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Times are changing and to keep the magazines free, we're asking dive stores to cover their own postage costs. If you enjoy reading the magazine, think about helping out your centre with a small donation to help cover their costs. Your continued support is most appreciated.

A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Where will your next dive adventure take you?

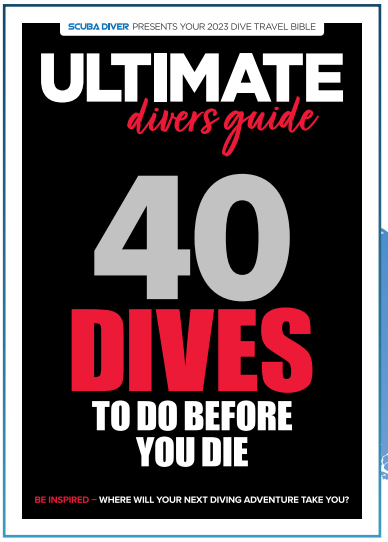
Welcome to the Ultimate Divers Guide annual, which this year aims to give you some fresh inspiration for where your next diving adventure might take you, by focusing on a rich selection of bucket-list dives, those dives you really have to tick off in your logbook before you shuffle off this mortal coil.

Dig in and you will find dive sites and locations from all around our watery planet, some well-known diving hotspots, others hidden gems that might not otherwise have popped into your consciousness.

Myself, and Scuba Diver North America Editor Walt Stearns and Scuba Diver Australia and New Zealand Editor Adrian Stacey, tapped into our decades of dive travel experience and sought to compile a varied list of places to whet your appetite, aided by regular contributors Stuart Philpott, Don Silcock and Deborah Dickson-Smith.

Whether you are a devotee of colourful coral reefs, a thrill-merchant looking to board the next exhilarating drift dive, a lover of epic dives along abyssal walls, a techie seeking the next cave or cavern to explore, or a wreck-ferret with a lust for rust, you will find plenty to take your fancy - and you never know, you might just stumble across a location or dive site that fires your next addiction in the world of diving. So enjoy, and who knows where your next diving adventure might take you after being inspired by what you find within the Ultimate Divers Guide this year.

Mark Evans, Editorial Director



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"We are thrilled to be returning in a few months! The reef systems here are the most unspoiled we have seen in our travels around the world and the resort is paradise. We can't wait to see all our friends at Wakatobi." ~ Robert and Barbara Hay

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www.wakatobi.com

Did you know?

Residents of the reefs include coral trout, clownfish, humphead parrotfish, Maori wrasse, Spanish mackerel, giant potato cod, dogtooth tuna and green turtles.

Essential information

Location: **Rowley Shoals, Australia**
Depth: **1m-50m**
Diver level: **Beginner to advanced**

Clerke Channel

Rowley Shoals is one of the most remote dive locations in Australia with trips only available in October and November each year. It is hard to believe that nearly 300km from the protection of land, in season, the ocean is calm, with only a few ripples from the warm breeze.

But the calm surface belies the power of the tides that pour in and out of the oval-shaped atolls each day. Funnelled through a few small channels, the tides gather tremendous speed, which makes for some truly adrenalin-filled drifts. One of the best is Clerke Channel, equally good dived or on snorkel.

On snorkel, as soon you jump in the water, the current tugs you away from the boat. Drifting from the outside of the atoll, through the channel, to the inside of the atoll, the incoming tide brings in clear oceanic waters, with great visibility, a good 20 to 30 metres.

The walls of the channel are lined with coral, and you can expect to see schools of snapper sheltering under coral outcrops and huge bumphead parrotfish chomping loudly on the coral. No need to kick, just relax and go with the flow – until you're pushed out into the inside of the atoll, where the current dissipates.

For the dive, you are dropped into the channel to drift outwards to the edge of the atoll – it's one of the fastest drifts you'll ever experience. There is no other option but to surrender to the tide, and zoom past the coral bommies, past the schools of sweetlips, bumphead parrotfish, and whitetip reef sharks.

When you're finally spat out of the channel exit, you reach a site called Coral Gardens, where the pace slows to a gentle drift along a colourful wall, which drops down to around 50m. ●

Who to dive with
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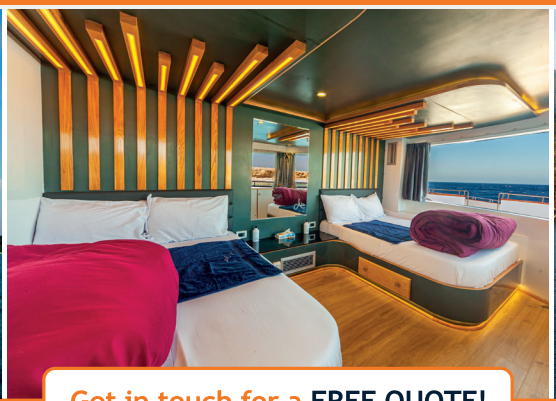

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Did you know?

The SS Thistlegorm is famous for its wartime cargo and was fitted with light weaponry. It consists of a 4.7inch light anti-aircraft gun and an anti-aircraft machine gun.

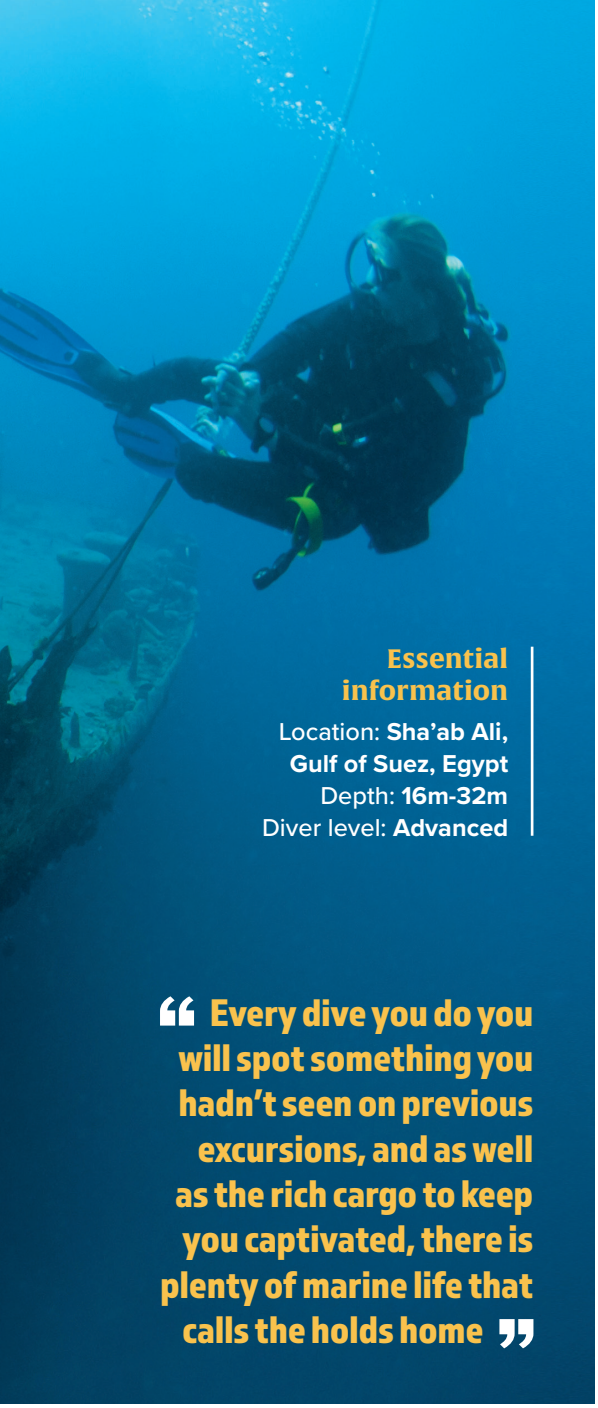
SS Thistlegorm

The SS Thistlegorm is undoubtedly one of the world's top shipwreck dives, and this is all down to the cargo it was carrying. The vessel itself makes a fine dive in its own right, but the treasures con-tained within the holds are what attract literally thousands of divers per year.

The Thistlegorm was less than a year old when it was sent to the bottom of the Egyptian Red Sea on 6 October 1941, succumbing to damage from German Heinkel He 111 bombers while at anchor in Sha'ab Ali, just east of the Straits of Gubal, waiting to go through the Suez Canal.

This British armed merchant navy ship was chock-full of Allied military supplies, including motorbikes, Bren gun carriers, trucks, rubber boots, Lee Enfield rifles, munitions of all shapes and sizes, airplane parts – today it is like diving through a museum. Every dive you do you will spot something you hadn't seen on previous excursions, and as well as the rich cargo to keep you captivated, there is plenty of marine life that calls the holds home, including moray eels, lionfish and scorpionfish, crocodilefish and even several species of nudibranch.

On the sandy seabed on either side of the Thistlegorm lie the remains of two steam locomotives, which were blown some 100 metres into the air by the explosion that decimated hold four of the vessel (where much of the ammunition



Essential information

Location: **Sha'ab Ali, Gulf of Suez, Egypt**
Depth: **16m-32m**
Diver level: **Advanced**

"Every dive you do you will spot something you hadn't seen on previous excursions, and as well as the rich cargo to keep you captivated, there is plenty of marine life that calls the holds home"

was stored, hence the devastation) and then landed upright, and are now seemingly steaming along the bottom.

The stern section, just behind the bomb damage to hold four, is tilted to port, and you can see the two anti-aircraft guns still in place, now host to plenty of coral growth, as well as the immense propeller and rudder.

The rest of the ship is perfectly upright, and swimming along the decks, which contain the water carriers from the locos, cranes and more, into the superstructure – you can even see the captain's sink and bath-tub - and through the multiple hold levels, is an experience that will stay with you forever. You only scratch the surface of this vast ship with a couple of dives – most day trips will feature a dive around the exterior of the vessel, followed by a second when you penetrate into the holds to see the magnificent cargo - and you'll be left wanting more as you surface from your final dive.

Incredibly, while the Thistlegorm was first discovered way back in 1956 by one Jacques-Yves Cousteau, it was then inexplicably lost again until it was rediscovered in 1992, and it has been a staple on trips to the northern Red Sea ever since. •

Who to dive with
Elite Diving
www.elite-diving.com

"The rest of the ship is perfectly upright, and swimming along the decks, which contain the water carriers from the locos, cranes and more, into the superstructure – you can even see the captain's sink and bath-tub"

SS Thistlegorm
Red Sea, Egypt
27.8137° N, 33.9208° E

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Hin Muang

Located in the Andaman Sea, around 60km south of Koh Lanta, are the spectacular dive sites of Hin Daeng and Hin Muang. The direct translation of Hin Daeng from Thai to English is Red Rock, while Hin Muang means Purple Rock. The names are derived from the red and purple broccoli corals that adorn their respective walls and peaks.

Arguably providing the best diving Thailand has to offer, and indeed the deepest, these two sites provide a stunning array of soft corals and marine life. They are one of the few places in the area where manta rays can be found regularly, and even the occasional whaleshark makes an appearance.

Even if you are not lucky enough to encounter a manta ray or whaleshark there is plenty to see. At Hin Daeng, you are treated to vibrant walls of red soft corals, large swathes of the reef shimmer with massive schools of glassfish, and lionfish glide around the perimeter looking for a chance to strike. The northern side drops in a gentler slope; it is more barren but seems to be a favourite place for yellow snapper to congregate. In between are several channels, ridges and pinnacles to navigate around. A school of batfish usually hang around the shallows near the main pinnacle. These curious creatures will often come very close and check out the divers who have invaded their patch.

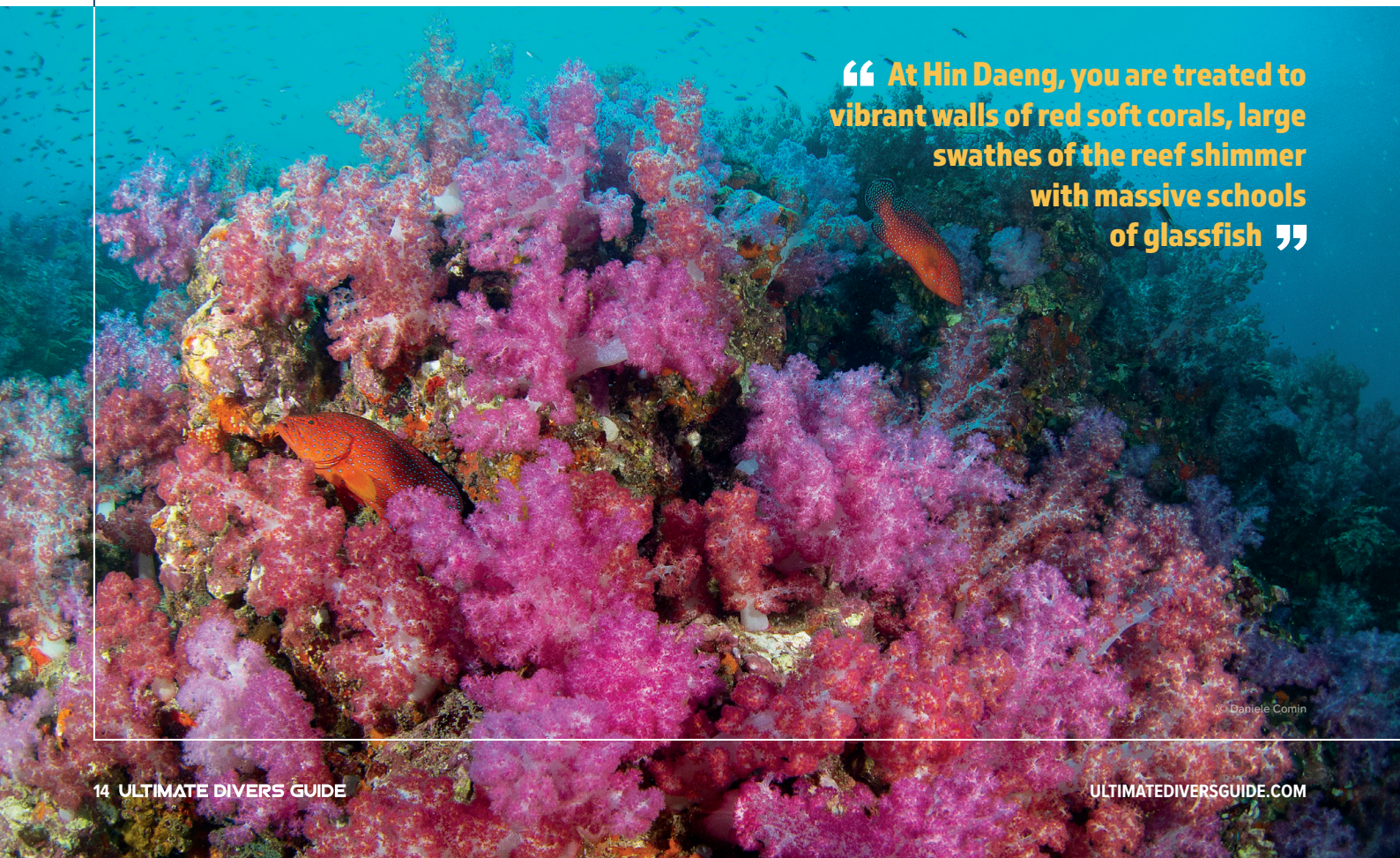
Hin Muang, though, is probably my favourite of the two dive sites, but only just. The top of this long slender ridge like-reef lies about 10m under the surface and is covered with anemones. Numerous peaks descend like giant stepping stones down to 22m. Its coral-covered walls then plunge over 60m to the ocean floor.

This impressive monolith is prone to strong currents, so it is advisable to use the attached mooring line for ascents and descents. Once safely on the reef, it is time to enjoy the show. In what seems like a well-choreographed routine, vast schools of baitfish move in unison to avoid the attention of marauding blue fin trevallies, jacks and rainbow runners.

The action can be relentless, and divers sometimes find themselves engulfed by a teeming ball of fish. Cleaning stations pepper the top of the ridge and offer the best place to see mantas.

A variety of nudibranchs, crabs and shrimp inhabit the reef for those who prefer smaller stuff. ●

Who to dive with
Phoenix Divers Koh Lanta
www.phoenixdivers-kohlanta.com



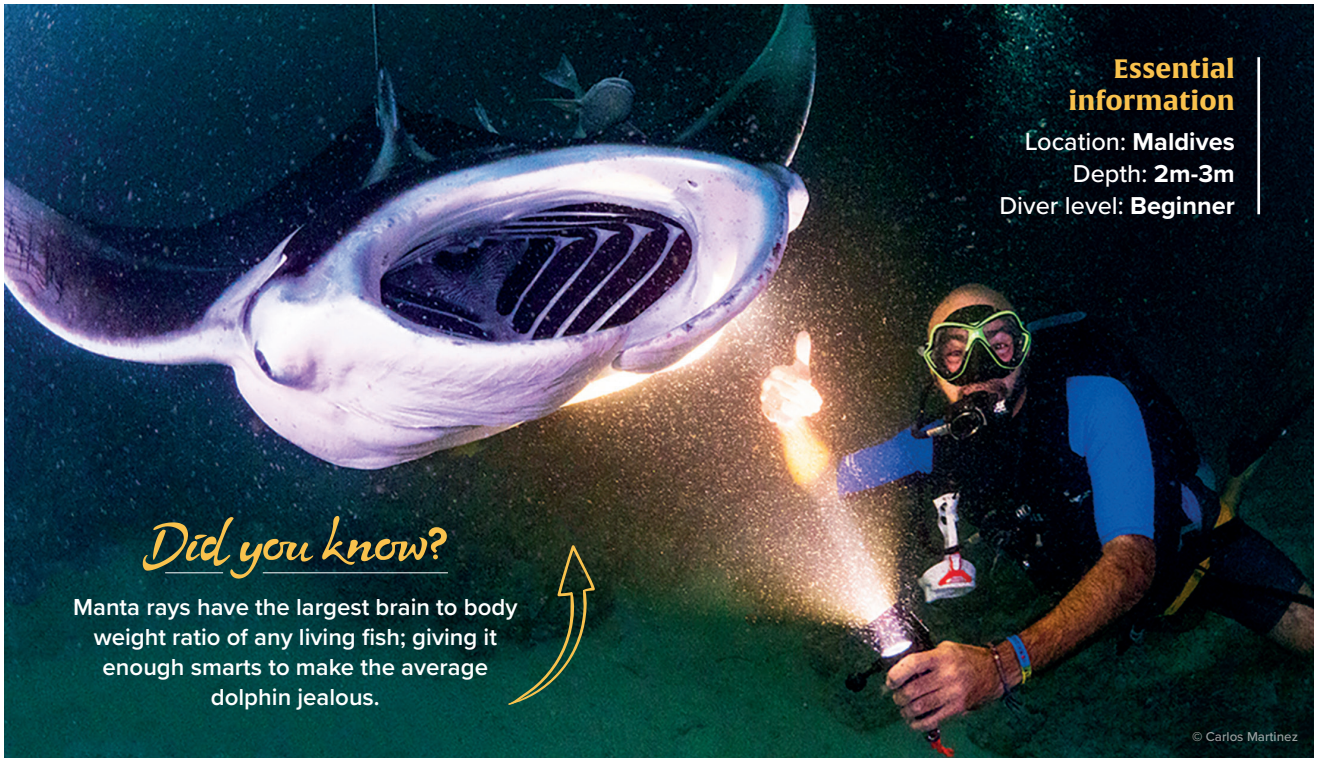
Did you know?

This diverse diving destination is bursting with highlights, in part thanks to the large geographic area that it covers.

Essential information

Location: **Hin Muang, Thailand**
Depth: **10m-60m**
Diver level: **Advanced**

> **“Arguably providing the best diving Thailand has to offer, and indeed the deepest, these two sites provide a stunning array of soft corals and marine life”**



Manta Ray Night Dive

Do you like to dance? Join us in the underwater dance of the manta rays in the paradise of the Maldives!

When we cross the surface of the ocean, we enter a new world, with its own rules, its own rhythms, but very similar to our terrestrial world!
Reefs are large underwater cities, around which a life system of thousands of living beings is created, each one with its work and its function. And like in every city ... there are also night shows! And one of the most impressive is, without a doubt, the majestic dance of the reef mantas!

The reef manta (Mobula Alfredi) is one of the largest and most-iconic marine species in the Maldives. Like sharks, they belong to the group of cartilaginous fish or elasmobranchs, but they are not dangerous.

They can measure up to 4.5 metres in wingspan, weigh 700kg, and live 40 years! Because they frequent relatively shallow waters along the coastal reefs of the continents and oceanic islands, encounters with this species are more frequent than with its cousins, the ocean manta (Mobula birostris).

Reef mantas are widely distributed throughout the tropical and subtropical regions of the Indian Ocean and western Pacific. However, they are also threatened by targeted fisheries driven by demand for their gills. Therefore, divers, promoting diving ecotourism with these wonderful animals, we help their conservation! And in return, they help us make our dreams come true by being part of the magical night dance that they star in.

At nightfall, the lights on the stern of boats attract and concentrate the zooplankton, which is the food of our hosts, the manta rays. That is why, in a matter of minutes, they can get to feed a few metres from us. As soon as the first manta appears, it is time to get in - the dive is easy, it consists only of staying still a few metres deep, and enjoying!

It is such a captivating dance that it does not need any more music than the bubbling of our air tanks! And it allows us to contemplate every detail, very closely (and when we say very closely, we mean having the manta rays a few inches from our eyes!). When manta rays open their mouths to feed, they unfold those horn-shaped projections, called cephalic lobes, to channel plankton-rich water through their specially adapted gills.

To optimize energy, mantas have developed many variations in their swimming positions to improve feeding efficiency.

To date, expert scientists have described a total of eight different eating strategies! ●

Who to dive with
Blue Force Fleet
www.blueforcefleet.com

Did you know?

The Maldives is better known for sharks and drift dives, but there are several wrecks just waiting to be explored by divers.

Essential information

Location: **South Ari Atoll, the Maldives**
Depth: **Max of 28m**
Diver level: **Beginner to advanced**

Mirihi Wreck

Just 50 metres off the white beach of Mirihi Island lies the Madige, resting almost perfectly upright on the sandy sea floor at 28m. After a productive life shipping goods within the Maldives, the Madige was intentionally scuttled in September 2000, with the purpose of becoming an additional attraction for the divers visiting Mirihi Island Resort.

In the decades since, the Madige has become a rich and colourful ecosystem in its own right. Every square centimetre covered in colourful sponges, tunicates and hard and soft coral, the wreck has become home to a large group of tiger cowries, which have found refuge under the hull.

They come out at night, extend the mantles over their shells, and wander around the sand looking for food. Their neighbours are a school of serene batfish floating around the bow watching the divers curiously.

A group of goatfish graze at the bottom while juvenile blue-fin and banded trevallies patrol the wreck as if it were theirs. In the nooks and crannies of the Madige hide all kinds of invertebrates – Durban dancing shrimps peek out of the broken railings and banded boxer shrimp use the wreck as a nursery. Most recently, cheeked pipefish babies thin as a spaghetti have been found on the bow of the ship.

But it is at night that the wreck shows its true colours. Neon orange Faulkner's corals extend their tentacles to feed. Two fully grown red bass circle back and forth between the reef and the wreck, following the divers on their tour. The resident yellow-margin triggerfish will sometimes get a little too close, but OceanPro's dive staff confirm that it is just curious and often accompanies the divers almost to their safety stop.

The absolute stars of the wreck though are the big surprises. Sometimes the resident white-tip reef sharks or a visiting Jenkins whip ray sleep at the keel of the Madige. Once a snoozing giant porcupine stingray or a guitarfish that is known to live in the area was found snoozing at the bottom. And very recently, some lucky divers watched a group of 15 shy nurse sharks circling the wreck for a series of afternoons. ●

Who to dive with
Diving Centre OceanPro
www.mirihi.com/ocean-pro-diving

CYPRUS

> The massive 172 metre long by 28 metre beam, 10,000-ton MS Zenobia has attracted 100,000s of divers over the past 40 years

MS Zenobia

Rated as one of the top ten wreck dives in the world, this Challenger-class RO-RO ferry was originally built at Malmo in Sweden. On 4 May 1980, she left port on her maiden voyage heading for Tartous in Syria. The Captain reported problems with the steering due to excess water being pumped into her ballast tanks.

While at anchor in Athens, checks were made on the computerised systems and the water drained out before she departed on the next leg of her journey.

When the Zenobia reached Larnaca in Cyprus, the problem re-occurred. But this time the condition worsened. Heavily listing to port side, the stricken vessel was towed 1.5km offshore where the captain gave the order to abandon ship. On 7 June 1980 at around 2.30am, she eventually sank. No casualties were recorded.

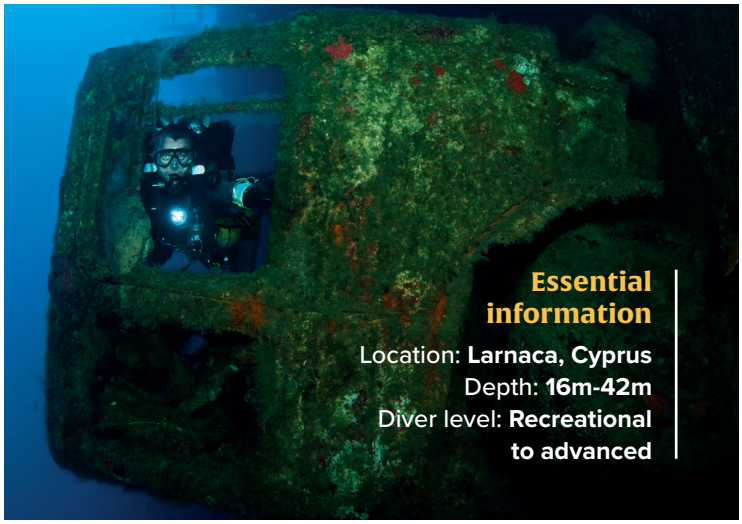
The massive 172 metre long by 28 metre beam, 10,000-ton MS Zenobia has attracted 100,000s of divers over the past 40 years. She lies totally intact on her port side at a max depth of 42m with a full cargo of 104 articulated trucks and other machinery which has never been salvaged. The estimated worth of her cargo was more than £200 million sterling. Over the years there have been many conspiracy theories regarding her sinking, from being purposely sunk as an insurance scam to sabotage by Israeli and British secret services, which all adds to the ship's history and intrigue.

The wreck is so big and so diverse visiting divers can spend an entire week exploring the Zen. Depths vary from 16m at the shallowest point on the starboard side rail to 42m deep inside the cargo holds. On the outside popular features include the lifeboats, prop, winches and a number of trucks either precariously hanging from deck chains or lying on the sea floor. The wreck also attracts a huge variety of marine life, from colourful nudibranchs to very friendly grouper.

For experienced technical divers, the wreck offers some serious penetration

Did you know?

The seabed is at 42m and the highest point is at 16m with visibility reaching 40 metres. Few currents and warm water it makes an ideal site for all qualified divers.



Essential information

Location: **Larnaca, Cyprus**
Depth: **16m-42m**
Diver level: **Recreational to advanced**

through the bridge, restaurant, laundry room and down pitch-black corridors and stairways deep into the engine room and the steering control room.

Each deck level houses a treasure trove of trucks, with cargoes varying from children's sweets, eggs and meat to expensive Persian carpets. This should definitely be a must-do wreck on every divers' bucket list! ●

For more information on Cyprus diving:
www.visitcyprus.com

> Whalesharks and turtles are seen here on a regular basis, just swimming around in their habitat, while big tuna and thresher sharks are seen here for their supper

Essential information

Location: **Moalboal, Cebu, Philippines**
Depth: **Down to 60m**
Diver level: **Beginner to Advanced**

Sardine Baitball

Most divers know about the famous Sardine Run in South Africa. This is where, during a limited time period, the sardines migrate. In Moalboal however, these millions of tiny, sparkling sardines dance here nearly every day, the whole year around!

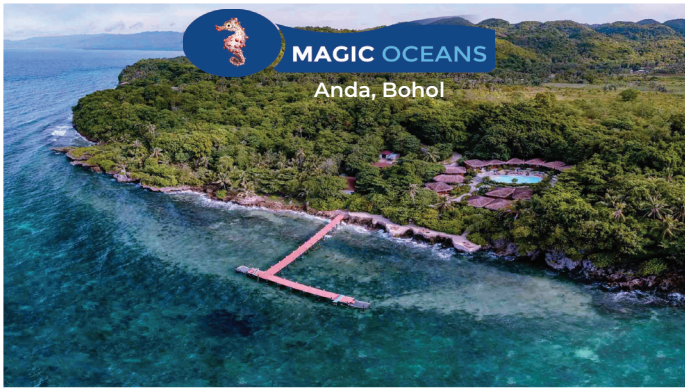
Moalboal is famous for its incredible walls, full with colourful soft corals and hard corals, like gorgonians, but the sardines are definitely the main attraction.

Watching the huge clouds of sardines creating different shapes and forms with the spectacular reef wall as the backdrop, is a definite must-do for underwater photographers and scuba divers. This tornado of small fishes is only 20-40 metres offshore, but most dive operators will take you there by a traditional Filipino banka boat.

It's not only attractive for divers, but also for the bigger marine life. Whalesharks and turtles are seen here on a regular basis, just swimming around in their habitat, while big tuna and thresher sharks are seen here for their supper.

The hunt on the small fish by these fish, especially from the thresher shark - the way they honour their name by using their tail as a whip to knock down the sardines - is a breathtaking show and the greatest bonus you can have during a regular dive!
The reef wall at this location makes it an all-inclusive dive site, so aside from a wide-angle lens, underwater photographers want to bring their macro lens as well. All kinds of marine life can be found in the corals on the wall that goes around 60m down. Critters such as frogfish, nudibranchs and shrimps, as well as different kinds of tropical fish, make this dive site astounding for any kind of diver. ●

Who to dive with
Magic Resorts Philippines
www.magicresorts.online



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Sardine Bait Ball - Whale Sharks - Blue Ringed Octopus - Bobtail Squid - Denise Pygmy Seahorse - Walls - Mating Mandarinfish

Natewa Bay

Natewa Bay is one of the newest diving areas in the Fiji Islands, and rapidly becoming known for its spectacular under-explored reefs boasting some of the highest hard coral cover and diversity to be found anywhere in the South Pacific.

The seaside town of Savusavu, known as Fiji's 'Hidden Paradise', is already known to many divers as an ideal base for exploring the world-class soft corals of Namena Marine Reserve and one of the few dive spots in the world where divers can encounter schooling hammerheads.

What most divers don't know is that it's also the gateway to the little-known natural beauty of Natewa Bay, just a 30-minute drive away.

It is one of the longest and deepest bays in the South Pacific (80km and 1,500m respectively), with the mountains buffering the bay on three sides providing sheltered conditions for divers and fragile hard corals alike.

Traditional Fijian villages dot the coastline, and relatively limited road access to the bay creates a notable absence of resort developments and boat traffic.

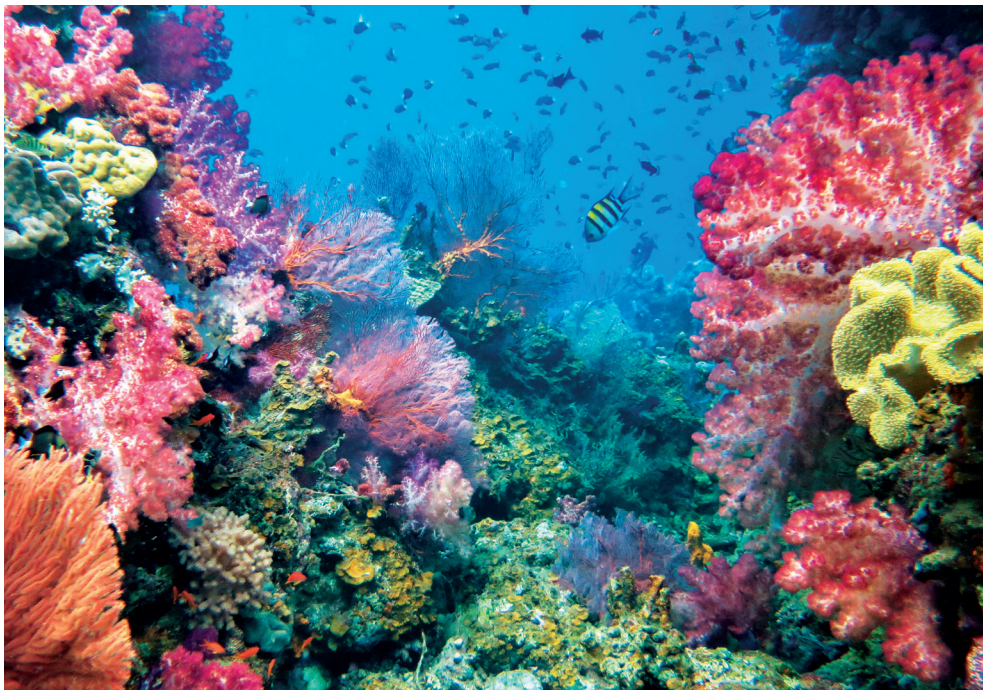
Divers who venture into Natewa Bay are treated to a staggering diversity of vibrantly coloured hard corals along with some of Fiji's iconic marine life - schools of snapper and barracuda, pelagics such

Did you know?

Fiji coral reefs support over 1,500 fish species in Fiji, many unique to Fiji. Fiji coral reefs are made up from over 390 coral species.

Essential information

Location: **Savusavu, Fiji**
Depth: **5m-25m**
Diver level: **Beginner to advanced**



as mackerel and trevally, reef sharks, enormous sea fans, and hundreds of species of colourful reef fish.

The shallow reefs of the bay are suitable for all experience levels without sacrificing exhilaration, as deep waters surrounding the reefs keep the corals healthy and the reef fish abundant without the stronger currents encountered in other parts of the islands.

The reefs are owned by local communities, and there are still numerous reefs that have yet to be explored by divers. With only one dive operator based in the entire bay, there is never a crowded dive site, and the added thrill that you could be seeing a part of the reef that has never been reached before.

There are few locations where divers can visit such pristine, remote reefs while still having access to the creature comforts and more popular diving experiences that Savusavu has to offer.

Natewa Bay is one of those places that is so magical that you'll want to share it, but at the same time you'll feel compelled to keep Fiji's secrets. •

Who to dive with
Ocean Ventures Fiji
www.oceanventuresfiji.com

Savasi Island Resort
www.savasiisland.com

"With only one dive operator based in the entire bay, there is never a crowded dive site, and the added thrill that you could be seeing a part of the reef that has never been reached before"

Did you know?

Due to this wreck's protected status, access is by permit only, so make sure you use a licensed operator. That also means you are not allowed to touch or penetrate the wreck.

SS Yongala

The SS Yongala was on her 99th voyage when she was caught in a cyclone and disappeared without a trace. All of the 122 people on board perished in the disaster. The ship had been enroute to Cairns from Melbourne.

She was due to be fitted with a radio on her 100th voyage - a piece of equipment that could have saved lives, or enabled the Yongala to avoid tragedy altogether. The vessel's sinking just south of Townsville on 23 March 1911 was a mystery, and the Yongala remained undiscovered until 1958.

The Yongala rests on its starboard side on the sandy seabed and has become a mecca for marine life. The deepest part of the wreck is at 28m, with the shallowest areas around 15m. It is in remarkably good condition for a ship that has been submerged for over a century.

The coral covers almost every inch of the 109-metre-long ship, and the sheer volume and diversity of marine life that visits this wreck or calls it home is astonishing.

Huge schools of barracuda swirl above this artificial reef, joined by other large predatory fish like trevallies, wahoo, kingfish and snapper. Silky sharks, grey reef sharks, guitar sharks, eagle rays, marble rays, cobias and turtles are just a few regular visitors to this oasis for marine life.

Residents of the wreck include giant grouper, lionfish, stonefish, scorpionfish and moray eels. There is also a substantial collection of critters, nudibranchs of all shapes and sizes, including huge Spanish dancers, various crustations and pipefish. As you would expect, this healthy and bustling reef is also home to a myriad of smaller reef fish.

As a mark of respect for those who lost their lives, and to help preserve this jewel of a dive, entering the Yongala is prohibited. However, with the amount of marine life on and around the wreck, it would be difficult to tear yourself away from the relentless action outside this absolutely stunning dive site. •

Who to dive with
Adrenalin Dive and Snorkel
www.adrenalindive.com.au

Essential information

Location: **Townsville, Australia**
Depth: **15m-28m**
Diver level: **Advanced**

“The Yongala rests on its starboard side on the sandy seabed and has become a mecca for marine life. The deepest part of the wreck is at 28m, with the shallowest areas around 15m”

Did you know?

Much like a terrestrial zoo, the Wakatobi dive site that bears this name is packed with an intriguing variety of creatures and attractions available to everyone.

The Zoo

The Zoo is a site that has something for everyone. A combination of easy-access, calm conditions and a diverse depth range make this site ideal for snorkellers, new divers and families wanting to share the underwater wonders with their younger members.

At the same time, a wealth of macro treasures keeps underwater photographers busy, and exploration-minded divers can create multi-level profiles that extend from precipice-like formations at the lower regions of the site up to sunlit shallows for relaxing off-gassing.

The Zoo sits in a small bay located just a short boat ride south of the jetty at Wakatobi Resort. The site is configured like a huge underwater amphitheatre, with slopes flanking a central valley that descends from the surface to depths beyond 30m. Close to shore, staghorn groves, porites clusters and lettuce coral formations crop up from a sandy seabed, providing snorkellers with plenty of opportunities for exploration. This area is populated with a colourful assortment of reef fish, and sandy areas between the corals hold a host of bottom dwellers, including alien-like mantis shrimp.

Moving a few yards offshore, the coral density picks up as the reef line transitions to a series of undulating slopes, and the multitudes of top-water reef fish are joined by more exotic individual finds such as frogfish, ghost pipefish, and leaf scorpionfish. This area is a favourite with divers who enjoy long, shallow profiles.

It's also the ideal place for a safety stop when returning from deeper multi-level profiles. For most divers, it's easy to log 70-minute bottom times at The Zoo — all without running into deco or out of things to see. In addition to ample coral cover, middle depths offer plenty of anemones

Essential information

Location: **Wakatobi, Indonesia**
Depth: **1m-30m**
Diver level: **Beginner to advanced**

photo-ready clownfish pairings. Another favourite with macro enthusiasts is the mushroom anemones that harbour a namesake mushroom coral pipefish. This small white pipefish has a triangular head that gives it the appearance of a small underwater python.

As the slope steepens a bit, large barrel sponges crop up, giving curious divers a chance to hunt for tiny treasures such as the hairy squat lobster that take refuge inside the barrels. One sponge resident that is relatively easy to locate is the pink hairy squat lobster, which also goes by the name of fairy crab. This delicate creature – which is technically neither a crab nor a lobster – is a favourite subject for macro photographers. Its near-translucent body glows with pearl-like luminance and intense pinkish-purple accents, while a coat of delicate white hair evokes a fairy-like appearance.

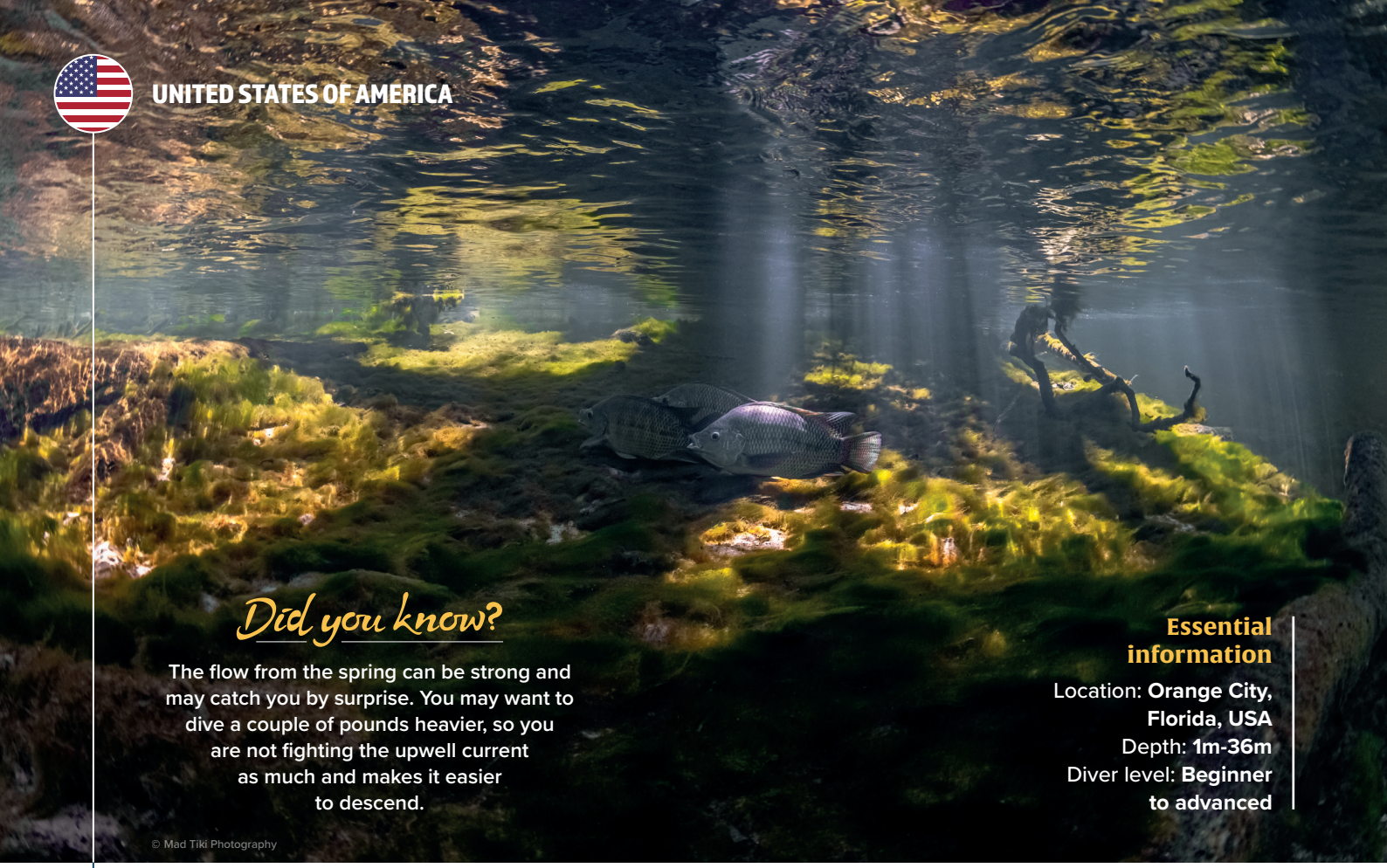
The Zoo is also a popular night diving site. The first show begins right around sundown with a final flurry of activity from the day shift before they head for nocturnal shelters. Then, as dusk turns to darkness, nocturnal hunters and scavengers emerge from their lairs.

Cuttlefish and bobtail squid prowl the reefs, while twin-spotted lionfish cruise in search of dinner. Octopus slink into the open, crustaceans use the cover of darkness to scour the seabed, and brilliant flatworms and nudibranchs make slow transits on the bottom.

The Zoo is a great site for fluo-dives, which showcase the reefs in a whole new light to reveal corals and marine life in ghostly shades of glowing fluorescence. •

Who to dive with
Wakatobi Resort
www.wakatobi.com

“Moving a few yards offshore, the coral density picks up as the reef line transitions to a series of undulating slopes, and the multitudes of top-water reef fish are joined by more exotic individual finds such as frogfish, ghost pipefish, and leaf scorpionfish”



Did you know?

The flow from the spring can be strong and may catch you by surprise. You may want to dive a couple of pounds heavier, so you are not fighting the upwell current as much and makes it easier to descend.

Essential information

Location: **Orange City, Florida, USA**
Depth: **1m-36m**
Diver level: **Beginner to advanced**

© Mad Tiki Photography

Blue Springs

Hidden away in the middle of Central Florida in a small town called Orange City is Blue Springs State Park. Blue Springs is rich with history as it was home to the Timicuan Indians for hundreds of years and later became a depot for the steamboat traffic along the St John's River.

Blue Springs is a first magnitude spring with beautiful emerald waters that are home to hundreds of manatees each winter that find a winter sanctuary from the cold waters of the St Johns River from November through March.

The spring itself is very popular with divers due to its diversity in the skills required to comfortably scuba dive there. Blue Springs is also a popular site for freedivers as the spring head reaches about 18m before it becomes a cavern. Many divers enjoy the challenge of the current rising from the deep aquifers, where water flow can exceed 100 cubic feet of water per second!

As you descend down into the spring you can see the remnants of fossils and shells from millions of years ago. Divers with proper cavern and cave certification enjoy depths that can bottom at about 36m.

After spending time diving in the spring head, Divers enjoy a beautiful drift dive back towards the main swimming entrance and can sometimes meet a friendly local manatee if they are lucky. Interacting with the manatees is forbidden, and often enforced by one of the volunteer manatee watchers that monitor the site.

Often times you will see several schools of alligator gar, you may find some plecostomus who really shouldn't be there but are interesting to watch nonetheless, turtles, bass, and sometimes, otters frequent the run from the spring head as you drift along winding through fallen oaks and observing the hustle and bustle of the underworld of the run.

You can practice your buoyancy while drifting in crystal-clear waters. In order to do all of this though, you'll need to arrive early - very early.

Check in with the rangers at the front gate. Be prepared with your physical dive certification card - they don't take your e-cards - and prepare for a healthy walk to the scuba entrance from the parking lot.

The water is 22 degrees C year-round and the run can be very popular with swimmers, snorkellers and tubers as you drift back from the spring. •

Who to dive with
Seminole Scuba
www.seminolescuba.com

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Did you know?

The Daymaniyat Islands are surrounded by turquoise waters and stunning coral reefs that are perfect for snorkelling and diving. The islands are home to endangered sea turtles, untouched coral reefs, and exotic fish.

The Daymaniyat Islands

The Sultanate of Oman is not embedded in the sub-conscious of the diving fraternity like near-neighbours Egypt and Jordan, but this is a crying shame, as this country has much to offer visiting scuba enthusiasts and adventure lovers.

With over 3,165km of coastline bordering three seas – the Arabian (or Persian) Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, and the Arabian Sea – being served by literally a handful of dive centres and liveaboards, it is a dream destination for divers, and with plenty of topside activities on hand, including wadi-bashing, climbing, hiking and much more, there is something for everyone if you happen to have any non-divers in your group.

The undoubted highlight of any diving trip to Oman are the Daymaniyat Islands, which have been a national nature reserve since 1996. This collection of nine small islands, which are spread over a reasonable distance, lie just 45 minutes from the marina in Muscat and, it has to be said, do not particularly inspire a feeling of awe when first viewed from the dive boat, as they are desolate, barren and windswept. But drop below the surface of the water and you can immediately see what all the fuss is about.

The Daymaniyat Islands boast a total of 22 dive sites, with some of the stand-outs being Aquarium, Garden of Eden, Three Sisters and Hayut Run. There are so many shoals of snapper, groups of Arabian and emperor angelfish, hordes of long- and short-fin batfish, honeycomb morays, cuttlefish, black-blotched stingrays, spotted eagle rays, leopard sharks, black-tip sharks, anemonefish, big-eye

Essential information

Location: **Daymaniyat Islands, Oman**
Depth: **3m-30m+**
Diver level: **Beginner to advanced**

trevally and turtles (you get four species commonly in Oman – loggerhead, green, Olive Ridley and hawksbill), it does actually feel like you are in a giant aquarium.

However, it isn't just the marine life that makes the Daymaniyats so great, the underwater topography is also unique. On some sites, you can make a slow 360 degree turn and just see endless gigantic table corals everywhere you look, these majestic corals literally interlocking with one another, there are so many competing for space.

As well as swathes of hard and soft corals, interspersed with vibrant sponges, some of the rock formations are also simply stunning. Swim-throughs, overhangs, nooks and crannies all help make the reef itself interesting, regardless of what swims or crawls into your path.

The best visibility can be found from April to July, and from October to November, and the waters attract a lot of plankton through August to September and December to February, but don't let this put you off – this nutrient-rich soup attracts the likes the manta rays and whalesharks. Water temperatures can reach the dizzy heights of 29-31 degrees C from April to June, but are still between 25-30 degrees C from August to November.

Oman is still one of those rare places where you can get a real 'explorer' feel when you visit, and as a diver, this is especially true, as with so few dive centres throughout the entire country, it is unusual for your dive group not to be the only ones in the water at your chosen dive site. •

Who to dive with
SeaOman
www.seaoman.com

"The undoubted highlight of any diving trip to Oman are the Daymaniyat Islands, which have been a national nature reserve since 1996. This collection of nine small islands, which are spread over a reasonable distance, lie just 45 minutes from the marina in Muscat"

Koh Haa 1

Koh Haa is a tiny group of islands situated in the Andaman Sea 16km west of Koh Lanta. The name means five islands, but there are, in fact, six beautiful uninhabited limestone islands that offer fantastic diving to suit all levels.

Whalesharks can be spotted all year round, however, Koh Haa is more famous for tiger tail seahorse, hawksbill turtle, blue-spotted ray, spotted garden eels, pipefish, ghost pipefish, barracuda, banded sea snake, blacktip reef shark and the shy guitar shark.

The lagoon is an excellent place for beginners. Its sandy bottom is scattered with hard corals and varied marine life. In the deeper parts of this site are the pinnacles of Koh Haa 2 and 4, where large schools of fish often congregate.

Koh Haa Yai boasts an impressive cathedral-like cave and shallow hard coral gardens. Numerous pinnacles are covered in soft corals of every colour where the reef drops off. Koh Haa 6 is a small pinnacle with abundant soft corals and tiny critters. Turtles are regular visitors to this excellent dive site.

But for me, the pick of the dive sites is Koh Haa 1. The soft coral coverage is outstanding, and the topography, which includes a chimney and caves, is stunning. The entrance to the chimney lies at 18m. It opens into a small chamber full of bronze cave sweeper. The exit hole above is at 5m. From there, you can enter another very narrow tunnel that links up with a small cave, from which you can swim directly onto the reef again.

To the south of the chimney, large limestone rock pinnacles create a playground of channels and swim-throughs. Giant pink and soft purple corals are also growing out of the sand everywhere, and huge schools of snapper hover above hard coral gardens.

This dive site is in pristine condition with big stuff in the blue and critters among the corals like harlequin shrimp, ghost pipefish and more. ●

Who to dive with
Phoenix Divers Koh Lanta
www.phoenixdivers-kohlanta.com

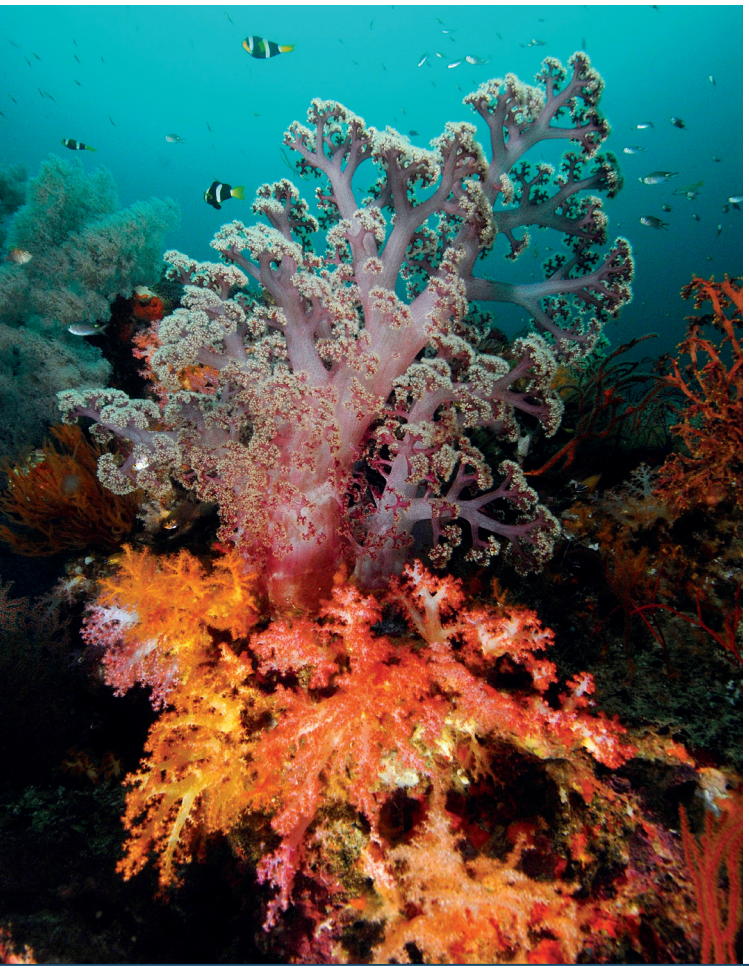
Did you know?

Thailand's has over 2,000 miles of coastline, encompassing 1,430 islands. Many of these are tourist hotspots, while others remain uninhabited to this day!

Essential information

Location: **Koh Haa, Thailand**
Depth: **5m-18m**
Diver level: **Beginner to advanced**

© Daniele Comin



“ The lagoon is an excellent place for beginners. Its sandy bottom is scattered with hard corals and varied marine life. In the deeper parts of this site are the pinnacles of Koh Haa 2 and 4, where large schools of fish often congregate ”

PHILIPPINES

> “This dive site offers all different critters, in all different species, colours and sizes”

Essential information

Location: **Anda, Bohol, Philippines**
Depth: **1m-20m**
Diver level: **Beginner to advanced**

Lamanoc – Anda, Bohol

Anda is an unknown town located at the south-east of Bohol. Being far away from mass-tourism, this little gem offers divers the feeling that they’re the only diver in the world. Anda has so much to offer when it comes to marine life, from passing whalesharks, rays and dolphins, to the smallest, rarest critters.

The combination between muck diving, walls, little caves and coral gardens makes it perfect for any type of diver. Although most divers love walls and pristine coral gardens, there’s a muck dive site in Anda that even wall-lovers believe is one of the most-special dive sites they’ve ever explored – Lamanoc.

Lamanoc will change the minds of all divers who think muck diving is boring – it’s the most bustling dive site in the whole area!

The first 0-5m is a sloping coral garden where you can find the most colourful soft corals full of tropical fish, whereafter you descend along a beautiful wall down to about 20m, and that’s where the sandy bottom is – the Valhalla of special marine life.

Most critters that are on divers’ buckets list can be found at this site, from the black hairy frogfish, wunderpus, bobtail squid, mimic octopus, flamboyant cuttlefish, ghost pipefish, Shaun the Sheep, tiger shrimp, blue ringed octopus, seahorses, and more than 100 species of different nudibranchs, in more colours than a rainbow! That’s why its second name is ‘Nudibranch Paradise’. This dive site offers all different critters, in all different species, colours and sizes.

Take your time at this dive site to explore the beauty and diversity – the eye of a professional, local dive guide is definitely useful. For those who think muck diving is boring – we’d love to hear their opinion after diving at Lamanoc! •

Who to dive with
Magic Resorts Philippines
www.magicresorts.online

Barefoot Luxury in the Heart of Indonesia

Bunaken National Marine Park

Did you know?

To initiate sex, a male cuttlefish spreads his arms around his partner's head.

Giant Australian Cuttlefish Aggregation

It has been called the 'the premier marine attraction on the planet' and attracts divers from far and wide eager to experience the only known dense aggregation of spawning cuttlefish in the world.

It begins around the middle of May as the water temperatures drop and the first giant Australian cuttlefish (Sepia apama) gather just off from the rocky beach at Stony Point some 35km south-east of Whyalla in South Australia's Spencer Gulf.

By early June, as the water drops below 17°C, the annual aggregation is in full swing and tens of thousands of these wonderful creatures will have gathered in an area of about 1km^2.

And they all have one thing in mind... sexual reproduction! So fixated are they on the task in hand, they almost completely ignore you and for the underwater photographer it provides an almost inexhaustible array of subject matter that just does not care that you are there!

It all happens in less than 8m of water and the cold water is really the only limiting factor as its all accessible from the shore.

Sepia apama is the world largest cuttlefish and when fully-grown can reach up to half a metre in total length and weigh in at up to 11kg. Solitary animals, they are found all around the coastline of southern Australia – from Central Queensland on the east coast, right around the bottom of the continent and up to Ningaloo Reef in Western Australia.

Truly fascinating creatures that have an amazing ability to instantaneously change their colour and skin texture. A skill they use to great effect as camouflage when they are hunting or being hunted, to communicate with other cuttlefish and as part of the amazing displays they use to great effect during the mating season.

Giant Australian cuttlefish are also remarkably intelligent and are said to have the largest brains of all marine invertebrates. The correct term for cuttlefish mating is polyandry – which means that each female cuttlefish will have multiple male partners to ensure better genetic variability of the species.

But with females outnumbered by as much 10 to 1, 'spectacularly promiscuous' would probably better describe the almost wanton behaviour!

Adding to that dynamic is the fact that the large, mature bull males are in their second year of life and will be dead by the end of the aggregation. Whether they know that is not clear, but they certainly act like they do...

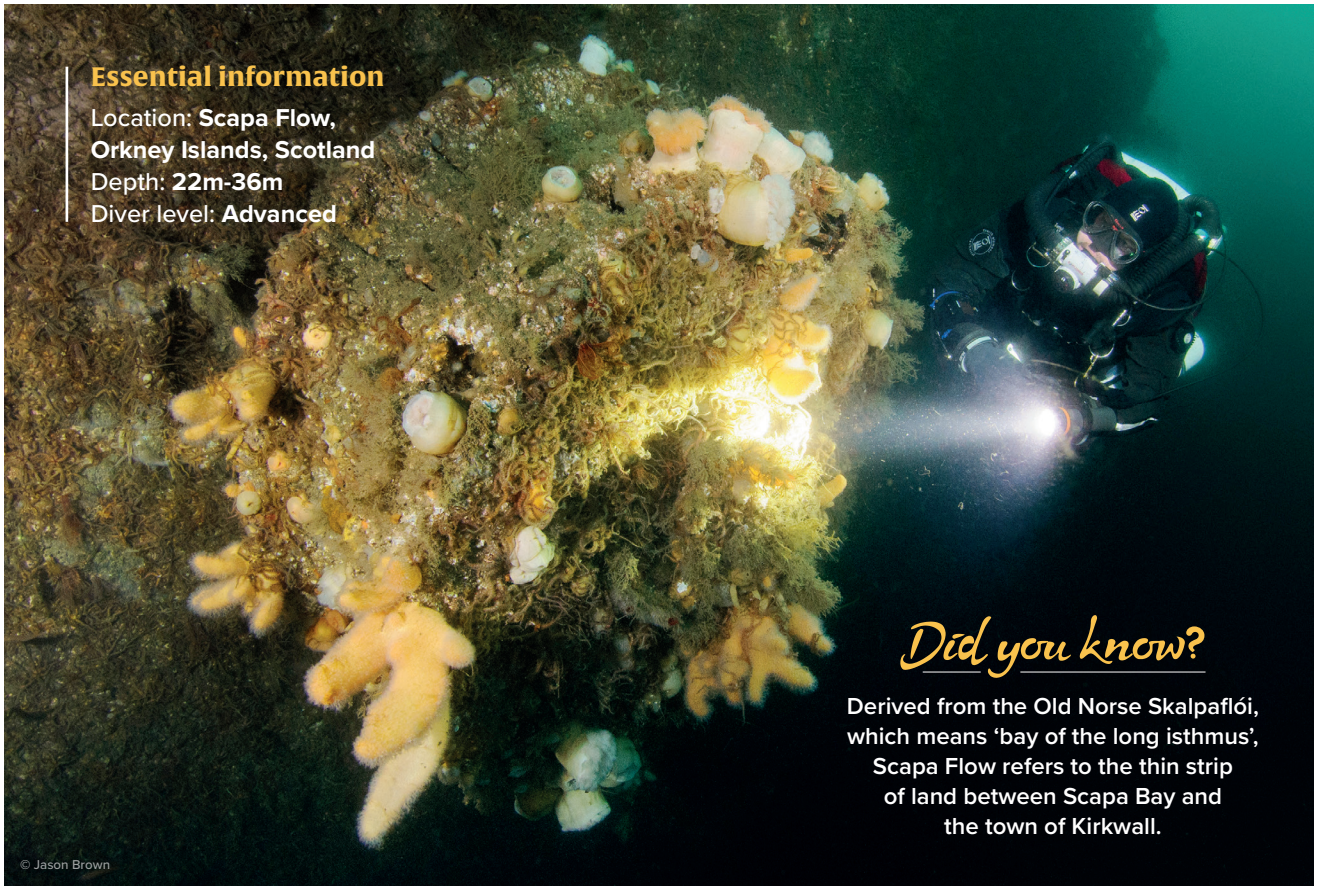
The annual aggregation is truly a unique event that really should be on every diver's Bucket List as there is nothing else quite like it! ●

Who to dive with
Scuba Courses
www.scubacourses.com.au

Essential information

Location: **Stony Point, Spencer Gulf, Australia**
Depth: **8m**
Diver level: **Beginner**

“ Giant Australian cuttlefish are also remarkably intelligent and are said to have the largest brains of all marine invertebrates ”



Essential information

Location: **Scapa Flow, Orkney Islands, Scotland**
Depth: **22m-36m**
Diver level: **Advanced**

Did you know?

Derived from the Old Norse Skalpaflói, which means 'bay of the long isthmus', Scapa Flow refers to the thin strip of land between Scapa Bay and the town of Kirkwall.

© Jason Brown

SMS Coln

Scapa Flow probably wouldn't really factor on any 'must-dive' list if it wasn't for the actions of a certain Rear Admiral Ludwig von Reuter. He was the commander of the German Imperial Navy's High Seas Fleet, which was interned in the Flow with weapons disarmed and just skeleton crews on duty.

On midsummer's day on 21 June 1919, he mistakenly believed that hostilities were about to resume and gave the signal to scuttle the entire fleet of 74 warships, comprising five battlecruisers, 11 battleships, eight cruisers and 50 destroyers.

A total of 52 of the great ships sank beneath the surface, the remaining 22 were beached or prevented from being sunk by Royal Navy boarding parties. Now, with all that intact metal on the seabed, you can imagine what sort of scene wreck divers can witness underwater today.

Right? Wrong. Sadly for divers, what followed from the early 1920s right up to 1946 was what is still the greatest marine salvage operation in history. The firm of Cox and Danks raised, towed and dismantled no less than 45 of the sunken vessels, and the remaining seven – battleships Konig, Kronprinz Wilhelm and Markgraf, cruisers Dresden, Coln and Karlsruhe, and mine-layer Brummer – were left in various states of disrepair after some further salvage and blasting work by other parties.

Thankfully, German craftsmanship back then was as good as it is now, and so while the Karlsruhe, Konig and, to a lesser extent, the Brummer are deteriorating rapidly from a recognisable 'ship-shape', the other ships – in particular the 115-metre-long Coln – are holding up pretty well considering they have been underwater for more than 100 years! On the magnificent Coln, you can still see the teak decking, 5.7-inch deck guns, capstans, bollards, armoured conning towers and much more.

Coated with a thick layer of silt and draped with sponges, plumose anemones and dead man's fingers, it can sometimes be hard to make sense of certain objects, but get your brain orientated as the ship lies – on its side for the cruisers like the Coln – and you can soon build up a picture of what it must have looked like pre-sinking.

The sheer size of the ships is daunting, but concentrate on one area – like bow to midships, for example – and you will be able to really enjoy what the wrecks have to offer. •

SMS Coln

Scapa Flow, UK

58.53.52 N, 03.08.27 W

Essential information

Location: **Kri Island, Raja Ampat**
Depth: **12m-30m**
Diver level: **Beginner to advanced**

Neu Reef

While Raja Ampat is home to an incredible number of dive sites, one area, in particular, is a hotspot for a myriad of interconnected and overlapping reefs. Kri Island is found in the centre of the Dampier Strait, an area well known for its abundance of marine life.

While the most popular dive sites you might hear about here include Cape Kri, Sardine, and Chicken Reef, there is a much less-dived and truly incredible reef to be found - Neu Reef.

Neu Reef is an extensive reef system comprising two main sloping reefs with a shallow sandbank connecting the two. Because of the location of the dive site, you will be treated to masses of fish swimming over the reef slopes. This site has it all, from turtles, barracuda, parrotfish, and reef sharks.

The reef is an impressive combination of rock formations rich with colourful hard coral and significant soft coral growth. The openings and overhangs shaped by the rock formations are home to many species of marine life, and it is often possible to spot a tasselled wobbegong shark or two relaxing here. The soft coral growth towers above you as you make your way to the lower reaches of the reef slopes, and when looking up, you can imagine being in a field with the tree-like sea fans gently swaying with the water movement.

The two reef slopes offer an incredible diving experience, but the connecting sandbank makes this site more attractive. While this area might seem very unassuming from the distance as you cross the patch to reach the connected slope, you can spot large schools of barracuda swimming in the current.

This dive site, for many, will be enough to take an already incredible dive to the next level, but this dive's crowning point is found hiding in the sandbank below. The bank sits at a shallow 12m-15m and is largely protected from the stronger currents that can sweep through the Dampier Strait, making it the perfect habitat for the elusive Papuan garden eels.

These small eels can be seen as far as the eye reaches and from a distance look like single stalk soft coral swaying in the current, but in fact, these eels are using the water movement to feed on the plankton and other micro-organisms transported in the water.

Neu Reef is genuinely one of the best-kept secret dive sites in the Raja Ampat area. •

Who to dive with
Meridian Adventure Dive
www.raja.meridianadventuredive.com

One network, a thousand ways to explore the underwater world!

Whether you are a **seasoned diver**, a **new snorkeler** or an **aspiring free diver**, looking for an adventure, **a plunge into luxury or a relaxed experience**, whether you are a solo traveller, a group of friends or a family with kids, we have a trip that is just right for you.

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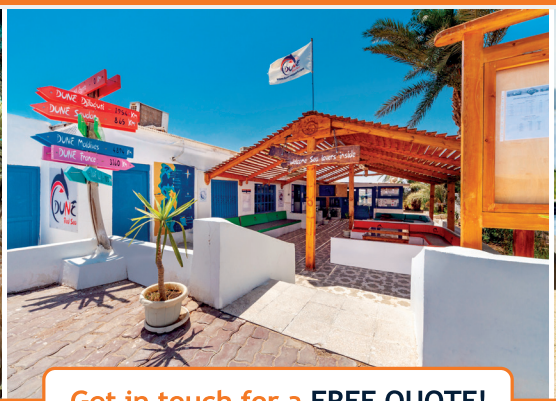

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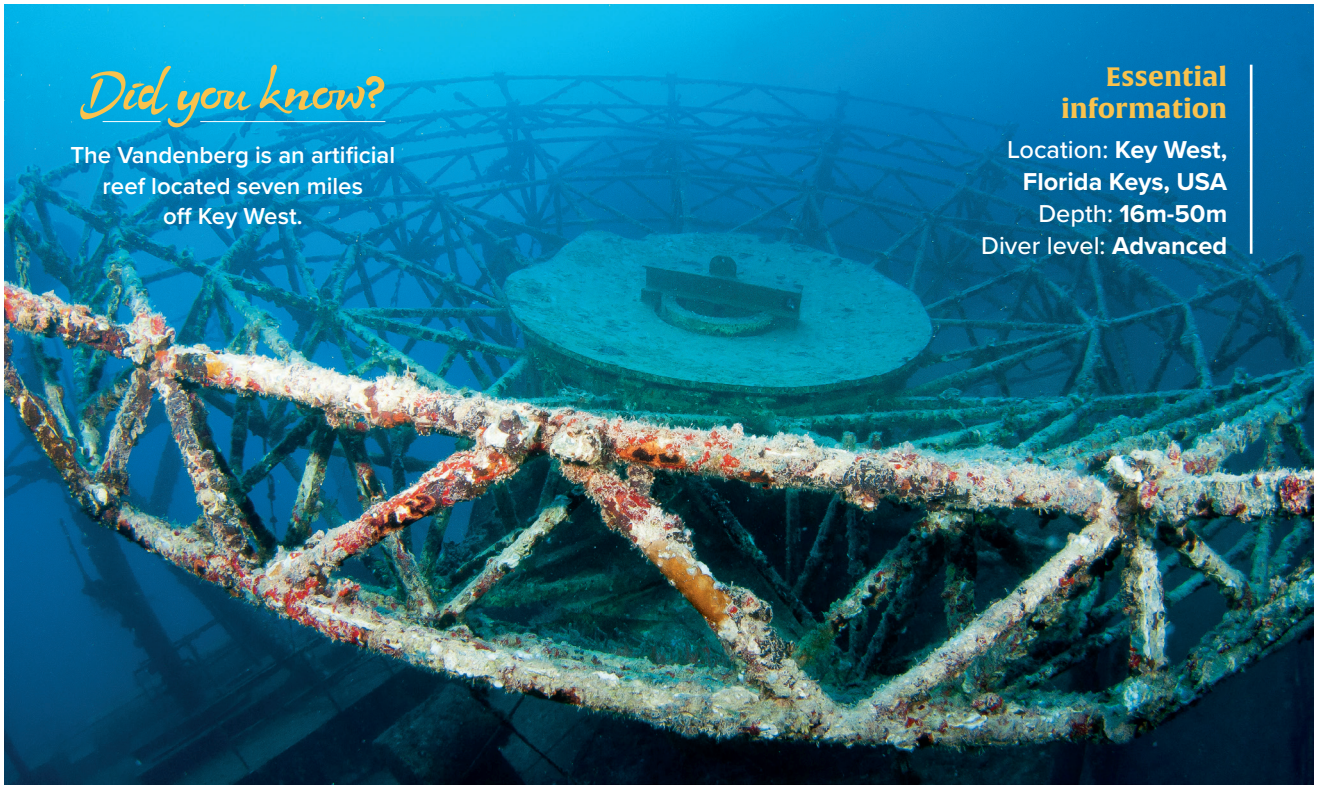


Did you know?

The Vandenberg is an artificial reef located seven miles off Key West.

Essential information

Location: **Key West, Florida Keys, USA**
Depth: **16m-50m**
Diver level: **Advanced**

USNS General Hoyt S Vandenberg

The 159-metre-long USNS General Hoyt S Vandenberg was originally named the USS General Harry Taylor, and was laid down under a Maritime Commission contract on 22 February 1943.

Designed to be a troop transport, it was officially acquired by the Navy on 29 March 1944, and set off from San Francisco on its first mission to New Guinea on 23 June 1944, carrying basic troop reinforcements. Throughout the following year, the transport vessel would continue to make routine trips to the area, carrying troops and supplies, until the war in Japan came to an end on 5 August 1945.

Following the conclusion of the war, the General Harry Taylor continued to be used as a transport vessel to carry returning soldiers from the Pacific Asian campaign and the European campaign back to the US. It did so up until it was decommissioned in Baltimore, Maryland, on 13 June 1946.

The General Harry Taylor went out of service on 19 September 1958 before being reacquired by the US Air Force on 15 July 1961, and being renamed the USAFS General Hoyt S Vandenberg - the namesake for the vessel was famed World War Two Air Force general Hoyt Sanford Vandenberg.

The ship was only in service for three years before the Navy reacquired it on 1 July 1964, thus changing its name once again to USNS General Hoyt S Vandenberg. Between 1964 and 1983, the Vandenberg was set to a variety of tasks, such as testing missile ranges, as well as missile and spacecraft tracking, and was equipped with distinctive radar dishes. In 1998, a horror film called Virus actually used the Vandenberg in a few of its scenes.

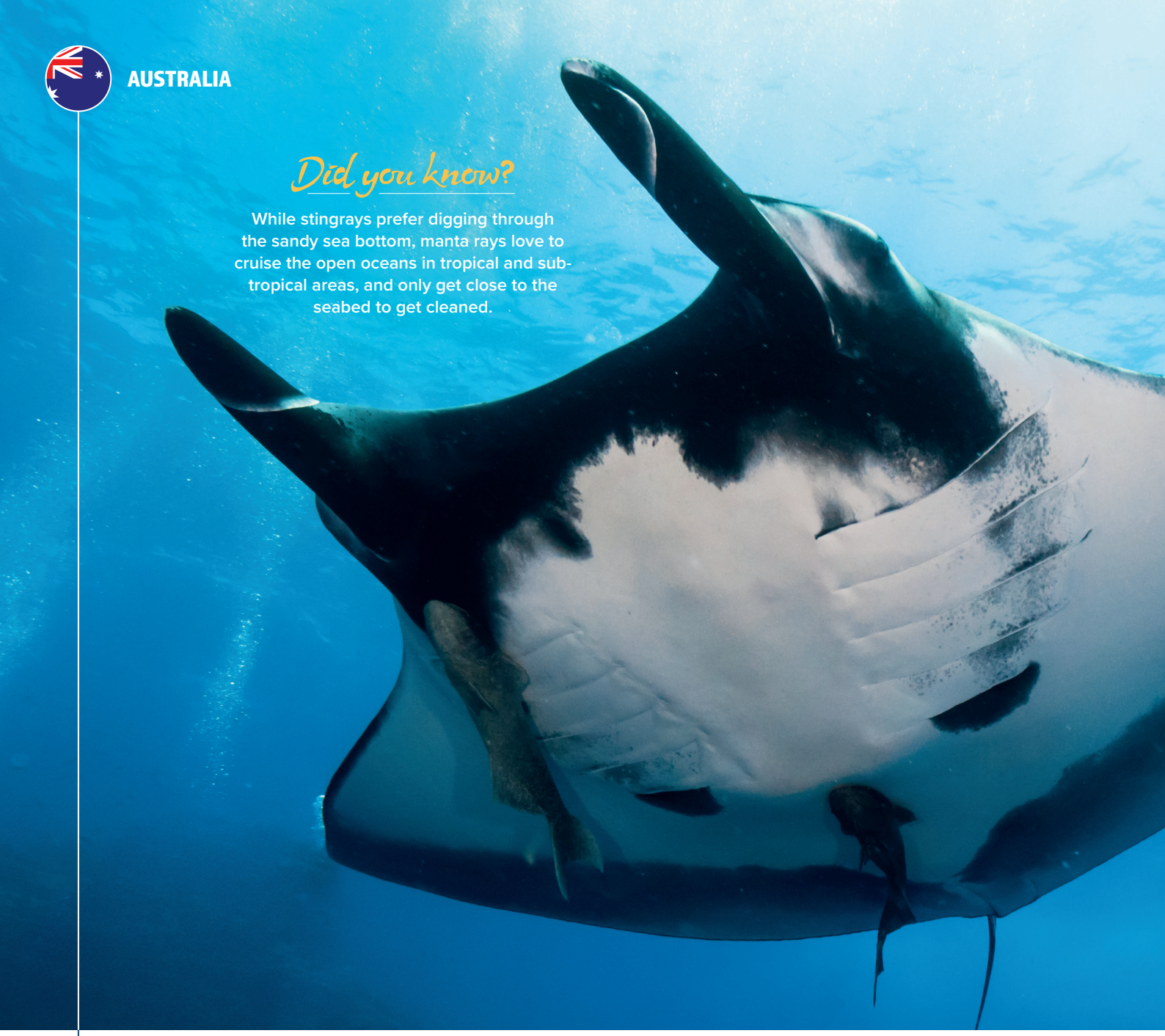
The Vandenberg was finally put out of order in 2008, before it was acquired and sunk as an artificial reef – the second largest in the world after the USS Oriskany - in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary off Key West on 27 May 2009.

It sits upright in 42m, with much of the extensive superstructure lying from 16m-17m, meaning there is plenty to explore in the recreational diving range, although its immense size makes it a great technical dive as well. However, its sheer size should not be taken lightly, and there have been fatalities on the wreck. Suitably qualified divers will find it an amazing dive, and it takes several dives to fully explore the vast ship. ●

USNS Hoyt S Vandenberg

Florida, USA

24°27’ N, 81°44’ W



Did you know?

While stingrays prefer digging through the sandy sea bottom, manta rays love to cruise the open oceans in tropical and sub-tropical areas, and only get close to the seabed to get cleaned.

Manta Bommie

Here's your chance to scuba dive with manta rays! Manta Bommie gets its name as it acts as a cleaning station for manta rays. Encounter manta rays throughout the whole year, however peak season is between May – August on the outer reef of Lady Musgrave Island.

Other wildlife you can see at this dive location include eagle rays, bull rays, reef sharks, blacktip sharks, whitetip sharks, leopard sharks, tawny nurse sharks, hammerhead sharks, turtles, anemones and, of course, Nemo the clownfish.

Humpback whales can be heard singing in the distance during whale season of July to October.

This is a great spot to take photographs as you'll be surrounded by beautiful, shallow coral gardens with a variety of different corals and colours. The Manta Bommie has a sloping sand bottom with scattered bommies throughout and allows for an amazing drift dive.

Let the current on the outer edge transport you through the water. You'll feel like you're flying and be able to cover a long distance from the drift dive. ●

Who to dive with
Lady Musgrave Experience
www.ladymusgraveexperience.com.au

Essential information

Location: **Lady Musgrave Island, Australia**
Depth: **12m-20m**
Diver level: **Beginner to advanced**

Did you know?

Lady Musgrave Island is a 14 hectares coral cay on Australia's Great Barrier Reef, with a 1,192 hectares lagoon surrounding the reef. The island is the second southernmost island in the Great Barrier Reef chain of islands.

"Other wildlife you can see at this dive location include eagle rays, bull rays, reef sharks, blacktip sharks, whitetip sharks, leopard sharks, tawny nurse sharks, hammerhead sharks, turtles, anemones and, of course, Nemo the clownfish"

Did you know?

Being a filter feeder, whalesharks cannot bite nor chew – they are truly the gentle giants of the ocean. Instead of biting and chewing, they mostly sieve plankton through their gills for nourishment.

> **“From November to April, whaleshark sightings are reported more often in the Maamigili area at the very southern end of South Ari Atoll”**

Essential information

Location: **Ari Atoll, Maldives**
Depth: **5m-30m**
Diver level: **Beginner to advanced**

Whaleshark Dive

In June 2009, the South Ari Atoll Marine Protected Area became the largest protected area in the Maldives, encompassing some 42 km sq of coral reef habitat – and it was selected for this protection because of its importance as a globally significant aggregation site for the whaleshark.

The MPA extends to 1km from the shoreline and runs from Rangali Island at its north western edge, round to the end of the local inhabited island of Dhigurah at its north eastern extremity. Bordering the length of the MPA are four local islands as well as four resort islands, and scattered among these larger islands are a few small vegetated islands and bare sandbanks.

The nearest landfall to the west of South Ari Atoll is Somalia, some 2,800km distant. As a result, the west- and south-facing reefs are exposed to powerful ocean swells and strong winds, with the reef top reflecting the strength of the pounding surf with relatively stunted growths of table and porite corals. On the eastern, more-sheltered side, the reefs are in a much better condition, with table corals up to three metres wide seen in places.

Sightings of whalesharks are possible all year round in South Ari Atoll, and research shows that there is no seasonality through the year for the number of individual whalesharks in the region, however, based on past experience, it seems like the best time on the east side for whaleshark diving is from August to November.

From November to April, whaleshark sightings are reported more often in the Maamigili area at the very southern end of South Ari Atoll, while from May to October, more often in the area just behind LUX* South Ari Atoll. Both areas feature a massive underwater reef with a shallow plateau between 5-10m deep and a sloping reef/drop-off to 30m and plus on the sandy bottom. A good variety of outstanding marine life can be seen by divers in these areas, for example white-tip and black-tip reef sharks, grey reef sharks, turtles, eagle rays and mobula rays, Napoleon wrasse, octopus and so on, as well as whalesharks.

From January to March, there have been more sightings of whalesharks on the west side of South Ari Atoll. •

Who to dive with
Euro-divers
www.euro-divers.com

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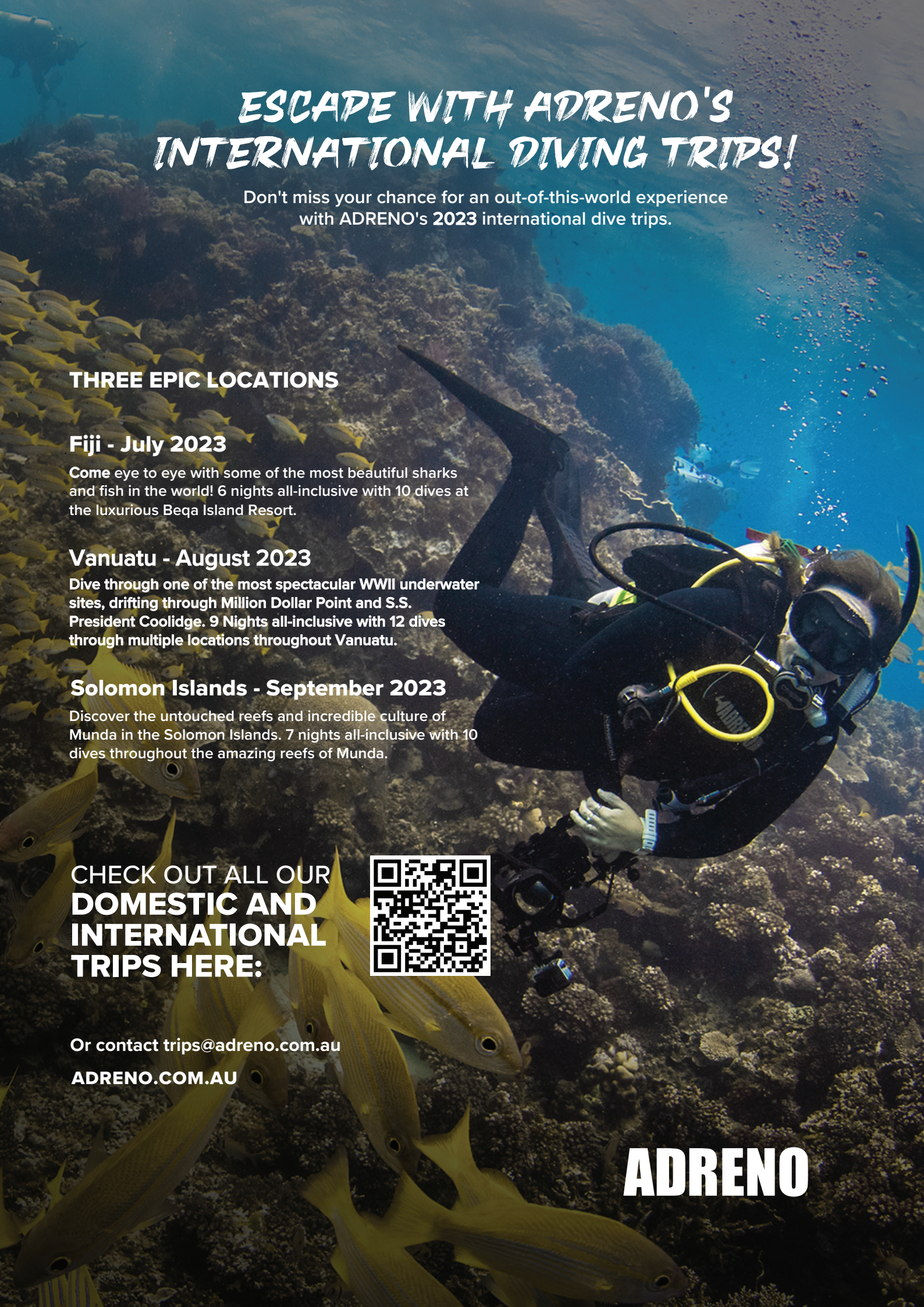
Don't miss your chance for an out-of-this-world experience with ADRENO's **2023** international dive trips.



THREE EPIC LOCATIONS

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Come eye to eye with some of the most beautiful sharks and fish in the world! 6 nights all-inclusive with 10 dives at the luxurious Beqa Island Resort.

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Solomon Islands - September 2023

Discover the untouched reefs and incredible culture of Munda in the Solomon Islands. 7 nights all-inclusive with 10 dives throughout the amazing reefs of Munda.

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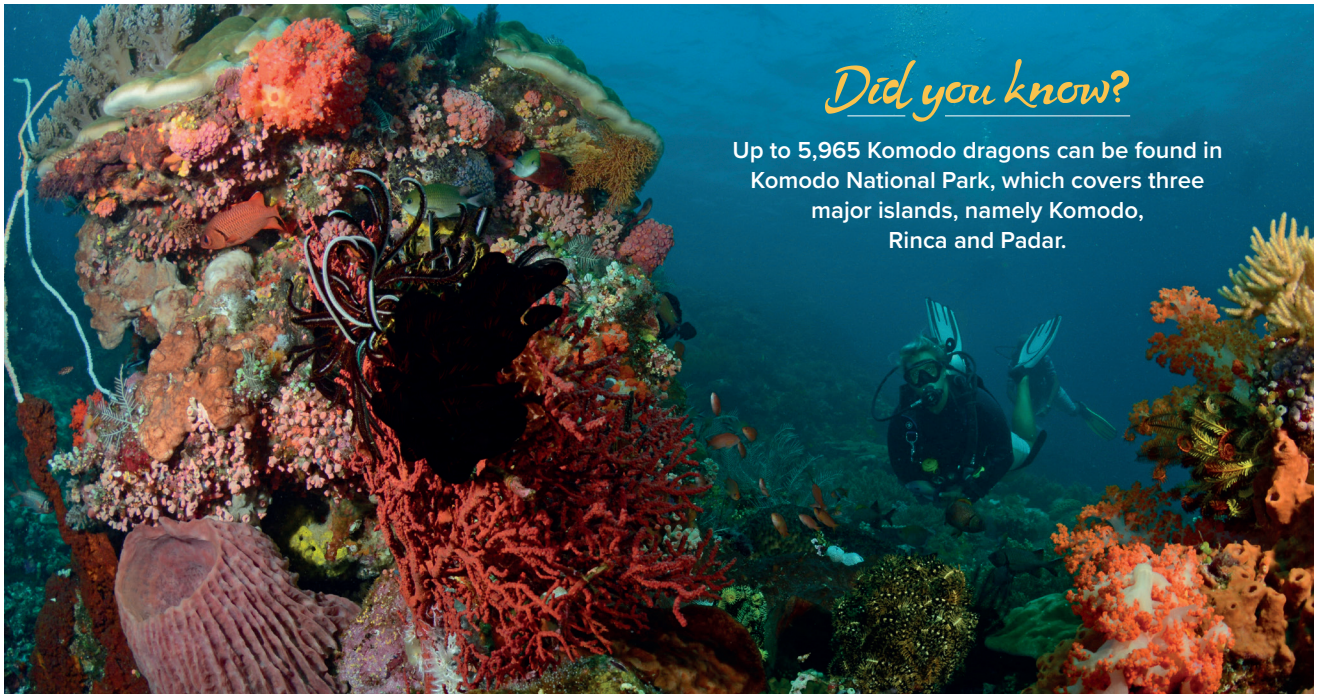


Did you know?

Up to 5,965 Komodo dragons can be found in Komodo National Park, which covers three major islands, namely Komodo, Rinca and Padar.

Castle Rock

Komodo National Park, Indonesia, is known for its strong currents and abundant marine life both big and small. The region has been blessed with a multitude of outstanding dive sites - Crystal Rock, Manta Alley, Batu Balong, Cannibal Rock and The Cauldron, to name a few.

For me, though, Castle Rock is the pick of the bunch. Located in open water in the park's northern reaches, this submerged reef is an absolute gem.

Lying just 5m beneath the surface, this giant rock vaguely resembles a turreted castle, which sits on top of a plateau that then slopes down on all sides into the depths. The reef has great coral coverage, excellent critter spotting opportunities, sharks, turtles, schooling fish and even the occasional visit from manta rays and dolphins. However, when the current is ripping, especially close to a full or new moon, Castle Rock transforms from excellent to mind-blowing and becomes an adrenaline-fuelled punch in the face of a dive site.

In my experience, the best time of day to dive this site is early morning or late afternoon when the predators are out in force, and most of the action seems to occur. The best place to be is where the current first hits the reef, and the best way to reach this spot is to drop in slightly in front of the reef and get down to 25m-30m as fast as possible before the current pushes you off the reef, and then hook onto a rock and watch the show.

Here, massive schools of fusiliers and yellow-masked surgeons congregate. Whitetip reef sharks glide over the reef, and grey reef sharks patrol out in the blue, joined by tuna and wahoo. Large gangs of the thuggish-looking giant trevallies mingle innocently with the schooling fish. Then out of nowhere, this tranquil scene of coexistence is shattered, the trevallies suddenly burst into life and harpoon through the fusiliers prompting the sharks and other predatory fish to follow suit. For a few minutes, absolute bedlam ensues, and the whole dive site becomes a swirling, dizzying mass of fish that completely engulf you. The schools are so large you can even hear a boom when they all simultaneously change direction in an attempt to confuse and evade their pursuers.

The reef fish that take refuge in the coral labyrinths are also not safe from the frenzied attention of the trevallies who enlist the help of moray eels and whitetip reef sharks to push the unfortunate fish from their coral enclaves. Once out in the open, they soon disappear in a cloud of scales.

Depending on the current, at Castle Rock, you can witness predation at its merciless best or enjoy a sedate cruise through coral gardens searching for critters. This is a dive site that you can dive time after time and never get bored. ●

Who to dive with
The Arenui
www.thearenui.com

“ Lying just 5m beneath the surface, this giant rock vaguely resembles a turreted castle, which sits on top of a plateau that then slopes down on all sides into the depths ”

Essential information

Location: **Komodo National Park, Indonesia**
Depth: **5m-30m**
Diver level: **Advanced**

“ Here, massive schools of fusiliers and yellow-masked surgeons congregate. Whitetip reef sharks glide over the reef, and grey reef sharks patrol out in the blue, joined by tuna and wahoo ”

Thundercliff Cave

With fantastic warm clear water, untouched corals, endemic and hybrid fish, whalesharks and other pelagics appearing during the year, Christmas Island boasts some of the best scuba diving sites in Australia, so it is hard to choose only one site to dive before you die.

The island rises dramatically from the edge of the Java Trench, the Indian Ocean's deepest point, and has 80km of spectacular drop-off diving, with most walls being only 20 metres from the shoreline. Dotted along the coast are numerous sea caves and overhangs that can be explored safely, by most divers.

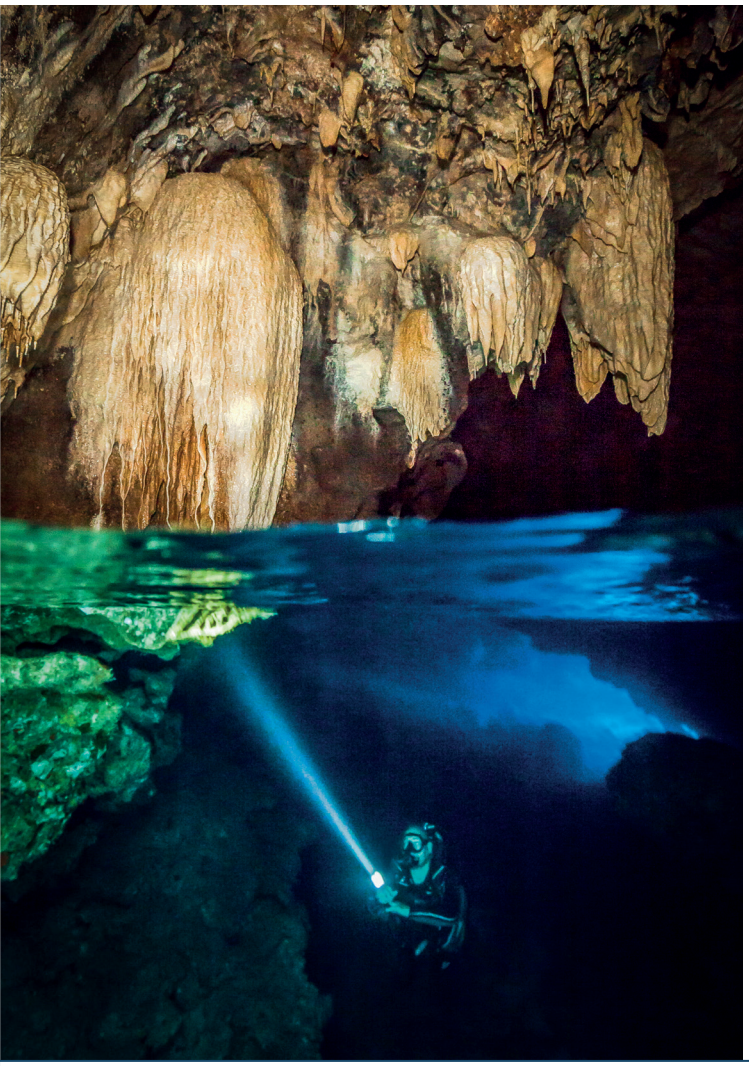
Thundercliff Cave is one of the most incredible and popular dive sites on the island. Divers get dropped by boat into the clear water right in front of the cave, where they can descend to 30m for the first half of the dive, to marvel at the drop-off. On the ascent to the cave, the outstanding coral gardens in front could delay your final goal and entry to the cave, which is why you'd never get bored diving this site. The entrance and cave is large, and can fit a number of divers, hugging the side walls, looking for rare nudibranch, slipper lobster and frogfish. As the first chamber shallows, divers ascend to the surface and marvel at the stalactites. The name quickly becomes evident with the sound of the seas outside.

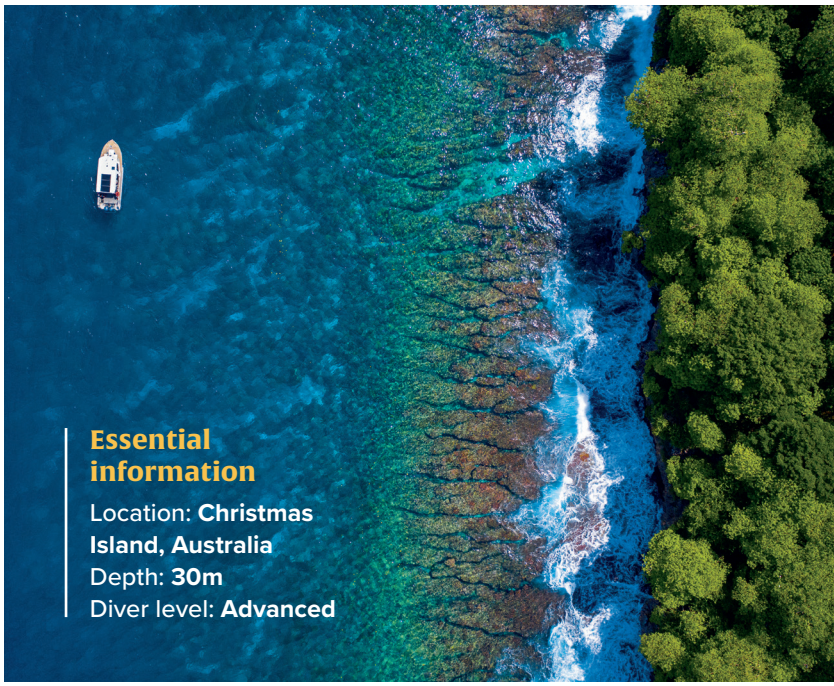
Descending to exit, the divers find an array of sponges, with small shrimps, crabs, eels and the iconic blue water exit. For those lucky divers at the right time of year, usually November to December, it's possible to see the red crab migration up close - unlike any diving in the world. ●

Who to dive with

Extra Divers Christmas Island
www.extradivers.com.au

Christmas Island Wet n Dry Adventures
www.divingchristmas.com





Essential information

Location: **Christmas Island, Australia**
Depth: **30m**
Diver level: **Advanced**

“Thundercliff Cave is one of the most incredible and popular dive sites on the island. Divers get dropped by boat into the clear water right in front of the cave, where they can descend to 30m for the first half of the dive, to marvel at the drop-off”

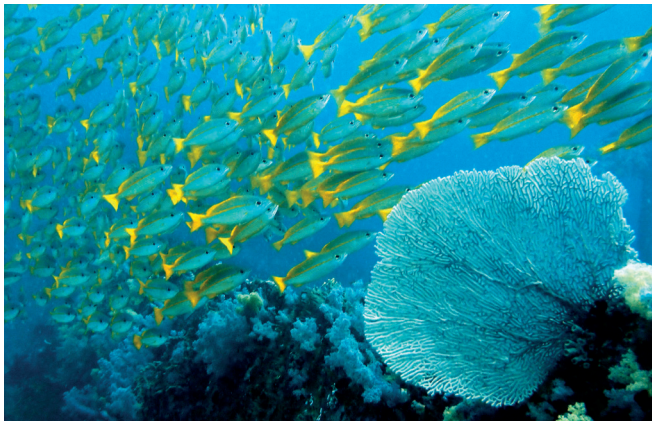
> The Alma Jane is home to large schools of batfish, sweetlips, red and yellow snapper, occasional frogfish and many other smaller fish, sometimes eels and sea snakes

Did you know?

The Alma Jane rests upright on the sand at 30m and is home to a good population of fish.

Essential information

Location: **Puerto Galera, Oriental Mindoro, the Philippines**
Depth: **30m**
Diver level: **Advanced**



Alma Jane

The Alma Jane, once a Philippine cargo vessel, was cleaned and stripped down in 2003 and sunk off the shores of Puerto Galera and Sabang Bay. It now sits at 30m in an upright position and is 30 metres in length.

There is plenty to explore around the exterior, but there are parts of the wreck where it is safe to penetrate into the interior.

The Alma Jane is home to large schools of batfish, sweetlips, red and yellow snapper, occasional frogfish and many other smaller fish, sometimes eels and sea snakes. Hawksbill turtles come by for a visit on the wreck too.

In the early morning light on a day with exceptional visibility, it's a perfect place to dive. Alma Jane is also a great place to train, including Nitrox and Deep Dive for your Advanced Open Water Diver course.

The Alma Jane is one of the most-popular dive sites of Puerto Galera and even if you have been there before, you won't get tired of the vibrant marine life surrounding it. You can end your dive by swimming to the shallows near Fantasea Reef to maximize your bottom time. •

Who to dive with
Arkipelago Divers & Beach Resort
www.arkipelagodivers.com

> She's become known as 'The Oliver', thought to be of British origin, and represents a time-capsule of great historical significance

Essential information

Location: **Utila**
Depth: **18m**
Diver level: **Beginner to advanced**

The Oliver

It's easy to be seduced by the clear blue warm waters of the Caribbean. And for good reason. You can experience pretty much every kind of diving there is, from stunning corals and beautiful wildlife to glorious drop-offs and haunting wrecks.

But a diver's choice is often guided by personal passion, not least the chance to learn new skills that help take their experience to a new level. The tiny, sun-scorched Honduran island of Utila offers a rare opportunity to become an expert in the art of being a wreck detective through a unique course in diving archaeology – Wreck Hunters.

For here lies an 18th century wreck discovered by a pioneering treasure-hunting expedition in the 1970s. She's become known as 'The Oliver', thought to be of British origin, and represents a time-capsule of great historical significance. This year, the team have been tirelessly preparing the site of the wreck, which lies in 18m of gin-clear tropical Caribbean waters, as an underwater classroom for a new course which begins in earnest in the summer of 2023.

Participants in the Wreck Hunters course will benefit from a masterclass in underwater archaeology skills, old and new. The wide range of techniques on offer vary from the fundamentals of diving archaeology to the latest hi-tech methods deployed to investigate historical wrecks in minute detail.

The Wreck Hunters team has invested in state-of-the-art underwater metal detectors to help find the hidden clues to the Oliver's past. Another valuable tool they use is the 'photomosaic', a software-generated image of the entire wreck site using multiple photographs 'stitched' together.

These skills in turn help answer pivotal questions about any sunken wreck - Where she was going? What was she carrying? How was she built? Who were the people on board? And what is her significance to the world of maritime travel?

The course is aimed primarily at recreational scuba divers with a passion for all things historical underwater. Other skills taught include the challenges of using lifting equipment to recover both small and large artefacts from the seabed, as well as using underwater magnetometers to locate wrecks.

Not only are the lessons from Utila transferrable, like any great diving trip the bonding experience of being part of a tight-knit team can inspire memories that will live on.

Most divers will know the remarkable story of King Henry VIII's warship the Mary Rose, as well as the recent triumphant discovery of Shackleton's famous Endurance. Well, believe it or not, what divers will take away from being a part of the Wreck Hunters project is precisely the knowledge and expertise used in these and other momentous archaeological wonders of the deep.

Project Director Mike Haigh invites you to get in touch if diving archaeology is the sort of challenge you'd like to add to your logbook. ●

Who to dive with
Wreck Hunters
www.wreckhunters.co.uk

The Great White Wall

Many divers come to Taveuni just to witness the spectacular soft coral blooms that occur when the current is just right. The current's sometimes more-than-gentle 'helping hand' will guide you past some of the most wonderful and unique proliferations of soft corals in the world.

Somosomo Strait's Rainbow Reef simply awes you with its vibrant colours as bushes of pink, white, brown or orange open and span out to capture the passing nutrients, creating the remarkable spectacle of colour that makes Taveuni scuba diving so special.

Taveuni diving, however, is not just about the colourful coral - these nutrient-rich waters boast plenty of pelagic fish species. Expect to come across barracuda, reef sharks, manta rays and turtles. Humpback and pilot whales can also be seen from July to September.

The Great White Wall is the best site to dive in the Rainbow Reef area. The site has to be hit at precisely the correct conditions and current. You are dropped off and proceed to a swim-through at 12m. The swim-through is adorned with hard and soft corals as well as colourful sponges and crinoids - you may even get to see the resident lionfish inside. Once through, you veer left. Your first thought is that you may be looking at a hill covered in snow. The wall is mostly covered in what looks like white corals, but they're actually mostly lavender, splashed in with colours of orange, red and green. As you drift by the wall, take a moment to look down and witness it disappear into the dark depths. ●

> **"The Great White Wall is the best site to dive in the Rainbow Reef area. The site has to be hit at precisely the correct conditions and current. You are dropped off and proceed to a swim-through at 12m"**

Who to dive with
Garden Island Resort
www.gardenislandresort.com

Did you know?

Solomon Islands is an island country consisting of six major islands and over 900 smaller islands in Oceania, to the east of Papua New Guinea.

Essential information

Location: **Russell Islands, the Solomon Islands**
Depth: **5m-29m**
Diver level: **Beginner to advanced**

White Beach

Nestling in the Central Province of Solomon Islands, some 50km from Guadalcanal, are a group of islands and islets called the Russell Islands. During World War Two, these islands became a very important strategic base for US forces.

This base, and the subsequent departure of US forces, has led to one of the most-unique dive sites on the planet... White Beach.

During the South Pacific Campaign, the US built an airbase along with a large pier to resupply their vessels in the area. Once the war was over, rather than packing up and shipping the supplies and working materials back to the US, the military simply pushed everything into the water and onto the nearby reef. While the Solomon Islands is home to many World War Two wrecks, White Beach is different - the site shows a different side of the war effort in the area.

From the second you drop into the water, life is all around, and lots of it. The water is teeming with tiny reef fish, including damselfish, anemonefish and cardinalfish. Above in the blue are huge schools of trevally, patrolling the pristine reef.

Heading down the reef wall and onto the sand, things change. While you might describe this section as a wreck dive, there are no boats, the wrecks are all vehicles. Jeeps, trucks, and even a bulldozer, all scattered in close proximity to each other. Each of these mini wrecks are now covered in life, forming part of the coral gardens. It is difficult to tell where the metal ends and where the coral reefs begin. As you leave the wrecks and head up the reef proper, the hard and soft corals are hugely impressive, with the reef wall boasting an array of large sea fans.

Things change again as you hit mangrove. Darting around this area are pyjama cardinals, and the unusual archerfish. Among the rocks, you can also find hairy squat lobster and a variety of crabs.

As dive sites go, it's difficult to imagine that there is a more varied reef anywhere else in the world. ●

Who to dive with
Master Liveaboards
www.masterliveaboards.com

Did you know?

Massive rock and coral formations are overgrown, with lush soft coral seen extending to the sea bottom.

Essential information

Location: **Dampier Strait, Raja Ampat**
Depth: **8m-25m**
Diver level: **Beginner to advanced**

Melissa's Garden

Melissa's Garden will often feature as one of the top dive sites on lists and recommendations when diving in Raja Ampat. As you approach the famous Fam Islands in the western part of Raja Ampat, two unremarkable pinnacles extend from the waterline.

However, nothing suggests that below the surface lies one of the world's best and most magical dive sites. The two pinnacles are surrounded by a shallow sloping reef system treating divers to impressive gullies, overhangs, and unbelievable topography as they swim between the towering structures.

While this alone would make the dive incredible, it is not even the most impressive part of the experience. As the name suggests, the entire dive site looks like a magical garden that someone has lovingly tended to.

The sloping reef is covered in colourful hard coral formations as far as the eye can see. Fields of bright red, yellow, and green surround you as you swim over the shallows connecting the two pinnacles, while masses of schooling fish gracefully swim over this immaculate garden.

Divers are often treated to large bumphead parrotfish swimming in groups or even hawksbill turtles looking for a resting place among the coral formations.

As you near the slopes of the dive sites, the topography changes again. Massive rock and coral formations are overgrown, with lush soft coral seen extending to the sea bottom. Sea fans of all shapes and colours gently move with the ocean's ebb and flow, giving the impression of walking through a field in a gentle breeze on a spring day.

The coral movement makes an eery but immensely satisfying cracking sound as you make your way slowly around the slope, while masses of fish are darting around you on the reef. Melissa's Garden is home to all, from schools of barracuda swimming in the blue just off the reef to uncountable numbers of red-tooth triggerfish playfully defending their section of the reef. While the masses of fish and incredible coral make the dive site so unique, there is plenty to see for those interested in the smaller critters. The soft coral-covered rock formations on the reef slope are home to nudibranchs, crustaceans, and much other macro life hiding in and between the dense coral.

As you steadily make your way up the slope and over the coral fields to reach the surface between the pinnacles, you are treated to incredible vistas of the Fam Islands and the Dampier Straits all around, all while the pinnacles give no hint of the magical world that lies below. ●

Who to dive with
Meridian Adventure Dive
www.raja.meridianadventuredive.com

Less metal.
Same mettle.

When asked for feedback on the C60 Trident, our Forum said "...make one that still gets noticed, without feeling its presence as much on your wrist." This new **C60 Trident Pro 300** is the result. Same widths. Same lug-to-lugs. Yet an average 1.75mm lower profile across the range. By using a sapphire case back, it's an average 14.67g lighter. too. This means its depth rating is now only as good as a Submariner. To compensate: we've added extra lume, a new bezel and an optional screwed-link bracelet. Plus actual compensation of £94 average saving. Less. And more, then?

Do your research.

Christopher Ward

christopherward.com

SCAN ME

Tabalagoal Passage

The Conflict Islands, Papua New Guinea, is an amazing place. Listed as a Hope Spot in 2020 by Mission Blue, it is made up of 21 islands with an abundance of incredible dive sites. One of the most interesting is Tabalagoal Passage, which sits a short boat ride away from the main island of Panasesa.

The site consists of a deep channel between two islands, with long coral formations interspersed with strips of white sand running parallel with the channel.

This site is known for large groups of reef sharks, schooling big-eye trevally and chevron barracuda prowling at either end of the channel, where the sand slopes away into the abyss. Due to the reliability of shark sightings at this site, it could be dived every day for those eager for shark encounters, and occasional visits from manta rays, eagle rays and turtles make this a site worthy of several dives. Peter Blatch, who visited in November 2021, said: "Entering the water on the outer slope of the channel, we descend through clear blue water to a sandy slope at a depth of 30m to sit in anticipation of what may greet us.

"Like a premonition appearing out of the gloom, a veritable wall of over 15 curious reef sharks appears, stalking back and forth in a calm yet mischievous manner, as their friends glide in from behind us to keep us on our toes. Above them and blotting out the sun like an eclipse is a large school of chevron barracuda and big-eye trevally who have arrived to see what all the fuss is about.

"The ducking and weaving sharks along with the cyclonic display of the barracuda and trevally make for an unforgettable viewing experience and will leave photographers with scant time to catch all the action due to the endlessly available subjects.

"Leaving this pelagic splendour, we ascend slowly along the coral spurs with the curious barracuda in pursuit, passing large gorgonian fans, barrel sponges and a dizzying array of reef fish swarming the hard and soft corals.

With the current now picking up we ascend to our safety stop just above the top of the coral spurs, and drift effortlessly along while enjoying the spectacle of this truly amazing dive site." ●

Who to dive with
Conflict Islands Resort
www.conflictislands.com

Did you know?

The islands are located in the Coral Sea, Milne Bay Province of Papua New Guinea, 80 miles due East of Alotau. The area is recognised for its exceptional beauty and marine biodiversity, one of the last remaining unspoilt and untouched regions.

Essential information

Location: **The Conflict Islands, Papua New Guinea**
Depth: **Max of 30m**
Diver level: **Advanced**

“Due to the reliability of shark sightings at this site, it could be dived every day for those eager for shark encounters, and occasional visits from manta rays, eagle rays and turtles make this a site worthy of several dives”

Did you know?

The cenotes are home to approximately 15 species of fish. Because the freshwater to saltwater ratio changes from cenote to cenote, so does the number of fish. Some cenotes are seemingly filled with small fish while others are practically void of marine life.

Essential information

Location: **Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico**
Depth: **1m to beyond recreational depths**
Diver level: **Advanced**

Mexico's Cenotes

Penetration diving is usually defined as entering an underwater space where there is no direct ascent to the safety of breathable air at the surface. It is very much a specialised and technically focused area of diving, that seems to attract a hard-core following of very dedicated and committed divers.

It comes in two main flavours... cave diving and wreck penetration, and it's not something you can just go and try as it's just too risky. You simply have to commit to doing the necessary training.

But there is one location where you can hire fully qualified instructors to provide a safe introduction to penetration diving – the cenotes of the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico.

The peninsula is the flat, exposed portion of the Yucatan Platform – the huge limestone foundation that forms that part of Mexico. Underground it is often compared to Swiss cheese because of the many caves and caverns found there.

Cenotes are sinkholes where the surface area of an underground cavern has collapsed to reveal what is below. Centred around Tulum, south of the main tourist city of Cancun, is a significant cottage-industry focused on training and the exploration of that Swiss cheese... which can be broken down into basic levels – cavern and cave.

Cavern means you can still see daylight and is basically a form of recreational diving using standard equipment, while cave divers penetrate much further and require very specialized training and equipment. A guided tour of the larger cavern areas of some of the cenotes in the Tulum area is a great way to get a safe introduction to penetration diving. The instructors are properly qualified, the caverns are large and have safety lines laid out to follow and the whole thing is a unique experience!

But... it is an experience that is highly likely to make you want to sign up for the full training programme. The thrill of gliding through those caverns is really quite something and is often said to be the closest thing you can get to being in outer space.

Who to dive with
Cave Training Mexico
www.cavetrainingmexico.com

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Anthony's Key Resort

Paradise got a little bit better...

Anthony's Key Resort (AKR) is located in a small key off Roatan in the Bay Islands of Honduras for over 54 years, and in that time this small, welcoming family getaway has grown and developed into an eco-friendly resort, while managing to retain its authentic island vibe.

Part of the charm of the resort is the fact that it has been owned and operated by the Galindo family from its inception, and many of the staff have been employed for decades, meaning if you are one of the legion of regular visitors, you will always be greeted by a familiar face when you arrive.

AKR is very much about being one with nature, whether you are staying water-side in a bungalow on the key itself, or in a cozy hillside bungalow surrounded by trees. Striving for a minimal impact on the environment, this eco-conscious resort has a complete ban on single-use plastics such as bottles, stirrers and bags, while solar energy provides power, and waste-water feeds the lush gardens.

Guests will be delighted with the newly opened **Ankor Seafood Grill**, with its stunning decor, sea views, and varied menu - the perfect apres-dive experience to round out your day.

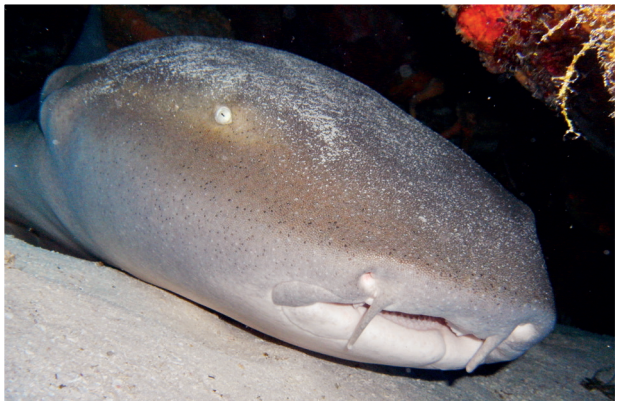
Diving is what brings many to AKR, and with a modern fleet of no less than 13 safe and comfortable dive boats, be prepared to be whisked to some of the most-scenic and memorable diving and snorkelling sites around Roatan - beginner or veteran, there is much to explore, regardless of your level of experience. There is even a coral restoration project that guests can actively get involved with.

Not yet a diver? AKR is a PADI five-star Career Development Centre, and if you want to capture your underwater adventures to show your friends, AKR has a fully equipped photo shop.

Safety is paramount at Anthony's Key Resort, and it is actually home to the Cornerstone Medical Services and Hyperbaric Chamber, which offers dependable healthcare and hyperbaric services to recreational and commercial divers in the region.

Whether you want to relax - chilling in a hammock, floating in the pool or being pampered in the spa is a great way to recharge your batteries - or get active under the water, AKR has you covered. So come join them for a coffee in Coast Coffee and see why you need the island flavour of Anthony's Key Resort in your life. •

T: **954.929.0090 / 800.227.3483**
E: **reservations@anthonyskey.com**
W: **www.anthonyskey.com**



Finding your Dive Paradise

Cozumel famously boasts some of the world's best diving conditions - bathtub warm waters teeming with life and sparkling with nearly unlimited vis. Dive Paradise, a leader on the island for over 35 years, has built its reputation on customer service and safety.

Guests benefit from those decades of professional experience and passion for sharing the local aquatic environment when they dive with 'the Name You Know and Trust'.

In addition to its exemplary safety record, Dive Paradise has the largest fleet on the island.

Whether you want a fast boat to get you to far-off reefs in a hurry, or prefer the laid-back comforts of large boats with shade and fresh snacks, you'll be well taken care of.

Plus, a large fleet means Dive Paradise has the flexibility to accommodate all experience levels, as well as groups and special requests. As for the new demands of travel, Dive Paradise is following all sanitary protocols to keep clients and employees safe.

With three scuba centres on island, no dive operator is more conveniently located. The main location is downtown, within walking distance of the Cozumel ferry dock.

A second location is within the beachside Cozumel Hotel and Resort, which offers stay-and-dive packages and features the largest pool on the island. A third location is at Villablanca Beach, where Dive Paradise hosts sunset beach parties with authentic homemade tacos and salsas.

Dive Paradise is also a full-service concierge, co-ordinating day tours to round out your dive vacation. The operator arranges day trips in summer to swim with whalesharks at neighbouring Isla Mujeres, as well as year-round offerings such as fishing charters and cenote diving. •

T: **954 743 5310 / 855 798 5300**
E: **reservations@diveparadise.com**
W: **www.diveparadise.com**

© Jordan Harrison

Essential information

Location: **Palm Beach, Florida, USA**
Depth: **6m**
Diver level: **Beginner to advanced**

Blue Heron Bridge

There are a number of reasons why Blue Heron Bridge has earned a reputation as one of the best shore dives in America. Located in the popular dive destination of Palm Beach, it offers easy water access and convenient shoreside amenities.

The site offers something for everyone from snorkellers and novice divers to avid underwater photographers, it is accessible year-round, is not affected by rough weather in the ocean, and it's definitely worth more than one visit.

The bridge itself is a sweeping arch that spans Florida's intracoastal waterway, connecting the beach community of Singer Island to the mainland. At the foot of the main span is Phil Foster Park, where divers will find ample parking, tables for gearing up and freshwater showers for rinsing off. The dive site begins at a sand beach located under and just south of the bridge, and divers can explore an area that stretches from the main span of the bridge eastward to a smaller secondary bridge.

Maximum depth at the site is rarely more than 6m, which makes for very long bottom times. In essence, the Blue Heron Bridge is a 'muck dive' but the bottom topography is not the main attraction - it's the marine life.

The sand and seagrass bottom provides ideal hunting grounds for macro life. For many underwater macro photographers, the bridge is second to none, delivering everything from stunning juvenile angelfish and butterflyfish, and nudibranchs to the strange and wonderful octopus, batfish, seahorses and frogfish. Marine life is protected here, with no collecting by scuba or snorkel allowed.

A short swim to the east of the entry point brings divers to the pilings of the smaller secondary bridge, where schooling fish and small wrecks add interest. This area is also visited by spotted eagle rays and nurse sharks as well as the occasional manatee or young Goliath grouper.

Another feature to the south of the beach that is of interest to snorkellers and new divers is a snorkel trail comprised of underwater sculptures, artificial reef modules and rock piles.

Hiring a professional dive guide will get you the optimum experience. In addition to managing logistics, gear set-up and safety, the guides know where the critters hang out. That's a big plus if your intent is to see the amazing number of things that await discovery.

Be aware that dive flags are required for diving activities, the best time to dive (for visibility and current) is one hour before high tide to one hour after) and the park hours run between sunrise and sunset. Epic night dives are permitted via a parking pass through local dive shops, such as below. ●

Who to dive with
Force-E Scuba Centers
www.force-e.com

Scuba Diving in Loreto

The waters off the Baja California Sur peninsula are well-known to be a diver's paradise, but to find the best diving in the Gulf of California, make your starting point the historic and quaint town of Loreto.

The crystal-clear waters of Loreto are home to deep reefs and unmatchable amounts of marine life of all kinds, offering unique experiences throughout its seas, lagoons, and bays. Divers have the chance to explore the Bay of Loreto National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which houses 80% of Pacific Ocean marine life and one of Mexico's largest schools of dolphins.

With angel sharks, guitarfish, torpedo rays, electric rays and more, there's immense wildlife to be seen along the reefs of this volcanic region, hailed by Jacques-Yves Cousteau as 'the aquarium of the world'.

For divers looking to make the most of their experience, June through November is known to be the prime diving period of the year, with robust wildlife in the area and pristine water temperatures.

Diving in Loreto offers the chance to delve into the enormous schools of fish, beautiful nudibranchs, and different types of turtles in the Loreto National Marine Park, with 25 dive sites for all levels, from shallow and calm with much to see to, drift dives, deep dives, wreck dives, wall dives, sea mounts, and more. From the beginner that wants to discover scuba, to the passionate tech diver that wants to go further, the many settings and dive operators will have you covered.

Groups such as Blue Nation Baja and Loreto Land and Sea Tours make up some of the many excellent local dive operators in the area. •

Loreto, Baja California Sur

Situated between the Pacific Ocean and the Gulf of California, the state of Baja California Sur encompasses the southern half of the Baja Peninsula. The climate is perfect for fishing, boating, surfing and diving, making the destination an adventurer and thrill-seeker's dream. Rich in history, Loreto - the first capital of the Californias (Mexico and US) - is said to be the first settlement in Baja California Sur and the state's original capital. The state features breath-taking scenery from the windswept ocean beaches on the west to the tranquil, turquoise waters on the east. In between are canyons, desertscapes and lush oasis ripe for exploration. Known for its extraordinary marine life, whale watching is one of the area's most well-known tourist attractions, along with sportfishing, kayaking and bird watching. More information on Baja California Sur's Loreto and northern regions is available at **www.visitbajasur.travel**

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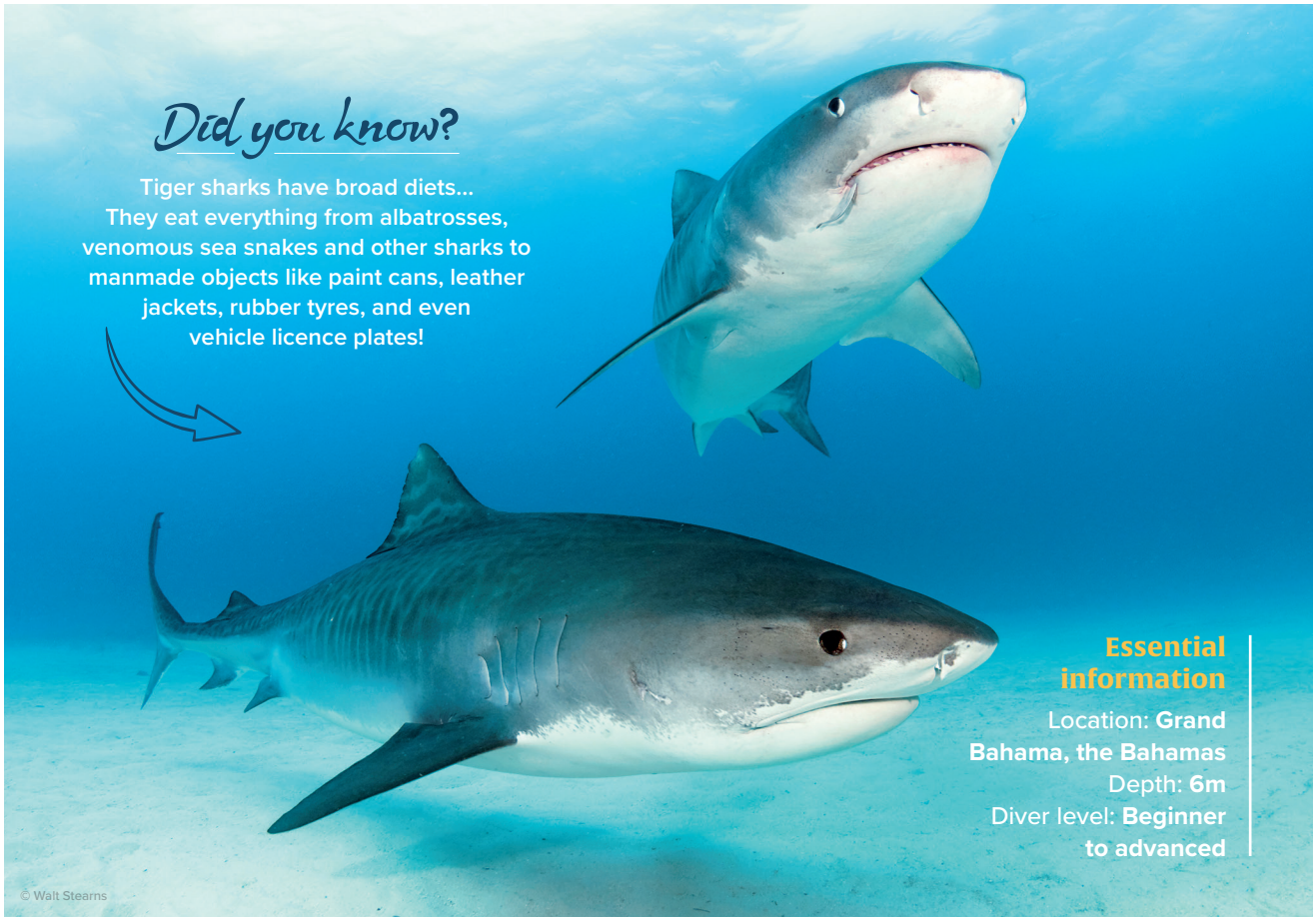

Tiger Beach

The Bahamas has something for everyone. There are wrecks, reefs, blue holes, all filled with a vast array of marine life. But it's very difficult to think of anywhere that is more iconic than Tiger Beach when you are thinking about the best dive site in the Bahamas.

Technically, Tiger Beach is not really a single site that you can cover in one or two dives. If you leave the West End of Grand Bahama, then cruise for around an hour, you will find yourself in an area of some 50 square km that is known as a whole as Tiger Beach. And what is Tiger Beach known for? Well, the clue is in the name... tiger sharks.

Nobody knows quite why, but this area is where pregnant tiger sharks congregate to chill, while preparing to release their babies into the wild. To add to the mystery, nobody knows where this release happens. But regardless, this means a stunning experience awaits.

The site itself is a relatively shallow sandy area, seemingly quite innocuous. But once you are in the water, things change. There are large numbers of lemon sharks and Caribbean reef sharks, in themselves, impressive enough.

But pregnant tiger sharks really make things impressive. Also, as individuals tend to stay in these shallow waters for several months on end, dive crews can get really familiar with these ladies, often almost considering them as friends. During a trip to Tiger Beach, you will generally get to know, and discern, specific individuals yourself.

And there is a cherry on this toothy cake too. If you head to Tiger Beach at the right time of year, you can also see giant hammerheads in the same place, cruising with the tigers. An experience that you really can't get anywhere else in the world.

You would think that this would be enough, but variety is the spice of life. And it's not all about the sharks. Tiger Beach is also home to a multitude of very healthy reef networks, mini walls, and of course, the continental shelf, where the drop off plunges down to more than 600m. ●

Who to dive with
Master Liveaboards
www.masterliveaboards.com

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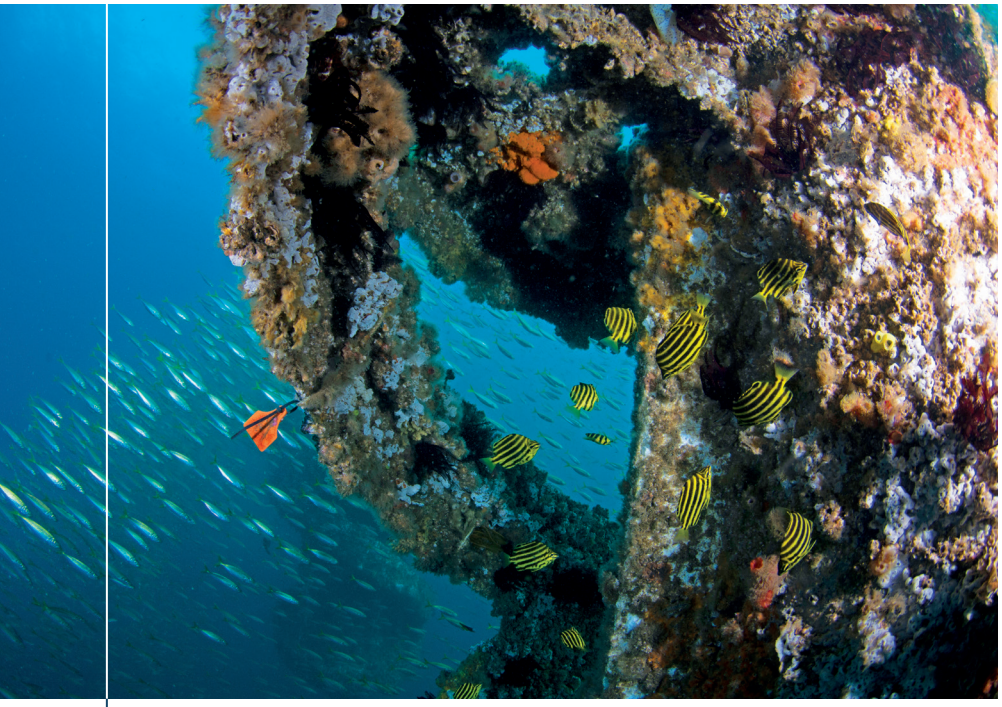
AUSTRALIA



Did you know?

Pause at different depths of this vertical drop dive to witness the ever-changing ecosystem, the deeper you dive.

Wonder Reef

Wonder Reef is a spectacular artificial reef located just 2.5km from the shores of the Gold Coast. This unique dive site is the world's first buoyant reef, and the visual effect of these huge underwater sculptures floating beneath the surface is a sight to behold.

Wonder Reef is the outcome of a collaboration between the City of Gold Coast, Queensland Government, global reef experts Subcon Blue Solutions and renowned Queensland sculptural artist Daniel Templeman.

The sculptures look similar to a giant upside-down bell, there are nine in total, and they are clustered in three groups of three. Each one is anchored to the sandy seabed at around 30m.

At the base of each installation is a hollow pyramid with holes cut into it to offer a place for fish to shelter, and they are big enough for a diver to swim through. Attached to the pyramids are large chains that lead up to the sculptures, which are about 7-8m below the surface.

Each one is slightly different, but they all have plenty of openings and ledges that allow light and currents to flow through, creating an ideal habitat to encourage coral growth and providing a perfect home for fish and invertebrates to thrive.

This impressive reef has only been submerged for a little over a year, but it has already attracted a wealth of

Essential information

Location: **Gold Coast, Australia**
Depth: **7m-30m**
Diver level: **Beginner to advanced**

marine life. The pyramids at the base of the installation are shrouded with cave sweeper and juvenile fusiliers.

Lionfish, moray eels, giant gold-spotted rock cods and massive Queensland grouper also inhabit the depths, while rays and the occasional turtle have also been known to visit the site.

The considerable chain links offer refuge to a host of small invertebrates and have become colonised with barnacles, sponges and magnificent ascidian.

The sculptures are also covered in algae, sponges, barnacles, crinoids and ascidians. Soft and hard corals have also already begun their colonisation. Tiny nudibranchs can be found on these structures, and small reef fish like gobies, blennies, hawkfish and bannerfish seek shelter in and around this new environment.

The reef has attracted large schools of yellow tail fusiliers and Indian scad bait fish. With all this food on offer, wahoo and tuna are never far away.

Wonder Reef is a truly unique dive site and will only improve as the coral grows and more marine life is attracted. •

Discover more and book with
Wonder Reef
wonderreef.com.au

“This impressive reef has only been submerged for a little over a year, but it has already attracted a wealth of marine life. The pyramids at the base of the installation are shrouded with cave sweeper and juvenile fusiliers”

Shark and Yolanda Reef

Many places boast as being on Jacques-Yves Cousteau's 'top ten dives in the world', but Shark and Yolanda Reef, which lies right on the tip of the Sinai Peninsula, certainly deserves that accolade, and on its day, can rival any dive elsewhere on our watery planet.

The jewel in the crown of the Ras Mohammed National Park, Shark and Yolanda are two round reefs which come up to just below the surface, perched on the precipice of a sheer drop-off down into the depths.

This location is what makes them such a jaw-dropping dive site, especially in the summer months, when literally thousands of fish congregate off the wall to breed. Hit Shark and Yolanda in late-June, July and early August and expect to witness massive schools of snapper, batfish, unicornfish, jacks and more. Occasionally, a large school of barracuda can put in an appearance, often preyed on by blacktip sharks.

While the vast shoals are the prime attraction, even if you dive outside of these months, Shark and Yolanda are still world-class. The walls – and the 'saddle' that links the two together – are absolutely smothered in vibrant soft corals and magnificent hard corals, which themselves are home to myriad reef fish, including angelfish, butterflyfish, chromis, blue-spotted rays, moray eels, crocodilefish, scorpionfish, lionfish, glassfish, triggerfish and many more reef dwellers.

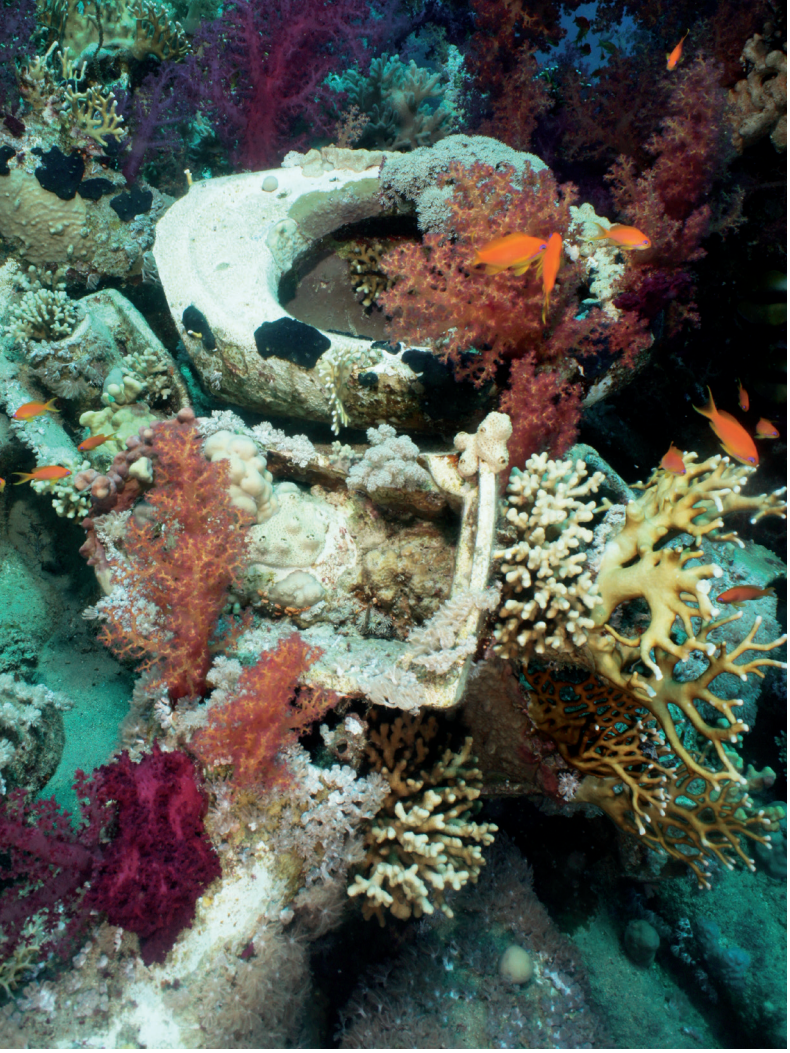
You often get turtles chilling on the reef, or munching on a tasty piece of soft coral. As if this wasn't enough for any avid diver, the dive also includes a wreck, or rather, the cargo from a shipwreck, which lent its name to one of the reefs.

The Yolanda (also called the Jolanda depending on which guide book you peruse) was a Cypriot merchant ship which ran aground in 1980, laden with sanitary fittings, bathtubs, toilets and sinks. This unusual cargo now lies scattered along the reef right to the drop-off, and the actual ship itself lies some 100m down the wall after sliding over the edge.

It is very bizarre to see piles of toilets, racks of stacked bathtubs, rolls of shower curtain, and even the twisted remains of what many say was the captain's BMW car. This cargo is all richly covered with encrusting growth and soft corals, and provides a handy habitat for all manner of marine life.

Currents can be exceptionally strong at Shark and Yolanda, so it pays to listen to your guide and follow their instructions implicitly. Then it is just a case of saddling up and going along for the ride. ●

Who to dive with
Elite Diving
www.elite-diving.com



Essential information

Location: **Ras Mohammed National Park, Sinai Peninsula, Egypt**
Depth: **1m-40m+**
Diver level: **Advanced**

“The Yolanda (also called the Jolanda depending on which guide book you peruse) was a Cypriot merchant ship which ran aground in 1980, laden with sanitary fittings, bathtubs, toilets and sinks”

Did you know?

Although these huge sea creatures are called 'whalesharks', they are not actually whales, but filter-feeding sharks, often referred to as 'gentle giants'. They are also the world's largest fish, growing up to 18 metres long.

© Carlos Martinez

Essential information

Location: **Maldives**
Depth: **1m-3m**
Diver level: **Beginner**

Whaleshark Night Dive

Those who have been to the wonderful Maldives islands will have been caught in the magic of its unforgettable landscapes, which makes us want to return to paradise again and again. No matter how many times we've been there... the Maldives will always have something to surprise us with!

Not even darkness can slow down the incessant rhythm of marine life on the islands. After a whole day of enjoying unforgettable dives and beaches with white sand and palm trees, the best is yet to come... As night falls on Gaafu Atoll, the most-awaited appointment arrives - the largest fish in the world, having dinner with us!

Our special guest

The whaleshark (Rhincodon typus) is the largest of the elasmobranchs, reaching up to 18 metres in length and weighing around 11 tons. It has around 6,000 teeth, which are barely 2mm long and appear to be vestigial. Whalesharks don't use their teeth to capture prey, but instead, they filter large amounts of water through specialized gills.

Despite being the largest fish in the ocean, it curiously feeds on the smallest food: plankton, made up of thousands of microscopic beings such as protozoa, tiny crustaceans, mollusks, worms, and fish larvae.

That is precisely what draws the whaleshark to the stern of the dive boats.

The secret of the visit

A few years ago, the local fishermen revealed their secret! While they used to fish for sardines and other species at night, using a great light as an attraction, they realized that somehow, they were attracting the giants of the ocean! At night, the light attracts plankton, which attracts the whaleshark. But why does light attract plankton? Well... at night, zooplankton organisms, such as copepods, migrate vertically into shallow waters to feed on phytoplankton (microscopic algae).

Since phytoplankton needs sunlight to grow, it's concentrated in the first layers of water; and zooplankton organisms take advantage of the night feed as they can't be seen by their predators (small fish, for example). But when humans introduce artificial light - bam! Small fish can see the copepods and begin to eat them.

Larger fish can also see these small fish and eat them, and eventually top predators can jump into the action and enjoy a good feast. And that's when our star of the night appears - the magnificent whaleshark. Sometimes we can see up to three or four together. And recently, a group of very lucky divers swam with 11 whalesharks on the central route! ●

Who to dive with
Blue Force Fleet
www.blueforcefleet.com

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Ex-HMAS Brisbane

The ex-HMAS Brisbane is located in Queensland, just off the Sunshine Coast at Mooloolaba, about a one-hour drive north of Brisbane. This 133-metre-long ex-Australian Royal Navy guided-missile destroyer was sunk in 2005 around 3km off the Sunshine Coast. The former warship now sits upright in 27m of water, with the smokestacks a mere 3m beneath the surface.

In its 17 years underwater, the ex-HMAS Brisbane has become a remarkable artificial reef attracting a staggering amount of marine life. An array of critters can be found on the wreck, including nudibranchs, pipefish, octopi, small crab and shrimps, to name but a few.

Numerous rays and even the occasional grey nurse shark visit this rusting hulk. There is impressive soft and hard coral growth on the wreck's exterior and interior.

Large schools of silver batfish are usually found congregating around the smokestacks and communications tower, while huge schools of grunts can often be found just off the wreck being harried by jewfish, snapper, wahoo and trevallies.

However, the most-impressive residents of the HMAS Brisbane are the millions of glassfish, cave sweeper and baitfish that inhabit this massive wreck.

Occasionally a blanket of baitfish seems to engulf the whole exterior of the wreck. Still, these shiny little fish usually stick to the interior, crammed in almost every room, sometimes so densely that it is almost disorientating. It is also important to watch where you put your hands as scorpionfish and lionfish are prolific

The Brisbane is also a great wreck to explore with plenty of points of interest, including large gun turrets at the bow and stern, a coral-encrusted anchor chain, missile control room, engine room and mess, plus plenty of smaller rooms and gangways. One of the favoured routes is to enter the wreck by descending through one of the smokestacks into the engine room. Then to work your way back up through the different level's corridors and rooms, finishing back at the smokestack and communications array for a safety stop among the large schools of fish that often congregate here.

This is a dive site that just keeps getting better and better and the marine life that congregates in and around this wreck is simply breathtaking. ●

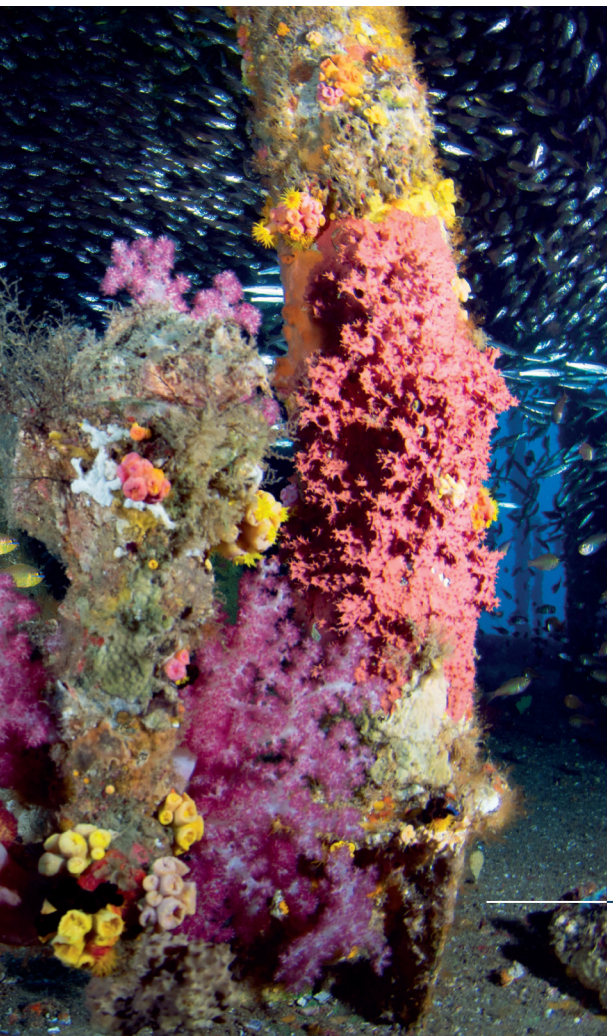
Who to dive with
Sunreef
www.sunreef.com.au

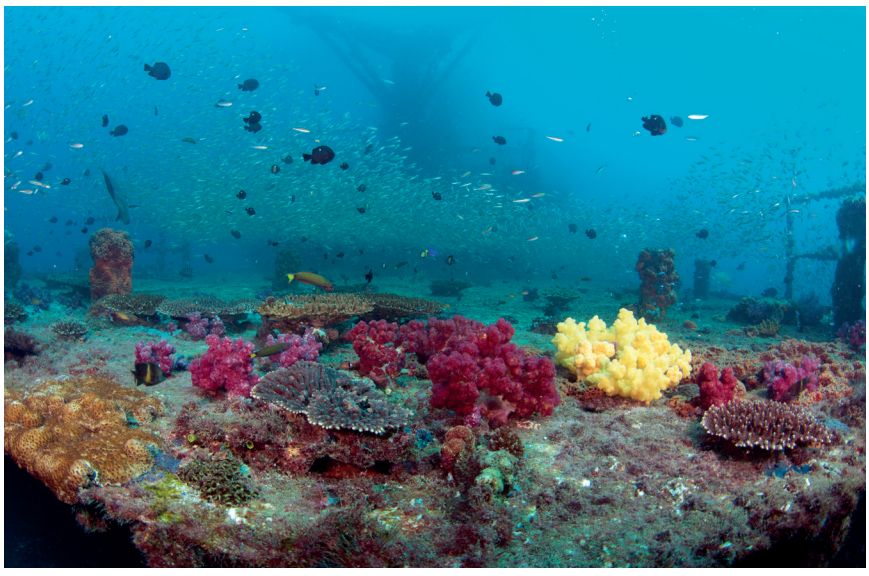
Did you know?

HMAS Brisbane was one of three Perth-class guided missile destroyers to serve in the Royal Australian Navy. The United States-designed ship was laid down at Bay City, Michigan in 1965, launched in 1966 and commissioned into the RAN in 1967.

Essential information

Location: **Queensland, Australia**
Depth: **3m-27m**
Diver level: **Beginner to advanced**





“The Brisbane is also a great wreck to explore with plenty of points of interest, including large gun turrets at the bow and stern, a coral-encrusted anchor chain, missile control room, engine room and mess, plus plenty of smaller rooms and gangways”

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Did you know?

Following Hurricane Gustav in 2008, the ship shifted 3m deeper leaving the flight deck at 44m. The island structure is accessible to recreational divers, but the flight deck and beyond requires additional training and equipment.

Essential information

Location: **Gulf of Mexico, Pensacola, Florida, USA**
Depth: **24m-65m**
Diver level: **Advanced to technical**

USS Oriskany

The USS Oriskany is, at 277 metres in length, the world's largest artificial reef by a considerable margin, and along with the USS Saratoga and the HMS Hermes, one of only a handful of 'diveable' aircraft carriers. However, with the Saratoga being located in the remote Bikini Atoll, and the Hermes lying turtle off Sri Lanka, the Oriskany is by far the easiest to get to – you can jump on a boat in Pensacola and a couple of hours later be descending on to this gigantic ship.

The Oriskany became the first ship sunk for reefing under a new US Navy programme to dispose of old warships. The project came with a US$20 million bill and was originally scheduled for 2005, but a series of setbacks due to hurricanes and problems getting environmental permission meant the vessel was finally sunk in May 2006.

Dubbed 'the great carrier reef', the Oriskany, which was commissioned in 1950 and served in the Vietnam and Korean Wars, is mind-blowingly massive. It is difficult to get a grip on the sheer scale of the vessel, but as an indication, recreational divers will carry out their entire dive(s) on the tower, and it is so vast that even several dives would not take you through every section. It is possible to work your way in and out of various rooms and corridors from the flight deck level right up to the highest point, and wherever you explore inside, you are never far from an exit.

Inside you can find radar consoles, control boxes, even a safe! The 'pre-fly' and the flight and admiralty bridges are wide open and beckon you to enter. From the seemingly endless flight deck down to the seabed is the realm of the tech diver, and again, there is so much to explore that you could rack up 20 or 30 dives and still be left wanting more.

You can descend into the hangar deck and beyond directly below the island, or if you have access to a DPV, you can head off on the long haul to the bow or the stern. This could be the best training ground for technical divers I have ever seen, as deep stops can be carried out on the island itself.

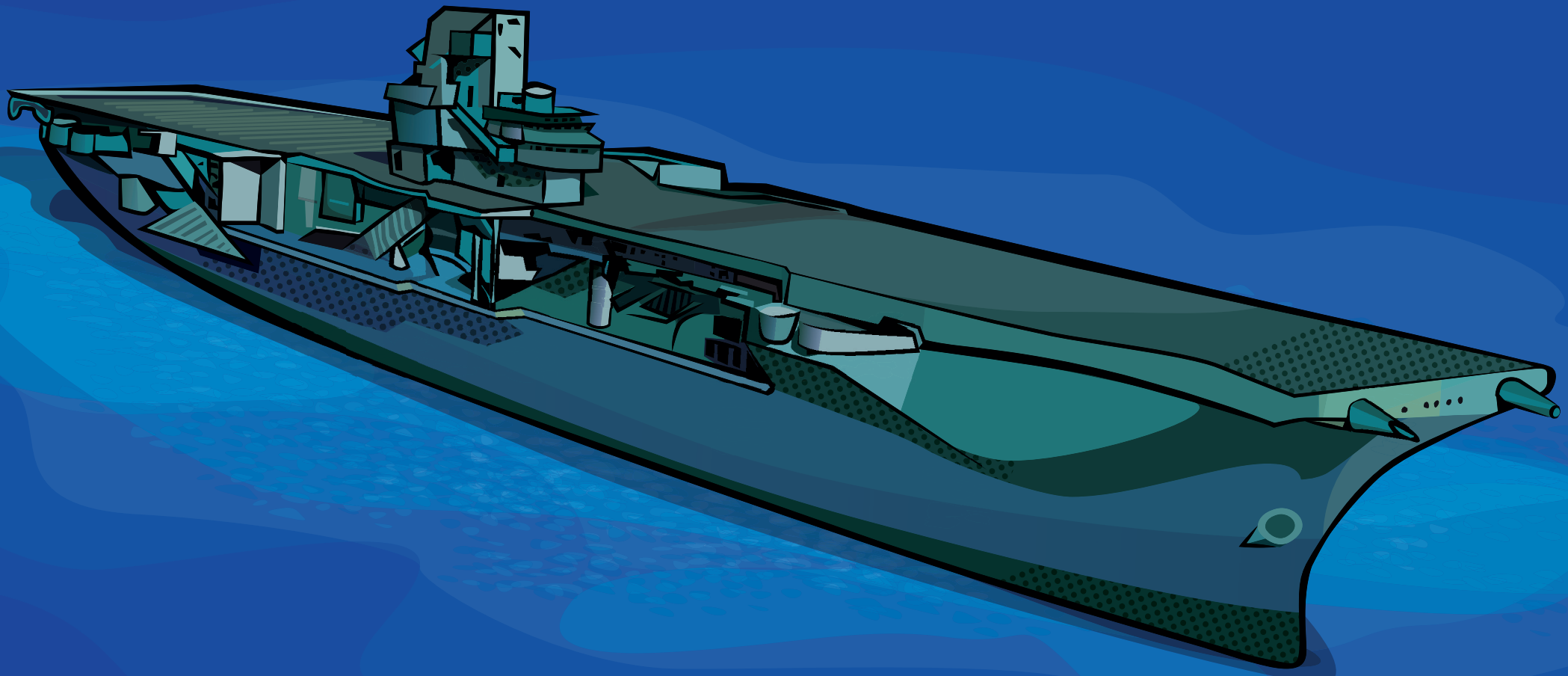
The exterior of the vessel is getting well colonised by shellfish and encrusting marine growth, but when you venture inside, it is a different matter. As soon as you are a metre or so away from a doorway or hole cut through the side, the growth peters out, and the walls – apart from a light covering of silt and some rust – look much as they did when it was sunk.

The visibility inside is also very good, as long as you are careful with your fin tips, though there wasn't a lot you can do about the rust and silt showers dropping down on you from your exhaled bubbles, so only venture inside if you are appropriately trained. •

USS Oriskany

Florida, USA

30° 02.600’ N, 87° 00.400’ W



Did you know?

If you're a fan of sea turtles, don't miss your chance to visit this UNESCO Marine Biosphere Reserve and immerse yourself in the wonderful world of sea turtles!

Wakatobi House Reef

Wakatobi's House Reef has been named 'The World's Best Shore Dive'. This site is a favourite with both divers and snorkellers, as it is easily accessed from the resort beach or pier and includes expansive shallows comprised of seagrass meadows and coral formations brimming with marine life, as well as a wall that extends to the north and south of the resort's jetty.

The shallows close to shore are prime hunting grounds for a cornucopia of marine life that includes frogfish, crocodilefish, stonefish, octopus, moray eels, cuttlefish, blue-spotted stingrays, ghost pipefish, jawfish, pygmy seahorses, shrimp and goby pairs, turtles out and about, and a plethora of nudibranchs.

Clear waters and an abundance of sunlight provide photographers with an ideal underwater studio. The well-lit seabed also allows snorkellers to enjoy an up-close look at marine life.

Some 73 metres from the beach, the contours of the House Reef make an abrupt transition to steep slopes and walls that begin just two meters below the surface and drop to depths of more than 91m. This underwater rampart is riddled with numerous overhangs and crevices, and is covered in a thriving array of sponges, hard and soft corals. Water clarity in the 30-metre-plus range allows ample ambient light to filter down into the depths, adding to the visual drama of the walls and undercut slopes.

The resort jetty at Wakatobi extends to the outer edge of the House Reef, a convenient access point to both the drop-off and reef shallows. The pier is also a noteworthy dive in itself, as the pilings create shelter and shade for schooling fish and a wealth of macro subjects. Here, more than a half dozen species of anemone fish shelter in their hosts' tentacles, and species of pygmy seahorse and pygmy pipehorse have been found within a few yards of the pier.

The House Reef spans to the north and south of the jetty. To help divers reach more distant sections of the wall, Wakatobi provides taxi boat services. These five-metre outboard-powered

Essential information

Location: **Wakatobi, Indonesia**
Depth: **1m-30m+**
Diver level: **Beginner to advanced**

Did you know?

The name 'Wakatobi' is an acronym of four large populated islands! WA referring to Wangi-Wangi (WAnci) which is also the regency's capital since its inauguration in 2003. KA = KAledupa, TO = TOmia, and BI = BInongko.

skiffs can comfortably carry five divers or snorkellers. Depending on which way the water is moving, taxi boats will drop divers well north or south of the resort for an extended drift dive that ends at the jetty stairs. To make drifts that last 90 minutes more, divers can request high-volume tanks from the dive centre to ensure an ample gas supply.

The House Reef is available to Wakatobi guests day and night. For some, sunset is the best time to visit. As the light fades, creatures active during the day begin to seek shelter, with some like broadclub cuttlefish performing colour changes that blend into the deepening shadows. After spending the day hidden in the coral, leaf scorpionfish begin to emerge a couple hours before dusk to hunt. With the setting sun, octopus come out to find food or a mate. Dive lights reveal eels slithering through the corals with squadrons of squid jetting through the shadows.

Over the reef's edges turtles are often found bedded down for the night beneath overhangs on the wall. ●

Who to dive with
Wakatobi Resort
www.wakatobi.com

> **"Some 73 metres from the beach, the contours of the House Reef make an abrupt transition to steep slopes and walls that begin just two meters below the surface and drop to depths of more than 91m"**

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Deborah Dickson-Smith

TRAVEL CONSULTANT, SCUBA DIVER, WRITER AND PASSIONATE OCEAN LOVER

Deb fell in love with the underwater world on her very first dive, on the Great Barrier Reef over 25 years ago. Since then, Deb has built a career in travel media and has managed to travel (and dive) through most of the South Pacific and Southeast Asia - experiences Deb now uses to design tailor-made dive holiday experiences for her clients at Diveplanit Travel (**www.diveplanit.com**).

Deb and partner Simon Mallender launched Diveplanit in 2012, initially a blog to share dive travel experiences and highlight marine conservation issues. Diveplanit has since morphed into an online dive travel guide, content marketing agency and dive travel agency, with the purchase of Diversion Dive Travel in 2018.

When Deb's not planning dive holidays for her clients – or writing blog posts on the Diveplanit Blog - she also writes for a number of travel publications, including Scuba Diver Magazine, Escape, Signature Luxury Travel, Get Lost, Vacations & Travel and several inflight magazines.

Stuart Philpott

UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHER, DIVE INSTRUCTOR AND TECHNICAL DIVER

Stuart started out as an instructor working for a number of UK South Coast dive centres, but much preferred the quiet life behind a camera lens. He took the opportunity to open a photo centre at Taba Heights in Egypt during the mid 2000s and dived three to four times a day taking pictures of DSDs and visiting divers, as well as trying to manage the staff.

After leaving Egypt he took short-term jobs in South Africa and the Seychelles and then returned to the UK to carry on working freelance for a number of diving magazines.

Over the years he has been fortunate enough to have visited so many amazing countries, had far too many action-packed adventures and met some of the best characters ever. He enjoys taking pictures with divers in the composition - it doesn't have to be any particular subject. It can be wrecks, scenery or marine life, tech or recreational. Every picture supposedly tells a story, and Stuart tries to make his pictures say 'this could be you'.

Don Silcock

ADVENTURER, UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHER AND WORLD TRAVELLER

Originally from the north-west of England, Don left the UK back in 1977 for a one-year assignment in Libya... 14 years, four countries, a wife and two kids later, he and his family migrated to Australia.

Now Australian citizens, Don and his wife split their time between Sydney and their house on the island of Bali in Indonesia.

A passionate diver and underwater photographer, Don has dived extensively in Australia, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea for over 20 years. Plus, since catching the 'big animal' bug in 2014 with his first trip to Tonga for the annual gathering of southern humpback whales, he has travelled to the USA, Mexico, the Bahamas, Argentina, the Azores, Mozambique, South Africa and Japan to encounter and photograph the larger creatures that inhabit the oceans.

Don uses the articles he writes, and the images he takes on his trips, to populate his website: **(www.infopacificimages.com).**

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