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Top: The Solitaries are spectacular in the early light. Below: Cleaner stations are found throughout the reefs of the Marine Park. Here a black spot goatfish *P. spilurus* is given the once over by a pair of cleaner wrass *L. dimidiatus*. Right: Female grey nurse at Manta Arch, South Solitary Island.



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Stretching 80 kilometres from Muttonbird Island at Coffs Harbour north to Plover Island near Sandon, Solitary Island Marine Park is made up of exploratory rock and coral reefs, estuaries, perfect beaches, open ocean and five islands collectively known as the Solitary Islands. It covers almost 72,000 hectares, and is a habitat for an abundance of different fish and coral species, marine mammals and invertebrates. The major drawcard for divers is the park's unique bio-diversity. Here, in the same environment, on a single dive, tropical and sub-tropical fish species – many of these are also found on the Great Barrier Reef – swim alongside pelagic schools common in the more temperate southern waters of Victoria and Tasmania. For some marine species Solitary Island Marine Park is the northern-most tip of their habitat; for others it can be as far south as they are likely to survive. The co-existence of species from these extremes delivers spectacular and diverse diving.

Visibility at Solitary averages 25 metres and water temperature varies from 18° to 27°C. On my visit in April it was a pleasant 24°C; warm enough for local surfers to wear boardshorts instead of wetsuits and for me to consider why I bother diving any further south!

All dive spots throughout the park lay claim to their own unique marine life. We were headed for South Solitary Island, a 45-minute boat trip, 12 kilometres northeast of Coffs Harbour and best recognised by its lighthouse. South Solitary is renowned for magnificent cobalt-blue water currents, immediately obvious when, after anchoring, we leaned over the boat edge and could see the seabed 20 metres down and clear as the blue sky above. Another surprise greeted us while we checked our kits and fitted



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weightbelts; a loggerhead turtle, one of four species found in the marine park, surfaced just metres from the boat. Big and bulky as an abandoned car tyre, we watched as it tilted side to side on the swell then disappeared below us. A prescient sign.

North of the island we descended into Shark Gutters, protected from a swell which wasn't big enough to blur visibility. The Gutters delivered almost immediately. As we left the descent rope at around 15 metres, we spotted a sleek two-metre brown leopard shark with black smudges like saddles across its back. It glided around us, mocking our ungainly mass of arms, legs and scuba paraphernalia, then whipped its tale and disappeared into the endless blue.

Turtles can be seen here year-round, but leopard sharks aren't a day-to-day South Solitary occurrence. This is as far south as

## COFFS DIVE BONANZA

+ WHEN CAPTAIN JAMES COOK NAVIGATED HIS WAY AROUND THE SOLITARY ISLANDS, NAMING THEM AS HE WENT, THE VETERAN EXPLORER MUST HAVE HAD LITTLE IDEA OF THE WONDERS THAT EXISTED BELOW THE HULL OF HIS TALL SHIP. AND EVEN NOW, CENTURIES LATER, RELATIVELY FEW OF US HAVE SLIPPED BENEATH THE SALTY SURFACE FOR AN UP-CLOSE-AND-PERSONAL WITH THIS DIVE SPECTACULAR.

: REPORT BY PENNY WATSON  
IMAGES BY IAN SHAW, ROB CLEARY



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Black anemonefish are commonly seen in association with giant anemones in the Solitary Island Marine Park.

An inquisitive bridled triggerfish *Sufflamen fraenatus* comes in for a closer look.

Schooling bigeye trevally (jacks) at the Manta Arch, South Solitary.

A small cuttle showing off after being disturbed during the dive.

Splendid hawkfish, *Cirrhites splendens*, a colourful but uncommon visitor to the Solitary Islands Marine Park.

Large blue groper *Achoerodus viridus* are a feature of the boulder areas of the Solitary Islands group.

Now a threatened species, grey nurse sharks are found in the gutters surrounding the Islands, especially during the cooler months of the year.

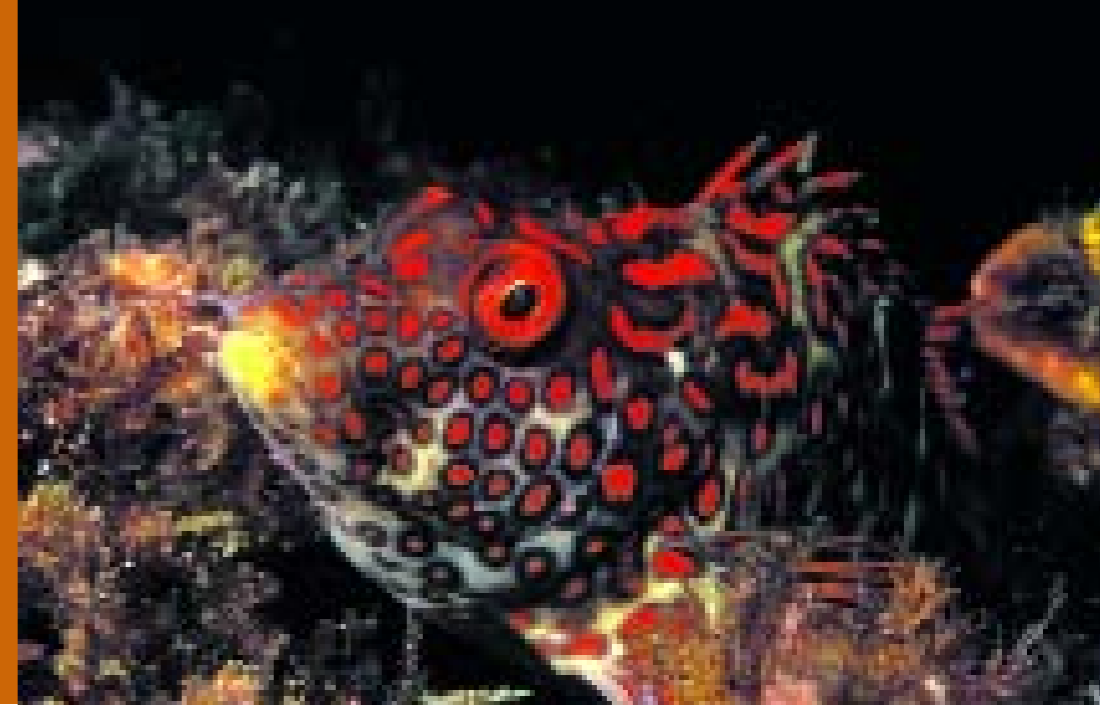


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they'll swim and our divemaster Chris Morley had waited three years so we were extremely lucky. You're more likely to see grey nurse sharks. These beguiling creatures are attracted to the marine life living in and around the sand gutters extending out from the island like piles of cluttered dishes.

Grey nurse are particularly common here because of nearby Manta Arch. This 30 metre deep site was off limits the day we dived, largely because its northern orientation was exposed to the swell – but when you can get some bottom time it's well worth the adrenalin rush. The underwater arch, surrounded by boulders and sand ridges, is the natural habitat of about nine or 10 grey nurse sharks. They're now considered so scarce they now feature on the New South Wales Critically Endangered list and local populations reportedly number fewer than 300!

Grey nurse aren't the only endangered or vulnerable species in the marine park. Dolphins are often spotted along the coast and for a few months each year dive boats can deliver the visual delight of humpback whales making their way up north for breeding. According to Morley, the whales are just as interested in humans as humans are in them. They're known to sidle up to a dive boat and peer up at their onlookers with big inquisitive eyes. And, though not quite as awe-inspiring, we're told black cod and the occasional bleaker's devilfish are also found in the marine park.

At Shark Gutters, cumbersome boulders jemmied against each other on the seabed create a playground for denizens of the deep and divers. Black coral trees and outcrops of other colourful hard and soft corals create perfect hiding places for angelfish, wrasse of different colours and shapes, painted flutemouth and tiny nudibranchs are pointed out by our divemaster as we go. Clownfish also dart in and around the billowing tentacles of anemones as they search for food; their busy work ethic mocks the slow calm of other marine life.

Frequent sightings of kingfish, bannerfish, golden trevally, jewfish and nannygai school give us good reason not to keep

our heads down for long. Advertising safety in numbers, these sparkling fish schools circle in the diffused sunlight then disappear around the contours of the island. Two manta rays materialise from nowhere, floating past in perfect symmetry. At the same time a wobbegong shark, beautifully camouflaged against the brown pebbles and white silt shimmies across the seafloor about a metre below us, leaving clouded water in its wake. A friendly blue groper also makes Shark Gutters his home, following us as we explore his habitat. Fooled by the water's magnification we reach out to touch him, but he retreats to a safe distance in a flick. "He used to be a lot more friendly with divers but he was hit by a speargun," explains Chris Morley back on the boat. "He used to let us pat him and we've got photos of divers cuddling him but one day we noticed a big gash on his side and he hasn't been the same since. He's getting better but it scared him." This is a sad reminder that although this is a marine park, the zoning scheme, which is set up to protect flora and fauna while allowing most recreational activities, does have its casualties.

Our next dive began at Shark Gutters and ended at Boulder Wall, a boulder reef of with swimthroughs and gullies. The back and forth motion of the underwater currents made for a meditative drift giving plenty to see along the way. Smaller rocks among the boulders provide cavernous homes for crustaceans, molluscs, tiny echinoderms and crayfish with shells so well disguised they're hard to distinguish from the silty white ocean floor. Tropical fish thrive amid the coral here too and we're treated to the beautiful silver-blue and yellow shimmering of passing blue tang, their pancake-shaped bodies slipping seamlessly around the coral as they graze on algae.

The dive team assured us April to May was a good time for giant cuttlefish (the largest of the world's 100 cuttlefish species) so we stay on the lookout. For divers from up north this is the ideal place to see these curious



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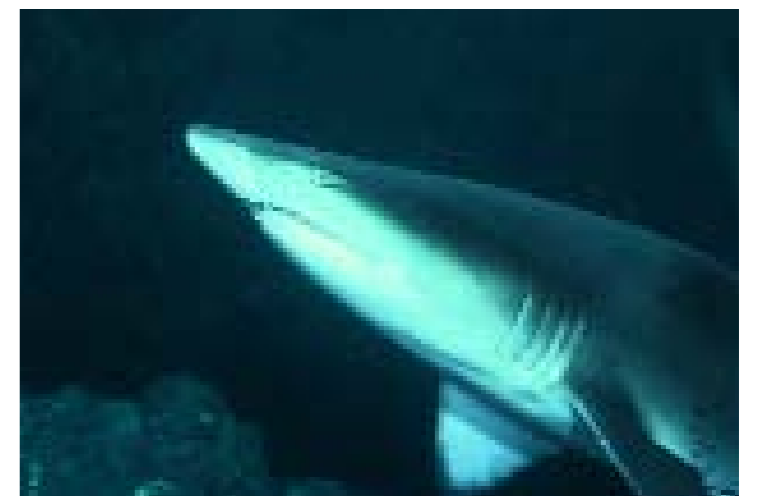


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A large Black Cod, common in the deeper caves and gutters, in mid water with an entourage of Silver Trevally. looking creatures which are more common in waters as far south as Tasmania. Swim away from the boulders and there's enough sandy space to roll over and watch your air bubbles dance towards the surface. Schools of trevally, mackerel, bonito and snapper are well known at Boulder Wall and the varied species stage a kaleidoscopic show, slipping around each other without fear or favour.

It's hard to ascend according to the rules because around every boulder and in the sand gutters there's something new to discover and we all push the last of our airtime to the limits. The weather was good to us, the marine locals staged a great show, we saw our first leopard shark and we experienced unmatched and fabulous east coast diving.

Just think, Captain Cook sailed over all this – hopefully he saw a turtle or two?

## FURTHER INFO

### Coffs Coast Visitor information Centre

www.coffscost.com.au  
tourism@coffscost.com.au  
1300 369 070

### Diving

Jetty Dive Centre 398 Harbour Drive, Coffs Harbour  
02 6651 1611  
www.jettydive.com.au

### ACCOMMODATION

#### Resort:

Novotel Pacific Bay Resort, Corner Pacific Highway & Bay Drive  
Coffs Harbour 02 6659 7000 stay@pacificbayresort.com.au

#### B&B:

Woodlands Beach House, 4 Boronia Street, Sawtell  
02 6658 9177 juron727@ecopost.com.au

#### Apartment:

Observatory Holiday Apartments, 30-36 Camperdown Street  
Coffs Harbour, 1300 302 776 Alicia@theobservatory.com.au

#### Dining

Tide & Pilot Restaurant, Coffs Harbour Marina, Coffs Harbour  
02 6651 6888

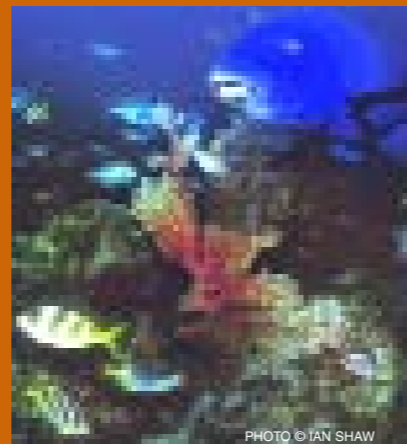


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South Solitary Island with its lighthouse and buildings. There are many excellent dive sites around its perimeter.

## GETTING THERE

### Flights

Qantas offers direct flights from Sydney and Brisbane to Coffs Harbour. Virgin Blue offers direct flights from Sydney and Melbourne to Coffs Harbour.

### Road & Rail

Coffs is about six hours' drive north of Sydney and four hours south of Brisbane. There are daily coach and rail

services from both cities.

For transport in the region, major car hire firms have offices in Coffs Harbour.

## OTHER LOCAL ATTRACTIONS

**Dorrigo Skywalk** From the Dorrigo Rainforest Centre, a slender boardwalk juts out from the spectacular rainforest canopy to reveal views across forested ridges and mountains to farmlands and the sea along Coffs Coast.

**Muttonbird Island** Stroll along Coffs Harbour Marina to Muttonbird island Nature Reserve, habitat for thousands of wedge-tailed shearwaters, which breed in nesting burrows from November to April, then make a long migratory flight to the Philippines and back – to the same burrow.

**Whale Watching** Between June and October humpback whales migrate north along the coast, and then return with their calves to summer feeding grounds in the Antarctic. Whales can be observed from headlands and highpoints or join a whale watching cruise from Coffs Harbour Marina.

