

King George and

seals,

+ HERE THE SOUTHERN OCEAN RIPS AROUND ISLANDS AND BULKY GRANITE OUTCROPS; OCEAN CURRENTS FROM THE NORTH MIX TROPICAL AND COOL WATER. SEALS LAZE ON ROCK LEDGES AND WHALES COME FROM THE SOUTH WITH CALVES IN TOW. KING GEORGE SOUND'S STEEP RUGGED HEADLANDS TUCKS INTO SHELTERED WHITE SAND BEACHES AND BAYS. THE WIND WHIPS WHITE WASH ONTO THE ROCKS AND THROUGH THE BLOWHOLES AND THEN STILLS TO GLASS SHOWING CLEAR TURQUOISE PATCHES BETWEEN REEFS. A LIGHTHOUSE FLASHES ON BREAKSEA ISLAND GUIDING LARGE BULK CARRIERS THROUGH INTO PRINCESS ROYAL HARBOUR WHERE THE CITY OF ALBANY ROLLS UP INTO THE HILLS.

: LUCY SADLER

Princess Royal

pelagics, the Perth, and a granite city

The natural, rugged beauty of this coastal city is obvious when you arrive and the locals know only too well the magic of this place. Garry, a local dive professional with over 20 years of experience in the industry takes the natural coastal experience to new depths for visitors and a regular contingent of local dive enthusiasts. Where other tourism operators will scribble landmarks on a map, Garry has the ocean terrain mapped out with first-hand experience. "Here", he pinpoints a spot of blue on a tourist map, "are large columns of granite you can slip down between and swim through". It's like a city street scene he explains; make sure you give way to your right to let the fish schools through. There are intersections and freeway bridges, towering high-risers, four-lane roads and tight one-way streets. This Albany local's big smoke is being between 9 and 28 metres underwater 100 metres off Breaksea Island, a popular local dive spot named Cables. My boyfriend Cameron is on his fourth dive trip here, and has experienced new reefs and boat wrecks

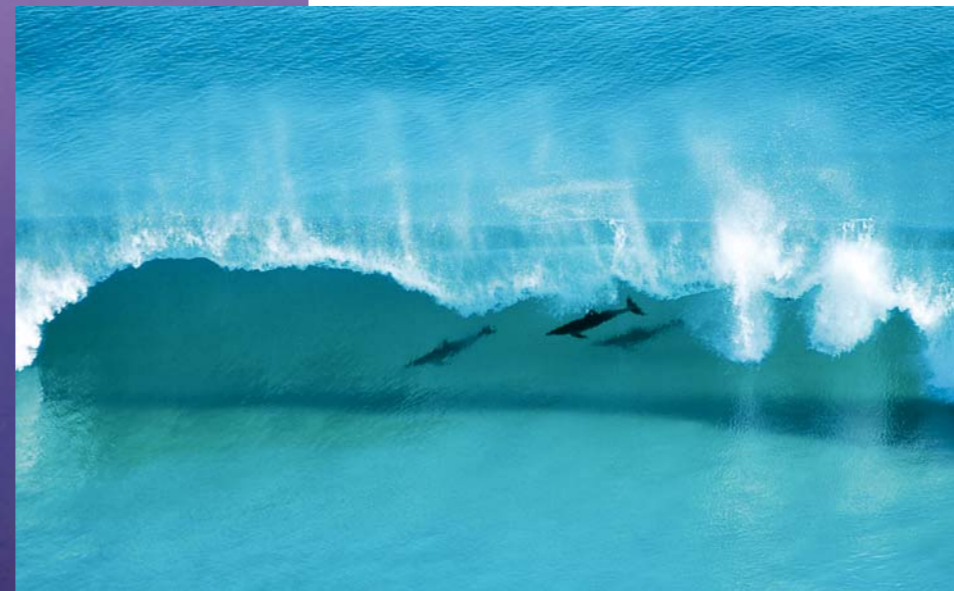
each time. I gear up in the dive shop in a semi-dry wetsuit, hood, gloves, booties, and torch. Hey, last time I dived I was in a bikini on Paradise reef off Cairns over a year before! I've only 9 logged dives. Scuba was something I'd always wanted to do and the Great Barrier Reef was a perfect place to start. I also knew it was completely different to this.

We head out across the Sound in Goanna 2, a small but well equipped dive boat, towards Breaksea Island. At Bald Head the ocean was a silky royal blue, broken momentarily by the flashes of a school of fish heading for the surface, chased by predators. Earlier in the year Cameron and I watched a dark shape with pectoral fins in a display of what the fisherfolk here fondly call 'the Salmon run'.

Before anchoring at Cables, we zip in close to a group of seals lazing on the warm rocks of the island. Cameron rolls overboard first. We're all stoked with the perfect conditions. It's my first backward

roll off the side of a boat and I go under flapping my fins in the air attempting to reach the surface as quick as possible. After a checkout on the surface we head under into a deep blue abyss. Billowing strands of kelp and brown algae beckoning us towards the crisscross of entrances to the underwater city. Large fish come out to greet us and then swim on, indifferent to our presence. Schools of swallowtail pass by, and tiny fish dart around plate coral, sponges of all colours and sizes, forested granite, and the fans...WOW. My focus is on following the naturally formed crevices that hold many alien species. Blue devils and groper go about their business.

The colour is incredible. A sponge with a thin body and bulging head attracts a brown cod with its fluoro yellow body. Mauve, dusty purple, grey and magenta sponges compliment the brown, orangey yellow forests of weed and we swim through narrow crevices and down the face of huge boulders. The stone loses its solidity with the motion of the weed and

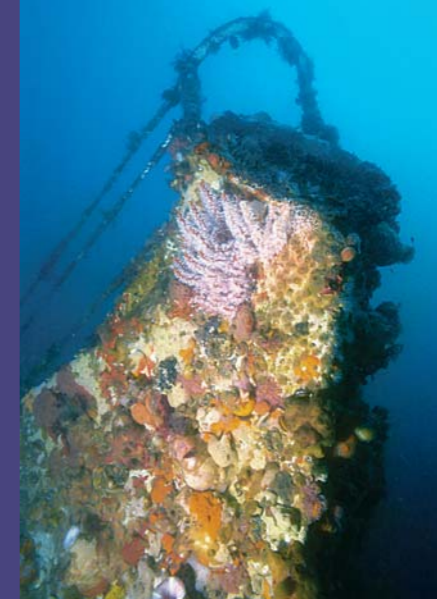


Becalmed on Princess Royal Harbour



Seals swim off Breaksea Island in King George Sound

Dolphins surf 'Sandpatch' below the Albany Wind Farm



Left to right:
 - Ancient Granite at 'The Gap', Torindurrup National Park.
 - Diving on Cheynes, Whale Chaser scuttled in 'the sound'.
 - The HMAS Perth.
 - Another underwater angle of the HMAS Perth.



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numerous fish of all shapes, colours and sizes. Hey I've seen you before I think gazing at species that are reminiscent of those in the tropics. A large white fragile fan catches our attention – it's like a precious fabric, a vulnerable living lace. Below it an equally remarkable neighbour has chocolate brown fingers with startling white coconut sprinkles. There are many sparkles, glimmers and bright colours here. The beauty is incomparable.

We zip back across the harbour for a cuppa and a range of tasty treats to get our energy levels back up on the lawn outside Whale World. The morning is getting calmer. There's no breeze, the water is glassy and we soon heat up in our thick gear. From here we can see the mast of HMAS Perth above water.

"Can we do the Perth?" Peter, a local guy, wants to find the garden gnome that lives on the wreck. Garry has a few spots up his sleeve but can see we're all keen to check out the wreck on such a calm day. It is the best visibility on the wreck in a while. The internet camera installed on the mast was viewed by a couple of us before planning a dive today.

We're quickly at the Perth wreck, scuttled in 2001, geared up and overboard after a briefing on the depths and features of the wreck. It seems to be easy to navigate through. We're transported into an eerie world of silty slime, rods, guns, ropes and dark holes. I find it difficult to place this hulk as a former war vessel, its seems more crustacean. Tubular horns with feathered insides, more technically known as giant sea squirts, grow outwards. Scallops and mussels and schools of local fish adorn the foreign object. Brown cod slip out of dark places, while our brave dive companions slip inside. It's possible to swim through large sections of the ship, passing by the former mess with deep-fryer still intact. The prospect of heading inside is a bit daunting as I watch silt rising from a flipper clipping the bare deck. Cameron and I slip off the deck down to the first level in 29 metres. It is deep and mesmerising swimming along the walkway and poking our noses and torches in dark places. I feel like I'm in scenes from Titanic spotting potential rusted objects that may hold treasures.

The treasure of this ship is for those who find the thrill in dark places and out of

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place objects. There is certainly beauty in the sheer size and the way the light bounces off the mast as you swim back up to the surface. It's also incredible how an artificial reef can be so packed with life. I surface exhausted, I've been breathing pretty hard. My dive log has certainly taken on a new light with depths never before encountered and a whole different experience of the underwater world. I feel like I've ticked the box on the HMAS Perth but the lure of other natural wonders in this area are beckoning.

Other dives in the area deliver caves, amongst colonies of sealions and off bommies and more spectacular granite formations deep under the harbour. You only need to see this area on land to realize the potential beneath the ocean.



MORE ON AMAZING ALBANY

Visit www.divealbany.com.au for more information on dive sites offshore Albany and book your trip with Garry at South Coast Diving Supplies. 84b Serpentine Road Albany WA, Phone (08) 98417176. Take the time to watch schools swim past the webcam on the mast of HMAS Perth live at www.hmasperth.com.au.

For more information about the regional city and other attractions in Albany visit www.amazingalbany.com. Professional dive photographer Andrew Halsall's prints are available at Albany Camera House 34 Albany Highway, Phone (08) 98415560.

EXTRA INFO:
 Albany is 4.5 hours from Perth by road and flying time is less than an hour with Skywest. The area is also renowned for fine wine and produce, a lesser known extension to the Margaret River Wine Region. From June to October your chances of watching whales off-shore are high and several tours operate from the harbour. It is an ideal location for adventurous couples or those seeking a break from city life without forgoing quality dining, accommodation, shopping, excitement – and relaxation!