

# Cape Paterson

: KEN HOPPEN

+ VICTORIA HAS MANY GREAT SHORE DIVES – FLINDERS AND PORTSEA PIERS, PORT CAMPBELL BAY ARE A FEW EXAMPLES. BUT CAPE PATERSON NEAR WONTHAGGI IN SOUTH GIPPSLAND MAY WELL BECOME KNOWN AS THE BEST. THE CAPE IS ABOUT AN HOUR AND A HALF'S DRIVE FROM MELBOURNE; IT'S A POPULAR SUMMER VACATION AREA, AND HAS SOME EXCELLENT BEACHES.



When the surge is right, the local seadragons all like to hide around the one spot at Cape Paterson

To view the dive site, it's best to drive down to the boat ramp carpark at the top of the small cliff; the boat ramp winds its way down to the beach in the small bay. Two reefs can be seen extending towards the ocean; a smaller rocky outcrop in the middle of the bay has a saltwater swimming pool carved into it.

The first time I dived the Cape I explored the eastern reef. It means a longer walk across the beach, as

swimming through the middle of the bay exposes you to boaters, using the boat ramp. Bring a dive float to trail behind you on the surface as you skirt the bay edge. This reef was good and had its highlights, but recently I dived the western side – much, MUCH better!

As a shore dive, there's two options. The best area is on the southern side of the



Kelsea Timmers explores the shallows of the bay at Cape Paterson during a Padi SEAL diving experience

reef. Plan A is to enter the water near the boat ramp and hug the right side of the bay then swim out around the headland to the dive site. This can be done either above water or below, but if you do it underwater you'll waste valuable dive time. Or you can cart your gear out to the edge of the reef and enter the water from the rocks. This puts you in the correct spot and you then can meander your way around to the left and back to the boat ramp, though it's quite a trek with heavy gear. Plan B is best – cheat! Get a small boat to drop you in the right place, then make your own way back. Strictly speaking it's no longer a shore dive, but it does make it easier to dive this site and saves energy if you're lugging camera gear. (That's my excuse and I'm sticking to it!)

So why bother? Well, the scenery in this little area is special. Gullies run into the reef and parallel to it and are full of interesting marine life, including some species I didn't expect to find here. The maximum depth would be only seven metres or so, but blue devilfish can be found in the slots. This spectacular, grumpy looking fish is normally found in deeper water, so it was quite a surprise to find a pair this close to shore, and this shallow. But this isn't the reefs only surprise.

In the first parallel gully, there are usually sleeping Port Jackson sharks. Often there are 20 or more snoozing in the relative calm. Whilst this is a reasonably regular sight in New South Wales, in Victoria a crowd like this is really rare! There are also variegated collared carpetsharks, a beautiful little thin black shark with white spots arranged around its neck in a sort of necklace. This seems to be one of the best spots to see this small shark. They hide well in the seaweed, but are frequently spotted here.

On certain tides or swells it seems all the local weedy seadragons move into this gully, probably to escape being buffeted on top of the reef. Sometimes they're spread out over about a 15 metre area, sometimes they're in the same place. Seeing seven dragons or more in a half metre area will make any underwater photographer smile. You have to be a little lucky with this, but it does happen.

Up on the reef there are different areas to explore, gullies meandering in and around the rocks full of morwong, sweep, zebrafish and the like. Occasionally a small stingray will swim past or a cray can be found in the rocks.

When your tank's half empty it's time to swim back to the beach. Straight over the reef puts you in the 'washing-machine' of the breaking waves, so you must head east, keeping the reef on your left shoulder, and work your way around and into the bay. Listen for boat traffic as you round the corner, and stay down on the bottom and near to the reef for safety. Boats aren't a problem as long as you're sensible and remember that a float with a dive flag trailing behind you is a very sensible precaution.

The bay has some interesting areas; it has both rocky reef and seagrass full of different sorts of stingrays. There are often smooth stingrays, the world's largest stingray species, and southern eagle rays, spotted stingarees, and sparsely-



Rob Timmers inspects a weedy seadragon in the first gully



Long nose boarfish can sometimes be seen in amongst the rocks. These are one of the most decorative of the larger fish species found in southern Australian waters

spotted stingarees. I've observed the first three within a 30 second period when I was staying stationary, and they all came to me! I've also seen spotted stingarees feeding here, lunging over the sand and trying to find anything worth ingesting. Interesting stuff! They can be in quite shallow water here, so keep your eyes out even in relatively shallow water. Usually I wind up in the western corner of the bay when I surface and have to swim back through shallows to the boat ramp. In fact by doing this I'm well out of the way of any boats. This ramp is not nearly as busy as I am making it sound, but you still need to be aware of it.

So is Cape Paterson the best shore dive in Victoria? Sure, every dive has its good and bad days, and the Cape is no exception. But I'd stack up a good day here against a good day on any other Victorian shore dive and I'd be ahead.

I would recommend that at least for the first time that you venture out here you give Rob Timmers at Seal Diving Services in Traralgon a ring, and get him to drop you into the correct place from his zodiac. He dives most weekends out of Inverloch and Cape Paterson, and would be very happy to hear from you. Seal Diving Services also has a diving lodge at Inverloch, a ten minute drive away from the cape, so accommodation in the area is now easily available.

Once you can see for yourself the site, any further incursions from the beach, or the rocks, become a lot easier and more manageable. Rob also offers dive trips to local dive sites such as Twin Reefs, Arch Rock, The Anchor, Wilson's Promontory, and the Cody Banks, but that's another story.

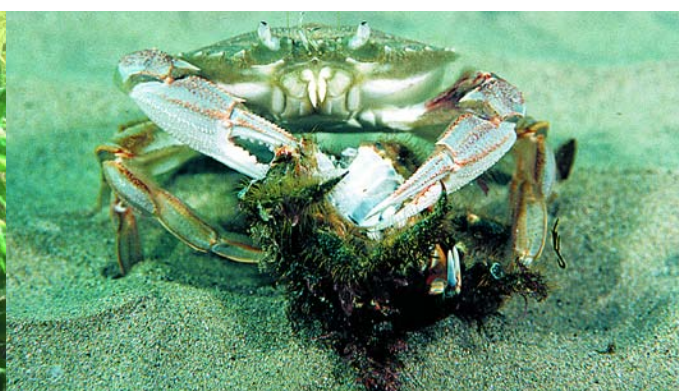
Enjoy your dives at the Cape; I'm sure that it will become a regular occurrence on your diving days. Especially once you have found that little spot that the seadragons like!

Spotted stingarees in the seagrass

An ocean beach surf crab makes a meal of a decorator crab

Kelsea Timmers

A group of young divers enter the water



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