

:: NIGEL MARSH

THE LAST FRONTIER

I FIRST READ ABOUT AUSTRALIA'S FAR NORTHERN REEFS IN SKINDIVING MAGAZINE IN 1984. TWO SEPARATE ARTICLES BY TOM BYRON AND BARRY ANDREWARTHA TOLD OF THEIR UNBELIEVABLE EXPLORATORY DIVING ON WALLS PACKED WITH COLOUR, CORAL, ABUNDANT FISH LIFE – AND SHARKS!

But it wasn't until November 2003 that I made this trip of a lifetime and it was well worth the wait. Four American divers and another Aussie flew out of Cairns on a light plane headed for Lockhart River. The next two hours were spectacular – endless reefs, large bays, winding rivers, sand dunes, woodland and wet tropical rainforests. Another 40 kilometres over dirt tracks took us to Portland Roads where *Nimrod Explorer* waited. Now we were getting serious!

Our checkout dive was four hours out at Lagoon Reef on the southern side on a pretty wall with plenty of fish and coral but vis was only 15 metres as it was late in the afternoon. This was the first of several excellent dives around Lagoon Reef, quite a large complex in two sections.

Later we returned here to dive Ariane's on a corner of North Lagoon Reef with plenty of pelagic action. The wall drops from 6 to 35 metres and has soft corals, wide gorgonians, seawhips and small black corals. At the base is a sandy channel dotted with small bommies and colonies of garden eels. Barracuda, trevally, dogtooth tuna, turrum, mackerel, grey and whitetip reef sharks, plus schools of fusiliers and rainbow runners rode the current. Here two pygmy devil rays glided by; I swam out for a closer look and the rays doubled back, but stayed out of camera range. We also found a Maori wrasse family, doubleheaded parrotfish, barramundi cod, coral trout and a wide variety of reef fish. Obviously few fishermen visit here judging by the size and variety of popular table fish!

Another brilliant Lagoon Reef dive was Nature's Way, one of the exploratory dives, stumbled upon by skipper Mark late one afternoon when looking for an anchorage. This sandy cove is dotted with numerous bommies, many small caves cut into the reef and the walls drop to the channel floor 35 metres down. Like Ariane's, masses of fish patrolled the wall. We saw garden eels, turtles, cuttlefish, whitetip reef sharks and countless reef fish. The night dive was wonderful – flatworms, nudibranchs, two monster painted crayfish, decorator crabs, arrow crabs, coral and cleaner shrimps, scorpionfish, squat lobsters and a large unidentified sea slug. Sleeping fish were



Surreal. Raine Island at dawn. On every dive at Raine Island dozens of green turtles are seen.

A U S T R A L I A ' S F A R N O R T H E R N R E E F S



“OUR DRIFT DIVE ALONG THE REEF WALL THE NEXT MORNING BROUGHT MORE REEF SHARKS, MAORI WRASSE, GREEN TURTLES, BATFISH AND A TWO METRE LONG QUEENSLAND GROPER!”

a number of sand patches plus lovely coral gardens with sweetlips, anthias, batfish, angelfish, butterflyfish, coral trout, lionfish, parrotfish, flutemouths and a mix of anemonefish. One sand patch had a resting school of barracuda; gobies and shrimps shared holes and two pavo razorfish danced across the bottom.

Some of us dusk-dived Raine, the rest took a seat on *Nimrod's* bow for one of the greatest shows on earth. Around 40,000 green turtles nest here October to February and thousands can come in each night. We watched the dark shapes lumber from the water to slowly make their way up the beach. At first light the sand is covered in turtle tracks which resemble thousands of tractor tyre treads.

GREAT DETACHED REEF Just south of Raine, this large complex is separated from the main Great Barrier Reef and new dive sites are found every trip. We first dived Perisher Blue, a wall at the northern end named for the sandy snow-like slope where the mooring is fixed. It was very colourful with pelagics and reef fish, but the best part was exploring the maze of coral in the shallows. We also did a brilliant exploratory drift dive at the lagoon entrance.

I loved the scattered pinnacles on the western side. Boterkoek Pinnacles was discovered by the *Nimrod Explorer* crew the previous trip. These twin towers rising from 35 to three metres were covered in exotic corals – the walls and ledges cutting into the pinnacles were draped in

gorgonians, seawhips, soft corals and dazzling black corals. A leopard shark lazed on the bottom, plus green turtles and a family of Maori wrasse. Schooling surgeonfish, unicornfish, barracuda, batfish and masses of anthias circled the pinnacle. The smaller stuff was just as impressive – untold flatworm and nudie species, including some I've never seen before. We found featherstars with resident clingfish and shrimps, seastars, lionfish, gobies, blennies, varied anemonefish and dozens of tiny pipefish. I counted six longnosed hawkfish propped up in the gorgonians. Next day we dived an amazing spot simply called The Pinnacle which had very similar marine life. An olive sea snake was seen here and we were circled by a curious grey reef shark.

SEMI DETACHED REEF Off the southwest side of Great Detached is another impressive reef with stunning dives. The Altar at the southern corner was brilliant – a large tube-like cave with gorgonians, soft corals, black corals and strange dangling spaghetti-like sponges cut through the wall. Along the wall were double-headed parrotfish, trevally, mackerel, whitetip reef sharks and a few moray eels. One of the best exploratory dives was on the western side at Nigel's Nook (named after me for fun!). Dozens of caves and crevasses pierced the reef wall, including a large U-shaped cave. On a dusk dive here we were circled by an aggressive silvertip shark and also had grey and whitetip reef sharks. Our drift dive along the reef wall the next morning brought more reef sharks, Maori wrasse, green turtles, batfish and a two metre long Queensland groper!

MANTIS REEF We had a couple of nice dives on the west side of this very long thin reef on shallow bommies, but the most impressive was Black Rocks at the northern end of the reef. On three action-packed dives we encountered silvertip sharks every time. On the first dive we dropped down the wall to a sandy slope at 35 metres and sat back to watch three patrolling silvertips and two grey reef sharks. There were also jobfish, mackerel, trevally, turrum and fusiliers. At the top of the wall were sandy patches scattered with bommies and a plethora of parrotfish, sweetlips, angelfish, anthias, lionfish, butterflyfish, wrasse, hawkfish and a number of nesting titan triggerfish. The shallows delivered whitetip reefies, turtles, stingrays and hosts of invertebrate species.



NORTHERN SMALL DETACHED REEF

Three days in a row brought glassy conditions so we headed for Northern Small Detached Reef which *Nimrod Explorer* hadn't visited before. Lying 10 kilometres off the main reef, this is barely a dot on the charts with no anchorage or shelter in rough conditions. Down the wall at 35 metres were wonderful gorgonians, sponges, seawhips, soft corals and massed black corals. The reef wall had many ledges, overhangs and small caves. Deep chasms gouged into the wall forming shoots which are wiped clean by falling rubble from the reeftop. I'd expected good shark action here, but there was only one grey and one whitetip. Fish action was impressive though – schools of surgeonfish, fusiliers, rainbow runners, trevally, dogtooth tuna and barracuda. A big school of oceanic triggerfish repeatedly swept past us, but never close enough for a shot. These large grey fish look resemble a mini sunfish and even swim in a similar fashion, waving their large dorsal and anal fins.

Two more dives here brought lots of fish and coral, but still no sharks. Vis was also down; a cloudy oceanic current dropped the expected over 40 metre vis to 15 metres out here.

SOUTHERN SMALL DETACHED REEF

Also off the main reef but more regularly dived, this is fantastic wall diving. Our second last day was spent exploring the western walls. Auriga Bay had wonderful big gorgonians, spiky soft corals, sponges,

seawhips and black coral trees, two silvertip and two grey reef sharks plus a big school of unicornfish and a huge Maori wrasse. The shallow bay at the top of the wall was packed with pretty hard corals and reef fish, giant clams and a few resting whitetips. Rosie's Wall had many ledges and caves and it was fun checking them out. Again the wall was massed with wonderful corals and we found a leopard shark precariously balanced on a tiny sand ledge. The same cloudy oceanic current cut vis here, so wide angle photography was a challenge.

LOG REEF On our last day the wind picked up to 30 knots from the southeast. Looking for a sheltered dive we did an exploratory drift dive on the northern side. As soon as we descended we had a whitetip reef shark, a big Maori wrasse and a barracuda. We drifted along a pretty wall that dropped into a channel at 35 metres, zooming past rows of gorgonians,



everywhere, but my bonus was a wickerwork sole. This 8cm long fish was on the reef wall swimming just like a flatworm – at first I thought it was one until I saw its small eyes.

RAINE ISLAND Arriving at dawn is surreal. The sun rises behind the island, thousands of seabirds whirl overhead and dozens of dark shapes dot the beach. Raine is the most important green turtle nesting site in the world and this tiny coral cay is fully protected so a permit is needed to land here. Raine's small fringing reef drops to 40 metres with a spectacular wall – wonderful gorgonians, spiky soft corals, seawhips, sponges and a few black corals. Turtles were everywhere but very shy perhaps due to the other notorious residents – tiger sharks. None appeared during our six dives but there were plenty of patrolling grey and whitetip reef sharks. Rainbow runners, barracuda, dogtooth tuna, mackerel, trevally and schools of surgeonfish and fusiliers cruised the wall. At the top were

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A group of batfish cruising in the shallows at Raine Island. Swimming just like a flatworm, this wickerwork sole was encountered on a night dive at Nature's Way on Lagoon Reef.

A sea whip goby at home at Nigel's Nook, Semi Detached Reef. Countless clumps of gorgonians line the walls at Log Reef.

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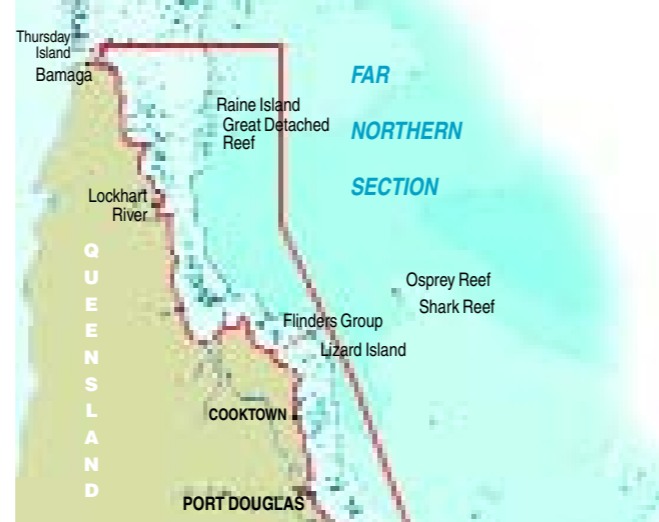
Diving at Boterkoek Pinnacles on Great Detached Reef, we found dozens of these beautiful pipefish.

Celestial Phyllidia nudibranch, one of the many species of nudies we discovered on the Far Northern Reefs.



seawhip gardens and lovely soft corals. There was a green turtle, mackerel, and schools of trevally, fusiliers and surgeonfish. When the current eased we were in a sandy cove with many large bommies. Gardens eels were scattered across the bottom and a Maori wrasse swam by. A massive Queensland groper suddenly appeared from behind a bommie to check us out. We also had cuttlefish, schools of feeding parrotfish and were buzzed by a large grey reef shark. What a great way to end a wonderful trip.

We had flat seas until the last day. Vis varied from 15 to 30 metres, a little down on the usual 25 to 40 metres, but the water was a lovely 28 degrees. The coral gardens were some of the richest I've ever seen. The fish life was overwhelming, sending us to search reference books after every dive to identify species we'd never seen before. This trip had been worth the long wait – the Far Northern Reefs are definitely the last frontier of the Great Barrier Reef.



THE FAR NORTH AND NIMROD EXPLORER This 22 metre long catamaran is surveyed for 18 passengers in six comfortable airconditioned cabins each with its own bathroom. She's very spacious with a large dive deck, lounge room and shaded upper deck. *Nimrod Explorer* does five or six day trips to the Ribbon Reefs and Osprey Reef and each October and November runs four adventure trips to the Far Northern Reefs. The Far Northern Reefs are those north of Lizard Island and the Ribbon Reef complex extending up to Papua New Guinea. They have the richest biodiversity of Australia's Great Barrier Reef – more fish species, coral and invertebrates. The few charters to this region are usually in October and November during the most stable weather and generally depart from Portland Roads, a remote and tiny coastal community 600 kilometres north of Cairns. For more on *Nimrod Explorer*, check out www.explorervertures.com