

# this lady

# TURNS IT ON

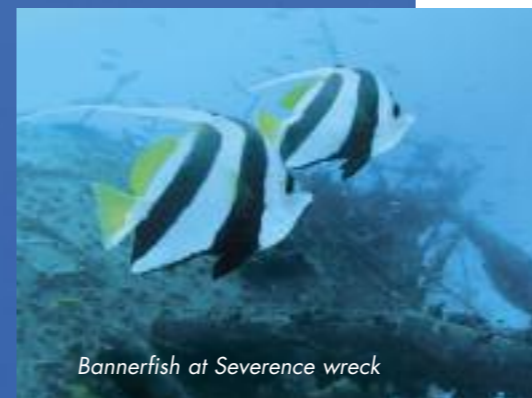


Manta ray and turtle at Anchor Bommie

: TOM DAVIS



Shovelnose ray



Bannerfish at Severance wreck



Manta ray grooming at Lighthouse Bommies

> IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR A WINTER GETAWAY, NOTHING BEATS A RELAXING ISLAND HOLIDAY, AND FOR KEEN DIVERS THIS TINY CORAL CAY IN SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND IS JUST THE PLACE. IT'S SURROUNDED BY THE GREAT BARRIER REEF MARINE PARK AND IS JUSTIFIABLY FAMOUS FOR ITS MANTA RAYS.

Unless you're into bird-watching, the real thrills here are underwater. Lady Elliot is in a beautiful section of the largest reef system in the world and delivers some outstanding diving and snorkelling.

On the western side is a fringing reef close to shore which rapidly drops away to 15-20 metres. There are a number of excellent dive sites and outstanding snorkelling. To minimise damage to the reef, diving is usually done using small dive tenders that come in through the reef at one of two access points. Snorkellers are also encouraged to enter and exit the water at these points to ensure that accidental damage to the reef is kept to a minimum. The access points are in front of the lighthouse at the southern end of the island, and at the coral gardens at the northern end. The marine life encountered snorkelling in these areas is excellent. We saw numerous turtles, black and whitetip reef sharks, large Queensland grouper, eagle rays, and loads of tropical fish of all colours and sizes.

But it's as you descend into the beautiful turquoise water that a whole new world opens up, and you have a chance to observe the island's main drawcards – manta rays. An estimated 40 of these gentle giants are resident around Lady Elliot, and it's one of the best places in the world to visit if you want to swim with these awesome creatures. We saw several manta rays on a number of our dives. The encounters varied from fleeting glimpses in the distance, to 10 minutes of being circled by mantas swimming within touching distance before swooping away.

One dive at Anchor Bommie was particularly memorable – several mantas took turns to approach the bommie to be cleaned. The variety of fish that rushed up to assist in the process was amazing – not only cleaner wrasse, but also bannerfish, moon wrasses, and butterflyfish chipped in. On the top of the bommie a turtle rested and was occasionally cleaned by those fish not tending to the mantas. On the sand nearby a huge shovelnose ray rested with two remoras. After more than 10 minutes



*Divers on the Severence wreck, where the masts and their rigging are still intact*

*A gold spotted sweetlips hides in the shelter of a coral ledge*

*Three of the forty resident manta rays that can be found at Lady Elliot Island*

*A large manta ray sweeps into one of the cleaning stations at Lighthouse Bommies*



enjoying this spectacle, we switched our attention to the other life in the area. We found beautiful soft corals on an outcrop, and intricate gorgonians with schools of glassfish under the overhangs.

We also encountered manta rays for extended periods on two dives at the Lighthouse Bommies dive site. This is the main manta cleaning station for the island, and mantas can be observed just hanging above the larger bommie while fish dart out to pick at parasites and



***The mantas were the highlight and exceeded all our expectations. It was a thrill to dive repeatedly with these gentle giants and spend extended periods observing and photographing their behaviour.***

other sensitive spots. We were told by the dive guides to stay close to the bottom when a manta approaches, to avoid startling them. However we found the rays to be relatively oblivious to the presence of divers; the rays even wriggled as they swam through divers' bubbles. The bubbles obviously tickled the rays, and it was only if a diver swam straight towards them that the mantas tended to get spooked and swim off.

The mantas were the highlight and exceeded all our expectations. It was a

thrill to dive repeatedly with these gentle giants and spend extended periods observing and photographing their behaviour. We were told manta rays are usually encountered by divers here, but the number and duration of manta encounters we had during our stay was unusual.

The frequent encounters could have been partly due to the low number of divers who were willing to brave the winter water, which my computer recorded at

21 degrees Celsius. On some dives we were the only divers, and the dive guides were happy to go wherever we wanted and took time finding fantastic marine life for us to photograph.

The staff at Lady Elliot are compiling a photographic database of the mantas visiting the island – they can be distinguished by unique markings on their pale undersides. So if you do go to Lady Elliot, take your camera and share your manta images with the dive team to help with this worthwhile project.

We enjoyed diving the Severence wreck, a two-masted sailing boat that sank off the island in 1998. It was in remarkable condition – one of the masts was still erect on the hull with rigging intact, and the other lying on the sand nearby with remnants of the sails still clinging to it. Beneath the hull schools of large snapper and sweetlips hung in the shadows and large batfish circled the intact mast. A large grouper swam off as we approached, the cabin was full of glassfish, and our eagle-eyed guide spotted a shy pipefish. When we'd finished circling the wreck we headed across the sand to a number of coral bommies while the dive tender followed the marker buoy raised by our guide. Between the coral outcrops was great for watching turtles cruising past. We also saw a leopard shark and some large cow-tailed rays resting on the sand.

We shared in snorkelling tours, a history tour, and reef walking with the island's marine biologist. We watched baby turtles being released, and saw the start of the winter whale migration up the coast. The



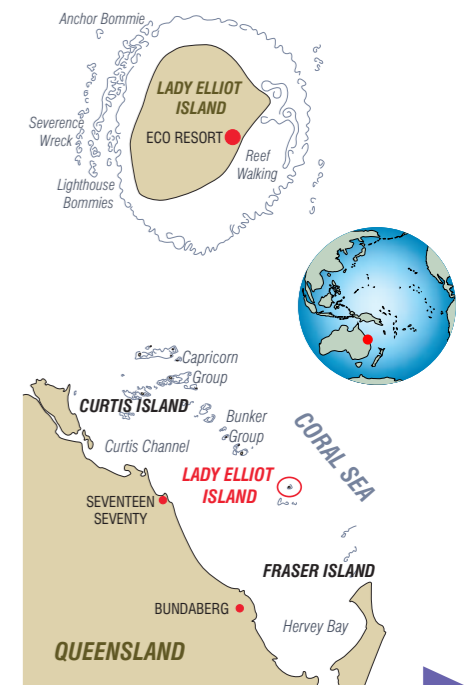
**LADY ELLIOT ISLAND**, on the Great Barrier Reef, is a declared 'Marine National Park Zone' with a level 6 classification (where level 1 is general use & level 7 is no public access). Up until the late 1960s the island was barren due to guano mining and the installation of goats by the Queensland Government for stranded sailors. 1969 saw the start of a revegetation program, and as a result of ongoing conservation efforts, the island is now home to a wide variety of seabirds and marine life.

The island is a great place for non-divers and divers alike to experience nature up close. Relax on the private beaches, feed the fish, take a guided reef walk, or swim, snorkel or dive the colourful reefs and lagoon. Encounter turtles, dolphins, coral fish and our 40 resident manta rays, and depending on the season, see birds nesting, turtle hatchlings emerging, and migrating humpback whales.

The Lady Elliot Island Eco Resort is one of only six island resorts on the Great Barrier Reef. It is reached by a short flight from Bundaberg or Hervey Bay on the Queensland coast. There is a range of accommodation available in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. The rooms are simple, but clean and comfortable. There is a PADI dive shop onsite, where experienced staff offer three dives daily and optional night dives. The island is renowned for outstanding visibility, around 30 metres, due to the fact that there's no local run-off, as the coral structure of the island soaks up any rainfall, and because it is situated well away from the coast and associated sediment from rivers.

Take the opportunity to explore one of the most diverse and untouched regions of the Great Barrier Reef, both above and below the water. (See Travelbug for the latest Lady Elliot Island Eco Resort special offer.)

>LINK: [www.ladyelliott.com.au](http://www.ladyelliott.com.au)





You get a good look at Lady Elliot Island as you approach in the light plane



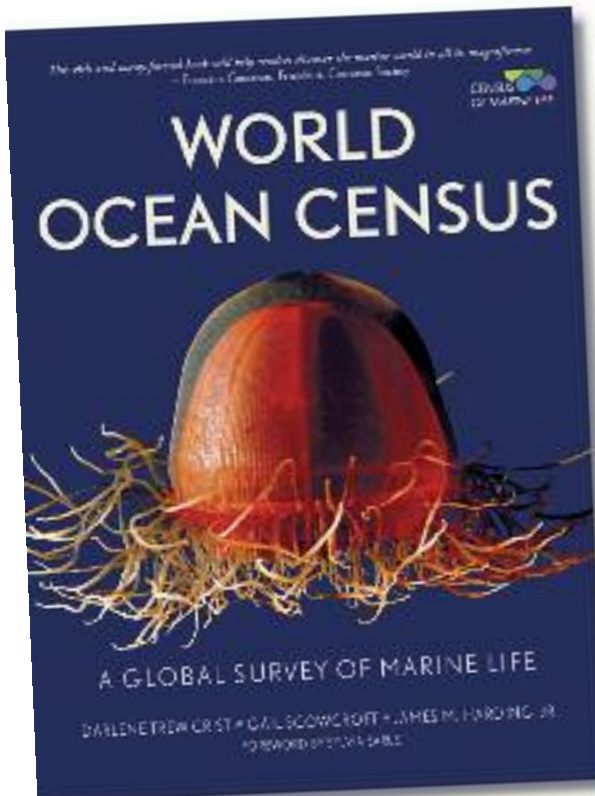
One of the tenders that take divers out, to prevent damage to the house reefs

shallow lagoon on the east side of the island in front of the resort has interesting snorkelling at high tide, and lets non-snorkellers get up close and personal to the marine life at low tide.

Lady Elliot Island is also a major nesting site for seabirds - over 100,000 roost on the island over summer. During winter the number of birds falls dramatically, and the main residents are black noddies which were an awesome spectacle at dawn as they took off en-mass to fish at sea. We found that a wonderful way to spend an evening was to take a bottle of wine and a platter of food to the west side of the island and watch these birds return in great swooping flocks as the sun set over the ocean.

Lady Elliot is a great winter getaway if you don't mind mild water temperatures and enjoy small eco-friendly resorts where the main focus is the natural surrounds and diving. The island is also great for non-divers to get away to for a few days, with friendly staff, uncrowded white coral beaches, awesome snorkelling, and plenty of other regular tours and activities.

## A GLOBAL SURVEY OF MARINE LIFE



By Darlene Trew Crist, Gail Scowcroft, and James Harding Jr.

Over a decade in the making, *World Ocean Census* illuminates what once lived in the global ocean, what can be found there today and what future this seriously threatened ecosystem will most likely endure. Launched in 2000 with the goal of producing the first-ever ocean census by 2010, this new release highlights the combined research of 2000 scientists from 82 nations. Filled with behind-the-scenes stories and over 250 breathtaking photographs of the sea's wonders, *World Ocean Census* showcases the deep unknown alongside accounts of gathering and processing data. The authors detail the most fascinating findings and exciting discoveries - the thrills encountered and the difficulties overcome - all illustrated with fabulous images captured during the project's explorations. The information is comprehensive, compelling and

current, and it represents an enormous group effort by some of the world's leading scientists. A unique record of a monumental global undertaking, this will appeal to marine enthusiasts and those interested in climate change and the future of the globe's ecology.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Darlene Trew Crist** is an award-winning writer. Her ventures have focused on raising awareness about the health of the world ocean and related marine issues.

**Gail Scowcroft** is the associate director of the Office of Marine Programs at the University of Rhode Island where she teaches in oceanography and global change.

**James Harding Jr.** is a marine scientist and educator working for the University of Rhode Island. He has spent a good portion of his life in, under, on and around the ocean - from the Caribbean to the Great Barrier Reef and beyond.

*World Ocean Census* is available from UWA Publishing, a division of the University of Western Australia Tel: + 61 (0)8 6488 6804 Visit [www.uwap.uwa.edu.au](http://www.uwap.uwa.edu.au) for details