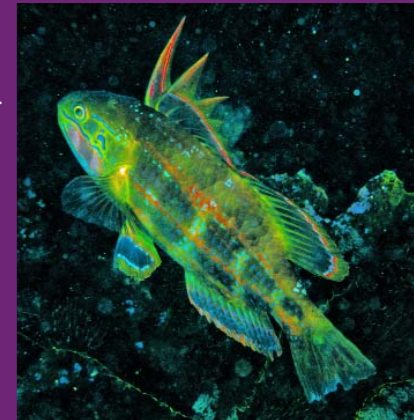


The SAPPHIRE COAST

† THERE'S A SPECTACULAR PIECE OF COASTLINE BETWEEN NAROOMA AND EDEN IN SOUTHERN NEW SOUTH WALES. IT'S ALWAYS BEEN A MAGNET FOR SOUTHERN DIVERS SEEKING WARMER WATERS, BUT IT SEEMS DIVERS FROM OTHER STATES HAVE ALSO DISCOVERED THESE RICH WATERS ARE WELL WORTH THE TRIP!

: KEN HOPPEN

EDEN This is a very scenic deepwater port just north of the interstate border. Historically it was a whaling port, and the Davidson family of whalers were known for their skilful use of a pod of killer whales as they plied their trade. Now Eden is known for its beautiful surrounding National Parks with superb water views. Whales still play a large part in the flavour of this town, and humpbacks in particular can be observed from October to December as they move down the coast from their tropical winter playgrounds. The diving here is brilliant too, with something for divers of all ages and experience levels.



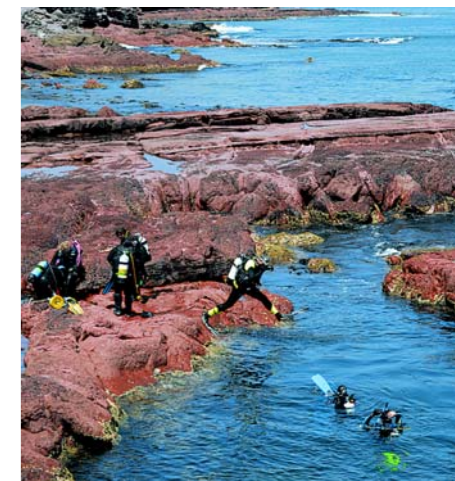
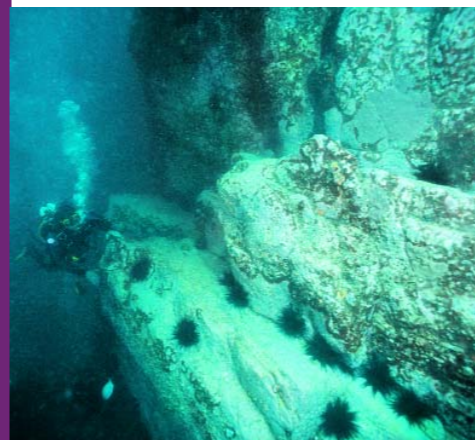
The Tasman Hauler is probably the best wreck in the area. This scuttled tug boat lies in around 32 metres, and is a dive that you'll have to do again and again. The superstructure is sound and overgrown with life. Further down, the bridge is very easily accessed, as is the rear hold. There's a wide array of marine life on the wreck, from schooling yellowtail to banded morwong, sergeant bakers to conger eels. The massive propeller at the stern is well worth the visit too.

The Henry Bolte is a little shallower than the Hauler, but is closer to the cliffs at 27 metres, and a little more prone to surge. It's more broken up than its companion, and this provides more areas for marine life to hide. It has a lot of life on it and is known for schools of yellowtail kingfish which circle it in the autumn months.

The Cave is perched against the cliffside and is probably my favourite dive around Eden. It has a large cavernous opening, which quickly narrows to become just wide enough for a diver to squeeze through and continue through to the other side. It generally has a lot of marine life in and around it, with large stingrays, Bleeker's devils, crayfish, and a host of interesting benthic life. The boat generally anchors in around seven metres and divers swim over a vertical dropoff, turn right, and descend to around 20 metres to find the cave. Back under the boat on a deco, blue groupers are a

Left: A Merimbula sunrise over the inlet
Inset left to right: This rosy wrasse was hunting small creatures in the kelp at Merimbula; The largest of the world's stingray species, a smooth stingray cruises past north of Merimbula; A juvenile white-ear sits near the entry to the Merimbula Wharf dive site
Right: Rainbow herring cale are amongst the most striking of fish





Clockwise: The dropoff near the Cave at Eden is a spectacular wall full of nooks and crannies for creatures to hide in. Ben Boyd's Tower was used to watch for whales in the latter half of the 1800s. Entering the water at Merimbula just takes a giant stride. A ledge and rope helps you exit. The Cave at Eden goes back into the ridge, emerging the other side as a small tunnel. A small stingaree cruising at Mystery Bay.



Top to bottom: Humpback whales migrate down the coastline during Spring; A gloomy octopus pokes its head out of its hole; No dive in this area would be complete without a visit from a friendly blue grouper; A grey spotted catshark

highlight – one large male is particularly friendly and provides many photo opportunities.

The Chip Mill Wharf is home to weedy seadragons, this structure on the southern side of Twofold Bay can only be dived from a boat and only when shipping traffic allows. This wharf is full of life. Look here for small bubble shells, and for schooling fish as they make their way around the bay.

MERIMBULA Just 25 kilometres north of Eden, Merimbula is a good place to stay whilst exploring the coastline here. You can easily access dive sites in Eden and Tathra, as well as the Merimbula sites. Whale watching boats leave from here too, and it has a regional airport.

Merimbula Wharf is the best shore dive on the southern coast of New South Wales. It's not just a great training ground. With easy access straight from the rocks in front of the Merimbula Aquarium, the topography drops in stages to around 15 metres. (It should be noted that it isn't OK to dive under the jetty here, you need to go out or to the east.) The ledges here are home to New South Wales's marine emblem, the protected eastern blue groper, plus a host of other

interesting marine life like rainbow fish, blue herring cale, mado, sweep, and most familiar southern New South Wales species. But there's more! Strange inhabitants are here for divers who take the time to explore thoroughly. Giant seapens can be found out on the sand, as can angel sharks and many species of stingrays. Amongst the seaweed-covered rocks strange weedfish and anglerfish hide. This area also regularly has a pod of dolphins pass by, and once or twice killer whales have wandered through.

Bar Beach is near the wharf and is a good entry point to dive the shallower western side of the wharf. The tide can rush through here, so choose an entry point as far to the east as you can manage, and continue to hug the coastline. As you swim east it drops away. In this area I've often seen small grey spotted catsharks, as well as some pristine and pretty locations, as few divers or fishermen bother with this shallower side. Angelsharks are here too, as well as their stingray cousins.

Empire Gladstone needs the correct sea conditions to dive it, but it's well worth it if you can get there. Located on the southern side of Haycock Rock just south of Merimbula, it's a large wreck in shallow water, fairly broken up by the constantly

pounding waves, but still has a lot of upright portions plus nooks and crannies to poke around in. With a depth under 10 metres this is a wreck for all experience levels.

Short Point is best done as a boat dive, and offers gullies, sand patches and interesting topography which shelters many creatures. I've observed pufferfish sleeping in the sand with only their noses showing. Octopus live amongst the giant sea tulips, and many species of wrasse fossick amongst the kelp.

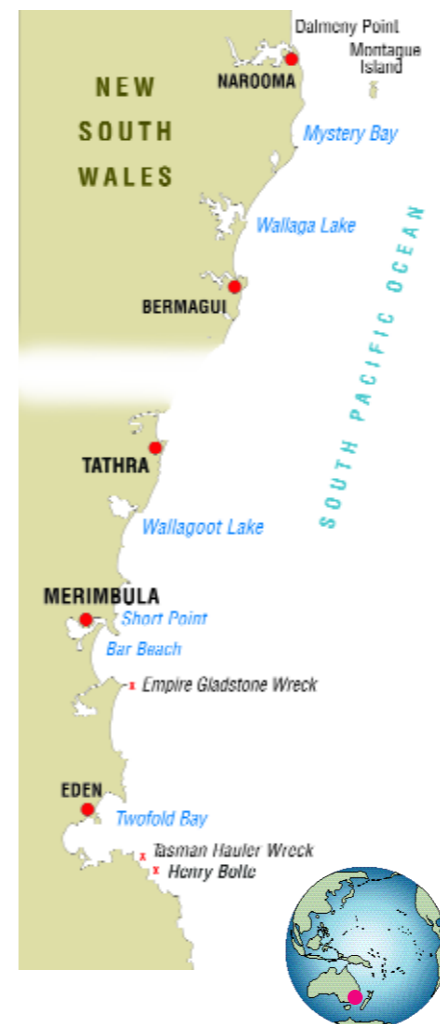
TATHRA This small seaside town is about 30 minutes drive north of Merimbula. The large wharf is a wonderful dive. In years gone by this wharf was known for its shark fishermen, who'd row the bait a kilometre or two out to sea, then wait for a strike before reeling it in. I bet this caused an interesting moment or two for some unsuspecting diver at some stage in the past. This practice has now been discontinued, leaving the area open to more mundane sorts of fishing, and for divers!

Tathra Wharf is a brilliant shore dive, though entry and exit are much harder than at Merimbula Wharf. There's an

entry and exit on the eastern side of this structure, though you need to do some rock scrambling down a short 'goat-track' to get to the water. It's not too difficult if you aren't in a hurry. Alternately, you can enter and exit from the beach, which is a swim to the wharf, but does enable you to explore a sandy patch that most tend to ignore, and which has marine life different to that found underneath the pylons.

Expect large stingrays with a wealth of small schooling fish, occasional octopus, and some interesting and varied invertebrate life, including basketstars. This wharf is a brilliant alternative shore dive to Merimbula Wharf, as it's on the northern side of the small promontory it abuts. It's best dived on a southerly wind as it's well protected from anything in this direction. Merimbula wharf faces south and is too rough in a southerly – it's best dived in a northerly wind. They complement each other nicely.

NAROOMA An hour north of Tathra, diving at Narooma is exceptional. When driving north the coastal road is very scenic and has many interesting drives running from it into the national parks. Some are quite steep, so do your homework before you



leave to ensure the roads are suitable. Narooma is a beautiful town with a notorious river bar to navigate before you reach open water. It also has a wide range of shore dives.

Montague Island has many great dive sites, so I'll just go over a few here. The island tends to have great water clarity, as the continental shelf cuts in close here. It's an amazing feeling entering the water and seeing the bottom 30 metres away in gin-clear water. Montague is famous for its fur seals, and now has two colonies, one of Australian fur seals and a smaller group of New Zealand fur seals. It's also home to grey nurse sharks during the summer months. These magnificent fish cruise the northwestern corner of the island and are a highlight to any dive. Also a highlight are the schools of yellowtail which create wonderful shapes and patterns as they mingle around the island. These fish also attract some of the oceanic fish seen in the area, and marlin are sometimes sighted. Yellowtail kingfish are regulars!

Dalmeny Point can be done as a shore dive, but it's probably better as a boat

dive – it can be a long swim! Nudibranchs abound here, and it is a beautiful, colourful dive site.

Mystery Bay is one of my favourite shore dives in this area, it constantly throws up a surprise or two. Often stingrays are encountered, usually eagle rays too. There are species of scorpionfish and lots of territory to cover. Keep your eyes peeled and see what you can find!

Narooma Jetty is not to be ignored. This jetty provides a shallow dive during bad weather and rough conditions. It's very shallow, a few metres at most, but can be prone to a lot of boat traffic, so be very careful and keep your ears open. Don't expect the world here, but you may be surprised! In the late summer months juveniles of many tropical species are found here, from butterfly and angelfish, even small lionfish. Juvenile lionfish must be one of the most beautiful of all creatures! Watch for morays, the occasional stingray too, and enjoy the wide variety of nudibranchs.



From the top: Narooma, Tathra, Merimbula – some of Australia's most spectacular coastline

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DIVING INFO & TRAVEL TRICKS

Eden: Make sure that you visit the Eden Killer Whale Museum for a glimpse of whaling history and some stories that you won't believe! Ben Boyd National Park is also worth a day or three! Cat Balou Cruises run whale watching trips in Oct-Nov, and scenic bay cruises during the rest of the year.

Merimbula: Take a deep sea fishing cruise, a whale watching trip, or take in a scenic sunset from Long Point or Bar Beach. Take a scenic flight! There are many good restaurants, plus fun parks for the kids, and great beaches.

Narooma: Tour Montague Island to see the seals, penguins and lighthouse; walk up nearby Mt Dromadary; visit historic Central Tilba; take a picture through Australia Rock, and visit nearby Bermagui. There's lots to do here.

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