

:: TEXT GINNY STUBBS IMAGES GINNY STUBBS AND CRAIG BALLARD

WHERE DO YOU GO IF YOU WANT EXCEPTIONAL DIVING AND UNUSUAL MARINE LIFE BUT CAN'T AFFORD AN EXPENSIVE TRIP AWAY OR A WHOLE HOST OF BOAT DIVES? WHERE ? WHY, NELSON BAY OF COURSE!

Nelson Bay is on the southern shoreline of Port Stephens, near to the ports headlands. Made up of a series of volcanic peaks and sand dunes formed around forty million years ago, Port Stephens became an estuary about 70,000 years ago when the sea level rose about 60 metres. A harbour more than 2.5 times the size of Sydney Harbour and nearly 23 kilometres long, it is the largest estuary in New South Wales. The incredible tidal flow in a harbour of this size, combined with its rich volcanic soils, provides nutrients and strong currents to nurture a wide variety of marine life. Due to this rich and strong tidal flow, Nelson Bay is one of the few places you can go where the shore diving rivals and even outdoes the boat diving. There's a profusion of unusual life beneath the slaty blue waters. Standing on the shore gives you no clue as to what waits below. Dive in and be surprised!

The most popular site at Nelson Bay is Halifax Park. On any weekend day there'll be a swarm of divers kitting up waiting for high tide. It's an outstanding shore dive, probably one of the best in New South Wales and such an easy dive that everybody will enjoy it. The slope is gentle and the life is prolific at every level so each diver can suit themselves to their profile and be assured that they will have a fantastic time. At times the visibility will be up to 20 metres which makes this site almost like a tropical dive.

From the rocky entry you swim down a gentle slope with periodic dropoffs that range down to a depth of about 30 metres. At about 4-5 metres beautiful sponge gardens start with an incredible density of soft corals and sponges and a mass and diversity of fish life. It's a nursery for young wobbegong and Port Jackson sharks, cuttlefish and many

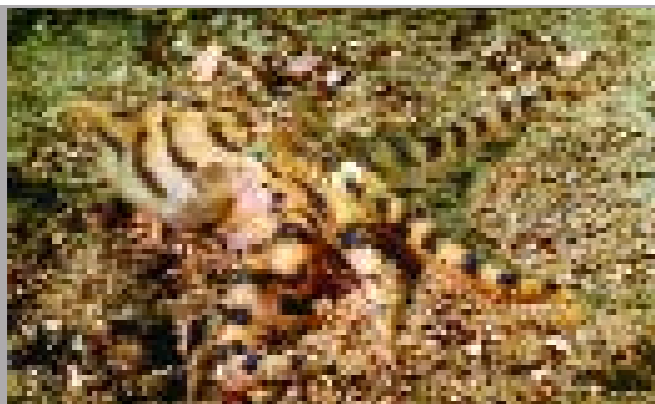


GETTING HIGH ON A TIDE

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species of tropical and temperate fish. At every level there are bommies covered in soft growth and almost obscured by schools of fish. Schools of juvenile old wives and bream mix it up with large golden trevally and drummer. If you look closely at the bommies there are strange nudibranchs, unusual crinoids, tiny brittle and basket stars. Halifax also has the greatest concentration of eels of anywhere that I've ever dived. Their curiosity often brings them out to swim amongst the divers – it can be startling to look down and find an eel swimming between your legs!

Further into the bay from Halifax Point is Fly Point. At about five metres or so the weed clears to a sandy bottom. Swimming on a bearing of 33° takes you down over a ledge to beautiful sponge gardens. This is a wide flat area filled with all sorts of soft coral. It's home to hundreds of decorator crabs, all carefully camouflaged with bits of sponge. There's all manner of uncommon life from pineapple fish, sea spiders and sea fleas





Previous pages: Gloomy octopus, Blue-lined octopus, beautiful Flabellina family nudibranch

These pages:

There's plenty of surprises – and this one we haven't identified yet!

Spindle cowries out working the flow.

Snooping amongst the soft coral delivered this seahorse.

Juvenile horned shark.

Decorator crab at Fly Point.

A bubble shell with extended mantle at Fly Point.

The beautiful view from Port Stephens

A seapen working the tidal flow.

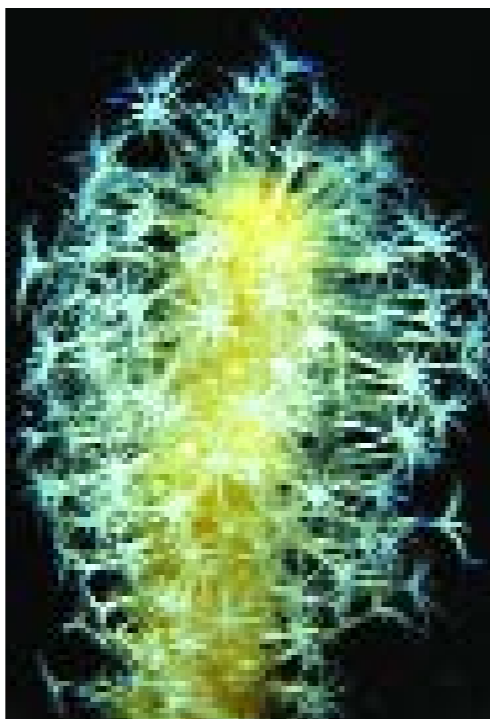
Blue whiptail cocooned at night.



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to strange and unusual crabs. The last few times we've been to Nelson Bay even a turtle has been seen at Fly Point. This is also a fabulous night dive. As you descend in the darkness over the fields of brown sargassum weed and seagrass, keep your eyes peeled for sea hares and octopus. I love this part of this dive: the weed waves slowly back and forth, enticing me – what interesting things might be hiding in there? Watch out for lurking numb rays though: this is not a place to put your hand in the sand without looking first!

For the true macro enthusiast there is nowhere more interesting than the Pipeline. This area is home to some of the most unusual life you'll have the chance to see. A submarine cable runs for 250 metres from the shore in a northerly direction. Between the sea wall and the pipe are vast gardens of the spectacular soft corals *Capnella*. These are host to decorator crabs and seahorses amongst other things. You may also find unusual tubeworms, angler fish, and blue-lined octopus.



Due to the strong currents generated by the vast tidal flow, the dives in and around Nelson Bay can only be dived on the slack. If you time your trip right you can dive twice a day – one site at say 7.30 on the morning high and a second on the night high at about 8pm. The norm is not to dive on the low tide as the visibility drops quite dramatically. But we die-hard Sydney divers are sometimes used to diving in only a few metres of vis, so if you're keen there are options for a low tide dive, particularly if the high tide vis has been good.

Little Beach is just such a site – good for a low tide dive, as it's shallow and has an amazing conglomeration of rubbish such as wheelbarrows and shopping trolleys that form a somewhat 'unusual' artificial reef! If the vis has been good on the high tide it should still be reasonable on the low tide at Little Beach. Though for quite a bit of this dive you'll be over sand, you may be surprised at what you'll find. No-one ever seems to mention that some pretty interesting underwater creatures

can be found on the sand – pipefish, seahorses, anglerfish, blennies, anemone crabs, hairy stone crabs and unusual nudibranchs to name but a few.

Following a triangular pattern from the 'swimming only' sign at Little Beach will take you round the most interesting parts of this dive. There's a rope attached to the bottom of the pole which leads from one section of the artificial reef to another but it's not always easy to find! However, if you end up following the wrong rope or can't find a rope like we've done on many attempts, it doesn't matter. You're bound to see something interesting and different regardless. Despite





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the shallow and sometimes murky water, I've had some great dives there – been surrounded by schools of golden trevally, followed a hunting octopus, and watched squid laying eggs.

Between dives, take the time to explore Port Stephens. Climb Tomaree Head. The views from the Tomaree lookout are spectacular. The climb to the top will take around 30 minutes. Drive out to Stockton Beach – at 32 kilometres you'll be in the largest continuous sand dunes in the state. Along the beach, half in the surf, lies the wreck of the *Sygnia*, a 53,000 tonne Norwegian bulk carrier, the largest ship ever wrecked on the Australian east coast. It's diveable, but only on those super-flat winter days, and it definitely has a sharky feel! Or you can walk across the spit to Fingal Lighthouse, accessible only at low

tide, and look back towards the coast for breathtaking views. All in all, there's plenty to do while you're waiting for high tide to come round again.

