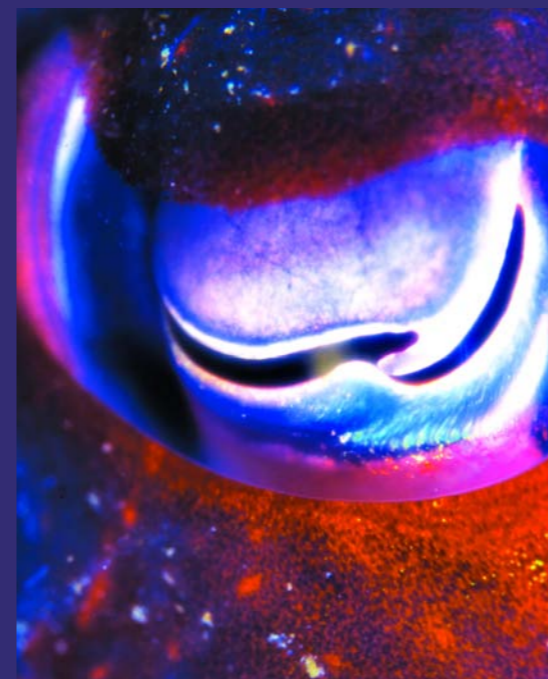


the dredge

: PHOTOS AND TEXT
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From the left -

- Many nooks and crannies are home to horned blennies.
- Hidden away in one of the holds we found this superb blue devil. When exploring the holds, it pays to take a torch with you.
- Here's looking at you – a hiding cuttlefish peers out at a passing diver.
- Clingfish are well camouflaged against predators in their orange sponge home. They lie waiting to clean passing fish.

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE PERFECT EARLY SUMMER DAYS IN ADELAIDE. AT 8 AM IT WAS ALREADY 23 DEGREES, NOT A CLOUD IN THE SKY AND JUST A BREATH OF WIND. LOADING THE LAST OF OUR GEAR INTO THE BOAT, WE KNEW IT WOULD BE AN EASY RUN FROM THE WEST BEACH RAMP OUT TO THE DREDGE. THE RECENT SPATE OF CALM WEATHER MEANT THE VISIBILITY SHOULD BE FANTASTIC!

We weren't disappointed. The six kilometre run passed in the blink of an eye and soon the familiar red marker buoy of the Dredge was about 100 metres off the bow. Making a couple of minor adjustments to the sounder, we began a slow run past the buoy from east to west. The dredge lies north-south – about 10 metres from the buoy the sounder spiked upward from 20 metres for about five metres and then plummeted back to the seabed. We'd arrived.

The Dredge is upright on a sandy bottom and in good condition. The marker buoy occasionally succumbs to rough seas, but the dredge rarely hides its position as there's usually several boats anchored nearby. But today we had the site to ourselves, there wasn't another boat to be seen. On a great day it's possible to make out the shadow of the wreck as you drive over it. Today was good but not great, so the dredge didn't appear until we were about 5 metres below our boat. As we slowly sank on to the deck the small deckhouses on the port and starboard sides were the first things to emerge.

We slowly swam toward the stern. The four bladed propeller is still attached and is a great place for photographs. Storms and currents have washed away the sand around the prop and the rust-stained blades are encrusted with soft corals. This area is always home to a school of fish, but the type of fish varies depending on the current and season. Sometimes you will be greeted by a school of Long Finned Pike, at others, there will be a school of Boarfish, or Dusky Morwong. Whatever it is on the day, the propeller, fish and a diver makes a great shot.

We moved along the side of the hull, where we often encounter cuttlefish. And at the right time of year their eggs can occasionally be seen hanging off the hull as well.

Reaching the bow, the hull tapers down through a narrow channel that contains the remnants of the suction dredge. The long tube emerges on the seafloor through the bow of the wreck where its now covered in colourful sponges and ascidians. As with the stern, wave action has washed away sand around this region, and it now provides shelter for more fish.



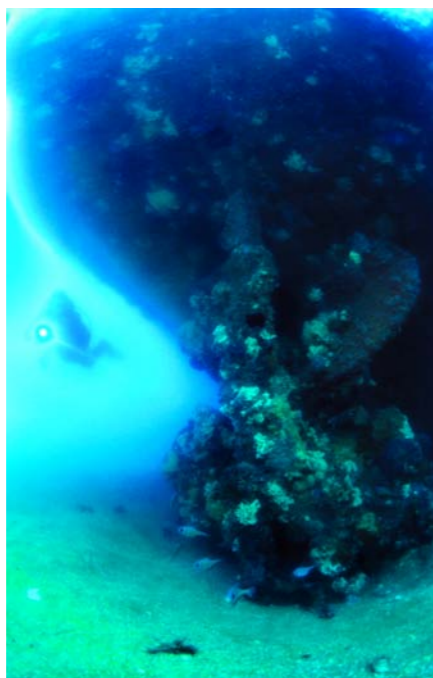
The Dredge was formerly the *South Australian*, a 41 metre long suction dredge built in Holland in 1911. She operated in and around Adelaide between 1912 and 1982 before finally being decommissioned and sunk as an artificial reef in 1985. More information about the history of the *South Australian* can be found at : www.environment.sa.gov.au/heritage/ships_graveyards/pdfs/south_australian.pdf Today the Dredge is a popular site for divers and fishers. On a warm day in summer boats departing from the West Beach boat ramp visit it regularly. It would easily be the number one wreck site dived off the coast.

We headed back up onto the deck via the suction dredge channel. The deck houses and hatches allow access to a couple of holds with interesting swimthroughs, easy to traverse with visible sunlight available for most of the time. However, there's a silt build-up in the holds so for the best diving conditions you need good buoyancy control and to be the first in. Today because we are the first here, the visibility is still good. Looking up from the main hold through crisscrossing beams and hundreds of bullseyes is surreal and its hard to tell whether this is underwater or in outer space.

The Dredge has been submerged for some years now, and the encrusting growth shelters lots of little critters. Many small holes contain blennies, and the sponges on the deck and surrounding seafloor are the base for clingfish cleaner stations.

We continue along the deck toward the stern, checking out orange sponges along the way for the telltale signs of a cleaner station. Dusky morwong or magpie perch on or near a sponge is a dead give-away, but you have to look very closely as the clingfish are only about three centimetres long and well camouflaged plus clingfish stations move. The cabins and compartments have schools of bullseyes, blue devils and the occasional wobbegong. In the poor light these critters can be

- From the top -
- At the bow of the dredge the suction tube is covered in sponge and ascidian growth.
 - Diver inspecting the prop.
 - The surreal view looking out of the main hold of the dredge.
 - Bullseyes inhabit the deckhouses on the dredge.



difficult to see so it pays to take a torch if you want to poke around inside.

At a depth of 20 metres its easy to spend 40 minutes exploring the wreck and, as is often the case, the time flies by and one dive isn't enough to cover all the interesting parts of the wreck. Our dive is no different, and the water hadn't yet warmed up after winter – the cold began to bite through our drysuits. Back at the anchor we both gave the thumbs up and start our slow ascent. The peace was shattered as other divers began their descent – on a day like this the Dredge would probably see another 30-40 divers!

If you learnt to dive in Adelaide, then there's a good chance you'll have experienced the joy of the Dredge at least once as it's close to metropolitan Adelaide, the popular Glenelg coastline and West Beach boat ramp.

There are also a couple of other diving options nearby such as the Glenelg Tyre Reef and another sunken barge. In fact the barge and Dredge are close enough together that the two can be visited on the same dive for those keen enough, or after a surface interval for coffee and muffins for more laidback divers. There used to be markers to guide divers between the two sites but these have long disappeared. But if you're good with a reel and compass, finding your way won't be a challenge.

The best time to dive the Dredge is any time of year when the weather permits (generally easterly offshore winds). But the best visibility can normally be found in winter and because of the cold water, there is usually a lot less 'traffic'. So if you're in Adelaide and are offered the chance to dive the Dredge, give it a go – you won't be disappointed!

