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# Abrolhos – It means, keep your eyes open

by Keith Saunders

Google Earth is a far safer option to find the Houtman Abrolhos compared to the 17th century Dutch method of blundering into it during the night to be marooned and desperate. What followed the Dutch experience, included prodigious feats of seafaring and unbelievable violence which now haunt this remote and magnificent West Australian location. Google will help you locate the place and then you will need to spend some time researching your options if you want to spend some quality time below the surface.

Aside from a tragic history that predates the European settlement of Australia, the natural history and complex ecosystems of the Abrolhos's, mostly windswept low coral cays, are fascinating. Here the warm Leeuwin current supports prolific hard corals and tropical marine life that converge with temperate seaweeds and fish species. The islands, a haven for a myriad of breeding seabirds, are mostly coral plate and fine white sands tenuously stitched together, in the main, with sedge and saltbush.

The Abrolhos is not easy to access, but has such awesome potential as a dive location that it is worth every effort to get yourself and a buddy there, particularly in the autumn when the sea and winds may bestow day after day of perfect diving conditions.

With three main groups, Pelsaert, Easter and Wallabi, in a scattering of 122 islands, the Abrolhos has a multitude of diving options. The waters are sparkly clear, sweeping from aquamarine shallows to cobalt blue depths. There are no resorts here because the islands themselves are an A-Class Reserve, though ironically they are populated with numerous ramshackle seasonal cray fishing shacks that have existed here since the early 20th century. Diving access is either by private charter, live-aboard or helicopter day trips. Many of the sites are yet to be named and appear as interesting features on the map and then consolidate as excitement over the sounder images. Mind you, many sites simple whisper their exquisiteness to you as you peer over the gunwale into clear water that belies its real depth.

Everyone likes options and recently aboard the Southern Image, a 20m dedicated live-aboard dive boat, skippered by owner Luke Nelson, my partner and I enjoyed 5 glorious days in the Abrolhos delighted with the options. We steamed through all groups and managed 4 dives a day. Thank goodness for nitrox, these days it makes my stamina look good. Like all good live-aboards it was eat, dive, eat, dive compare photos more eating and diving and then blissful sleep until



you get up and do it all again. This was our second adventure in the Abrolhos in 12 months after an absence of over 30 years.

The attraction here is multi-layered. The wreck of the Batavia, which tantalisingly avoided discovery until 1963, is one of the most historic wreck sites in Australia. In the sixties and seventies it was the scene of frantic activity when the Museum of WA painstakingly recorded and recovered much of the 1629 wreck, which lay hidden on a reef edge continuously pummeled by the Indian Ocean. It is now a captivating permanent display in the Maritime Museum of WA. I lived on Beacon Island adjacent to the wreck, for 6 months in the late 70's. The sea guardian of the wreck never allowed me the opportunity to even snorkel the site then, but persistence pays and we were rewarded with a perfect day that saw Southern Image back into the exact location and allowed us a placid snorkel examining the admiralty anchors and canons still on site. Climbing back onto the duck board in benign seas and gazing back to Beacon Island the nearest refuge, some 500m away and where only a 180 would struggle to survive from the compliment of 316 aboard the Batavia. The island is barely an acre in size and less than 3m above sea level, with no water or shelter. My mind quavers imagining the fear that must have overwhelmed the survivors confronted with broiling surf and a barely discernable speck of land in the middle of the night. The history of the savagery that ensued and the skeletons that still lie buried on the island appeal to the shipwreck seeker in me. For those that are interested in the murderous rampage that followed, when at least a 125 men, women and children perished at the hands of mutineers, I can recommend the book *Island of Angry Ghosts* by Hugh Edwards. The Abrolhos holds other more intact wrecks to explore but the sense of history that pervades this wreck is spellbinding.



Moving on from the Batavia site, just a few hundred metres into Goss' Passage we found ourselves swimming with shimmering balls of bait fish being harassed by monster spanish mackerel, impressive trevally, horse-size kingfish, sampson fish and tuna. Apex predators, such as bronze whalers, hammerheads and tiger sharks pay a visit from time to time to keep things interesting. At the other end of the passage near the northern tip of Long Island is the Long Island Dive Trail, which can be appreciated on snorkel or scuba. Here we had the opportunity to observe a wide variety of larger reef fish including curious baldchin groper, pugnacious coral trout, various varieties of snapper and cod, a plethora wrasses and West Australian dhu fish, a prized commercial species. Fish in abundance, safely tucked within the boundaries of the Beacon Island Reef Observation Area, a no take zone. Who said fish where dumb? The trail moves over different ecosystems from plate coral to staghorn and to a massive isolated brain coral in an open sandy stretch. Careful observation in each of these habitats reveals the nuances of a healthy reef system. Myriads of small reef dwellers dart in and out of the structures with cryptic and not so cryptic predators waiting to pounce. There are shells everywhere and nudibranchs aplenty and the ever-present crayfish for which the region is renowned. They seem to line every crevasse, jostling for the best position to observe their neighbours. Turtles sometimes come to play and when they do they weave there special magic for all those who wish to be enchanted.

What draws and excites both my partner and I to the Abrolhos is the opportunity to see and photograph a rich diversity of creatures and landscapes. Its isolation and comparative lack of commercialisation are also infinitely attractive. Bearing in mind that there have been fishing operations of one sort or another in the area for more than a century the reefscape still has an intense beauty that can distract you from little things like bottom time and tank pressure. Divers need to bear in mind that if things go wrong it's at least 50 to 80 km across open sea to medical assistance, so pushing the envelop is not wise.

Night dives are always exhilarating but more so when you know how diverse and rich the area is likely to be. Night dives tend to be protected waters in places where you have anchored for the night. As an aside, WA has the by line "the sate of excitement" in promotional advertising. I can tell you, while making my way back to the boat after a successfully night dive scouting out a variety of crabs,



nudibranchs, sea hares, sleeping fish and active little bob-tail squid, I suddenly understood why it was the state of excitement when an energetic seal buzzed over the top of me and then looped the loop around me. I kept telling myself he was just being inquisitive and not pairing up for protection. It was not a good time for the batteries to be fading. It was one of the few times when I didn't pause to remove my fins before exiting!

The standout dive, however, from our trip had to be a site that was christened the Golden VW. No, a VW hadn't formed part of an artificial reef, but the bommie had a very special visitor while we were combing its flanks for macro subjects. The bommie was mid channel in the Easter Group, the top around 15m and getting down to around 40 at he bottom. The plate corals at the top of the reef held plenty of trout and baldchin. Crays also crowded all the ledges. Drifting down the bommie wall the reefscape changed to one dominated by large and almost glowing golden soft corals, amongst these, sponges and numerous colourful nudibranchs, flat worms and scorpion fish awaited patient eyes. With no current and 20+m viz, gazing out from the bommie revealed plenty of mackerel, kingfish, trevally and sampson fish, cruising the bait and looking for an easy feed. Around 30m my partner started signalling frantically, assuming she had found some gem I finned over and started to scow the area in front of her, however she shook her head, spread her arms wide and pointed down the slope. There, serenely cruising with an entourage of large sampson fish that looked like bait, was a Queensland groper akin in size to a compact VW. I looked around to realise all 6 divers from our group where hovering motionless, agog at the grace of this majestic creature as he slowly circuted the base of the bommie carefully eyeing the interlopers in his realm. Not perfect timing for the macro lens. Back on board the impact of



such an encounter was recounted with both excitement and awe, by all for the remainder of the trip.

The Abrolhos offers an interesting variety of dive challenges for the tech minded. Not being a tech diver myself I can only relate what fellow divers have discussed around the galley table, often with wistful reverence. Somewhere in the Pelsaert group exists the almost mythical Blue Hole. I know it is not mythical because I recall reading a fascinating article about it in DiveLog. It's a sub sea, deep cave created by a fresh water upwelling through the limestone. Its coloration is due to depth much to the chagrin of cray fishermen lured to it, as it proves to be much deeper than their pot ropes. For those with the skills and professional support to dive it, the Blue Hole resonates with an eerie light and a jumble of cray floats suspended mid water like errant balloons. Blue Hole trips seem to be the province of private club charters.

Back in the late 1930's the local fisherman from the coastal town of Geraldton, who fished the area and set up businesses on the Abrolhos recognised its innate beauty and rich resources and moved to set up a privately controlled Tourism and Progress Association for the area. This endeavour succeeded in encouraging the Government of the day to declare the Abrolhos an A-class reserve, so no private group could gain exclusive control of this stunning natural asset. Line and cray fishermen where granted access under strict licensing conditions, however the tourism potential was never truly realised due to the harsh conditions that prevailed even for those reaping the bounty of the seas. The Abrolhos is still only accessible to those who wish to make it happen.

It is frivolous to rave about one site or aspect of the Abrolhos because it offers so much, appealing to all levels of ability, experience and interest and should be recognised as a dive destination rich in opportunities that can only be described in superlative terms. When the Dutch named the Abrolhos, little did they know their meaning would be so prophetic to those of us who dive, for when you keep your eyes open, so many options can be seen, so many experiences materialise to mesmerise, enchant and enrich ones understanding of the natural world.

Abrolhos starting points  
[www.imageidive.com.au/](http://www.imageidive.com.au/)  
[www.odysseyexpeditions.com.au](http://www.odysseyexpeditions.com.au)  
[www.abrolhosislandcharters.com.au/diving.php](http://www.abrolhosislandcharters.com.au/diving.php)  
[www.bcda.com.au/helicopter.html](http://www.bcda.com.au/helicopter.html)  
[www.stiffysboatcharters.com/abrolhos\\_divingcharters.html](http://www.stiffysboatcharters.com/abrolhos_divingcharters.html)  
[www.museum.wa.gov.au/collection/s/maritime/march/shipwrecks/Batavia/batavia.html](http://www.museum.wa.gov.au/collection/s/maritime/march/shipwrecks/Batavia/batavia.html)  
[www.fish.wa.gov.au](http://www.fish.wa.gov.au)