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> ASK ANYONE ANYWHERE WHAT'S THE MOST FAMOUS DIVE DESTINATION IN THE WORLD AND CHANCES ARE THEY'LL SAY THE GREAT BARRIER REEF. PRESSED FOR THE BEST DIVE SITE ON THE GBR, THEY'LL PROBABLY CHOOSE THE COD HOLE. WITH GREAT FORESIGHT THIS SPOT WAS DECLARED A MARINE PARK MANY YEARS AGO, AS WERE OTHER LARGE AREAS OF THE GREAT BARRIER REEF. THOUSANDS OF DIVERS STILL COME TO WATCH THE BIG FISH SPECTACULAR AT THE COD HOLE EVERY YEAR

There's nothing quite like being in the water with a big marine animal and the huge potato cod *Epinephelus tukula* never disappoint. Their well-fed bulky bodies, googly eyes, oversized lips and natural curiosity allow divers to get up close and personal; for the nervous it's sometimes too close!

The 37 metre Cairns-based *Spirit of Freedom* operated by Tusa Dive was my luxury transport out to the Ribbon Reefs on one of their regular three day cruises. Boarding at Trinity Wharf, it was a relief to get out of the tropical heat into airconditioned comfort. I was early and the first on board, so I took advantage of the quiet to set up my cameras in the spacious upper lounge and used the charging station to boost my strobe batteries for the first dive. The whole process was improved by liberal refills from the 24 hour coffee machine and a raid or three on the cookie jar!

A bus soon delivered the other guests, bubbling with excitement in the chaos of boarding, finding cabins, sorting baggage and setting up dive gear. How much weight will I need? Which dive locker can I use? Where did the crew put my BC and reg? On your tank, all set up and ready to go. With the last guest on board the *Spirit* gently drew away from the wharf;

downtown Cairns slipping by was the only indication we were moving.

The first dive on any trip is always a checkout dive so divers can discover and fix all sorts of issues with their gear in calm shallow water while getting a taste for the coral and fish life of the Great Barrier Reef. Quite often divers haven't been in the water for 12 months so an easy start avoids any nasty surprises, such as my torn regulator mouthpiece which delivered endless saltwater to breathe unless I swam along on my left side like a demented seal. The dive site was a series of bommies and flat-top reef on a gently sloping sand face. Now, open sand is to be avoided and often viewed as boring by most but I found some great stuff out there. Wel, Tony, my dive buddy, did, a huge peacock flounder hidden under the sand, it's oggle eyes and pouty Hollywood lips giving it away. With gentle waves of a hand we completely uncovered it while it sat there in denial, 110% sure that its perfect camouflage made it undetectable. Deeper down the slope a number of blue-spotted maskrays (*Dasyatis kuhlii*) sat motionless on the sand, ruminating on matters important to all rays, with a couple wuffling up the sand in search of small crabs and shells for a midday snack. These pretty little rays have a distinctive set of white bands on the tail and, as their common name indicates, a

Left to right: Green humphead parrotfish (*Bolbometopon muricatum*); Smooth flutemouth (*Fistularia commersonii*); Olive sea snake (*Aipysurus laevis*); Grey reef shark (*Carcharhinus amblyrhynchos*); Barramundi cod (*Cromileptes altivelis*); Slender suckerfish (*Echeneis naucrates*); Blue-spotted maskray (*Dasyatis kuhlii*); Malabar grouper (*Epinephelus malabaricus*); Pickhandle barracuda (*Sphyaena jello*); Spangled emperor (*Lethrinus nebulosus*); Potato cod (*Epinephelus tukula*); Peacock flounder (*Bothus lunatus*); Huge delicate soft corals; Diver and cod; Blue tilefish (*Hoplolatilus starckij*); Wall to wall sharks off the end of North Horn on Osprey Reef; A pair of honeycomb grouper (*Epinephelus merra*).



Left to right: Red Lionfish (*Pterois volitans*) stalking small Long-spined Glassfish (*Ambassis interrupta*) on coral head; Ships anchor stuck and abandoned in coral crevice; Potato Cod (*Epinephelus tukula*).

smattering of blue spots on their back. Their eyes protrude above their flattened body, probably to provide a slightly wider horizon to alert them of approaching predators while they munch through the sand. A gentle approach can get you quite close.

The Ribbon Reefs, long slender ribbon-like shapes, are a major drawcard due in part to the channels that shunt oceanic water inside the barrier reef, delivering rich nutrients from the deep via a system of strong currents, particularly at the ends of the long reefs or in deep channels open to the outer ocean. Beginner divers usually dislike currents because they can make diving hard work, but experience brings the realisation that when currents are running, the whole ocean comes alive. It's meal time! One of the best places to experience that on the Ribbons is one of my favourites, Pixie Pinnacle.

Putting up from a flat 30 metre deep seabed, the Pinnacle acts like a drive-through window – tiny reef fish like chromis and anthias emerge from the protective hard corals to feed on plankton in the passing current. Their activity attracts larger predators such as barracuda, tuna and the bully boys of the reef, blue trevally. These fearless and aggressive predators will even use divers as a 'blind' to get close to their small dancing prey. Or casually cruising the reef until finding a distracted fish, they explode in a burst of blinding speed, gulp down the unwary then drop back into cruise mode, all blithe

innocence. Regular attacks are choreographed with masses of fish rushing for cover; the audible roar of a thousand beating tails sounds like a wild crowd in a sporting arena.

While the general diving is typical of the famous Great Barrier Reef, divers are primarily interested in the action found at the Cod Hole. Not a 'hole' as such, this dive site is a small sandy area averaging about 14 metres deep in front of a wall reaching towards the surface. Small coral heads or bommies litter the area, all part of Ribbon Reef #10. To the north the wall curls

THE COD HOLE IS A FANTASTIC EXPERIENCE WHICH IS ACCESSIBLE TO EVEN NOVICE DIVERS... AS IT'S SO SHELTERED AND SHALLOW, DIVERS CAN TAKE THEIR TIME TO GET CLOSE TO THE BIG FISH

eastward where a large channel allows clear oceanic water into the inner Barrier Reef. A great way to start diving the Cod Hole is a drift dive through this channel on an incoming tide. Sharks, including an occasional great hammerhead, and big fish are usually seen in the area along with clear water and good coral growth. As you drift around into the inner part of the reef towards the Cod Hole site, the current drops off. In the wall are large caverns and holes, many of which have a massive resting potato cod waiting for the next dive handout.

When a divemaster hits the water with a tub of fish bits, dinner bells ring. Even if you aren't in the 'traditional' Cod Hole spot, fish

come running. With divers arranged in a circle, the divemaster literally walks around handing out morsels to the giant residents who put on a great show. While years of experience and massive diver numbers have toned down the early 'wild west' days, it's still a fantastic experience, better managed, safer and accessible to even novice divers. Above all, it's safer for the fish with a no-touch rule to prevent removal of the protective mucous cover on their skin and a clean diet which has eliminated most of the growths and ugly sores resulting from junk-food handouts of boiled eggs, bread and other human nasties.

When the food is gone, the sand settles and it's time to enjoy the big residents at leisure. Smaller camouflage cod and coral groupers come in after scraps and the large potato cod hang about like spoilt puppies hoping for another tub of juicy morsels. As it's so sheltered and shallow, divers can take their time to get close to the big fish – very difficult to do in other areas of the reef – or find some of the resident whitetip reef sharks snoozing in a sandy overhang.

Three days of constant diving are quickly over as the *Spirit of Freedom* heads into nearby Lizard Island to swap crew, load extra provisions, and bring on board guests who have flown in from Cairns for

Top to bottom: The Spirit of Freedom heads out to Osprey Reef; Star Pufferfish (*Arothron stellatus*) resting on coral reef sand flats; Scrawled Leatherjacket (*Aluterus scriptus*) feeding on coral reef.

the next leg out to Osprey Reef. Most of us on the Cod Hole trip stay on, enjoying the break from the 'eat, dive, eat, dive, sleep, dive, eat, dive, eat, dive, sleep' routine. Well, someone has to do it!

Osprey isn't part of the Barrier Reef. It's an oceanic reef out in the Coral Sea. Being a long way off the mainland past the Barrier Reef – and an even longer journey from the nearest city, Cairns – ensures that only the more adventurous get to dive Osprey's plunging walls. Coral growth can be lush but like most outer reefs which are hit hard by cyclones and oceanic storms, the shallow areas are often well-scoured and sporting stubby hardy corals. You can see where storm surges lose their power around the 30 metre mark, as that's where large seafans and delicate soft coral trees thrive.

The main drawcard to Osprey isn't coral gardens but big, beefy, burly, bulky oceanic predators: sharks, tuna, barracuda, giant trevally and coral cod. This is real adventure diving where conditions can change in the blink of an eye, currents can roar, soft corals blaze, silver walls of fish curtain the reef and no one really cares about that nudibranch you saw.

North Horn is the hottest spot on Osprey where a permanent buoy line is used to tether bait for a shark feeding dive. If you want shark photos, the best time is before and after the feed when you can swim around and get closer to the sharks which are much more approachable due to anticipation of the coming feed or hope for a second round after the feed. The most common shark species seen are grey reef sharks, then whitetip reef sharks – and the occasional silvertip may dominate them all. You can be fortunate enough to see a great hammerhead or tiger shark but it's much less common than you'd probably like.

One thing you'll get year-round is dazzling visibility. The water can be so clear that it's dangerous to unwary divers. Slipping down the wall to get a closer view of a soft coral can get you into 40+ metres without any effort. With water this clear a sense of depth and distance is thrown out of whack. Every dive becomes a deep dive unless you're regularly monitoring your depth. Guessing based on light levels and visibility will get you into trouble. Following the dive plan and the dive guides who lead every dive will ensure a safe experience.





While the high current areas guarantee fast action, meandering along a sheltered wall also provides amazing views, even in the shallows. On most dives, huge schools of green humphead parrotfish (*Bolbometopon muricatum*) can be found on the reef top, stopping briefly to grind away on hard corals with their powerful beak and creating an excreted cloud of new coral sand. Hunker down on the reef in the path of the browsing school, and you can be surrounded by their big green bodies, armoured with shield-like scales the size of a drink coaster. Though not having the prettiest faces, the parrot-like beaks and steep foreheads scarred from bumping against the brittle coral, give the impression you're watching a heard of grazing buffalo.

While dogtooth tuna and other solitary pelagics are often seen, the huge schools of bigeye trevally (*Caranx sexfasciatus*) are a sight to behold. Swirling in towering columns or moving as a mass across the reef, there's nothing quite like being surrounded by hundreds of silver bodies, blank black eyes staring as they fearlessly swarm around you. Similar schools of barracuda can also be found, their pugnacious jaws and protruding canines giving them a 'bother boy' air. Sea snakes, turtles, sharks and a host of other big animals regularly drag attention away from the smaller reef dwelling critters. For the macro tragics, searching the huge soft coral trees in their pink, orange and red fluffed-up finery, may reveal camouflaged soft coral crabs or impossibly spindly skeleton crabs. And don't forget the world's smallest seahorse, the pygmy; they're there, clinging to the webbing of the occasional deep gorgonian seafan. You just need the patience of a Zen master to find them.

There's no best time to dive Osprey. When the regular trade winds blow, the surface can be rough but the water is clear from top to abyss. In the southern summer, when the doldrums flatten the surface to a burnished mirror, the surface waters can be less clear with plankton bloom and coral spawn but the oceanic viz is still there just a few metres down, along with all the big animals. Compared to pioneering dive trips in smaller single hulled boats, today's excursions are much more affordable and comfortable on the big stable twin hulls of the *Spirit of Freedom* along with Nitrox options, dive courses and lots of room to move around. And don't forget, they have a cookie jar.

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