

: TONY KARACSONYI



**MARLIN! WE WATCH AS THE SILVERY BLUE FIN SLICES THROUGH THE OCEAN. SECONDS LATER, A DUO OF MANTA RAY FIN TIPS BREAK SURFACE. A SEVEN METRE WHALE SHARK CRUISES 20 METRES AWAY – WE'RE TORN BETWEEN SNORKELLING WITH THE WHALE SHARK OR THE MANTAS. THE WHALE SHARK WAS BIGGER, SO IT WON!**

**W**e were soon snorkelling with the 'great spotty fish', as our whale shark spotter loved to call them. It all starts happening in April after the corals spawn along Ningaloo Reef in Western Australia, creating a huge food source for the whale sharks and mantas. The whale sharks start gathering along the 260 kilometre long reef which extends north from Amherst Point to past Exmouth. The whale sharks usually stay until the end of June but this year they stayed to mid August. There were so many whale sharks, we saw six different whale sharks in one day. Every shark is different. Some are small and fast, others are big and slow, some have entourages of snow white remoras and others carry cobia (black kingfish) which swim alongside. Some have ragged tails and some show bite marks, probably tiger sharks or orcas.

Ningaloo's reefs are rich, colourful and quite different to the Great Barrier Reef. There's lots of hard and soft corals with a generous sprinkling of bright ascidians and sponges, providing a unique habitat for unusual Indo-Pacific reef species, including parrotfish, black cabbie and Indo-Pacific dolphins. Many green turtles and whitetip reef sharks slept in coral caves. One shark even had its mouth wide-open, being cleaned by several large cleaner wrasse – a sight to savour!

Most scuba diving, whale sharking and fishing charters are based in Exmouth and run shuttle buses to Bundege Beach (12 kilometres from Exmouth) or Tantabiddi to board the large boats via rubber duck transfer. Bundege Beach is the start of the Ningaloo Marine Park and from



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here the popular Lighthouse Bay sites of Blizzard Ridge, The Labyrinth and Gullivers Reef are easily reached. When whale shark snorkelling off Tantabiddi divers have the option of scuba diving on a coral reef beforehand. The spotter plane doesn't go up until 10am, so there's plenty of time to dive The Floats where you can see parrotfish, blue angelfish and a giant potato cod.

The Muiron Islands is an excellent day trip 9.8 nautical miles off the tip of North West Cape. Our first dive there was at Fraggie Rock, a little wall dive with broken bommies to 14 metres. Green turtles, six-banded angelfish, blue-lined sea bream, gangs of Moses sea perch, blue angelfish and golden-lined spinefoot, made for a lovely dive.

East Side Bommy, a shallow, eight metre dive proved to be stunning. Coral

bommies reached skyward, with bannerfish, snappers, coral cod and yellow emperor. East Side Bommy is a great photo dive with painted crayfish and yellow soft corals.

Blizzard Ridge is Exmouth's most popular dive. The fishlife has to be seen to be believed; whitetip reef sharks, striped catfish, ring-tailed cardinalfish, yellow-stripe snapper, gold-banded fusiliers, two-lined monocle bream, six-banded angelfish, mantis shrimps and green turtles.

There's been much written about the Navy Pier. With up to 200 species of fish, trevally, snapper, barracuda, anglerfish, it is one of Australia's best dives.

I hope this has given you a little insight into diving and exploring on the Ningaloo Reefs. I would recommend seven days at

least, for exploring Exmouth. This will let you dive the local sites and do a couple of whale shark snorkelling trips, (April to July). Do a self drive tour of the Cape Range National Park or better still, spend a day with Neil McLeod, on a Ningaloo Safari Tour; winner of the 'Western Australia Tourism Award'. Neil is a genuine outback character and knows the hinterland and its amazing canyons like the 4WD "Oka". Shothole Canyon and the Charles Knife Gorge, are breath-taking. Giant shark teeth have been found at 'Shark Tooth Ridge'. You will love his mum's famous boiled fruit cake.

Wildlife abounds in the Cape Range National Park, with red kangaroos, blue flyers, sea eagles, emus, bustards and unique wildflowers. At Yardie Creek Gorge, you can see rare black-footed rock wallabies and osprey nests.

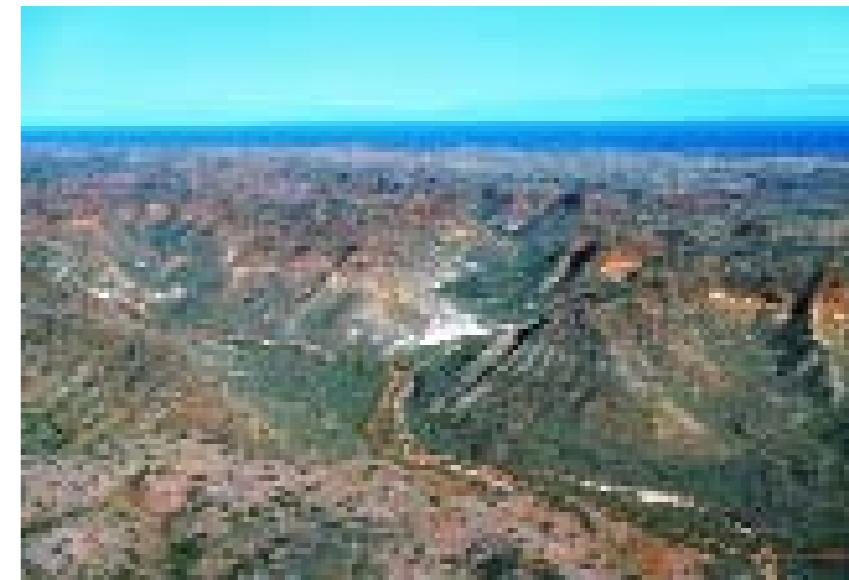
Turquoise Bay is the most popular snorkelling spot. Here snorkellers are greeted by green turtles, leopard sharks and a melting pot of tropical reef fishes. The trick is to walk about 300 metres along the beach, left from the carpark, before entering the water and drifting with the current back to the sand bar. Whitetip and blacktip reef sharks are also sometimes seen here.

During November to March, Neil runs tours to the turtle nesting beaches, where you can see the females dig their nests, lay her eggs and if lucky, see the hatch.

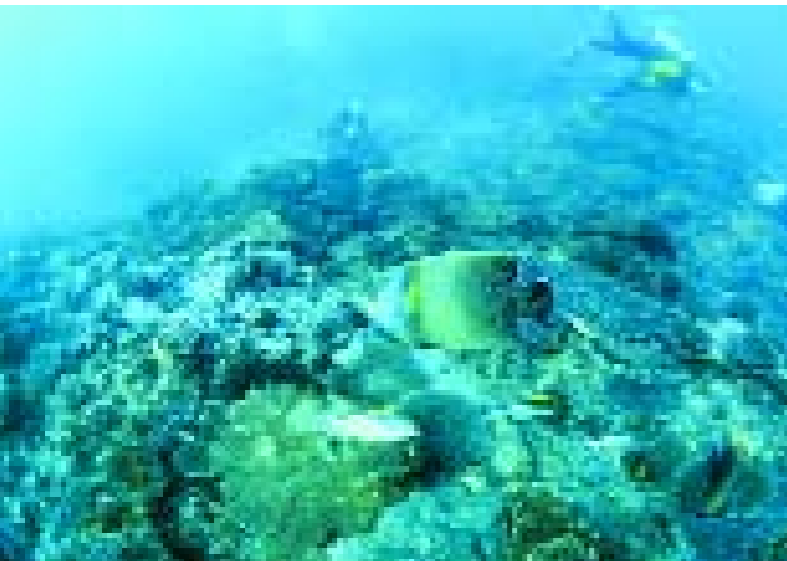
Neil's tours include the historic Vlamingh Head Lighthouse. Lighthouse Hill offers 360 degree views of the Ningaloo Reef, Exmouth Gulf, Cape Range National Park and the 13 famous NCS HEH very low frequency towers. We often saw the towers reaching into the clouds, an other-worldly scene.

The Potshot Hotel Resort is a best place to stay for visiting divers, as it's next to the dive shop. Other places include a large caravan park in town, another at Lighthouse Bay and several small motels/units.

The Ningaloo Reef Retreat (a luxury tented camp) is a wonderful option, where you can swim, snorkel, sea kayak or hike to the top of Mandu Mandu Gorge.



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## OTHER THINGS TO DO:

There's a whole swag of other things to do around Exmouth; sea kayaking, snorkelling, four-wheel driving, fishing and exploring the Cape Range National Park. You can hire scooters, cars and decent boats, once you're in Exmouth. I'd recommend a scenic flight with Norwest Air Work. Several fishing and diving charters operate from Exmouth.

The Potshot Hotel Resort and Exmouth Visitors Centre offer plenty of information. The Ningaloo Reef Bus can drop you off to snorkel Turquoise Bay, swim with the turtles at the Ningaloo Reef Retreat, or visit the Milyering Visitors Centre, where you can see fossilised shark teeth.

## HOW TO GET THERE:

Fly with Qantas, or another airline, to Perth, then north to Learmonth Airport, Exmouth, with Skywest Airlines.  
Contact Exmouth Bus Charters for transfers, to & fro, Learmonth Airport.

## HOW TO BOOK:

Contact the Exmouth Diving Centre; [whaleshark@exmouthdiving.com.au](mailto:whaleshark@exmouthdiving.com.au)  
[www.exmouthdiving.com.au](http://www.exmouthdiving.com.au)  
tel; 08 9949 1201 fax; 08 9949 1680  
or Ningaloo Reef Dive (at Coral Bay) [info@ningalooreedive.com](mailto:info@ningalooreedive.com)  
tel; 08 9942 5824 fax; 08 9942 5836  
Potshot Hotel Resort; (next to EDC) tel; 08 9949 1200 fax; 08 9949 1486  
[potshotresort@bigpond.com](mailto:potshotresort@bigpond.com)  
Exmouth Bus Charters; tel; 08 9949 4623 fax; 08 0418 491 220  
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Norwest Air Work; (Scenic Flights); tel; 08 9949 2888 fax; 08 9949 1888  
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