

EXMOUTH

a breath of fresh air

:GLEN COWANS
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Cardinalfish hide everywhere on the reef

Being just around the corner from North West Cape and the tidal movements from Exmouth Gulf, the reefs here are bathed in plankton and nutrients from the within the Gulf. Water movement in Lighthouse Bay is such that the current flowing over the reefs varies from calm to 'strong but manageable' and it generally helps that the reefs are very easy to navigate around or along. It is these constant currents created by the tides that change the feel of the reef from one day to the next and expect anything from millions of baitfish, schools of pelagics, sharks and bullrays, loggerhead and green turtles to manta rays, even recently a large hammerhead was repeatedly seen cruising up and down the reef.

Halfway through one particular dive on the main site within the bay, Blizzard Ridge, there came a surge of water and we watched as a mass of plankton and

nutrients arrived, surfing the surge were a rush of pelagics. Trevally and mackerel swooped in on the reef bailing up the baitfish into tight balls and as they were tearing through them you could almost feel the stress on the the tiny schools of fish as they were turned into fast food. On another dive we had several whaler sharks enjoying feeding time on this same site, cruising about us as they hunted for prey under the ledges. I was starting to get nervous about one shark in particular that continued to come closer and closer when a large cod burst out from under a ledge and chased the shark away. It was quite amazing to see.

Despite the constant threat of marauding predators, the fish here are incredibly approachable for divers and almost pose for the camera so long as you stalk them gently. There is a group of bannerfish on this site that almost seem to act like glamour models and constantly change

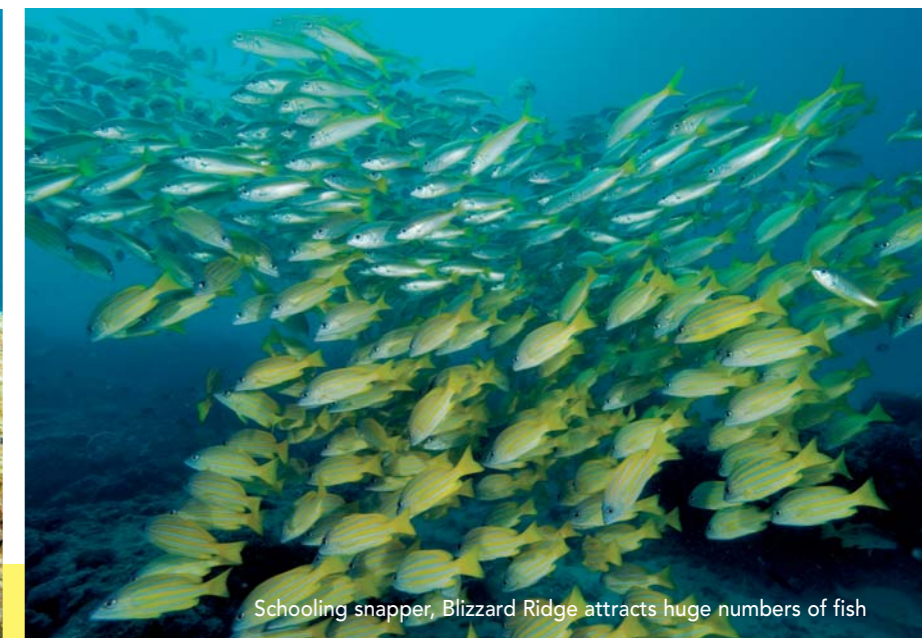
their formation from one photographic pose to the next as you shoot away. There are a group of lionfish that constantly hover around the same section of reef that also just happens to be the manta ray cleaning station. These lionfish think nothing of hanging in the open up from the reef and turning continuously to hunt the tiny masses of fish, they offer unlimited photo opportunities.

Then there are the manta rays, Blizzard Ridge it would seem is like a cruise path for mantas. On one particular dive I was coaxing my dive buddy/underwater model Louise to pose above a bubble coral that I was attempting to shoot from underneath. Well she came over the top at warp speed, her video camera held out in front as if it was an underwater scooter pulling her along. I turned to watch why and saw a manta ray coming straight towards me. I already know Rule #1, 'Never get between Louise and a Manta.' So I took the

+ AT THE VERY TOP OF THE NINGALOO REEF SYSTEM LIES NORTH WEST CAPE, THIS IS VIRTUALLY THE VERY END OF THE NINGALOO COASTLINE AND THE FINAL POINT OF LAND THAT SEPARATES THE INDIAN OCEAN FROM EXMOUTH GULF. THE LAST CURVE WITHIN THIS SECTION OF COASTLINE IS LIGHTHOUSE BAY, IT IS HOST TO A MULTITUDE OF DIVE SITES AND ON ANY GIVEN DAY ANY SITE CAN BE COMPLETELY DIFFERENT TO WHAT IT WAS THE DAY BEFORE, OR EVEN EARLIER IN THE DAY.



An anemone on the edge of Blizzard Ridge



Schooling snapper, Blizzard Ridge attracts huge numbers of fish



Adult & juvenile porcelain crabs on an anemone; A small short bodied pipefish under a ledge; One of the most bizarre nudibranchs I have ever seen

Even the octopuses were out and about; Small neon threefins are on just about everything



Ningaloo Reef, a fringing reef with awesome diving and snorkeling so close to shore. (Image courtesy of Sea Breeze Resort)

This turtle lay half asleep on the reef.

opportunity to photograph her with it instead. This was not our first experience with a manta on Blizzard or in Lighthouse Bay, we have had several such encounters and each time the manta has been incredibly interactive. One manta

move on and then gently swim away. The first time it is very unnerving and seems to defy all your natural instincts of fear and composure but stay calm and you soon realize it is an awesome and privileged experience.

This is muck diving at its best... I'm sure if you dived here enough there'd be amazing discoveries.

actually bumped Louise on her head with a wingtip as it pirouetted around her. We have noticed though that the smaller the group the more interactive the manta and when it is just two people, well usually we have had to leave instead of the manta as those dive tanks never seem to hold enough air.

Sea snakes are also common and great to watch. It is funny how it always seems that the snakes know which divers fear them the most and head straight for them. This is not truly the case, it is simply that the divers that fear them most often back peddle madly in an attempt to get away. The snakes have bad vision but sense the water movement and swim towards it trying to take scent from the water via their tongue and work out what is going on. If this happens to you, just stay calm, let the snake pass by (or if you are lucky, pass around your arms or legs), stay still, wait for it to

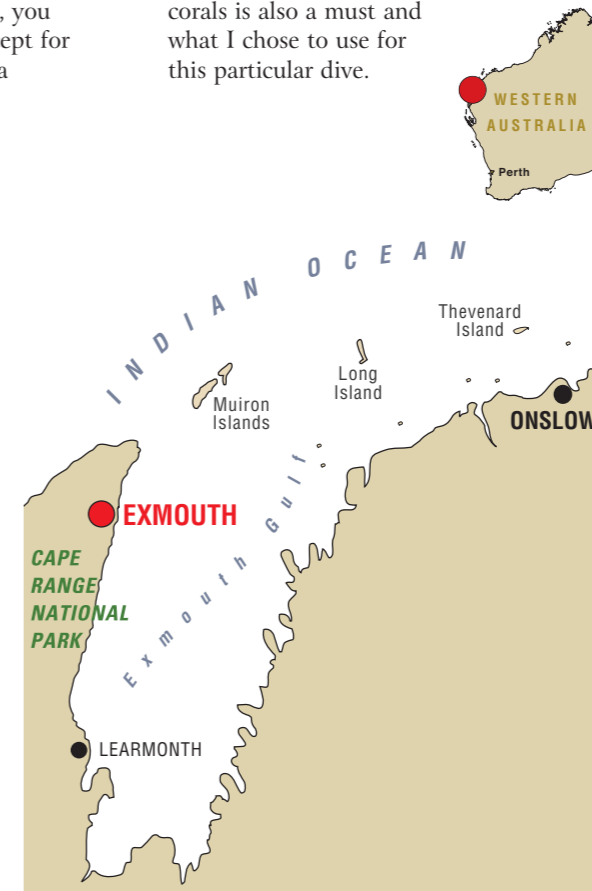
Now I cannot vouch for Blizzard all year round but what I can tell you is that over several instances within a six week period in 2007 towards the end of the whalesharks and the beginning of the manta rays (May/June) this is how we found Lighthouse Bay to be every time we dived it and the year before was very similar. You might not see everything each dive but you run a good chance of seeing some of it each and every time.

On this trip we were finally lucky enough to do the 'Sponge Gardens' which lie within the Gulf between Point Murat and the Murion Islands. Here, in 20m of water you will find a marine garden that rivals any other. This is not a dive that is regularly done due to prevailing winds and currents but time your visit to Exmouth right, request this dive and you will be in for a special treat. This is always a drift dive, even during neap tides (periods of small tidal movement)

there is potentially a current. The best conditions are light winds and towards the end of an incoming tide allows for clear water from the ocean. As this is a deep drift dive with a square profile this is usually recommended for experienced divers.

Your dive will be done with a dive guide trailing a float, jump in, swim down and simply drift along, you hardly even need to kick except for sterage. Here you will find a kaleidoscope of sponge and coral growth, seawhips, barrel sponges, huge flat sponges like elephants ears, gorgonians, candelabras and a plethora of other sedentary life sits on the flat seabed. This is not spaced out terrain, it is thick with life growing all together in high density style. This is muck diving at its best, although knowing the area, don't be surprised to have a manta ray or dugong swim by. Amongst all this colour (make sure you bring a bright torch), keep an eye out for a multitude of nudibranchs and I am sure, if you dived here enough, there would be amazing discoveries. This is terrain that simply screams frogfish, anglerfish, leaf

scorpionfish and who knows what else. I love muck diving for the incredible and bizarre life that you can find and this small sample that I have just done would rate with some of the best muck diving seabed I have ever seen. The hard choice here would be what lens to choose as macro possibilities could be incredible but wide angle with the colourful sponges and corals is also a must and what I chose to use for this particular dive.



GETTING THERE BY AIR Learmonth, the airport for Exmouth, currently only accepts domestic flights, so flights are ex Perth and then up to Exmouth. Skywest are sole operators to Exmouth and fly daily. Sat to Sun: 1 flight; Mon to Thurs: 2 flights; Fri: 3 flights. 20kg baggage limit per person. Visit www.skywest.com.au

GETTING THERE BY ROAD To drive Perth-Exmouth takes around 13-14 hours of continuous driving over 1260kms. This is best broken down to 2 days with an overnight at Carnarvon, (9hrs traveling 902kms), which leaves an easy 358kms to Exmouth on day two. Pre-arrange accommodation. The alternative is 3 days travelling - a half day of driving daily. Stop at Geraldton, Carnarvon, then Exmouth.

WHERE TO STAY The Best Western Sea Breeze Resort was originally part of the Naval Base at the Harold E Holt Communications Station. The owners have converted the original Chief Petty Officer's quarters into a comfortable and modern resort. It has very comfortable and quiet rooms, a pool and separate heated spa. There's free internet access plus all rooms have ensuite, fridge, and inhouse movies. The layout of the original facility means for 4 rooms there's either a communal kitchen or lounge, great for visiting groups of divers or dive clubs. There is a shuttle to and from the airport for arrivals and departures, and the resort offers Thrifty Car Rental from their front desk.

Best Western Sea Breeze Resort:
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THE DIVING Ningaloo Whaleshark N Dive operate the 20m dive vessel Alkiikai. On request, for experienced and suitably qualified divers, they will do trips to the Sponge Gardens when the prevailing wind and tidal conditions are suitable. On all day trips they provide a sumptuous buffet style lunch which smells even more appetizing after your first dive is done. Ningaloo Whaleshark N Dive operate dive charters to all the key locations, Lighthouse Bay, Murion Islands, the West Coast, outer reef, and the famous Navy Pier. Visit www.ningaloowhalesharkndive.com.au or phone 1800 224 060