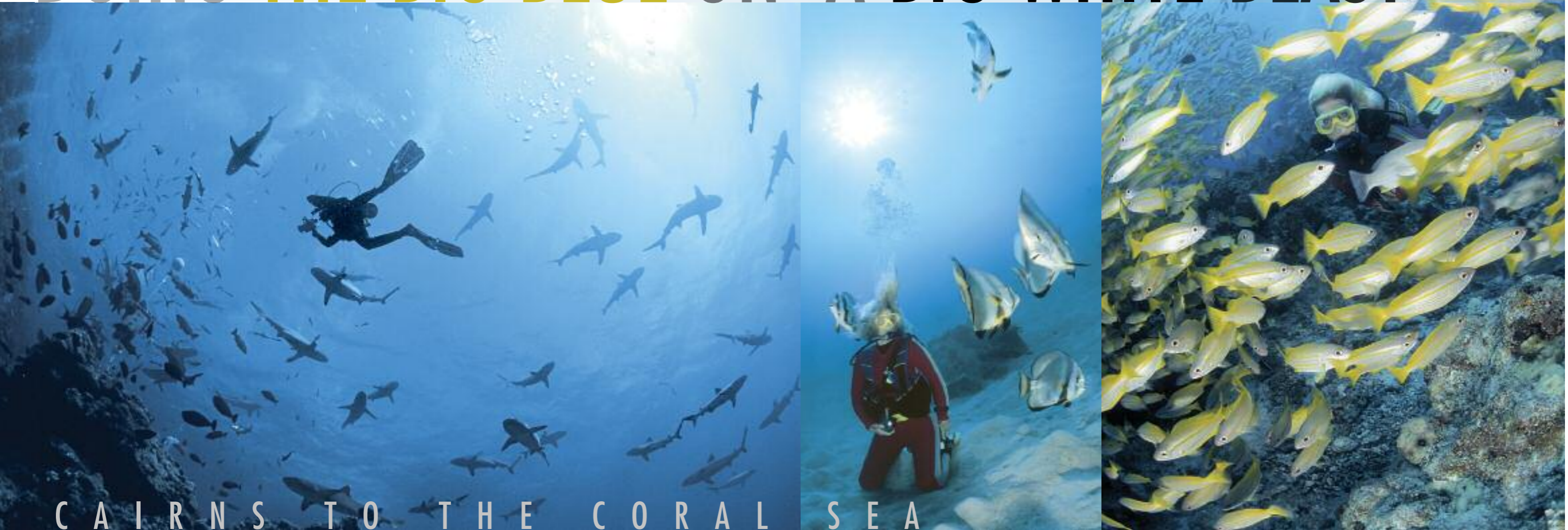


DOING THE BIG BLUE ON A BIG WHITE BEAST



CAIRNS TO THE CORAL SEA

>YOU'VE JUST COMPLETED YOUR OPENWATER SCUBA AND WANT TO SEE WHAT DIVING'S REALLY ABOUT BY EXPERIENCING A VARIETY OF REEFS AND CREATURES IN A SHORT TIME PERIOD. BUT SUPPOSE YOU'RE AN 'OLD CROC' WITH THOUSANDS OF DIVES AND WANT TO GET BACK INTO THE WATER WITH YOUR FISHY FRIENDS WHERE YOU BELONG. WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

The answer, I discovered, is the same for both. Take a trip on *Taka*. Cairn's longest established sport diving company, Deep Sea Diver's Den, was created way back in 1974. It's become one of the largest dive schools in the world, certifying about 5,000 students per year. It's a PADI 5 Star Dive Centre and PADI Career Development Centre. For its 30 year anniversary the company invested in a new fast day boat the *Reef Quest*, then a large luxury liveaboard to act as a floating hotel on the Great Barrier Reef, the *Ocean Quest*, and has also purchased *Taka* to provide extended liveaboard Great Barrier Reef and Coral Sea diving adventures for certified divers. All their vessels operate from Cairns.

I joined *Taka* in mid 2009 for a four night cruise to the Cod Hole then out to Osprey Reef in the Coral Sea, returning along the Great Barrier Reef to Cairns. Guests assembled at the Deep Sea Divers Den where we completed paperwork and admired the shop, seven airconditioned classrooms and new 25 metre heated dive training pool. At 4pm we were bussed to the wharf for boarding. With gear and cabins sorted *Taka* was soon underway for the overnight run to the Cod Hole. We had a following sea and *Taka* took it in her stride, barely wavering from her charge northward.

Our gang of four included Getty Images photographer Pete Atkinson and his wife

Darin, and my model friend Leigh Paine. We managed to get a bottle of bubbly and merrily sipped through the safety briefings that were geared to the less experienced divers aboard. Pete and I were a little concerned by some of the restrictions but as it turned out our experience was accommodated in a quiet and professional manner and we were able to dive pretty much as we wished. The crew also went out of their way to get us into the water early, but I was once chastised (correctly) - for walking on deck in my fins. I'd planned to use one of the side doors for entry as usual, but when it wasn't available I waddled to the huge dive platform, too lazy to remove my fins. Shame on me!

: BOB HALSTEAD

Above -
Thirty-plus sharks waiting for dinner at North Horn
Leigh Paine with obliging batfish at Norman Reef
Leigh surrounded by snappers at Steve's Bommie

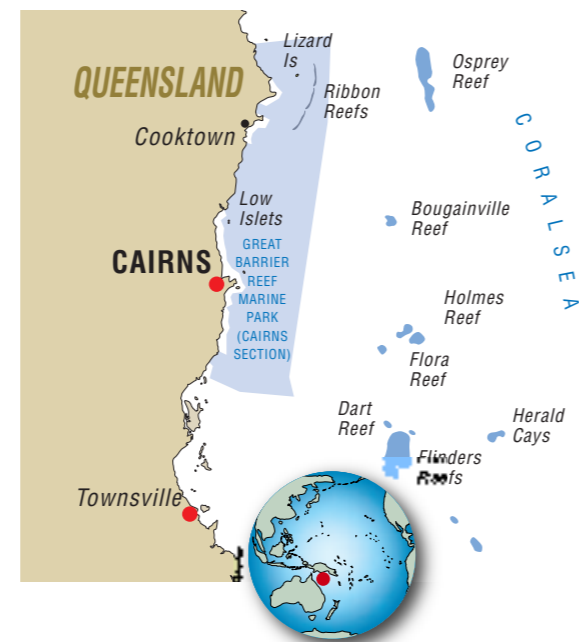


The crew were alert, competent, friendly and helpful. Trip Director Matt had everything well organised, and Vili, instructor and Mr. Personality, kept us all amused. He, along with Instructor Mike (a.k.a. Mad Dog), kept my tank filled with Nitrox, and made sure I was signed back on board after every dive.

My first look over the side at the Cod Hole confirmed an incoming tide and 30 metre plus visibility with a chance for some good photos. We had a couple of dives with the potato cod, and later moved to a nearby reef for afternoon dives and a night dive. The corals were in excellent condition!

Overnight we cruised out to Osprey Reef in the Coral Sea where visibility increased to over 50 metres and I was able to photograph the beautiful hanging soft corals. A hammerhead meandered below – a good omen for our second dive, the fantastic shark feed at North Horn. This was extraordinarily well planned with all 28 guests in the water and positioned round the amphitheatre shaped feeding station in just a few minutes. *Taka* actually feeds the sharks and the difference between this and other dives I have done where the sharks were just 'attracted' is enormous.

I guess there were 60 sharks, (I shot 37 in one frame) including a couple of super silvertips, all around and above us. The sun was shining, and the dive was truly spectacular. I'm thinking; this is one of the best shark dives I've done in 41 years – and some of these divers have only just learned to dive and have not made 10 dives yet! Remoras, red bass and potato cod joined in the feed.



We had our lunch after the sharks had eaten, then dived one of my favourite places – Round the Bend – where a long ridge at 27 metres runs parallel to the main reef wall. Mantas were promised and sure enough one greeted me with a close pass as soon as I arrived. Then a silvertip shark turned up – and another hammerhead, a big one, swam between the wall and us, rolling his belly at us as he passed. Grey reef sharks patrolled the deep edge, working off their meal.

The day finished with a shallow gentle dive at Entrance Reef where coral bommies with swimthroughs rose from a sandy slope. That night the crossing back

to the Great Barrier Reef was a bit roly-poly but *Taka* has such a solid-ship feel that it was comfortable enough for sleep, and smooth when inside the Ribbon Reefs. We were heading for Lighthouse Bommie and were hoping for minke whales.

We did see them – but not underwater this time. *Taka* is licensed to let guests snorkel with the whales and every year many get fantastically close. The whales always initiate the encounters; we were just a bit unlucky. But there were resident green turtles and olive sea snakes to play with. One PC diver was a bit upset that I touched one of the turtles but he didn't

understand that the turtle was an old friend, and I was just giving her a caress.

Cruising back to Cairns the weather turned idyllic and the wind dropped away – rather rare for July. We dived a selection of reefs, and even had a choice, but my favourite remains Steve's Bommie with its schooling fish. Amazingly at Norman Reef – our last site, just out of Cairns and a favourite with the day boats – we had huge visibility of 40 metres and batfishes following us around gorgeous healthy corals.

I have to say it again to counter the alarmists – the GBR and Coral Sea reefs

*Facing page -
A manta at Round The Bend
Luscious soft corals at Osprey Reef
Great hard corals along the Ribbon Reef
Great Barrier Reef
This page -
Trip Director and Instructor, Matt
Instructor Vili, the fun master
Instructor Mike (Mad Dog)
Reef top at Norman Reef, Great Barrier Reef
Yellow trumpet fish, Ribbon Reef, GBR*





Entry and exit is easy using the large rear dive platform on Taka. A choice of Taka itineraries includes three, four and seven night trips.

are in revival mode, they are not deteriorating. Corals have regenerated and fish life is exuberant. It is still one of the best places in the world to go to photograph fishes as they are so used to friendly divers and are easy to approach. Government aircraft patrol over the reefs on a daily basis and protect them against illegal fishing.

As a Cairns houseowner I gladly pay a "Cleaner Seas" surcharge on my residential rates to pay for treatment plants that limit effluent and toxic runoff to a fraction of what they were previously.



This work is continuing. Fishing pressures have been reduced, and much of the reef is protected through the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA). Water temperature was an entirely normal 24/25 deg C. for July. Ocean acidification is still speculation – not fact. There was no sign of bleaching or crown of thorns seastar infestations. What we saw was beautiful live coral reef, and lots of fishes.

Taka docked at precisely 14.30 as predicted, and suddenly the trip was over. I'd had a wonderful time and it was obvious that the less experienced divers did too. In terms of dive encounters they had experienced five years worth in just five days!

Taka - Maximum 30 passengers in six ensuite cabins and five shared bathroom budget cabins.
Length 30 metres, range 2500 Nm.
Taka Cruises Coral Sea departs Fridays 5.00 pm, returns Tuesdays 2.30 pm, four nights
Cod Hole departs Tuesdays 5.00 pm, returns Fridays 2.30 pm, three nights
Back-to-back adventure combines both Coral Sea and Cod Hole, seven nights.
For more contact www.takadive.com.au taka@takadive.com.au

Deep Sea Divers Den, 319 Draper St. Cairns, Qld, 4870
Tel + 61 7 4046 7333
Other liveaboard dive operators servicing the Cod Hole and Coral Sea ex Cairns:
Mike Ball Dive Expeditions www.mikeball.com
Spirit of Freedom (Tusa Dive) www.spiritoffreedom.com.au
Minke whale season - June through July
Dry Season - May – November, sea temp 24 – 27 deg C.
Wet Season - December – April, sea temp 27 – 29 deg C.
Cyclone season - typically January - March