



: KEN HOPPEN

Marion May

+ REMOTE AUSTRALIAN REEF SYSTEMS RARELY BECOME ACCESSIBLE TO SPORT DIVERS, BUT THIS ONE MAY WELL BECOME ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S MOST DESIRABLE DIVE DESTINATIONS. THE MARION REEF COMPLEX IS WAY OUT IN THE CORAL SEA – AND IS PACKED WITH UNEXPLORED DIVE SITES!

By boat it takes over 30 hours to reach remote Marion Reef, but to maximise dive time the operators transfer passengers by sea planes from Hamilton Island to the *Odyssey* – 85 minutes land-to-deck. After a boat reco and lunch, you can gear up and go diving!

Marion has a large barrier reef to the east, north and south, a huge lagoon in the middle littered with large bommies, and a few isolated barrier reefs to the west. Our diving started on the southern end where the bommies mostly rise from about 40 metres depth to within a few metres of the surface.

The diving is done from dories – three or four to a dory plus a guide and boat driver means the diving certainly isn't crowded. The dories tend to go in different directions as there are many known sites to choose from, but the beauty of this reef is that you can also choose to explore new and undived areas.

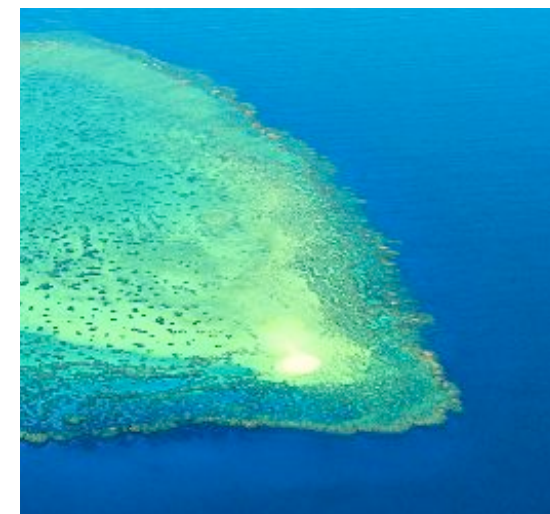
A large bommie dubbed 'The Hills One' was our first. Guided by Julieanne Gregory, the *Odyssey's* dive instructor, we dropped to 28 metres. Immediately we were surrounded by eight small grey reef whalers. None were over 60 centimetres long, and I wondered if we'd stumbled into a nursery area for these beautiful sharks. They were curious for a while, then most meandered off, but a couple stuck with us as we circled the bommie. I was after macro subjects; a crinoid was hosting a small shrimp slightly different to most I've seen in these feather stars. But soon a small and curious silvertip shark distracted me, then a dogtooth tuna. On deco in the shallows an olive sea snake was

fascinated by its reflection in the lens a first dive!

My theory about the nursery site was our later dives almost every dive del grey reef whalers, and several larger we were checked out by up to 10 of soon after hitting the water, then they go about their business. Marion is one of the most densely packed shark reefs seen, and certainly the best shark dive bait isn't used. It's hard to put a man on your camera because you know something large will visit! This is big central.

'The Hills Two' was a great site as well highlight being a turtle-faced sea snake Marion Reef proved to be a haven for reptiles also – sea snakes were seen on a dive. They're no problem if you don't they'll come to check you out at close them and let them be, especially if they're heading to the surface for a breath. A turtle-faced sea snake was a terrific find. After a single breath it immediately headed back to the bottom. Impressive – I thought they'd need more time to re-oxygenate.

The main boat moved north to Carc Cay on the second day. Though there were several small sand atolls at Marion Reef the biggest. With the mother vessel



Checking out the red seawhip corals. Heller's barracuda are small, but the patterns they create are amazing.

Tawny nurse sharks favour the base of shallow bommies on the lagoon side of Grouper Alley.

A turtle-faced sea snake was a terrific find.

Brodie Cay is at the southern end of Marion Reef, to the left of the reef the charts record a 454 metre vertical wall.



This beautiful silvertip shark was at The Towers of Mordor.
The Queensland grouper passes us out on the sand.
Clown triggerfish are common on these reefs.
Schooling pennantfish at ABC Reef.

the mill pond behind these sand dunes, we explored this new area with gusto.

'Double Reef' had a large ledge around the 20 metre mark before a second big dropoff. On the ledge were four dogtooth tuna, two larger ones patrolling back and forth and two smaller ones coming in occasionally. This was exactly what the doctor ordered – I'd often seen dogtooth, but rarely been this close. They came back again and again. What more do you need to keep a photographer happy? A silvertip also came in; by now we were seeing them regularly.

Visibility on this outer ocean reef? Fifty metres and more is the norm here. One shallow dive had only around 30 metres viz, and it seemed really murky. How quickly you get spoilt.

'Grouper Alley' was next. Here three Queensland groupers have taken up residence in a channel through the reef. Depth is around 20 metres and the current either takes you into the lagoon or out into the big blue. We chose an inward drift and dives were timed to suit. The first time we were dropped onto a small bommie in mid-channel and circumnavigated it in a mild current. After the expected grey reefies and a whitetip reef shark, we drifted past a school of bigeye trevally, several batfish and a coral trout, towards the seaward side of the rocky outcrop. A Queensland grouper a little under two metres long rounded the corner; we obviously surprised it. I was shooting a bigeye trevally school when the grouper shot past but I managed a few images. Then it spotted my buddy and turned for blue water.

We then drifted along the northern channel wall and were about to ascend when we found a large tawny nurse shark sleeping in the shadows. It was just short of three metres long and smartly cruised off into the lagoon. Following, we spotted a second one, but low air forced us to surface. A second dive here later in the week brought another encounter with our grouper, plus several passes by some larger grey reef whalers. The water clarity was brilliant; we could see almost the entire channel and constantly saw grey reef and whitetip reef sharks patrolling the sand.

'ABC Reef' is a three-pinnacle bommie full of fish, sharks and gorgonian corals. Named from the pathway you can take to encompass the three peaks, this spot also sports a large school of Heller's barracuda. These small 'cuta' moved in constantly changing swirling patterns and were great to watch and photograph.



A footballer trout.



The boat.



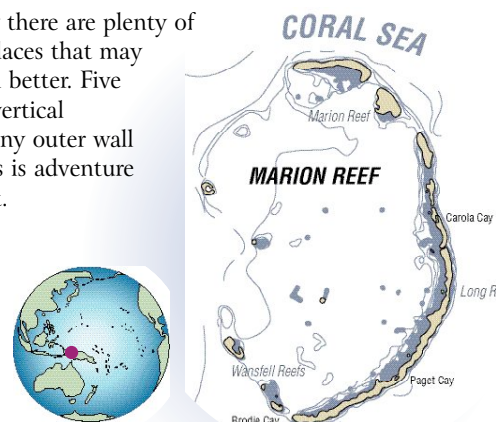
The seaplane.

'The Towers of Mordor' hadn't been dived before. North of the cay, it was on the south side of a large entrance to the reef. The dropoff here went straight to 35 metres. It's a very sharky site – we were met by several large grey reef whalers and a very curious silvertip came in close enough for the shots I was after. This site doesn't have the general fish life of other sites, but promises to be a great 'big fish' event with the right current conditions. The reef here looks foreboding and is worth seeing for its ambience.

Dive Nomad have been taking fishing trips out here for a few years now, and were happy to show us their best fishing locations. This led us to the next site, and the best dive on the reef so far. We named this 'The Cinema', and I was one of the first two people to dive here. The channel is only about six metres deep, and the lip falls quickly to around 40 metres. The incoming tide here has always produced good fishing, so that's when we entered the water. As there was a bit of current, we quickly dropped to the bottom at six metres, and were surrounded by several large grey reef whalers obviously not pleased to see us. The current was strong but not impossible to swim against, so we made our way hand over hand to the lip of the channel, and peered over. Hundreds of bigeye trevally swirled below, with around 40 grey reef whalers circling and cutting through the school. At least 15 dogtooth tuna up to two metres long patrolled back and forth, with the occasional giant trevally cutting through the bigeyes.

We made our way down the slope to a flat amphitheatre at 15 metres, and spent our dive sitting there as the ocean's denizens paraded and swirled around us. Two silvertips moved in and out and a large school of yellowtail barracuda hovered off the wall. This is definitely one of the best dives I've done, and once the flat ledge is reached I didn't have to move. A clown leatherjacket swirled out into the mass of fish, odd-looking amongst all that silver and grey. Fisher folk say sailfish, marlin and even an occasional oceanic whitetip can be seen here.

The charts show there are plenty of other undived places that may prove to be even better. Five hundred metre vertical dropoffs and many outer wall dives await. This is adventure diving at its best.



No dives can be done in the last 24 hours due to the flight back to Hamilton Island so there's a non-diving afternoon – and that's easily filled. Canola Cay has a weather station and more nesting birds than you can cope with, even a resident population of hermit crabs. You can snorkel the shallows and the best spot is Paget Cay to the south. The reef's east side has some of the best corals you'll ever see in four to six metres with brilliant fish life. There's two small shipwrecks partly above water here, though I only managed the first one – and that dive is worth a separate story.

We only 'scratched the surface' of the diving in my week-long trip, and as superb as 'The Cinema' was, even better sites will be found – and that was one of the best dives I've ever done in Australian tropical waters.

For more info on Marion Reef visit www.oceandots.com/pacific/coralsea

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