

# SOUTH COAST

# DRIVE &

# DIVE



This strip of coast has a huge choice of dive sites with a wonderful range of diving experiences. Our first stop was 80 kilometres south of Sydney. After loading our gear onto Shellharbour Scuba Centre's boat, we headed for Lou's Rock off the northern tip of Bass Point. When we tied up, the water was so clear a long stretch of the mooring line could be seen before it disappeared into the blue. Once in the water I could see the bottom – just – through swarming masses of one-spot pullers around us. Halfway down a cloud of bullseyes again obscured the bottom. We finally touched down on the rocky reef in 20 metres visibility.

The wall on the northern side of Lou's Rock drops to 30 metres, with most of the best growth below 20 metres. Our torches lit up colourful sponges, gorgonians, sea tulips, bryozoans and ascidians. I spotted a large cuttlefish in a crevasse which began displaying a barrage of colours. My buddy Helen found a blind shark protruding half out of a hole; we gently extracted this shy shark for some photos before letting it disappear back into a dark crevasse. As we drifted along we discovered green moray eels, more cuttlefish, beardie, nannygai and three more blind sharks.

The blind shark is one of my favourites; though common in New South Wales, they're hard to find and photograph due to their habit of wedging themselves into tight crevasses. The rocky reef also

supported healthy invertebrate species and reef fish, nudibranchs, basket stars, seastars, shrimps, leatherjackets, gobies, blennies, wrasse, morwong, sergeant baker, eastern wirrah and blue gropers. On the way back to the mooring line, a huge dark shape cruised in over the reef, straight for us – a smooth stingray with a small school of piloting juvenile silver trevally. It did a circuit around us before taking off into deeper water. Back on the boat we were buzzing, though a little sorry that this was only a single boat dive. But while returning to the

we checked conditions at the Blue Metal Loader. Yes! Flat and blue! After an airfill we drove down to The Loader on the northern side of Bass Point. I've done some wonderful shore dives under this 100 metre long pier, although the best vis I'd had here was 10 metres. It seemed to be a lot better today and it was – the vis was around 18 metres, OK for wide angle work. The Loader sits in just 12 metres with dozens of steel pylons rising out of the rocky bottom; most



encrusted with sponges, ascidians, sea tulips and delicate orange and red jewel anemones. Moving between the pylons we found a cuttlefish resting in the kelp under the pier. Within a minute we'd spotted another 10 cuttles, all around 30 to 40 centimetres long. Most of them appeared to be half asleep, perfect subjects!

Swimming around one of the pylons was a school of old wives, their stark black and silver sparkling against the clear blue. There were globefish leatherjackets, mado, red morwong, blue gropers and a number of species of wrasse. Reaching the 'tee' junction at the end of The Loader, we began to find masses of varied nudibranchs. Breeding season maybe – groups of four or more were packed together on the pylons and around assorted junk on the bottom.

Heading towards the first batch of easily visible isolated clusters of pylons, we spotted a large female smooth stingray moving around the base. As we got closer she changed tack and turned towards us. She was quite fat, either very pregnant or very overfed. She also had a fish hook in her mouth and was trailing a length of fishing line. About a metre away from me she lifted off the bottom and

## :: NIGEL MARSH

I'VE ALWAYS LOVED IT HERE AND HAVE GREAT MEMORIES OF COLOURFUL SPONGE GARDENS, GUTTERS PACKED WITH PORT JACKSON SHARKS AND BEING BUZZED BY FUR SEALS. IT USED TO BE AN EASY DRIVE FROM SYDNEY FOR A WEEKEND DIVE TRIP, BUT I MOVED TO BRISBANE AND IT HAD BEEN YEARS SINCE MY LAST VISIT. WITH A FEW DAYS TO SPARE AFTER SPENDING CHRISTMAS IN SYDNEY, WE HEADED SOUTH.

## With little wind, the seas were slight and the water was clear and blue

glided straight over my head, then quickly turned and circled before swimming off into the nearby kelp. We continued fossicking beside and in front of the pier. A number of kelp-covered large truck tyres lie out here, providing shelter for nudibranchs and octopus. The smooth stingray returned, this time swimming right under me. Out over the sand patches we spotted half a dozen common and kapala stingarees, plus a coffin ray over 60 centimetres long – but I didn't get too close as I've had plenty of electric shocks from these rays over the years! In the kelp on the way back to shore we found a small sea-moth and a two centimetres long baby weedy seadragon which we stopped to watch until it vanished into the kelp.

Back on shore, we packed up and pulled out for the next leg. Morning found us 200 kilometres south at Batemans Bay on National Diving Academy's boat heading out to Black Rock. With little wind, the seas were still slight and the water was clear and blue. The crew anchored us off the southern corner of Black Rock so we could dive The Arch. The vis was 15 metres and the bottom

was clearly seen 16 metres below. Descending to the rocky reef the resident blue groper came to check us out. Swimming north, we fossicked as we headed for The Arch. The pink boulders were crusted with coralline algae; many were also sported pastel sea tulips, sponges and small gorgonians. We passed an overhanging cave bursting with bullseyes. Shining her torch through them, Helen spotted a large cuttlefish at the back of the cave.

The Arch is actually a large L-shaped cave cutting through the rock wall. The sides and ceiling are coloured by sponges, gorgonians, anemones and a thick covering of yellow zoanthids. We swam through the cave twice for a close look at the colourful growth before we found a darker side cave at the end. This was also full of bullseyes and through the curtain of fish we could just see a Port Jackson shark. On the way back we explored the kelp

Previous pages: Helen Rose with a small school of old wives under the Blue Metal Loader, Bass Point.

This curious smooth ray circled us a number of times at the Blue Metal Loader.

Left page: Helen Rose gets close to one of the many cuttlefish at the Blue Metal Loader, Bass Point.

Right page: One of the playful fur seals at Montague Island inspects the anchor chain.

Grey nurse sharks are common at the Shark Gutters at the northern end of Montague Island over the summer months.

One of four blind sharks we found on the dive at Lou's Rock, Bass Point.

Helen Rose explores some of the junk under the Blue Metal Loader, which is home to a school of mado.

beds and sand off to the side of the reef, discovering leatherjackets, pike, wrasse and a kapala stingaree.

The crew moved the boat up to the Tollgate Islands and Dragon Rock for the next dive. This site has one of the most important grey nurse shark habitats on the New South Wales south coast, so the pre-dive brief included the new 'Code of Conduct' for diving with them. Wayne the skipper limits his divers to a 30 minute bottom time here and all divers are supervised by a divemaster, ensuring minimum disturbance to this threatened species.

We followed the divemaster down a rocky gully to the main gutter. Approaching this from shallow water gives the sharks freedom to move away into deeper areas and prevents the sharks being hemmed in. We took up positions at the edge of the gutter. The depth here is only 12 metres; the vis was a little cloudy and around eight metres. As we watched, a grey nurse glided up the side of the gutter, across the mouth and disappeared into the gloom. A second shark materialised, swimming across the gutter then it too was gone. For 10 minutes we watched these two sharks swim past the gutter, not close enough for photos, as they appeared to be a little wary. Up to 30 sharks pack

into the gutter at times, though a dozen would be the average. The grey nurse are found at Dragon Rock from December to June and the two sharks we were watching were the first of the season, a little late this year possibly due to the water being quite cold.

After watching the grey nurse for ten minutes we returned to the shallows to explore the gutters and ledges in only four metres. There were lots of small reef fish, but the highlight was the large ornate wobbegong found resting in a cave.

Packing up again we drove 70 kilometres south to Narooma, the gateway to Montague Island. I last dived Montague Island 10 years ago, so I was looking forward to exploring it again. The fresh wind made for a bumpy trip to the island, but we were warm and dry on Narooma Charters, large dive boat. At the island the water was cobalt blue, so clear you'd think we were in the tropics, except for the fur seals swimming around.

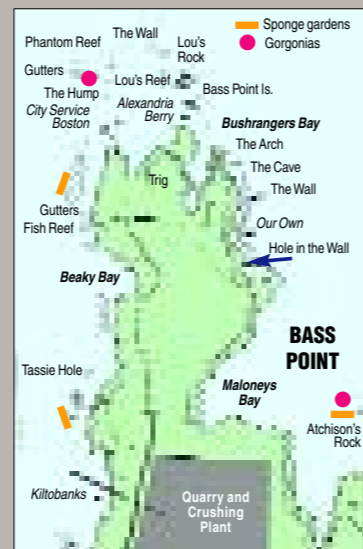
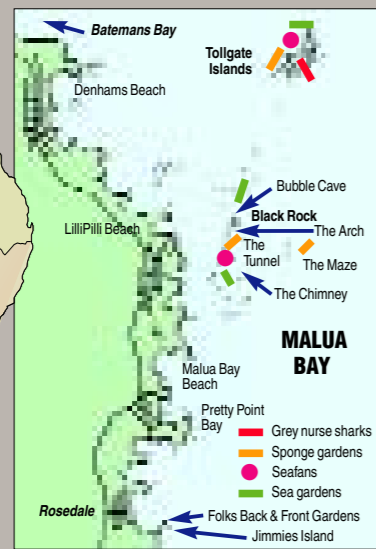
The first dive was the Shark Gutters at the northern end of the island. In the choppy conditions it was decided to run a live boat, no anchoring, with a drift dive south to calmer waters. The vis was a fantastic 30 metres plus and the water was very warm. There were two grey nurse sharks below. Reaching the bottom at 20 metres, we positioned ourselves on the rocky slope so they could swim past us. I shot a couple of photos before suddenly realising there were over a dozen grey nurse further down

the reef. At 26 metres down we found a spot about six metres away from the shark procession slowly gliding up and down the reef. They all appeared to be females, from juveniles only 1.2 metres long to mature, and possibly pregnant ones three metres long. They'd glide in to inspect us, then continue down the reef. Most sharks appeared to be heading south and, when following them, we realised that the slight current was actually heading north! So much for the drift dive south!

The sharks didn't seem concerned by our presence as they had plenty of room to move around. It was hard to tell exactly how many grey nurse there were as they were spread across the reef. I did a quick count – 16 in my field of vision – though there could have easily been 30 of them. My film quickly disappeared so we decided to continue south down the reef. We found a Port Jackson shark, plenty of reef fish, schools of one-spot puller, kingfish and yellowtail and had a southern eagle ray cruise close by.

The next dive was the Seal Colony. Over summer fewer fur seals are in residence, generally under a 100, but in winter over a thousand can pack onto the island. We anchored in the sheltered bay nearby; a dozen seals rested on the rocks, while another 24-odd were cooling off in the water. After changing tanks and film, we were again in the clear warm water. Heading out over the sand towards the seals I spotted a large smooth stingray several stingarees. As we reached the

rocky reef the seals spotted us and zoomed over. They swam in circles around us, charging in at our heads, only to turn away at the last second. We watched as they chased each other across the reef and inspected everything that caught their eye. We tried our own antics, doing somersaults and turns to entertain them, but these underwater acrobats easily outperformed us. At any one time we had up to 12 seals around us, before they tired of us and disappeared for minutes at a time. Suddenly they'd be back, the most inquisitive ones stopping to investigate our fins with their whiskers or to peer into our masks. One small female even nibbled on the anchor chain with her large canine teeth. We spent almost an hour here with the seals and couldn't imagine a better way to end our south coast sojourn.



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 Shellharbour Scuba Centre - 41 Addison Street, Shellharbour, Ph: 02-42964266

**BATEMANS BAY**

National Diving Academy - 5/33 Orient St, Batemans Bay, Ph: 02-44729930

**NAROOMA**

Island Charters- Ph: 02-44761047  
 Narooma Charters - Ph: 02-44762240  
 Ocean Hut Dive Centre - 110 Main St, Narooma, Ph: 02-44762278

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