

> UNIQUE DIVING, SPECTACULAR SCENERY, PLUS TEMPERATE WEATHER AND WATER TEMPERATURE MADE A PERFECT WINTER ESCAPE. THE RICH CULTURAL HISTORY WAS A BONUS.

: ROB MORLEY

July was rapidly approaching with the prospect of single digit diving temperatures around my home on Melbourne's picturesque Mornington Peninsula. Time to escape! The two previous winters I'd dived the Solitary Islands National Park at Coffs Harbour and Fish Rock Cave at South West Rocks on the mid-north coast of New South Wales. Was it to be the Coffs' Coast with 20 degree water, great coral and fish life plus certain encounters with the critically endangered grey nurse sharks, or somewhere new? I'm a Libran male; I chose procrastination as my immediate course of action.

Two weeks before my month off from my job as a paramedic, the NSW north coast was being battered by a massive east coast low which parked around

Coffs Harbour for several days. I decided to fulfill a long-held ambition and head to Norfolk Island. I couldn't have made a better choice.

After a 24 hour delay at Sydney airport due to bad weather on Norfolk - that east coast low was now giving Norfolk a hard time - I met up with James Edward; he and his wife Chantelle own and operate Bounty Divers, Norfolk's only dive shop. The delay had cost me two of the eight dives I'd booked, so I was keen to confirm the remaining dives. James informed me that regardless of the wind, there's usually somewhere around the island that's diveable. Reassured, I arranged to meet early the next morning.

The day dawned mild and sunny but with strong southeasterly winds. James' boat



210 year old grave stone from Norfolk's First Settlement.

was launched via a crane at Kingston Jetty - no boat ramps here! After a lumpy 15 minute trip we reached The Fish Bowl on the west side of Nepean Island 800 metres offshore, the closer and smaller of two nearby islands. James briefed us thoroughly, then we rolled into the 19 degree water with 20-metre viz. It was a wonderful introduction to Norfolk's diving. At 17 metres there were numerous small to medium Acropora plate corals, swimthroughs and ledges covered with sponges and anemones sheltering blennies, anemonefish and the feisty Norfolk Island Aatuti aka banded scaly fin *Parma polylepis*. Fusiliers and silver trevally *Pseudocaranx dentex* cruised in mid-water. During this dive I saw the first of several brightly coloured Susan's flatworms (*Pseudoceros susanae*) and mosaic morays (*Enchelycore ramosae*), a wild lookin' eel!

NORFUK AILEN: A SOUTH PACIFIC GEM



Main: The toothy grin of a mosaic moray eel (*Enchelycore ramosus*) at Ball Bay. Left to right: Aatuti aka banded scalefin (*Parma polylepis*);

Black-tailed seahorse (*Aplysia dactylomela*); Hawksbill turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*); Comb seastar (*Astropecten polycanthus*).



with great viz and rich diversity of marine life. Tii-Tii off Nepean Island has magnificent ledges and swimthroughs. We were visited by a large school of silver trevally and another of yellow-tailed kingfish (*Seriola lalandi*) during our safety stop there, a spectacular sight as they circled us almost close enough to touch.

Ball Bay on Norfolk's southwest corner is rarely dived due to the prevailing southeasterly and strong surge. James, who'd never dived here before and I were lucky enough to have the chance. Large bulb-tentacle anemones (*Entacmaea quadricolor*) and their resident wide-band or bluelip anemone fish (*Amphiprion latezonatus*) danced in the surge. Mosaic and Lord Howe moray eels with toothy grins waited patiently for a passing meal whilst time slipped by slowly for a couple of large and colourful Leach's seastars

a short tunnel which rejoins the cave several metres further in. Outside, not far from the cave entrance, a pair of large banded coral shrimp (*Sternopus hispidus*) have taken up residence in a small recess at the base of the bommie.

A night dive in Emily Bay is a must. This shallow (I maxed out at 3.6 metres) sandy bottomed lagoon is protected – by a low coral reef. Calm and safe, James often conducts his Open Water 'pool' sessions here. Whilst the sandy centre of the lagoon is a bit of a desert, the fringing coral reef is a kaleidoscope of colour. A black-tailed sea hare (*Aplysia dactylomela*), long-nosed butterflyfish (*Forcipiger flavissimus*), threadfin butterflyfish (*Chaetodon auriga*) and several juvenile conger eels shared the reef along with hundreds of juvenile reef fish, anemones in full bloom, several



Norfolk Island is 8km x 5km and formed by a series of volcanic eruptions between 2.3 and 3.1 million years ago. 1600km northeast of Sydney, 1200km northwest of Auckland and about 800km south of Noumea, at roughly the same latitude as Byron Bay, Norfolk has comfortable

winter temperatures of between 12 degrees at night to 21 during the day. Summers are humid with temperatures up to 30 degrees. But best of all, the winter water temperature is usually around 18 to 20 degrees!



Too soon, our air was down to 70 bar. Due to the strengthening wind, our remaining dive was abandoned.

The next day was much calmer and promised excellent diving. We launched via crane onto gentle half-metre swells at Cascade Jetty on the sheltered northern side of the island. Approximately a kilometre west of Captain Cook's 1774 landing site and memorial, was our first dive site 'Star Wars'. James named this site because it resembled the narrow trenches on the surface of the Empire's Death Star in the movie. How fitting! At 16 metres was a world of narrow canyons and gutters, the walls adorned by anemones, sponges, hard and soft corals with numerous small ledges and rocks of all sizes littering the floor.

Suddenly my dive buddy grabbed my fin, pointing under a ledge. I dropped down

and peered under. I was stunned; a metre from my mask was a large resting turtle. James sent my images to his friend in WA, a marine biologist specializing in turtles. She identified it as a very old, critically endangered hawksbill turtle *Eretmochelys imbricata*. In her words to James: "This is too exciting, the turtle is a very old-looking hawksbill! I am blown away as Norfolk is a long way south for them and so if it is living there it would push the boundary of the range a long way south."

For the next three days, mornings and early afternoons were spent at dive sites dotted around Norfolk and Nepean Islands. Afternoons and evenings were spent exploring Norfolk's rich history and spectacular scenery.

Norfolk's 32 kilometres of mostly granite shores are bound by temperate waters

(*Leiaster leachi*). As if on cue, a large school of moorish idols (*Zanclus cornutus*) turned up with the surge at my safety stop. This site has much to discover and I hope to spend more time here on subsequent trips.

Steele's Point is a stunning wall dive. Large anemone colonies with dozens of wide-band anemone fish were attached to granite walls rising from 24 to about six metres - ideal for a safety stop whilst viewing the abundant life on the top of the wall. Colonies of large nepthean soft corals swaying in the light surge were abundant in the deep water under the shadows of the wall.

Little Organ Bomme (no, it's not what you think!) adjacent to Organ Rock (named for its pipe-like rock strata), has a safe wide cave at its base. About half way along the caves' length is the opening to

species of seastar and large prawns that made my mouth water!

Once out of the water, book yourself onto some of the many cultural and theme tours. Watch a re-enactment of the Mutiny On The Bounty, spend a night as a convict, hear about the island history and have a beautiful meal during a Progressive Dinner held in islanders' homes or taste the local foods at the Island Fish Fry at Puppies Point and watch the sun dip into the sea in a spectacular sunset.

Kingston is the administrative centre of Norfolk. The buildings are faithfully restored examples of convict built architecture from the second settlement period of 1825 to 1855. Tours through several of these magnificent buildings are conducted on a daily basis.

A BRIEF NORFOLK HISTORY

1774 Discovered by Lieutenant (Capt) James Cook on his second global circumnavigation and named "Norfolk Isle in honour of that noble family".

1788 Norfolk was first settled six weeks after the Australian colony at Botany Bay. A small group of free and convict settlers eked out a scant existence.

1814 The harsh conditions caused abandonment of the settlement.

1825 Norfolk's second settlement, Britain's most infamous and 'hellish' penal colony, was established to help feed the struggling Australian colony.

1855 Conditions again caused the settlement to be abandoned. The convicts were moved to the penal colony on Van Dieman's Land.

1856 6000 kilometres east on Pitcairn Island, 194 descendants of the nine Bounty mutineers who'd come there in 1790 with their families, had outgrown their home. The population was resettled to Norfolk, all free settlers.

Bounty Day celebrates the Pitcairners arrival on 8 June 1856 as a public holiday. About 800 Norfolk residents, a third of the population, are Bounty mutineer descendants. Norfolk Ailen (the Pitcairners brought their own language, an amalgam of Old English and Tahitian) is now a self-governing External Territory of Australia with an elected nine-seat assembly.

The business, retail and social hub of Norfolk Island is Burnt Pine. There are several good quality restaurants and cafes with reasonably priced meals. Together with the pub and theme dinners, you wont go hungry. Accommodation varies from basic but adequate to several 4 and 5 star apartments and cottages.

Most island accommodations offer a car as part of their package. Fuel is

Main: Beautiful underwater terrain at The Fishbowl, Nepean Island.

Left to right: Kingston - Norfolk's administrative centre; Cemetery Bay with Nepean and Philip Islands in the background; Wide-band Anemonefish (Amphiprion latezonatus); James Edward launching via crane at Kingston jetty.

www.bountydivers.com

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GETTING TO NORFOLK

Norfolk Air runs direct flights from Australia ex Sydney and Brisbane three times weekly, Melbourne and Newcastle once a week. Standard allowances of 7kg carry-on and 20kg of checked baggage apply. Great news for divers – a 10kg sporting equipment allowance. Air New Zealand operates one direct flight from Auckland weekly. A valid passport is required. Currency is the Australian dollar. There's an ATM at Burnt Pine's Commonwealth Bank and most businesses take major credit cards or eftpos. The Liquor Bond store offers a 30% discount on up to three litres of spirits or liqueurs per valid airline ticket. Power is 240V, 50 cycle and uses a standard 3-pin plug. Global roaming for mobiles is not available, however there is an internet cafe in Burnt Pine.



Susan's flatworm (*Pseudocerus susanae*).

expensive, but with only 170km of roads and a 50km/hr limit (40km/hr in Burnt Pine and 25km/hr in Kingston and the National Park) you won't use much fuel. Roaming cattle (hundreds of the bloody things) have right of way! If you run out of things to do, just kick back and enjoy the quiet ambience, take in the stunning coastal scenery, or enjoy a leisurely stroll in the National Park.

As they say on Norfolk - "Yorlei kam luk orn" - come and have a look. You won't be sorry!

LINK> www.theworldofnorfolk.com.au ■