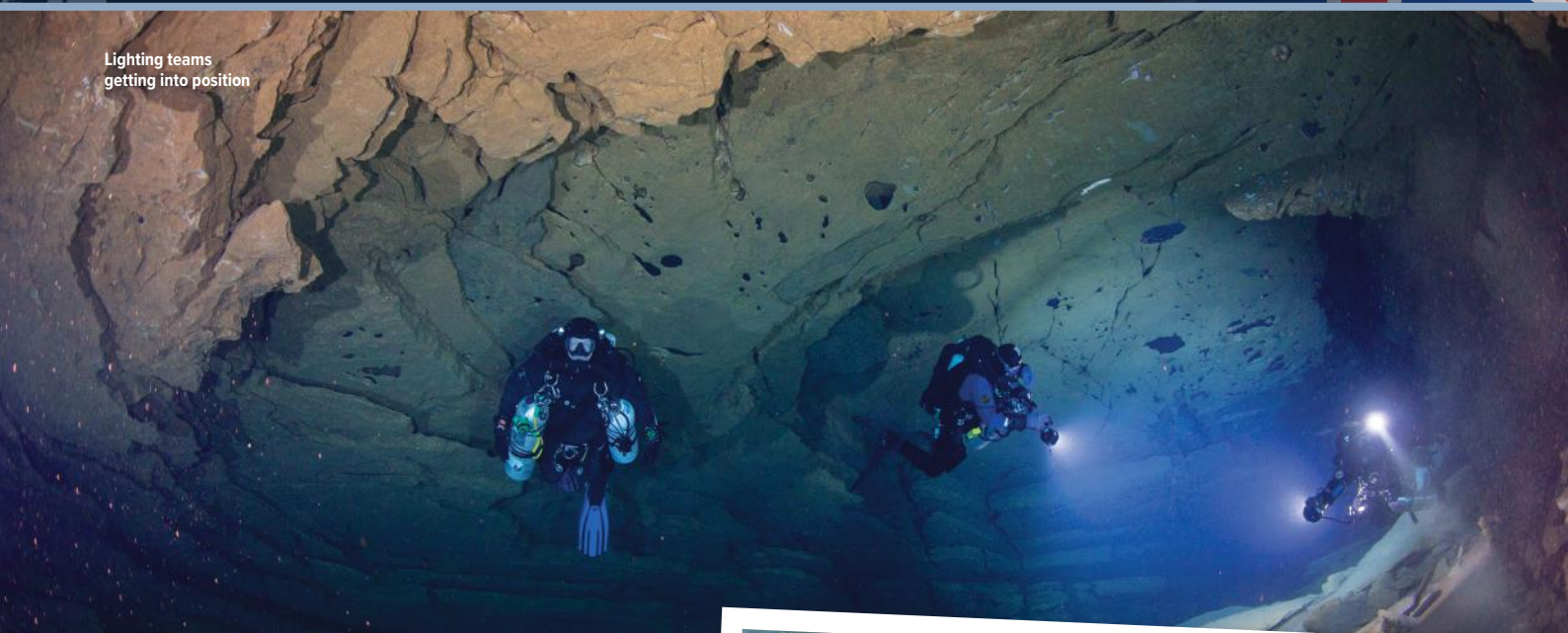
Since that first cave-diving filming dive, we've shot a huge amount of material underground both in the UK and abroad. But one of the most-intense and technical shoots was for an independent sci-fi short called Dive Odyssey. The film itself is a beautiful, cinematic experience. It was led by Finnish film-maker Janne Suhonen. The main action was shot deep in Ojamo Mine, near Helsinki, specifically at Hell's Gate and Lucifer's Pillar.

Unlike the dive in Llangollen, this operation required up to nine divers. We had two 'actors', two cameramen, and as many as seven support divers carrying lights to illuminate the huge underwater scenes. Hell's Gate is the entrance through the megalithic concrete wall built by the miners to support the roof. As they burrowed beneath the earth, they realised they had under-mined the lake above and the roof would need supporting in order to prevent a catastrophic breakthrough of lake water. The wall, over 16 metres high, stretches across a vast chamber, cutting it in two.

Andy in Action
Man mode



Lighting teams getting into position



“ The cameraman, Rich Stevenson, and I have been cave-diving and filming together for years, so we work well as a buddy pair ”

Through Hell’s Gate and down deeper into the mine lies Lucifer’s Pillar, a gigantic concrete column designed to support the roof and prevent the same disaster as Hell’s Gate.

The problem with illuminating these locations were not simply the darkness, but the vast spaces in which it existed and the clarity of visibility. Often the problem with lighting a tight limestone cave is the torch-beams bounce off the white walls, and over-exposure becomes hard to manage. In Ojamo we had the opposite problem, which is why such a large crew of divers were required. So, before each dive, Janne would go through a long, detailed and often necessarily complicated brief to ensure every one of the team knew where they had to be, where their lights had to be pointed, and on which power setting.

It was difficult but engaging, as the team tried to ensure all the areas were lit correctly, some with just a hint of shadow, others in more detail, and the main focus of the action, usually the ‘actors’, were fully lit to ensure that was where the viewer was focused on. Of course, the necessity to overcome darkness in technical diving doesn’t only come when you enter the subterranean world. Sometimes submerging beneath the surface is all you have to do... provided you go deep enough. ▶



Taking a 360 degree camera for the shoot



Inside the habitat after a deep dive

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In 2016, we produced a documentary for BBC2 to mark the 100th anniversary of the sinking of HMHS Britannic, twin sister of Titanic and seconded into service as a hospital ship in World War One. The wreck lies, beautifully preserved and almost entirely intact apart from some damage near the bow where she struck a German sea-mine, 120m below the surface of the Aegean Sea. We dived Britannic near midday on a bright, cloudless day typical of Greece in the summer.

We stepped off the research vessel and dropped into the azure blue. But as we drifted down, freefalling through the water column, the abundance of natural light diminished. However, the combination of water clarity, with almost 30 metres visibility, and the over-head sun meant we could easily make out the shipwreck as we touched down on her port side. But this ambient light, although sufficient to navigate the shadowy remains of this giant vessel as she stretched out almost 300 metres in length, was not enough to discern the details, colours and textures we needed to film.

We had known this would be the case and Evan Kovacs, the cameraman on this trip, had mounted huge, twin filming lamps to his camera. And we had another ace in the hole. To be able to light up huge sections of the ship, to really capture the vast metallic landscape, we needed to floodlight whole areas. Fortunately, our dive boat was better equipped than any I'd ever been on. The crew deployed a large ROV and a three-man submersible, the latter of which had lights to illuminate panoramic shots of the ship, with the tiny divers among the wreckage, giving true scale to the scene.

Andy often uses a CCR for zero bubbles



State-of-the-art ROV

Underground between shoots



There is a lot to think about when deep diving or cave diving. Add to this the tasks of operating a camera, lights, presenting to camera underwater, keeping track of shot lists and scripts, improvising shots and scripts if the situation underwater is not as expected or something interesting happens, and you create a long task list. You are there to do a job, the diving is merely the vehicle to get you to your place of work. But when that place of work is in total, or near-total, darkness, the job becomes all the more difficult and often the lighting plan, regardless of how technical and difficult the diving may appear, will become the most in-depth part of the brief. These dives are opportunities to show your audience something few people, even divers, will ever get to see, but if you can't come back with the right shots, then there was no point going in the first place. ■

mares



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In a shallow patch of blue water at the mouth of the island's small harbour, these sharks put on a spectacular daily performance for divers. For many, this is the greatest shark show on Earth, staged by what is believed to be the world's largest resident tiger shark population. More than four hundred adult individuals, mainly females, have been documented so far. An incredible number of them are pregnant, judging by the Momma Shark ultrasound project, which began while we were on the island.

Fuvahmulah is called Shark Island for good reason. "Basically, the Maldives is the Galapagos of the Indian Ocean," says marine conservationist Arzakan 'Zuzu' Askin, who has helped set up an NGO, the Miyaru Programme, dedicated in part to studying the island's tiger shark population. "The Maldives is home to over 30 shark species many of which are classified as critically endangered or vulnerable or endangered by the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) Red List," she adds.

One of her Miyaru partners, Jono Allen, is our tour guide. An environmental scientist and renowned underwater photographer/videographer, Jono says tiger sharks are the cherry on the cake for the island. "But there's a whole cake," he explains. "So that cake is made up of schools of hammerheads, thresher sharks, whale sharks, schools of silvertips, schools of grey reef sharks, and at the right time of

the year, hundreds of oceanic manta rays," adding, "There are also very rare species, mola mola seen sometimes and mako sharks seen sometimes and then passing pods of cetaceans, you've got melon-headed whales, pilot whales, humpbacks, you've got, you know, absolutely everything."

This was my second Shark Island safari, returning after 12 months with a group of five divers from Sundive Byron Bay, daughter Gabrielle, Stephen Henley, Brian and Lyn Pool and David Kyle-Robinson. In the two weeks we spent on Fuvahmulah diving from Nasheen Lonu's Shark Island Dive's converted, traditional fishing vessel called a dhoni, we found ourselves in shark heaven.

On our very first dive in Tiger Harbour, we encountered 12 or more different individuals. The tiger experience here is like no other shark dive, anywhere. You jump on the boat and



The

TIGER SH

of Fuvahmulah

just a couple of minutes later you are in the water, making your way to a sandy bottom, 8m-10m deep just outside the small harbour's entrance. "That is unique in itself," says Jono. "Where else in the world does that happen, drop to the bottom and come face-to-face with numerous of these apex predators."

A couple of tuna heads are dropped from the boat above, and amid the gathering tigers, expert shark guides grab the fish nibbles and quickly and adeptly place them between a small pile of rocks, just a few metres from the awe-struck underwater audience.

“Swimming close to the surface, the sun's rays cast an enthralling, ever-changing electric light pattern across her back”

For the next 40 minutes, divers are treated to a non-stop shark extravaganza as the tigers come in from all directions to feast at their tuna-head snack bar. At one stage, in what seemed like a choreographed performance, three big tigers were vertically head down all at once picking at the remaining tuna scraps, their huge bodies and caudal fins swaying in unison. Even when the plate's empty, the sharks continue to move around, often passing within ▶



Did you know?

It's a common misconception that tiger sharks are solitary creatures. Research indicates that they do socialise, especially in shallower waters close to the coast. They can also be picky about which sharks they spend time with and have demonstrated group hunting strategies.

SHARKS

Fuvahmulah is just a speck in the Indian Ocean, but this tiny equatorial island in the far south of the Maldives is earning a big reputation, thanks to its resident population of tiger sharks, as Andrew Nieuwenhof showcases

Photographs by Andrew Nieuwenhof and Brian Pool



Jono photographing a shark



Oceanic whitetip shark

Tiger sharks are impressive animals up close



Did you know?

Tiger shark jaws are a different shape from other sharks. While other predatory sharks have fewer cutting teeth on their lower jaw, tiger sharks have an almost even number of teeth on their upper and lower jaws.

arm's length or less of divers. On each of our ten days of diving with them, we watched spellbound as they came ever closer, their eyes, bright and alert, looking straight at us, their rhythmic tail movement powering their huge frames, and their enormous white underbelly casting a big shadow as they passed over us. Truly awe-inspiring, and an absolute privilege for them to allow us to be among them.

The show ends in a dramatic finale as we head back to the boat for our safety stop. Alertness is the key, as a tiger comes up from the blue, approaches head-on or descends from above, often passing by closely. A crazy sight on some of our dives in Tiger Harbour was a notorious hawksbill turtle, the locals call Gangsta, trying his best to steal the show.

You would see Gangsta swimming in among the tigers, generally making a nuisance of himself by getting in their way at the snack bar, but not once did he seem in danger from sharks that usually have turtles on their menu. One jaded shark put her snout under the insistent turtle and tossed it metres away, only for Gangsta to head straight back into the fray.

You will also see tigers cruising along the fringing reefs surrounding Fuvahmulah, where another major attraction are the threshers, which gather at cleaning stations at a depth

of 40m or so. Unlike the tigers, the threshers are a wary species.

Divers need to remain close together at 20m or so, moving as little as possible to best observe them from above, but for an eye-to-eye view, experienced divers can descend slowly to the bottom where these unique, long-tailed sharks with their cute faces and seemingly permanent startled look, are being cleaned.

On one dive Jono filmed a close-up of a moving thresher, which he posted on Instagram, going viral when it was shared by guitarist and environmentalist Slash from Guns N Roses. Scalloped hammerheads are frequent visitors to the reef, as are whale sharks, and oceanic manta rays pass through for a few weeks each year at the end of March into April.

Reef sharks also abound and on one dive I saw a group of 40 or so grey reef sharks swimming around with several pups among them.

“
On one dive Jono filmed a close-up of a moving thresher, which he posted on Instagram, going viral when it was shared by guitarist and environmentalist Slash from Guns N Roses
”

One of our goals was to find oceanic whitetips, but these are only rarely encountered and require a day trip farther out to sea. On Lonu's dhoi, we set off to look for one of the world's most-threatened species. Our destination was a buoy called a FAD, fish aggregating device, used as a marker by local tuna pole fishermen where oceanic whitetips and silkie are sometimes seen.

At a spot far out in the Indian Ocean somewhere between Australia and Africa we struck gold. Nearing the end of our time snorkelling around the FAD and ready to head home without a sighting, one of these iconic pelagics appeared out of the blue, heading straight for us. For the next hour or so, we were mesmerised by one of the ocean's top predators moving among us.

Both cautious and curious, she made multiple approaches checking each one of us out individually, coming towards us, then moving away and then coming back again and again, showing off her beauty and elegance highlighted by the distinctive white smudge on the tips of her dorsal, pectoral and tail fins. Swimming close to the surface, the sun's rays cast an enthralling, ever-changing electric light pattern across her back. For me, the encounter was one of the most-thrilling shark experiences of my diving life.

Recognising the importance of Fuvamulah's tiger shark population, Zuzu, together with Jono and local shark enthusiasts, Abdulbasith Mohamed and Hamna Hussein, decided to found the Miyaru Programme, an NGO dedicated to expanding collaborative research and conservation of predatory sharks in the Maldives. "We realised there was a really big gap in the Maldivian NGO landscape where all the other larger species were covered through research and conservation efforts, but there wasn't one dedicated to predatory sharks, says Zuzu, who was brought up in Turkey and studied a masters in conservation science and biodiversity management at Oxford University. ▶



Did you know?

As their name suggests, tiger sharks are covered in stripes making them easy to differentiate from other sharks!



To meet Zuzu is to be instantly swept up in her passion for sharks. Her exuberance, captivating smile and dazzling eyes all come into play, especially when she is talking about the island's Momma Shark Project, which seeks to uncover new insights into the reproduction of Fuvahmulah's tiger sharks using non-invasive ultrasounds.

Near the end of our stay, the first of these ultrasound devices arrived on Fuvahmulah and using it for the first time, there was more gold. In all, the team scanned 35 tiger sharks in ten days and detected 25 pregnancies. Pups were at different life stages from early to late-term pregnancy. The Momma Project is a collaboration with @fuvahmulahdiveschool @miyaru_org and Dr James Sulikowski from @sulikowskilab @big_fish_lab and @oregonstate @inah_shark @sharkbeyes @lennyunderwater @nathanvperisic. Going forward, the team is excited about the next steps, which will include collecting information about movements and spatial distribution of these big mommas.

The 'tiger' stripes on the shark are distinctive



“ To meet Zuzu is to be instantly swept up in her passion for sharks ”

Zuzu and her team are keenly aware of the threat facing sharks globally. She explains, “The Indian Ocean is the global epicentre of shark decline, it has got the highest rate of megafauna loss in the world, according to recent (scientific) papers. The Maldives is a really significant place because it's one of the few shark sanctuaries in the Indian Ocean where shark fishing is completely banned in national waters and the Exclusive Economic Zone.”

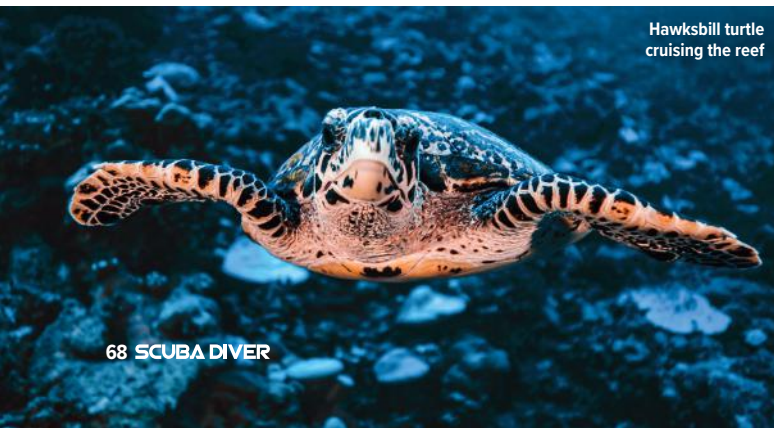
All smiles aboard Lonu's dhoni



Gabby with her fishy entourage



Hawksbill turtle cruising the reef



Joining Zuzu in the Miyaru Programme is Jono Allen, a tall, laid-back Aussie with long, curly salt-drenched hair whose easy-going manner belies his intense love of sharks, and their plight, tiger sharks in particular. “They are incredibly unique. I didn't know tiger sharks at all. I went from being scared of them to, these are the most-beautiful, misunderstood, gentle, elegant, just perfectly balanced creatures in our oceans. Then I learnt a lot more about the Maldivian ones, the ones here and learnt how the ones here are even more vibrant with more striking patterns on them than elsewhere on this planet.”

Diving among the tigers of Fuvamulah in the company of people like Jono, Zuzu, Lonu and other good friends is such a sublime experience that my now-annual pilgrimage to Shark Island can not come quickly enough. ■



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CURTIN ARTIFICIAL REEF



“ With all the vessels resting on a sandy bottom, and the sands constantly moving with currents and storms, each time you dive the site is different ”

AL

In 1967, the members of the Underwater Research Group of Queensland had a very novel idea of creating a dive site in Brisbane's Moreton Bay, and a year later, after getting permission and surveying a site on the inner side of Moreton Island, they sunk an old dredging barge, thus creating the world's first artificial reef built by divers for divers, as Helen Rose and Nigel Marsh explain

Photographs by
Helen Rose and Nigel Marsh
www.nigelmarshphotography.com

Did you know?

This artificial reef system was created specifically for divers with an assortment of ships sunk between 1968 and 1998. Sunken vessels include car ferries, tugboats, whale chasers, coal barges and even a Brisbane tram!



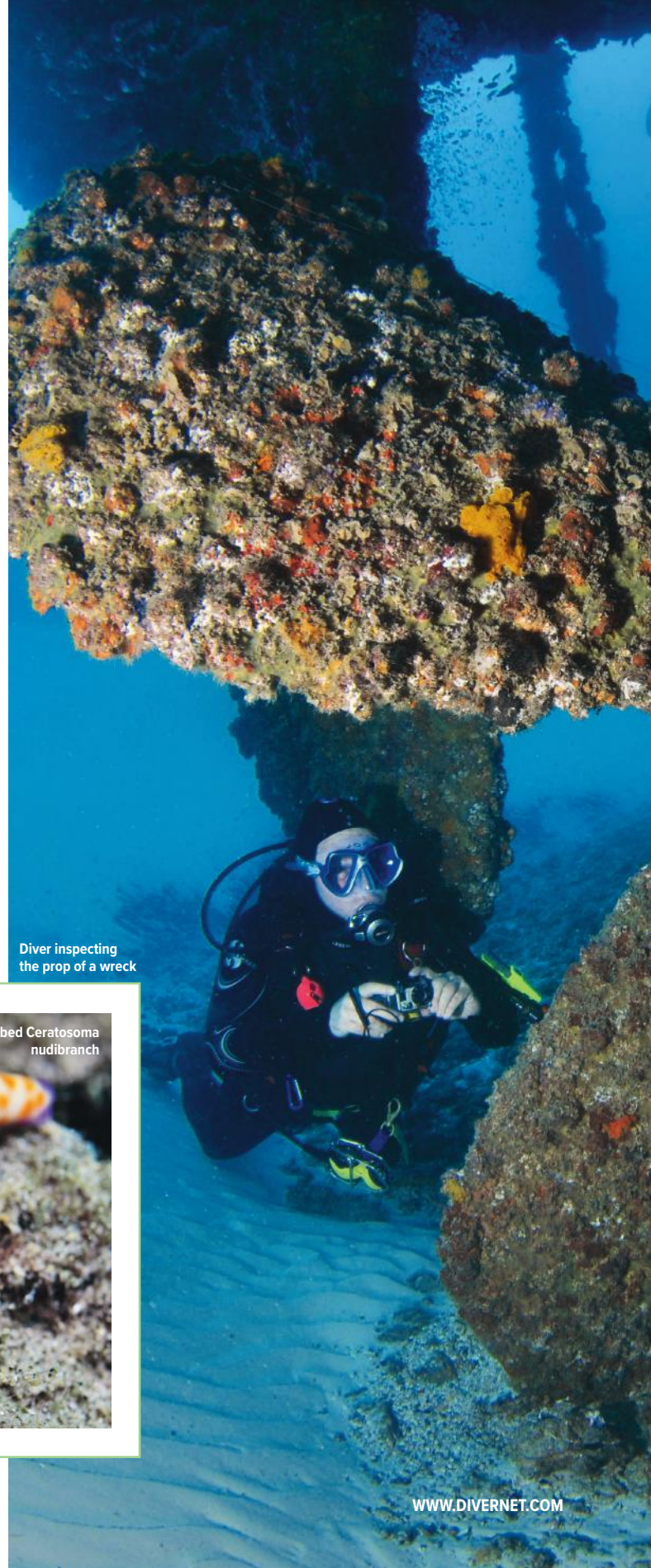
Over the next 30 years the dive club added 25 vessels to the reef, including gravel barges, tugboats, sand carriers, a yacht, a trading vessel, a ferry, a drydock gate, an old Brisbane tram and even two whale chasers from the old whaling station at nearby Tangalooma. In addition to this they scuttled pontoons, buoys, car bodies and old tyres. Today, Curtin Artificial Reef covers a large area, around 400 metres by 120 metres, with depths varying from 12m to 30m.

All the vessels were prepared and sunk by the dive club, with Frank Curtin a leading figure in the creation of the reef. He was also a dab hand with explosives when it came to sinking the vessels. In honour of his work behind the scenes, the reef was named after him.

Today Curtin Artificial Reef is one of the most-popular diving and fishing spots off Brisbane. The site is best dived on the high tide, as it is tidal, and is also fun as a drift dive at other times. Visibility at the site is generally around ten metres, yet can vary from six metres to 30 metres, and is usually at its clearest after a week of southerly winds.

On a typical dive you can generally explore around five vessels. Most have been positioned close together, so you can easily navigate between them. Some of my favourite vessels to explore include the 35-metre-long tugboat Melbourne. Located almost at the centre of the reef, you used to be able to explore the interior of this wreck, but over the years it has become full of sand.

“ With so many vessels to explore it takes around a dozen dives to thoroughly investigate all parts of Curtin Artificial Reef ”



Diver inspecting the prop of a wreck



Queensland grouper



Three-lobed Ceratosoma nudibranch

Dive Operators

Brisbane Scuba operate a boat from Manly and are one of the few charter boats that regularly dive Curtin Artificial Reef.

www.brisbanescuba.au



Painted frogfish



Juvenile yellow boxfish



Reef fishes on a wreck

Did you know?

This area is extremely tidal with strong currents between high and low tides. It is also very popular with fisherman and thus there is very often discarded fishing tackle.

Carrying a dive knife and wearing suitable gloves is recommended.

South of this is the 32-metre-long Barrambin, a coal and gravel barge. Siting on the deck of this ship is an observation station built by club members, which has sadly fallen on its side. Heading north divers can explore the huge Cairncross Drydock Gate, the gravel barge Estrella Del Mar, the tugboat Lovenstein, and the barges Bremer and Amsterdam. Most of the vessels still have their props, and divers can explore cabins, engine rooms and the cavernous hulls of the barges. The largest vessel at the site is the 40-metre-long Lady Norman. A coastal trader, this vessel is a little hard to find as it sits by itself 50 metres west of the Melbourne. ▶

With all the vessels resting on a sandy bottom, and the sands constantly moving with currents and storms, each time you dive the site is different. Vessels get covered by sand at times, and then uncovered, with the tram disappearing from view several times. The shifting sands have also filled the interiors of many of the vessels. However, some of the vessels can be penetrated by experienced divers, just ensure you have the training and the equipment to do this safely.

Being down for such a long time, all of the vessels are covered in hard corals, soft corals, black coral trees, gorgonians, sponges, algae and ascidians. However, stinging hydroids also decorate some of the vessels, so watch where you place your hands if not wearing gloves.

While the vessels, pipes and other items are fun to explore, the main attraction at Curtin Artificial Reef is the prolific marine life. When the sandy bottom was first surveyed in 1967, only two species of fish were observed by members of the dive club. Now several hundred fish species populate the site, along with a wonderful variety of invertebrates.

The most-famous residents of the site are the massive Queensland grouper. Dozens call the vessels home and greet divers as they descend and often follow them around the reef. They are a little camera shy at times, but it is quite common to have six or more following you from wreck to wreck. They vary in size from one metre to two metres long, however I once encountered a monster hiding inside the Melbourne that was three metres long!

The Queensland grouper are not the only big fish seen at the site, as also common are barracuda, giant trevally, goldspotted grouper, yellowtail kingfish and cobia. Several stingray species visit the site and rest on the sand beside the wrecks, and divers often see turtles and spotted wobbegongs. Schools of pelagic fish circle the wrecks, so watch out for trevally, rabbitfish, batfish, scad and bream.

Reef fishes abound on the vessels, with a good variety of butterflyfish, angelfish, wrasse, tuskfish, pufferfish, damsels, hawkfish, surgeonfish, boxfish, morays, sweetlips, Moorish idols, coral snapper, fusiliers, basslets, scorpionfish, rockcod, lionfish and blennies to be seen. On the sand rest grubfish, flatheads and gobies.



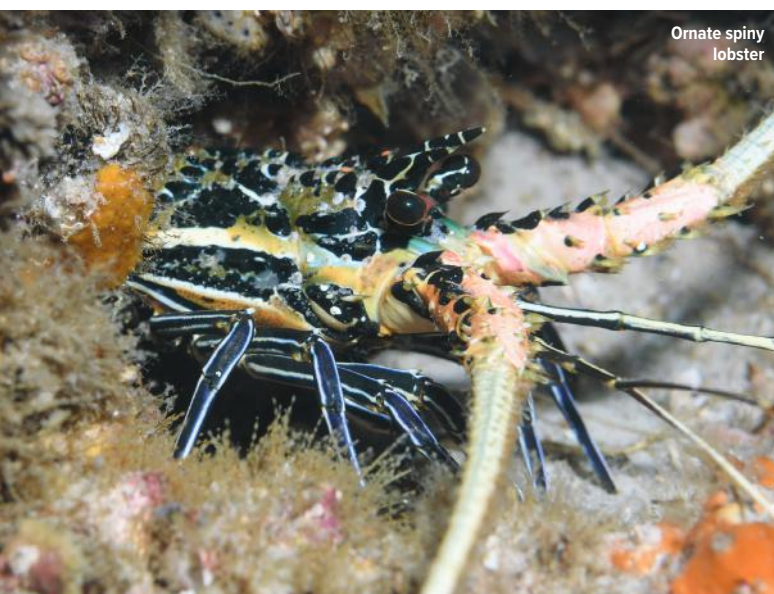
Spotted wobbegong



Loggerhead turtle



False scorpionfish



Ornate spiny lobster

Nudibranchs feed on the wrecks, with lots of three-lobed ceratosoma to be seen. Some of the nudibranchs I have seen here have tiny skeleton shrimps on them. Divers will also find octopus, squid, spiny lobster, crabs, shrimps, sea stars, seashells, feather stars and hermit crabs.

Located in the sheltered estuary waters of Moreton Bay, divers also find unusual and unexpected marine life at Curtin Artificial Reef. Stonefish, demon stingers and leaf scorpionfish hide on the wrecks or the sand. On one dive I found a painted frogfish, on another an ornate ghostpipefish being eaten by a grubfish. I have also seen the rare northern blue devil, the little-known blackspot waspfish and also a false scorpionfish, a type of rockcod that pretends to be venomous.

With so many vessels to explore it takes around a dozen dives to thoroughly investigate all parts of Curtin Artificial Reef. Each time I dive this site I find something new and give thanks to the Underwater Research Group of Queensland for creating the world's first artificial reef created especially for divers. ■

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APEKS EVX | SRP: AUD\$7BC

Apeks has announced the launch of the EVX range, their most-advanced series of diving regulators ever created. This revolutionary range, which includes the EVX200, EVX Tungsten and EVX octopus, marks a new era in diving innovation.

Since 1974, Apeks has been a leading innovator in the field of diving technology, consistently challenging the boundaries of what is possible, and the EVX range is the latest manifestation of their ongoing commitment to excellence, integrating years of experience with cutting-edge technology to deliver a regulator that establishes new standards within the industry.

The EVX range features advanced technology to ensure optimal performance and reliability across all models. Each regulator is equipped with the Auto Closure Device (ACD), which protects the first stage from water, dirt, and debris, ensuring optimal performance in the most-challenging environments. The seamless integration of the sealed breathing effort adjustment and the laminar flow valve



ensures a tranquil and comfortable diving experience, enhancing the overall enjoyment of every dive. The EVX range is designed to offer unparalleled breathing performance at depths of up to 50m. It has been developed to surpass previous models by incorporating advanced pressure regulation and efficiency. Whether in warm tropical waters or freezing cold environments, the EVX delivers consistent and reliable performance. In line with Apeks' commitment to sustainability, the EVX range incorporates eco-friendly materials, bio-based and recycled polymers.
www.apeksgiving.com

NRC AIRPRO NANO NITROX MEMBRANE SYSTEM | SRP: APPROX €3,000

As popular as nitrox is around the world, hardly anyone with a portable compressor would be pumping it, despite all its safety benefits, and if you wanted it, it meant a trip to your local dive centre that could provide it (and as we know, not all centres offer nitrox or technical gases like trimix). However, the manufacturer NRC has now succeeded in developing a compact membrane system with which private divers, diving clubs and smaller diving centres can produce nitrox themselves.

The 'Nitrox and Rebreather Company' from Bergneustadt in Germany presented its innovation to the trade press at the BOOT trade fair in Dusseldorf just in time for the company's 25th anniversary. With a capacity of 120 litres of Nitrox32 and a weight of only around 35kg, the system, in combination with a 100-litre high-pressure compressor, can handle up to 15 tanks of Nitrox32 per day, which covers the needs of smaller centres and clubs. What's more, the AirPro Nano can be operated from any normal 230V power supply and is affordable, costing less than €3,000.

The product should therefore make it easier for divers to access nitrox in the future and fill a gap in the market - at the same time, NRC emphasises that the AirPro Nano, which is barely larger than a cat transport box, uses the same high-quality technology as the large membrane systems. It's hardly a surprise that Dirk Göldner, the company's



founder and Managing Director, is delighted: 'It's almost like we're giving ourselves a birthday present with this world premiere,' he said with a grin. 'But above all, it should show our customers and the market that we are not resting on our laurels, but that NRC continues to work on innovations and excellent products to increase diving safety.' Most divers are already familiar with NRC as the market leader in nitrox, as its products, such as membrane systems, analysers, sensors, boosters and many more, can be found on numerous liveboards and diving centres. The AirPro Nano should further increase awareness of the diving safety company.
www.nrc-international.com

ORCATORCH ZD710 MK2 | SRP: AUD\$279.95



When you're exploring caves, observing marine life, doing underwater photography, or communicating with your dive buddies, have you ever thought, 'How great would it be to have an adjustable beam dive light?'

The innovative OrcaTorch ZD710 MK2 zoomable diving flashlight can meet your need, boasting an impressive max 212,500 cd intensity and a versatile 4-72° beam angle.

Compared with the old ZD710 version, the ZD710 MK2 has a more focused and brighter beam underwater. When

you adjust the beam to 4°, the max beam intensity is 252100cd and the beam distance can reach up to 920 metres.

This ZD710 MK2 offers four adjustable power settings, ranging from 1,500 to 150 lumens, allowing you to tailor brightness while optimizing battery life. With remarkable burn times spanning from 2h 10mins to 12 hours across different intensity levels, the ZD710 MK2 guarantees extended diving sessions without compromise, and you can monitor battery life with the colour-coded indicator.

Constructed from durable anodized aluminium, the ZD710 MK2 is built to endure the challenges of underwater exploration, boasting an impressive depth rating of 150m for unmatched reliability.

Your ZD710 MK2 comes complete with a 21700 5000mAh USB-C rechargeable battery, a bracket mount compatible with WS02 or H620 Goodman handle, a USB-C charging cable, wrist lanyard, and owner's manual.

www.orcatorch.com

SCUBAPRO NAVIGATOR LITE | SRP: AUD\$TBC

The new Scubapro Navigator Lite BCD is lightweight and easily foldable, perfect for the recreational travel diver who prefers back flotation in a simple, yet durable form with the added benefit of showing off interesting colour combinations. The Navigator Lite also offers a new feature that no other Scubapro BCD has - replaceable air cell covers (£45) that come in a choice of six colour options for colour-customizing your dive gear.

The Navigator Lite is available as standard in Black, Blue and Coral, with replaceable air cell covers available in six colours (Black, Blue, Coral, Navy Blue Camo, Army Green, and White). It is equipped with Scubapro's Quick Cinch tank buckle, which makes attaching the BCD to a tank a doddle, and it has detachable pockets which can either be used facing upwards (for carrying accessories) or downwards (providing quick-releasing ballast).

The air cell is made of durable 4200 nylon with high-frequency welds, there are two 8mm stainless steel grommets on each pocket to provide a mount for a dive knife. The Navigator Lite comes in two sizes – 2XS-M, and M-2XL.

www.scubapro.com





GEAR TEST EXTRA

Each issue, the Scuba Diver test team bring you the latest product and equipment releases from the dive industry. Cannot wait for the next edition? Keep up-to-date with all the latest gear news and reviews by heading over to the Scuba Diver YouTube channel!
www.youtube.com/ScubaDiverMagazine

SEAC IT 500 ICE | SRP: (SET INCLUDING OCT AND REG BAG DIN OR YOKE) AUD\$1,195

Mark Evans: I have always been impressed with Seac products, particularly in the last few years. They seem to have really cranked up the effort on the design front, and quality at a reasonable price has always been their watchword. The Seac IT 500 Ice regulator continues this trend.

First off, it is a good-looking unit. The steel surround on the second stage really sets off the large soft PU purge, which proudly has Seac emblazoned on the front. The engraved badge in the top of the second stage also adds a nice little bit of detail.

The balanced diaphragm first stage is equally eye-catching, with a Seac badge on the front, shiny steel cap to match the second stage surround, and a matt-chrome finish on the body.

The hose protectors also feature the Seac logo, which again all adds to the subtle but effective branding.

So, the reg looks great, but how does it perform?

Well, the first stage offers high air flow and performance through all depth ranges, and I found it delivered more than enough air to me even when I simulated a heavy workload and was breathing it hard. I never felt that it could not give me the air I needed. The high-pressure and low-pressure ports are all pre-orientated into the perfect position, thus keeping hose routing tidy and sending each hose exactly where it needs to be.

Equally, the second stage proved to maintain a dry breathe in various positions, even inverted. The large Venturi lever and cracking resistance control are easy to grasp and operate wearing thicker neoprene gloves, or even drygloves, and they make a noticeable difference to





the breathe, especially when you dial it right down. This would be useful in a high-flow current area, or if using a scooter.

The wide exhaust directs exhaled breaths to either side of your mask, keeping your vision clear, and the mouthpiece is simultaneously soft but also

firm enough to sit nicely between your teeth. I never felt any need to clamp down hard to hold the reg firmly in my mouth.

The compact size and relatively lightweight nature of the IT 500 Ice also makes it ideal for travelling divers as well as those diving in local waters. The braided hoses also help keep the weight down – essential in these days of ever-decreasing baggage allowances.

The Seac IT 500 Ice comes complete with a semi-rigid preformed case made from an ultra-resistant fabric finish, to protect your reg during transport and storage. It is available in International, and DIN fitting.

www.seacsub.com



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