

TOWERS OF CORAL

THE BOMMIES OF THE RIBBON REEFS

: NIGEL MARSH AND HELEN ROSE
www.nigelmarshphotography.com

Main: A tower of coral.
Top to bottom:
A school of big-eye trevally swarm under the boat at Lighthouse Bommie. Flaming file shells lurk in ledges at Steve's Bommie. A lovely yellow boxfish at Steve's Bommie.

> WE'D BARELY PUT OUR HEADS BELOW THE SURFACE AND WE WERE ALREADY SURROUNDED BY FISH. ZOOMING AROUND US WAS A MIXED SCHOOL OF BIG-EYE TREVALLY AND CHEVRON BARRACUDA. DROPPING BELOW THIS SHIMMERING MASS OF SILVER WE WERE ENGULFED BY YELLOW-FINNED GOATFISH AND YELLOW-LINED SNAPPER. THIS SWIRL OF GOLD WAS MESMERISING, BUT WE COULDN'T STOP – BELOW US WERE MORE SCHOOLS OF FISH AND A GIANT TOWER OF CORAL CALLED STEVE'S BOMMIE.



This is just one of the amazing bommies to explore on Australia's Ribbon Reefs, one of the most popular dive destinations on the Great Barrier Reef. Only accessible by liveboard, this string of colourful reefs is north of Cairns and forms a hundred kilometre long barrier on the edge of the Coral Sea. Divers will find endless walls and coral gardens, but the most memorable dives has to be the bommies. The word bommie, for those not familiar with the term, is derived from *bombora*, a term used by Australian Aboriginals to describe a submerged formation or pinnacle. Aussies, in the great tradition of shortening words and adding an 'ie' to the end of everything, have adopted the word and shortened it to bommie.

The Ribbons' bommies are incredible towers of coral that attract marine life like giant magnets, because they generally rise from the barren sandy bottom in reef lagoons and provide the only shelter in the area for both small and large marine life. It is this dense concentration of marine life that makes bommies some of the best dive sites on the Great Barrier Reef.

Over the years we've explored the Ribbon Reefs several times, and are always astounded by the marine life these towers of coral attract. It was no different on our recent trip on *Spirit of Freedom*. Following are some of the bommie highlights.

LIGHTHOUSE BOMMIE

Named because it looks like a lighthouse, this single tower of coral rises from 25 to five metres and is a haven for marine life. We started our dive on the smaller mound of coral at the base of the pinnacle, which is riddled with ledges and was covered by a massive school of yellow-lined snapper. Thousands of these golden fish were circling the top of the mound and looked wonderful in the 30 metre visibility. But our focus quickly changed when we spotted two olive sea snakes slithering across the reef. They were searching each hole for potential prey and ignored us in their quest for food.

We circled the base of the main bommie to find half a dozen common lionfish, reef-top pipefish sitting on the coral, rock cod, angelfish, butterflyfish and several nudibranchs. As we made our way up the pinnacle walls we found a black coral tree with several longnose hawkfish hiding in its branches, gorgonians and seawhips with numerous seawhip gobies. Just below the peak of the bommie is a wide shelf with reef fish and a small cave lined with sponges and tubastra corals cuts right through the formation and hosts squirrelfish and coral cod.

But this tower saved the best until last – circling the top of the pinnacle were several hundred big-eye trevally. It was mesmerising watching this whirlpool of fish circling and it was a lovely way to do a safety stop.

PIXIE PINNACLE

This tower of coral is renowned for its macro marine life, but also gets its fair share of larger visitors. Slowly swimming around its base, which is 30 metres deep, we found plenty of pretty coral and plenty of fish – trevally, barracuda, coral trout, fusiliers, coral cod, squirrelfish and a flowery groper. But our cameras were set



THE RIBBON REEFS



up for macro so we concentrated on smaller critters and we weren't disappointed. Investigating the walls and ledges we soon found pipefish, nudies, flatworms, hermit crabs, commensal shrimps, anemonefish, hawkfish, gobies and blennies. But the highlight was the flaming file shells, which hide in the ledges and flash their incredible neon colours.

SNAKE PIT

The twin bommies at the Snake Pit are surrounded by a ridge of coral and sit next to a dropoff. As we descended we got side-tracked by a school of chevron barracuda at the mooring, then by several olive sea snakes – we found half a dozen olives on the dive. Exploring the reef and bommies we encountered a great collection of fish – coral trout, coral cod, flowery gropers, fusiliers, parrotfish, rabbitfish, sweetlips, snapper and two large Maori wrasse. Several titan triggerfish had nest sites here so we gave them a wide berth, but despite this we were attacked by one angry trigger. Around this site we also found green turtles, cuttlefish, blue spotted stingrays, numerous invertebrate species and a two metre long bull shark that checked us out several times but never came close enough to photograph.

TWO TOWERS

This was one of the highlights on *Spirit of Freedom*. The site consists of twin towers of coral rising from 20 metres and several smaller bommies at 25 to 30 metres. We circled the smaller bommies first, finding lovely gorgonians, seawhips, soft corals and a few giant clams. The deepest bommie had a wonderful array of swarming fish; schools of snapper, fusiliers, parrotfish, batfish and sweetlips. We spotted several whitetip reef sharks patrolling the edge of these bommies and also ran into a few olive sea snakes.

The two main bommies are about 20 metres apart and quite large, so there wasn't enough time to explore them both thoroughly. As we circled the first one we encountered a massive school of yellow-lined snapper, turtles, trevally, barracuda, coral trout, mackerel and a spotted eagle ray. We

had only enough time to investigate the top of the second bommie. It was covered in hard corals and reef fish, and also harboured a variety of anemonefish species.

STEVE'S BOMMIE

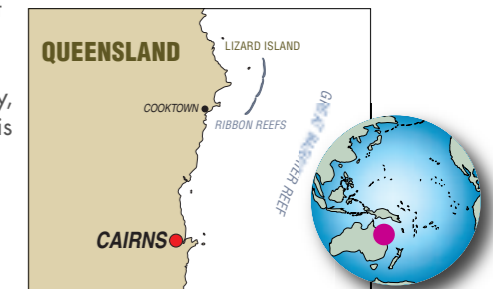
Saving the best until last, we had two sensational dives here on our last day, which left some very lasting memories. Steve's Bommie rises from 30 to three metres and is always swarming with life. Some divers probably never reach the bottom of this pinnacle, because they're captivated by the masses of fish on top. Having dived this amazing place before, we knew there was plenty of interesting stuff below so we headed to the bottom.

Around the wide base we found some lovely gorgonians, seawhips and big elephant ear sponges that were covered in sea cucumbers. As we slowly swam round we also found several whitetip reef sharks, a shy flowery groper and a small green turtle. We stopped at the smaller bommie jutting from the side of the main pinnacle, with a plaque in memory of Steve, to spend some time investigating the small cave cutting into the bommie which is filled with gorgonians and overflowing with snapper and squirrelfish.

Rising up the side of main bommie we were engulfed by a huge school of yellow-line snapper and yellow-finned goatfish. As we made our way to shallower water the fish life became even thicker – big-eye trevally, chevron barracuda, fusiliers, mackerel, surgeonfish and giant trevally. It was captivating to watch, but we knew there was more to be seen amongst the corals and under the ledges.

A wide coral shelf sloping off one side of the bommie is packed with reef fish, but a closer look also reveals pipefish, boxfish, hawkfish, anemonefish, moray eels, hermit crabs and mantis shrimps. There are a couple of resident leaf scorpionfish we couldn't find this time, but did locate several very ugly but very colourful reef stonefish hidden in the corals. There is so much to

CORAL GARDENS AND COD HOLE Of course there's much more to the Ribbon Reefs than just outstanding bommies; there's countless coral gardens and reef walls to explore. Clam Gardens, Challenger Bay, Wonderland, Pixie Wall, Pixie Garden and Joanies Joy were some of the sites we dived and saw everything from giant clams to egg-laying cuttlefish to manta rays. In winter the Ribbons complex is also visited by dwarf minke whales, and encounters with these small cetaceans are unforgettable. But the number one dive site on the Ribbon Reefs is without doubt the Cod Hole, where a dozen or so large and very diver-friendly, potato cod reside. This site is also populated with reef sharks, massive fish populations and even pygmy seahorses!



SPIRIT OF FREEDOM This is one of the best liveaboard boats on the Great Barrier Reef. Based in Cairns, the 37 metre long vessel has 11 cabins, each with its own bathroom and is airconditioned throughout. The vessel has a large dive deck and duckboard, and divers can either use air or nitrox. Each Monday *Spirit of Freedom* departs on a three day trip to the Ribbon Reefs, stopping at Lizard Island on the fourth day so guests can either depart or stay on for the following four days. New arrivals also join the vessel here for just the four day leg which are spent exploring more of the Ribbon Reefs and also Osprey Reef, deep in the Coral Sea. www.spiritoffreedom.com.au

Top to bottom:
Relaxing on the sundeck of
Spirit of Freedom between
dives; Some of the impressive
fish schools found at Steve's
Bommie; A common lionfish at
Pixie Pinnacle.



see on Steve's Bommie you'll
want to do it again and again
and again.



There are dozens of coral
towers on the Ribbons with
incredible diving and many
more yet to be discovered.
On our last day on *Spirit of
Freedom* the skipper passed
another new bommie boiling
with fish life at the surface –
we didn't have time to check
it out, but this is yet another
dive to explore on the always brilliant Ribbon Reefs.

