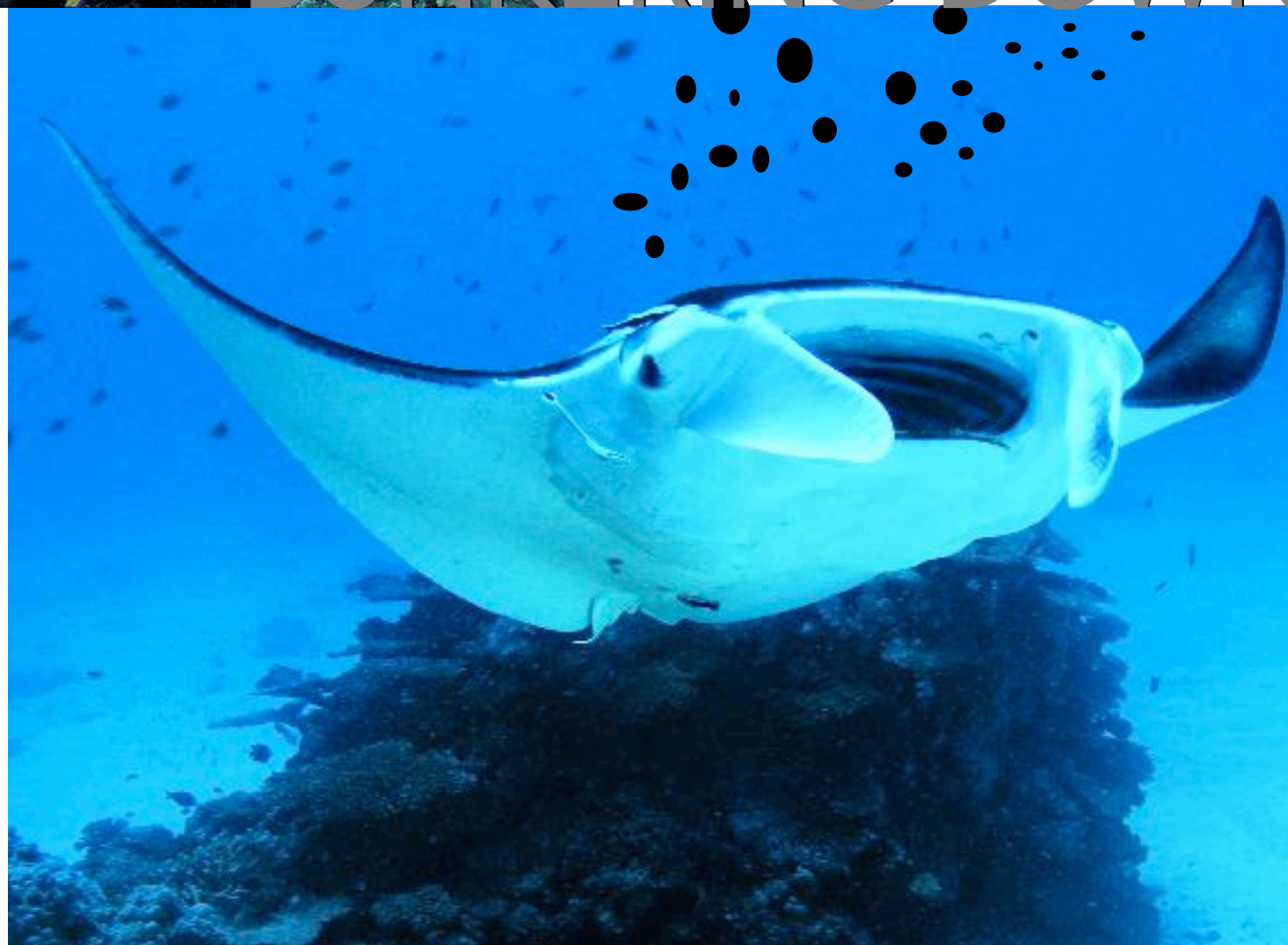


: NIGEL MARSH © 2008

+ ONE OF THE FIRST ARTICLES I WROTE FOR SPORTDIVING IN 1989 WAS CALLED 'CRUISING THE BUNKERS' ABOUT A FABULOUS LIVEBOARD TRIP TO THE BUNKER GROUP OF ISLANDS. RECENTLY I WENT BACK ALMOST 20 YEARS AFTER THAT FIRST TRIP. IT WAS A GREAT CHANCE TO COMPARE THE DIVING, MARINE LIFE AND HEALTH OF THE REEFS.

BUNKERING DOWN ON A BIG CAT



EIGHT reefs and coral cays at the southernmost end of the Great Barrier Reef make up the Bunker Group. This reef complex offers fantastic diving on colourful reef walls, rich coral gardens and magnificent bommies. The most famous island here is Lady Elliot, which has its own resort and dive operation, but the other reefs of the group are best dived from a liveboard.

For these Bunker trips Big Cat Reality departs from the port of Bundaberg, about four hours drive north of Brisbane. After boarding late in the afternoon, and receiving a safety briefing on the vessel and the diving, Big Cat Reality headed out on the overnight crossing. The following morning found us anchored at Lady Musgrave Island.

The first dive on both trips was at Manta Ray Bommie at Lady Musgrave Island. This dive site hadn't changed at all – healthy coral gardens and a

scattering of bommies in 12 to 24 metres. There were always masses of reef fish and quite a few pelagics cruising in mid water. The mantas were missing this trip, but we did see heaps of turtles. Around a dozen green turtles were sighted during the dive, probably because the trip coincided with the turtle breeding and egg laying season. One thing I did notice, that became more evident with every dive, was the large number of coral trout. This popular 'table fish' was only occasionally seen on Great Barrier Reef on trips I did during the 1980s. I can only assume greater protection from fishing pressures has contributed to coral trout numbers increasing.

In 1989 we spent two days around Lady Musgrave exploring the wonderful dropoff on the southern side, drift diving into the large lagoon, plus two night dives in the lagoon. But strong southerly winds stopped us diving the dropoff, but in a day and a half we explored many sites on the calm northern side including Radar Fix, The Canyons, Entrance Wall,

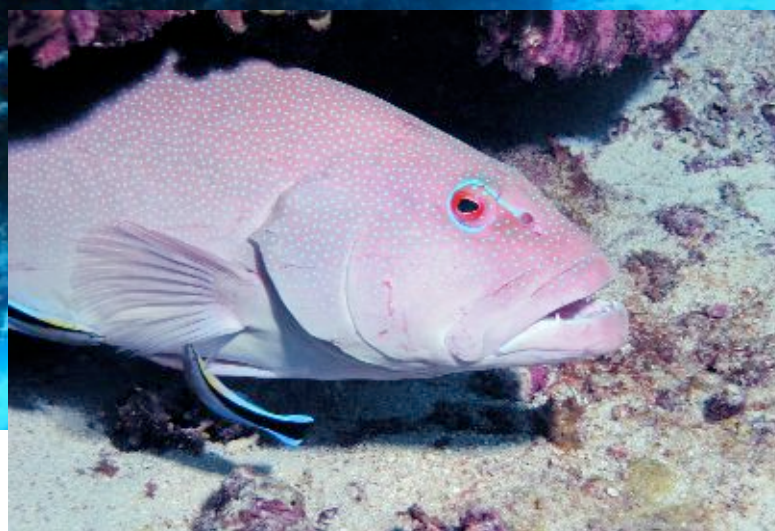


Main image - A graceful manta ray glides over a bommie at Fairfax Islands.

Inset top left -Helen Rose with a gorgonian fan surrounded by baitfish.

Above - A large tawny nurse shark rests next to a bommie at Lady Musgrave Island.

Below left to right - A coral trout relaxes on the bottom while getting cleaned by cleaner wrasse; A giant moray eel draped in the staghorn coral at Hoskyn Islands.



DIVING THE BUNKERS

For more info on the Great Barrier Reef visit www.gbrmpa.gov.au



Entrance Bommie and had a night dive in the lagoon.

The abundant reef fish included wrasse, angelfish, butterflyfish, parrotfish, lizardfish, anemonefish, surgeonfish, damselfish, fairy basslets and rock cods to name a few. We also found shrimps, crabs, crayfish, nudibranchs, clams, seastars, featherstars, octopus, turtles, stingrays, moray eels, pelagics plus a very large Maori wrasse. The best dive was on the Entrance Bommie, a large formation in 23 metres riddled with ledges and small caves and populated with millions of baitfish. Swarming trevally feeding on the baitfish constantly zoomed around us. I also found a 2.5m long tawny nurse shark under a ledge and managed a few shots before this shy shark swam off.

Back in 1989 night dives in Lady Musgrave Lagoon were great. Only eight metres deep, the lagoon is dotted with small coral heads and we saw lionfish hunting, a variety of crustaceans and molluscs, plus many sleeping reef fish. This time I was too tired (must be

Juvenile tall-fin batfish at Manta Ray Bommie, Lady Musgrave Island.

Adding a splash of colour to any dive are Rainford's butterflyfish.

Red emperors, once fished out from many sites, are making a comeback in the Bunker Group.

A speckled grubfish awaits prey, sitting on the sand at Hoskyn Islands.

Big Cat Reality anchoring at Hoskyn Islands. Green turtles nest on the coral cays of the Bunker Group and are regularly encountered by divers.

A dive brief underway on Big Cat Reality's large dive deck.

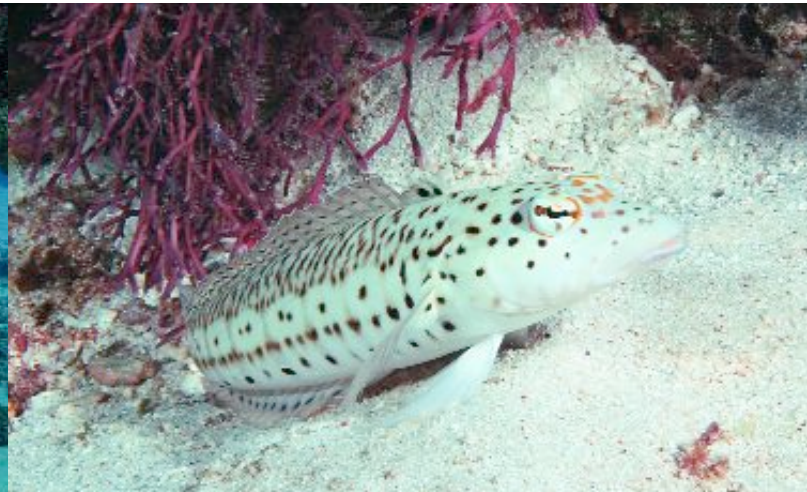


getting old!) for the lagoon night dive so I missed the manta ray that cruised around our divers!

FAIRFAX ISLANDS

Next stop on both trips was the twin coral cays of Fairfax Islands. On the north side of Fairfax Islands are countless coral bommies in depths from 12 to 24 metres. In 89 we found a huge bommie, we named Swim Thru Bommie; it was the size of a two-storey house and cut with ledges, caves and several swimthroughs. It was sheltering thousands of cardinalfish, tasselled wobbegongs, a huge moray eel, lionfish, sweetlips, gropers and reef fish. We also found turtles, stingrays, Maori wrasse and a leopard shark. It was so good we stayed for three dives!

I thought nothing would top that bommie at Fairfax Islands, but on our first dive here this trip we explored another fabulous group of bommies. First a large Maori wrasse and then found a tawny nurse shark in a cave. Moving slowly from bommie to bommie we found a massive black blotched stingray, two tasselled wobbegongs in cave full of cardinalfish, trevally, an estuary groper



destination report°



and numerous reef fish. At the end of the dive a three-metre-wide manta ray cruised in and then hung under the boat feeding and being cleaned by the cleaner wrasse crew. It was only low air forced me out of the water.

We dived a variety of bommies at Fairfax Island, the crew would find another interesting lump on the depth sounder and we'd jump in and explore. Each bommie delivered something new and exciting. We saw lots of turtles, moray eels, tasselled wobbegongs and also a huge black manta ray. There were also a couple of nice wall dives at a site called

Tag Wall. As we drifted past it there were lots of ledges to investigate. We found barramundi cod, nudibranchs, octopus, moray eels, crayfish, lionfish, pipefish, ornate wobbegongs and even a leaf scorpionfish. The finale was four smooth-tail mobula rays (a dwarf manta ray species) performing an underwater ballet while we hung on the safety stop.

HOSKYN ISLANDS

The bommies on the northern side of Hoskyn Islands are also spectacular. This was a 1989 highlight – we saw several manta rays and also encountered whitetip reef sharks, turtles and several

very big stingrays. This trip I was impressed by four red emperors (another rarely-seen 'table fish') on our first dive. These striking creatures, with their prominent red bands, were gathered under a wide ledge. Red emperors were seen on almost every dive at Hoskyn Islands.

The bommies here were magic. Several were decorated with spiky soft coral and gorgonians, and all were massed with coral trout and reef fish. Stingrays, trevally, barracuda, mackerel, sweetlip and barramundi cod were just some species we encountered. Massive moray



Tasselled wobbegong surrounded by a halo of baitfish;

eels were also a feature at Hoskyn Islands. On almost every dive we encountered at least one of these two metre long eels hanging out of a hole in a bommie, one was even draped through the staghorn coral – a perfect model!

FITZROY REEF

We skipped Fitzroy Reef in 1989 for several nice dives on the Boulton Reef coral gardens. The Big Cat Reality trip gave us three lovely dives at Fitzroy Reef on the wall, bommies and coral gardens on the north side of the reef. This reef had the

most degraded hard corals, many algae covered, that I saw this trip. Prior to this the corals appeared to be very healthy, with no apparent bleaching and only a few crown of thorns starfish. Even though the corals looked at little sad here, fish populations were good.

At Uncle Pete's Bommie we saw the first whitetip reef shark of the trip. Drifting slowly along the reef we also found several anemones full of pink anemonefish plus some very big red coloured pineapple sea cucumbers looking like an alien being. But the highlight of this dive was finding a baby barramundi cod only a mere four centimetres long that was slowly moving through the coral like a flatworm. At other sites here we encountered tasselled wobbegongs, morays, stingrays, nudibranchs, crayfish, trevally, parrotfish, octopus and a tiny spotted eagle ray.

After almost 20 years the Bunker Group is still an impressive dive destination. I enjoyed every dive and was delighted to see the coral and marine life was as good as it was on my first trip. Twenty years on, cruising the Bunker Group is still one of the best Great Barrier Reef experience.

BIG CAT REALITY FACILITIES

This 25m long, 10m wide catamaran caters for 24 divers and eight crew. Fully airconditioned; lounge area; 2 x dining areas; Fully licensed bar with ice maker and large walk-in cold room; PS system, CD Player AM/FM stereo to all decks; TV & video; large barbecue; freezer capacity; 4 good toilets; 5 showers; 28 airconditioned berths; huge covered top deck, (the party deck)

DIVE EQUIPMENT

K180 Bauer Compressor - (KAP180-20E) 3 phase Electric: 660 l/min - 21 cfm, approx. 4.5 mins to fill scuba tank; large tank rack with seat for 24 divers comfortably and 4 filling whips for easy refilling; 4 entry points and a submersible duckboard with full handrails for easy recovery; 4.2 metre rigid inflatable rescue vessel with centre console, depth sounder and GPS; large diving lights for night dives; medical oxygen equipment with 1 large G, 1 D size medical O2 first aid equipment; 2 shot lines, 30m J line and float line to anchor chain; 2 areas with large whiteboards for onboard training between dives; fin bin; safety bar at 5 metres; wetsuit rack with fixed hangers
Info and bookings -
www.bigcatreality.com

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