

heading south

> THE VAST MAJORITY OF AUSTRALIA'S DIVING, ESPECIALLY FOR FOREIGN TOURISTS, TAKES PLACE ON THE GREAT BARRIER REEF. HAVING SPENT MOST OF MY DIVE CAREER PHOTOGRAPHING AND RESEARCHING CORAL REEFS AND THEIR INHABITANTS, I WAS KEEN TO EXPLORE AUSTRALIA'S COOLER WATERS. SO, BEGINNING IN BRISBANE, A FRIEND AND I SET ASIDE A MONTH TO DRIVE DOWN AUSTRALIA'S EAST COAST AND OVER TO TASMANIA. THE PLAN WAS TO DIVE ALONG THE WAY AND OBSERVE FIRSTHAND HOW THE MARINE ENVIRONMENT ALTERS OVER THE 2,000 KILOMETRES OF LATITUDINAL CHANGE ON OUR NORTH TO SOUTH VOYAGE.



Brisbane and Beyond Living in Brisbane has been great for my logbook. There are plenty of dive sites within an hour or so drive of the city, ranging from shore and oceanic dives to wrecks. The waters remain relatively benign year round, but there is quite a seasonal variation in temperature. This affects the marine life found in and around Moreton Bay, with megafauna migrating north or south depending on the time of year and their temperature preferences. Summer brings us mantas and leopard sharks and winter grey nurse sharks, making Brisbane the perfect year-round doorstep dive destination.

As well as the bigger creatures that have the fin power to make long migrations, Moreton Bay also hosts a blend of smaller tropical and temperate species. It acts as the most southerly limit for the many tropical species, which are carried by the

East Australia Current as it journeys south from the Great Barrier Reef. Hard coral gardens even grow off the north of Moreton Bay and are some of the most southerly coral reefs in the world. However, these aren't the reefs of the tropics, amongst the dazzling reef fish are also temperate species at the northern edge of their range.

Plan the Dive and Dive the Plan I began planning our road trip a month or so before leaving. I was keen to do a fair amount of shore diving as it gives you as much bottom time as your air will allow, to dive at your own pace and keep costs down. The average cost of hiring two tanks and weights for shore diving was only A\$30-40 compared to \$110-130 for a double boat dive, making shore diving more economically viable. Shore diving can be pretty hit or miss, but the odds are definitely in your favour with a

little pre-planning. There are some brilliant web-based resources created by some really enthusiastic divers. Of course local dive shops will help you with entry and exit points, suitability of the conditions and the best route to take, but finding out whether a site is tidally influenced, the species found on a dive and where you can hire or fill tanks are worth finding out in advance.

Australia's geographic isolation means many of its species are found nowhere else. Prior to planning our trip I was aware on a broad scale of the number of endemic species (species found nowhere else) in temperate Australian waters, but as I began to research further I became more and more excited by the sheer diversity of species found only around southern Australia's shores. The diversity of Australia's indigenous marine life has evolved thanks to



: RICHARD SMITH
www.oceanrealmimages.com

1 A blue-lined octopus (*Hapalochlaena fasciata*) with camouflaged colouration; 2 A blue-lined octopus (*Hapalochlaena fasciata*) with vivid threat colouration; 3 Head and lure detail of the hairy/striated frogfish (*Antennarius striatus*) in Sydney harbour; 4 An unusual and striking nudibranch (*Polycera capensis*) at Nelson Bay.

1 Grey nurse sharks school in the shallow entrance of Fish Rock Cave; 2 A threadfin hawkfish near the southern limit of its range just south of Brisbane; 3 An ornate wobbegong (*Orectolobus ornatus*) perfectly camouflaged in Moreton Bay, Brisbane; 4 A colourful nudibranch (*Ceratosoma amoenum*) at Nelson Bay; 5 Large school of stripey cluster around a black coral bush; 6 Vibrant soft and hard corals form coral reefs north of Moreton Bay, Brisbane; 7 White's seahorse (*Hippocampus whitei*) hiding in a sponge.

millions of years of complex oceanographic and geological events, driving its evolution. As I began to plan our dives, they were soon being dictated by the presence of a unique animal I was eager to see, found only on a small stretch of coast. First, the blue-lined octopus, a close cousin of the blue-ringed octopus, was on my list for the Port Stephens area, followed by the pot-bellied and short-head seahorses around Melbourne and my most southerly objective being the critically endangered spotted handfish of Tasmania. Hardly any species I researched had a geographic range greater than several hundred kilometres of coastline.

A Familiar Road Between Brisbane and Sydney the first of our two stops, South West Rocks, is an unassuming town almost equidistant between the two state capitals. It is home to my favourite dive site in Australia, Fish Rock Cave, and since it's only 500km from Brisbane it's one I'd visited several times before. The

grey nurse sharks and Australia's longest marine cave are the highlights.

Fish Rock is a tiny islet 2km off the coast. Although it is classed as lying within a warm temperate marine realm the water temperature here can vary widely due to its proximity to the continental shelf. I once visited in February and whilst the air temperature was in the thirties the water was a frigid 15°C! Luckily on this trip we were blessed with 26°C and great visibility; however, despite the warm water, corals cannot survive below around 18°C and are not seen this far south, being replaced by rock barrens and algae. Water temperature effects where the resident aggregation of grey nurse sharks are found on the site too. When it's warmer they tend to be found in the deep gutters off the east side of the island. When it's cooler they often spend their days in the shallow cave entrance, which makes for some great photo opportunities. Especially when the sharks are deep I think this is a great spot to use

Nitrox, the increased oxygen percentage in the gas allows you to spend longer at depth by reducing the amount of nitrogen absorbed by the body. The added time spent at depth makes a huge difference to your dive and the time spent with the sharks.

An ideal dive for me at Fish Rock is to enter the cave, which spans 125m through the island, from the deep entrance at 26m and exit through the cathedral-like opening at 14m into a school of 30-40 grey nurse sharks. The cave is full of lobsters, wobbegong sharks and even an occasional hawksbill turtle feeding on the dark-loving white sponges. The turtles are attracted to divers and make use of their torchlight to find these delicacies in the pitch black. There is plenty to see in the cave, which can distract you if you're not sure about the idea of cave diving. Once out of the cave you can spend as long as you like at the shallow end, provided you're not freezing cold, whilst the sharks pass in a conveyor

belt of teeth. Although they look menacing, grey nurse sharks (also known as sand tigers and ragged tooth sharks) are harmless and use their needle-like teeth to catch small fish. Each time I visit Fish Rock there's something different about the site. I knew two dives wouldn't be enough so we spent a couple of days here on our first stop before heading further south for an entirely different type of diving.

Treasure Hunt Another four hours south was our next dive destination, Nelson Bay in the Port Stephens area. It's a beautiful spot with kilometres of white sandy beaches and idyllic bays dotted along its shoreline. A certain creature had piqued my interest whilst researching diving in the area. The blue-lined octopus is only found along the New South Wales coast and is a close relative of the blue-ringed octopus but with iridescent blue lines covering the body rather than rings to advertise its deadly bite. From my experience of blue rings in Indonesia I

knew this was going to be a tough one to find, so I researched the local shore dives and found that a site called 'the pipeline' was our best bet.

This shore dive became one of my favourites of the whole trip. The access was pretty easy, although the parking fees added up due to our 110-minute dives! The local dive shop, Let's Go Adventures, were really helpful with telling us creatures to look out for and how best to dive the site. The area is tidally affected so high slack tide was best for still water and decent visibility. We managed a couple of long dives on consecutive days and found two very accommodating blue-lined octopuses. They were bigger than their tropical counterparts and much more content to sit in the open and pose for photos. The pipeline itself is a landmark that's useful to follow underwater but the sponge and soft coral gardens that surround it are where most of the creatures can be found. The site was full of nudibranchs, many of which I'd never

Resources

- Brisbane – Go Dive (www.godive.com.au)
- Fish Rock Cave – Fish Rock Dive Centre (fishrock.com.au)
- Nelson Bay – Let's Go Adventures/ProDive (www.letsgoadventures.com.au)
- Sydney – Plunge Diving (www.plungediving.com.au)



seen before, as well as White's seahorses, blind sharks and common Sydney octopuses all in less than 12m of water.

Rest & Relaxation Sydney was our next stop and although it's Australia's most densely populated city it has some great dives. Sadly, we only managed one due to distractions from the other things big cities have to offer, such as great dining and sight seeing opportunities. We chose to do a couple of shore dives in Chowder Bay off Clifton Gardens beach to go in search of seahorses and frogfish. The visibility was terrible and sadly we only saw one seahorse (according to a local dive shop owner

the lack of seahorses may be due to unscrupulous folks taking the seahorses for the aquarium trade!) but we did manage to find three hairy frogfish amongst the algae. These hirsute anglerfish are covered in long filaments that provide amazing camouflage and give them their common name. Another brilliant sighting on this dive was a coffin ray, an Australian endemic, which is capable of giving a hair raising electric burst to stun prey or ward off predators. As well as some great dives it was nice to have a few days home comforts in Sydney to refuel before the next leg of our road trip down to Melbourne and beyond to Tasmania. *(Continued Sportdiving Feb/Mar 2012)*



1 The blend of tropical and temperate species on a Brisbane reef; 2 Queensland yellowtail angelfish off Brisbane. This species can be found from the southern Great Barrier Reef to Sydney; 3 Grey nurse shark (Carcharias taurus) in the deep gutter of Fish Rock.



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