


Two engines from a Catalina flying boat, the wreckage lies scattered, it would seem to have disintegrated on impact with the ocean.



The islands like Direction Island and Prison Island are great for a snorkel between dives.

I CAME TO DIVE A HISTORICAL SHIPWRECK AND COMMEMORATE A GREAT SEA BATTLE.. BUT I ALSO DISCOVERED A TOTALLY LAID-BACK TROPICAL MULTICULTURE WHERE TECHNICALLY YOU'RE STILL IN AUSTRALIA BUT PHYSICALLY YOU'RE 3,685 KILOMETRES WEST OF BROOME IN THE MIDDLE OF THE INDIAN OCEAN. PERFECTLY SAFE TO VISIT, IT DELIVERS AMAZING DIVING AND INTERACTIONS WITH NATURE.

November 2004 marked 90 years since Australia's first naval victory, one of our own amazing war stories – the battle between the German light battle cruiser SMS *Emden* and Australia's original HMAS *Sydney*. The *Emden* had been plying the waters north of Australia creating havoc with merchant shipping and naval warships from the very start of WWI. In a mere three months she'd challenged 21 British and Allied merchantmen and subsequently sunk 16 of them. She was the stuff of legends, bravely sailing straight into Madras harbour to shell oil tanks onshore and at speed made a daring incursion into Penang harbour to successfully sink the Russian Cruiser *Zhemtchug* and French destroyer *Mousquet* – and all this occurred with the loss of only one life. The honourable and humanitarian approach to warfare by her captain and crew meant the exploits of the SMS *Emden* were closely followed by both the British Empire and the Kaiser's Germany alike. Her final engagement began on 9 November 1914 when her commanding officer Kapitän Karl Friedrich Max von Müller sailed her into the calm waters behind Direction Island to destroy the vital

Australian communication station based in the Cocos Keeling Islands. A short message from the station alerted the nearby HMAS *Sydney* and a brief but deadly battle ensued that resulted in the *Emden* running aground on Keeling Island in an attempt to save her remaining crew. Her shore-based raiding party had successfully destroyed the communications station and subsea cables, but then sat and watched alongside the members of the station as the battle unfolded. Both ships were heavily damaged but the *Emden* was severely beaten with a loss of 134 souls. The *Sydney* in turn lost four and a total of 76 crew were injured.

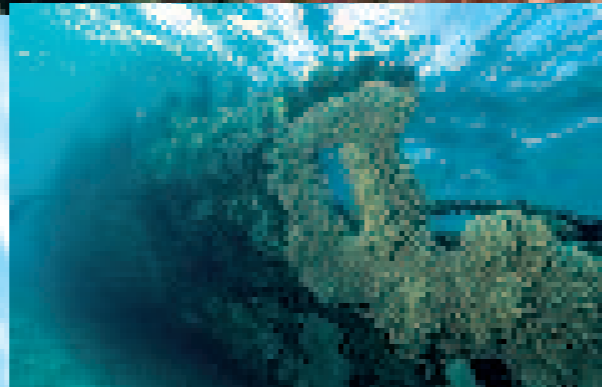
The Cocos Keeling Islands are probably little different from 90 years ago. The population has increased to around 600 and there's more housing and infrastructure, but the beaches and reefs are the same. What remains of the *Emden* is in shallow water on the edge of North Keeling Island, now the Pulau Keeling National Park. The island and reefs are virtually untouched today as strict permit

ALTITUDE 10 FEET!

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Lone seawhips are often havens for whip gobies and other tiny life. Some of the most interesting dives are isolated lumps of coral amongst a sandy bottom. The reefs are mainly sloping areas of hard coral with soft coral growing throughout. Right: Originally referred to as a coal barge, this wreck seems to be a composite of steel that was once a great clipper ship.



Above left: The remains of the stern, rudder and propellers sit upright, you can almost imagine the thrust as the props hit the reef driving the ship hard aground. The propellers are complete with bracket and prop shaft. Above: The plaque is placed at one of the large propellers during our dive. Left: The Emden aground on North Keeling Island seen from the deck of HMAS Sydney.

control by Parks Australia limits access. The *Emden* was heavily salvaged after WWI when the Japanese, short on steel, sought it wherever possible. Today all that remains is the rear keel section, her twin propellers and shafts, sections of her engines, as well as some unexploded ordinance.

Travelling to North Keeling to dive can only be done on calm days when the swell is low and the constant trade winds are minimal. As we approached, the first thing to become evident before the island even appeared over the horizon, were the curious birds. Totally captivated by our presence the boobies and tropicbirds zoomed in closer and closer until they were almost landing on the boat. After almost an hour of open ocean we reached the wreck site where we quietly spoke about the historic battle and looking out at Keeling Island we tried to imagine that great warship aground on the reef. We then held one minute's silence in memory of those that lost their lives, while the birds continued to swoop and hover closely almost as if they themselves were the lost souls of the battle now in flight.

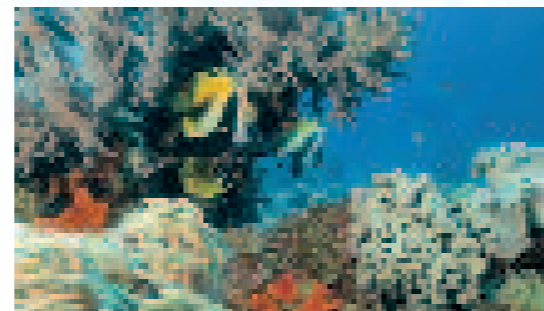
Immediately on descent we could see the remnants of the great warship lying in 10 metres. Unexploded warheads can still be seen around the site and the stern,

complete with both propellers and rudder, still stands proud with the twin drive shafts pointing towards shore and what's left of her engines. Here and there reminders of the human aspect appear – an eating fork amongst the stern and wheels from unknown valves sprouting coral growth; even a torn door latch and a segment of bulkhead door.

During our visit we laid a plaque donated by the HMAS *Sydney* Association and photographed it at the propellers, while the surf audibly boomed on the shore almost like distant sounds of battle. Though the *Emden's* remains lie on a hard bed of ancient coral, the sand and rubble under her keel are constantly moving, clearly evident in the highly polished sections of bronze or brass amongst the remains and the two eating forks never before seen. Looking up from the hollow underneath her, the propellers and mountings stand proud as if still attached to the hull. You can almost feel the power that once spun from these blades. With a last few images of the plaque before we took it back up, on the surface we found the birds still hovering incredibly close to our heads as we awaited pickup by the dive boat. The plaque will be placed on Direction Island, the site of the original communications

station so that all visitors, not just divers lucky enough to reach the *Emden*, can read of the brave battle between the two ships.

Off the western tip of Direction are the remains of the original cables for the communication station, now part of the reef and sprouting healthy coral growth. Near the cables are several 19th century cannon suspected to be from wooden ships that visited the islands long before World War I. It's thought the cannon were used as ballast on a near-empty clipper ship which came to the islands to take on copra. The cannons would have been jettisoned overboard to allow a full load of coconut to be loaded. The West Australian Maritime Museum recently searched the islands for wrecks and artifacts and plans to release a documented wreck trail. Apart from the *Emden* and the cannon, there's the remains of a long



wooden sailing ship thought to be a 19th century American whaler, a JX 435 Catalina flying boat that appears to have disintegrated during a forced landing. Also, what was once thought to be a coal barge now appears to be a great clipper ship like the *Cutty Sark*, probably the *Phaeton* which caught fire and was run aground in the lagoon in 1889.

Diving here is via Cocos Dive run by long time residents Dieter and Karen Gerhard who are passionate about the islands and their waters and know all the best locations in any given weather condition. Not that the weather varies greatly – it's usually fine with constant medium strength trade winds – but the direction and strength of the wind and swell can dictate the best spot with a protected lee side where diving is possible.

Most dive trips come complete with extras. Flyingfish fling themselves from the water beside the boat, the light bouncing off their wings in rainbow colours. Manta rays will

often be seen as you travel into or out of the lagoon and common dolphins often escort the boat and will group together to closely inspect snorkelers.

will sweep into the lagoon. Another way to interact with mantas is in the lagoon shallows – you can quietly slip into the water from the boat and snorkel amongst these magnificent giants – they also come in to inspect you!

Manta rays are somewhat predictable around the islands and one of our favourite dives was simply called 'Manta Beach'. Expecting crystal waters over a white sandy beach, we discovered that whilst the clear water and sandy beach was exactly what was promised, the beach, water and mantas are actually in 40 metres at the bottom of the reef slope! We descended to 20 metres and swam along the slope above the 'beach', conserving vital bottom time while looking for the mantas. Once they were sighted, we descended and watched from close quarters as the mantas swooped over the sand, some even doing flyovers within arms reach!

Mantas are also common entering the lagoon at the western end of Direction Island; this is an interesting site with small coral bommies to explore, a large school of batfish, telegraph cables encrusted with corals, plus several coral ridges with some of the most approachable fish I've ever come across. Keep looking out and upwards as you never know when a squadron of manta rays

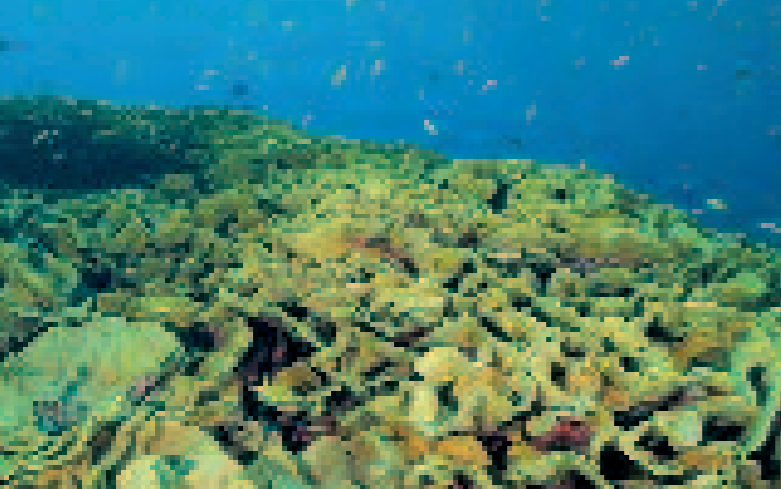
A new lagoon resident is 'Kat' the dugong that frequents the western side of Direction in the same location as the cannons. She's solo and seems to enjoy greeting divers during a dive. As there's no other dugong to keep her company she's befriended a solo batfish and is almost never seen without it; I actually saw her slow down and wait for the batfish to catch up!

The coral reefs feature hard corals, seawhips and gorgonians and usually come complete with a buzz of pelagic action. Every dive has either sleepy whitetips and/or inquisitive and definitely not sleepy 'other' sharks which can range from grey reefies and blacktips, with tigersharks and oceanic whitetips commonly seen. Leather corals are on most reefs but one of the most amazing collections is 'Cologne Gardens' off Hornsborough Island; the reef is blanketed with pastel soft corals resembling crumpled fruit leather covered in tiny coral polyps. Cabbage Patch is an awesome spread of green turbinaria coral blanketing a reef



Above: Batfish schools are common at Cabbage Patch and Gerhard's Cannons; Kat the dugong and her 'buddy' batfish. Usually you see the lone batfish checking you out, then you hear Kat whistle as she sneaks up behind you; Bigeye schools roam the reefs.

Left: Imagine hundreds of square metres of cabbage coral with masses of anthias and schools of fusiliers!



slope from five metres to around 30 metres and covered with yellow anthias and swarming fusiliers. Sand banks resembling ski slopes descending into the depths run alongside the Patch; here another school of batfish gathers and the sand is littered with garden eels, further down sharks sleep and cruise.

Cocos Keeling is not a bustling tourist mecca, you won't need to avoid any crowds – its actually hard to find one. Of all the things that makes this location so great, if there are other tourists here it's more like a social occasion when you run into them – most of the time you'll have this beautiful solitude and peace all to yourself.

COCOS KEELING TRAVEL TIPS

Best time of year to visit – all year.

Australian departure for the Cocos Keeling Islands is from the Perth International Airport – though the islands themselves are an Australian Territory, it feels as if you're traveling to another country. Travel from Perth is uniquely via National Jet Systems who run twice-weekly flights to the islands. Cocos is on the same flight plan as Christmas Island and if you're visiting one for a week then it is well worth doing the same for the other island – though they're completely different in every way possible, they go together like two sides of a coin. However if you only have time for the Cocos, the twice weekly flights allow flexibility for planning a holiday.

National Jet flies twice weekly:

Circuit loop Perth – Cocos – Christmas – Perth on Thursdays.

Circuit loop Perth - Christmas – Cocos – Perth on Mondays.

Baggage limits apply: 5kg hand luggage and 20kg checked luggage.

However this can usually be varied provided you plan in advance, when you book your trip make sure either the agent or Cocos Dive pre-confirm excess luggage allowance for you.

The Diving: Cocos Dive run two dive boats. For groups of four or less they have a large and well fitted out Orca duck capable of quickly reaching any dive site within the group. For groups up to eight they run a larger mono hull. All dive days include a generous picnic lunch usually set up amongst the palms where you enjoy the food and shade.

OTHER THINGS – There's plenty to fill a day off diving or for non-divers. The airfield on West Island doubles as a golf course – just clear the field when the siren sounds! Direction Island, accessed via charter boat or a ferry on Saturdays, has some of the most beautiful snorkeling in the islands; a must is The Rip where you jump in and the incoming tide races you towards the lagoon. If you feel adventurous, duck dive and fly alongside a whitetip cruising the current! Prison Island, which once kept a harem of young women isolated for Alexander Hare, who settled here with the Clunes Ross family, is an excellent snorkel and like many of the 27 islands is a beautiful place to spend the day. If relaxation is your thing, head for a beach and let the day go by.

Travel can be arranged direct through Cocos Dive www.cocosdive.com

or Dive Adventures - Sydney: sydney@diveadventures.com.au Ph: 02 9299 4633 Melbourne: melbourne@diveadventures.com.au Ph: 03 9646 5945

Accommodation All tourist accommodation is on West Island and features a variety of standards ranging from motel with tea & coffee making facilities, through self contained budget or high quality housing and apartments to high end bungalows. Many accommodations come with push bike for traveling the 12km length of the island. **For full information on the Cocos Keeling Islands visit www.cocos-tourism.cc**

Eating on the island The island features a co-op general store and it's possible to purchase food here for preparing at your self-contained accommodation. Keep in mind, however, that the co-op is not open until 9am and is closed after 12 noon Saturday and not open Sundays, so if you're diving all day you'll need to factor in time to buy food. It is possible to eat out at the motel where there's a buffet of canteen style food on most nights – but a delicious Malay night also occurs on Wednesday night. You can enjoy a much awaited and delicious Malaysian buffet at the Mutiara Cafe which is also on the veranda of the airport.

Getting Around Walk, ride a bike or hire a car to explore West Island. Car hire is available and most accommodations come with push bikes. A glass bottom boat can take non divers out to fish, see the reefs and the mantas, or even drop you on your own private beach for a day. An inter-island ferry visits Home Island where the descendants of the original Malay copra workers live; also here is the atoll's museum as well as the original Clunes Ross house. On Saturdays the ferry also visits Direction Island for a day of snorkelling and relaxation on what could possibly be the best beach in the world. Fare to Home and Direction Islands: A\$2 per person at publishing.