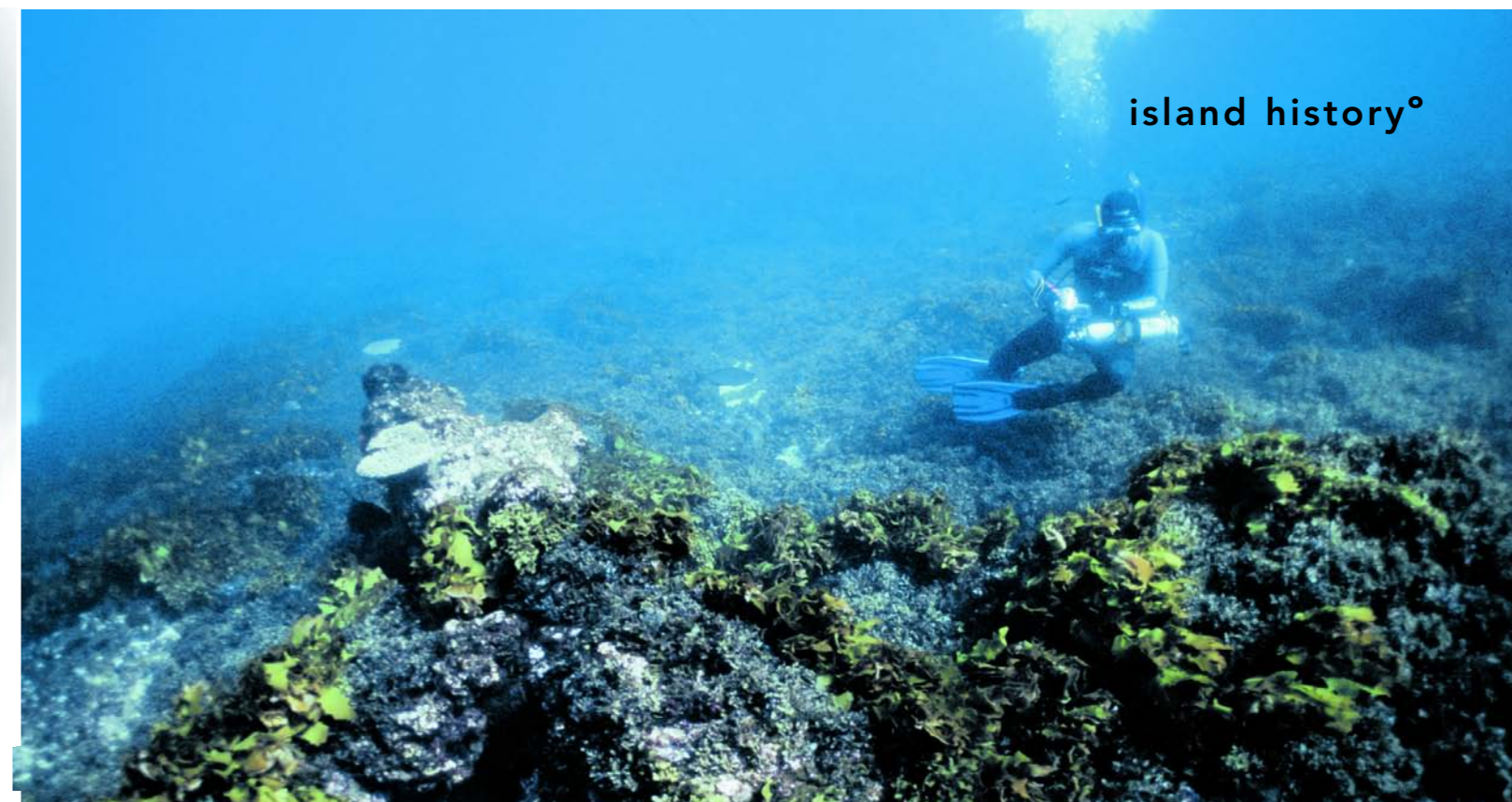


:MARK GERLACH

DIVING INTO HISTORY

+ WAKING TO THE GENTLE HUM OF DIESEL ENGINES, I LOOKED OUT THROUGH MY PORTHOLE AND SAW A CLUSTER OF LOW LYING ISLANDS ON THE HORIZON IN THE EARLY MORNING LIGHT. AH, THIS IS WHAT MY BUDDY JOE AND I HAD BEEN WAITING FOR, A FIVE DAY DIVING TRIP EXPLORING SOME OF THE ABROLHOS ISLANDS AND SURROUNDING MARINE PARK.



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Diving on the *Batavia* wreck among the cannon

The Abrolhos or Houtman Abrolhos Islands are made up of 122 mainly coral atolls spanning nearly 100 kilometres on the edge of Australia's continental shelf. Located between 35 and 60 kilometres from the busy shipping port of Geraldton Western Australia, a first glimpse of these islands looks a little precarious. They sit barely above sea-level, and on closer inspection are a harsh mixture of broken coral and low scrubby bushes. Currently, of the 122 islands, 22 have been set aside for habitation. These are used by rock lobster fishermen and their families during the fishing season.

Most Abrolhos dive sites are outcroppings of reef rising from depths of 30-40 metres to within a few metres of the surface, with a few wall dives thrown in for good measure. The region is bathed by the warm Leeuwin current which flows down from the tropical north. This provides an excellent biodiversity between the temperate and tropical regions, such as soft colorful sponge at depth, leading up to masses of stag horn and plate coral on the way to the surface, while temperate fish species forage for food around anemone fish valiantly defending their host anemone.

The first dive of the trip was at a site called Stairway to Heaven. Looking up the steep side of the reef from below masses of plate coral form a giant staircase leading to the surface. Around the other side of this reef a more gentle slope has both plate and gardens of stag horn coral growing. Coral trout drift by in the light current, while above parrot fish and king wrasse feed, and schools of buff bream, butterfly fish and silver trevally dart past.

Next was the dive we had been waiting for, the *Batavia* wreck site. With the silent sentinel of Beacon Island only a few hundred metres away, the atmosphere of this wreck site makes the hair on the back of your neck bristle. One anchor and three large cannons can be seen from the surface next to the sand patch where the wreck used to lay. Despite the small size of the site it's easy to spend some time just soaking up the atmosphere and history.

The first night dive at Long Island dive trail was unforgettable, in only six metres of water we dived just under the boat and the smorgasbord action was unbelievable! The large schools of small baitfish

attracted to our dive lights meant that everything was there to feed on them. First an anemone ate about 20 baitfish, a small squid hovered in our beams, a tiny cuttlefish had its fill and a normally well camouflaged scorpion cod became very animated, snapping up half a dozen of the tiny fish! Of course I ran out of film halfway through the dive!

Anemone Lump is a tremendous site, being about the size of a football oval, it has steep sides covered in colourful sponge and plate coral, while the top consists of broken up limestone with kelp and soft coral. As the name suggests there are anemones, lots of anemones! From tiny ones inhabited by equally tiny anemone fish, to sprawling clumps nearly a metre across. Pelagics such as kingfish and spanish mackerel patrol the edges of the reef, above wobbegong sharks can be seen hunting for prey, while wrasses, large bald chin grouper and bright yellow butterfly fish poke about in search of food.

At Eagles Nest Passage the boat mooring is on a steep sandy slope only a few metres from a small island. Making our way around the island we passed over soft sponges and hard plate coral. Ascending to 25 metres we were confronted with an





Anemone fish on Anemone Lump

THE BATAVIA HISTORY...

Over the centuries many ships have been wrecked along the Arolhos Islands, the most famous being the *Batavia*, after which this stretch of coastline is named. On 28 October 1628 this VOC Indiamen ship sailed from Texel in the Netherlands on her maiden journey to Batavia (modern day Jakarta) in the Dutch Colonies of Indonesia. On 4 June 1629 the *Batavia* was wrecked when it struck a shallow coral reef at night on the Arolhos Islands. Most passengers and crew were off-loaded onto a nearby island, later known as Batavia's Graveyard. The Commodore Francesco Pelsaert, the Skipper Ariaen Jacobsz, some 35 others, and most of the food and water were landed on a smaller island. Pelsaert and Jacobsz knew they were in dire straights and after much deliberation loaded the two ships' boats and set sail for Batavia.

Soon after, Under Merchant Jeronimus Cornelius, the most senior company man amongst the survivors and a psychotic killer, took control. With a loyal band of murderous young men drawn from the ship's Junior Officers, soldiery, and even cabin boys, Cornelius began to systematically kill anyone he believed would be a problem to his reign of terror, or a burden on the limited resources.

He sent one group of soldiers in search of water to another island and left them to die. On this island, later to be known as Wallaby Island, the soldiers constructed the first European buildings in Australia, two dry wall 'forts'. Back on their island, Beacon Island, Cornelius and his band murdered 125 men, women and children. The treacherous outcome makes toe-curling reading.

The wreck of the *Batavia* was discovered relatively intact over 300 years later in June 1963 when lobster fishermen Dave Johnson showed bronze cannons and anchors to Geraldton divers Max and Graeme Cramer. The water depth on the wreck site is only five to six metres, so it can be easily snorkeled or dived. The *Batavia* wreck site is easily identified by the large patch of sand amongst the reef where most of the wreck was removed by the Western Australian maritime museum between 1972 and 1976.



Mating chromodoris africana nudibranchs on Anemone Lump

almost sheer wall of stag horn coral rising to the surface; in amongst this dense thicket live anemone fish, small eels and various reef fish.

A night dive was needed to explore more of this site. Slipping into the water just after dark I was amazed by what you could find in the shallows. Most of the hour dive time was spent in a little over a metre of water. Small cowrie shells normally shy were out feeding on the reef; a pacific octopus wasn't quite so keen to see us and our cameras; I had my heart in my throat for a second when I spotted movement out of the corner of my eye, to my relief a curious sea lion come over to see what I was doing and not one of the many shark species that periodically inhabit these waters. Next morning as we were getting ready

for another dive, two female sea lions swam up to the boat. Joe and I slipped into the water for a snorkel with them. While I stayed still taking photos our new friend did the same laying on the reef watching me, but when Joe rolled on his side to better enable him to film and breath it was like a cue for action. She started performing all sorts of antics for us, barrel rolls and back flips; obviously she was an actress, not a model!

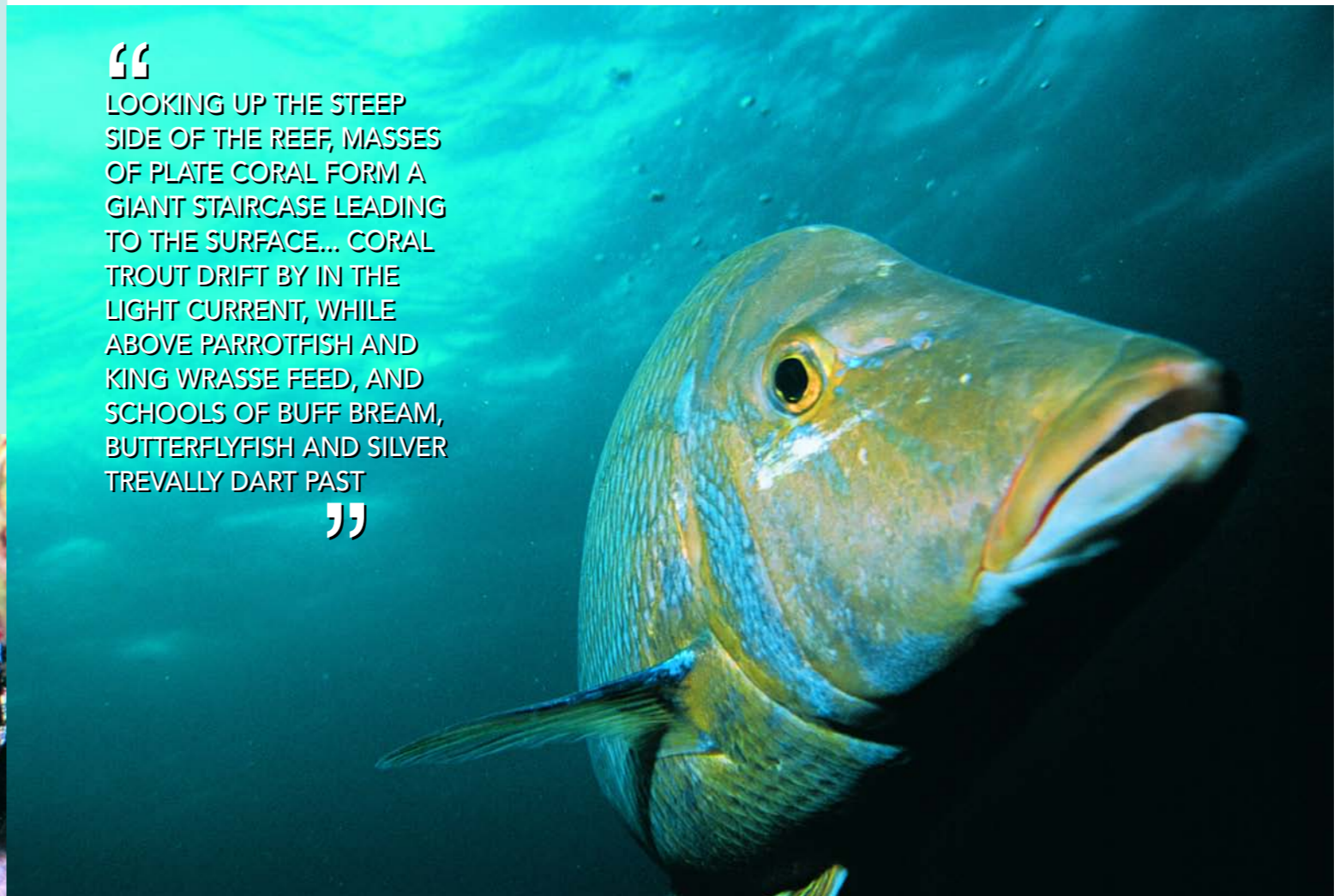
Little North Spit is a very steep sided reef ranging from 5-36 metres. Schools of Spanish mackerel can be found near the base, anemone fish up the sides, and up top schools of buff bream and tens of thousands of baitfish swim over the kelp covered reef. Red Lump, is in a word, awesome! A pinnacle rising from 45-14 metres, covered in multi-coloured sponge

gardens, whips and soft coral. Being a small site you descend to whatever is a comfortable depth for you and then slowly spiral upward. Look for colourful nudibranchs among the sponges, and out into the blue for schools of palagics, trevally, large rays, grouper and maybe sharks, if you are lucky.

During surface intervals there is plenty to keep divers occupied onboard MV Odyssey. You can sit back and enjoy the view while writing your log book or if you feel a little more active, there is fishing when out side the marine park zones, snorkeling on the shallow reefs around the islands where curious sea lions will often come over for a closer look and play, excursions to local islands, and even surfing if the swell is up!

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LOOKING UP THE STEEP
SIDE OF THE REEF, MASSES
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GIANT STAIRCASE LEADING
TO THE SURFACE... CORAL
TROUT DRIFT BY IN THE
LIGHT CURRENT, WHILE
ABOVE PARROTFISH AND
KING WRASSE FEED, AND
SCHOOLS OF BUFF BREEM,
BUTTERFLYFISH AND SILVER
TREVALLY DART PAST

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Spangled emperor swooping in for a close look.

EXTRA INFO ON THE ABROLHOS ISLANDS



Wobbegong on the hunt



Friendly sealion, Eagles Nest Passage



Cuttlefish among the staghorn

Situated on Champion Bay in the heart of the Batavia Coast, Geraldton is 424 kilometres north of Perth and is the launching point for diving the Abrolhos Islands. Initially established as a base for mining, farming, and manufacturing, Geraldton became a busy port during the Murchison gold rush. It was used by the US Navy as a base during World War II. Today Geraldton is a busy port city for exporting fishing, agriculture, mining and resources, as well as a base for thousands of tourists each year. It's well worth spending a couple of days in Geraldton to see and enjoy some of the other maritime experiences it has to offer – beautiful sunny beaches, world class windsurfing, yachting, fishing, the Maritime Museum, Point Moore Lighthouse and the more recent HMAS Sydney memorial. Flights to Geraldton are available

through Sky West Airlines. Once there, you can either catch a boat out to the Abrolhos Islands or be flown out by helicopter. The MV Odyssey is a new luxury purpose-built dive boat, a 24 metre catamaran which sleeps 22 guests with all the creature comforts any diver requires. It includes personal climate controlled airconditioned cabins, indoor or alfresco dining, onboard desalinators, 21 CFM dive compressor with backup, a large spacious dive deck, two tenders, easy to exit and enter dive platforms and a very friendly and accommodating crew.



The MV Odyssey



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