

AUSTRALIA

Cairns, the jumping-off spot for the Great Barrier Reef, is a tropical city with day boats going to the GBR and making 2-3 night trips to Cod Hole. Cairns' "beach" is a mud flat and there's no shore diving anywhere in Queensland. The best diving, with pristine reefs and oodles of fish, is to the north, reachable by live-boards during the Aussie summer, November to March. Aussie dive rules are now tight, with redundant headcounts after every dive. The wreck of the Yongala, reached from Townsville, may be the best fish-covered wreck in the world. Water is in the 70s so bring rubber. North American divers are beginning to discover diving south and west of Sydney.

Deep Sea Divers Den, Poseidon, November 2005, Mort Rolleston, Washington, DC. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm. Day trips from Cairns to the Great Barrier Reef with family who were a mix of divers and non-divers. Did three dives at Norman Reef. Another day, we did three dives at Agincourt Reef with Poseidon out of Port Douglas. In both cases, the dive boats were comfortable and modern with fun, well-organized crew that did well given the large numbers of people (about 50). The small army on each boat consisted mostly of snorkelers and beginner dive classes with less than a dozen certified divers. Poseidon's guides work hard as they also served as the drivers who picked up and dropped us off from our hotel a half hour away. Our driver and guide were helpful in giving us good information about the area and what to do. Both boats were on tight schedules

and thus had a time limit of 40 or 45 minutes per dive. Deep Sea Diver's Den allowed us to dive on our own, but Poseidon instructed all the divers to stay together in one of two groups – each with a guide. As the groups were cruising too quickly to explore the reef and scaring all the fish away, we started lagging behind and often separated from the group. The guide was initially a little annoyed, but realized we were experienced divers and gave us some latitude. Poseidon also wasn't flexible with buddy pairings. Making up for Poseidon's tighter restrictions, however, the dives on Agincourt Reef (sites: Barracuda Bommie, Castle Rock, and Triggerfish City) were superior to those on Norman Reef (sites: Plate Top and Troppos) in all categories. Agincourt diving featured two bommies off the edge of the reef and a rapid drift dive that ended up at a cave swim-through into a beautiful shallow coral reef. The dives offered lots of barracuda, a few whitetips, tons of medium size fish (snappers, parrotfish, groupers, etc.), nudibranchs, morays, giant clams, and numerous large triggerfish who were in their nesting season (we were warned to steer clear, with good reason as several divers who got too close discovered). Norman Reef was mediocre in both fish and coral (though we saw some turtles and barracuda) and the dive classes stirred up the bottom so visibility wasn't great. Coral on both trips was noticeably damaged by the sheer numbers of beginner divers who carelessly bumped into it. The diving wasn't as good as the live-aboard we were on the week before out of Townsville. I'd recommend finding an operator with a small number of fellow divers who isn't on a tight time schedule. If large, tacky beach party cities are your thing – stay in Cairns. If you prefer quieter, more

green and pleasant surroundings, I recommend Palm Cove (where we stayed), which reminded me of the sea islands along coast of Georgia or South Carolina. If you are looking for something in between, the small town of Port Douglas is your best bet. If you plan to visit the nearby Daintree National Park, Port Douglas is about an hour closer than Cairns. Palm Cove is in between and is the one of the few places in the area to have a beach. Spend a day driving/hiking in the nearby Atherton Tablelands.

Poseidon, June 2006, John Crossley (jcrossle@csufresno.edu), Fresno, CA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. The Poseidon will provide pick-up service down in Cairns as well as in Port Douglas. It was a two hour ride out to Agin Court Reef and not too rough. It's a nice boat with lots of room for the 35 passengers who went. Most were snorkelers or "Discovery Divers" who loved the experience. I thought it was pretty average, even dull at times. The highlight was a photo cooperative cuttlefish that held its ground and flashed a variety of color patterns. Visibility was great at 80 to 100 feet and the water temperature was about 78. There was a great buffet lunch, but the price for the entire day was around \$120.

Pro-Dive, February 2006, Dennis Van Langen (vanlangen@yahoo.com), Williamsburg, VA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 84 F, calm. I was in Cairns for a little over 3 weeks at ProDive taking the Instructor Development Course (IDC) - PADI. My instructor, Alex van Welderen, was exceptional. I was comfortable with the teaching and tests given during the PADI Instructor Exam (IE)—despite the stress! Only downside was that we were too busy to do any

overnighter's on the reef. Most diving was pool for water training and then Frasier Island for final open water training. After passing the exam (whew!) I was able to dive with Tusa on the reef and found their boats to be a lot of fun. After the IE, Alex took us to the Tablelands for altitude lake diving for specialty certs. This was fun, but not really comparable to the reef diving. Pro-Dive Cairns is a world class operation.

Sea Quest, April 2006, Edwin L. Granite (egranite@aol.com), Chaddsford, PA. Experience: 1000+ dives. Vis: 25 to 40 feet. Water: 80 F, choppy, no currents. Barrier Reef 2-1/2 to 2 hour boat ride. Saxon Reef – poor vis. due to cyclone hit area one week before arrival. Two dives on different parts of reef – good guide (requested) – saw one white tip reef shark resting on bottom – otherwise, nothing special. Very safety-conscious – good checkout and in system. Crew mentioned Lonergans issue to make everyone aware of it and out system, for ID of all divers.

Southwest Rocks Dive Center, February 2006, Ian Kennedy (kenn123@mac.com), Davis, CA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 79 to 80 F, choppy, no currents. Southwest Rocks is a small town about 6 hours drive north of Sydney. It is a favorite spot for families to vacation at the beach and for fishermen. The town is pleasant and an excellent place to spend a quiet few days doing bushwalks (as Australians call hiking) and hanging out at the pub. It also boasts one of the best dive sites on the southeastern coast of Australia (just to confuse things geographically with the name of the town). signed up with Southwest Rocks Dive Centre. This is a small operation that goes exclusively to

Fish Rock. Occasionally they may go to another site if the weather is bad. We encountered heavy rain showers every day but not enough to keep us inside, nor enough to stop diving, at least on the first day. The ride to the site is about ½ hour in a fairly small boat. The boat has room for about 8 divers; on my day there were only 4 customers. One dive master went with the 3 certified divers, the other was busy with a student. The crew was helpful but an appreciation of Australian humor would be useful. Fish Rock sits alone about ½ mile offshore. The rock is only about 200 yards or so in diameter. A tunnel opens at 80 ft below the surface and runs through the island, via a vertical chimney in one part, to exit at 40 ft. Before we entered, we spent 20 minutes watching the grey nurse sharks that congregate at Fish Rock in the late summer. There were about a dozen 6 to 10 ft sharks. On the first dive, they kept their distance. On the second dive they approached to within a few feet. The tunnel is completely dark so this was a sort of a night dive. A large wobbegong shark was in the dark recess of the tunnel and did not budge. Near the exit of the tunnel, we moved through a sea of fish. It was a beautiful sight to see the enormous schools of fish silhouetted against the open blue ocean.

CHILE

Easter Island

Orca, March 2006, Edwin L. Granite (egranite@aol.com), Chaddsford, PA. Experience: 1000+ dives. Vis: 100+ feet. Water: 73 F, calm and flat, no currents. One dive with guide – as requested – just guide and me – no other divers. Only had one day here before moving on – good dive operation and guide.

FIJI

For left coasters, it takes about the same amount of time to get to Fiji as it does to the Caribbean: 10 hours nonstop from L.A. Prices are comparable and air packages can include New Zealand/Australia extensions at little extra cost. Fijians are polite, friendly, modest, and religious, so watch your language, and wear nonrevealing clothes to town. Wetsuits are staples year-round; currents add coolness and in some places they're vigorous, so carry surface signaling devices. In September 2004, American Dan Grenier, the former operator of Crystal Divers, disappeared with another diver while leading divers from Bamboo Reef Resort on Nananu-I-Ra. The weather can be stormy June through September; short, heavy showers are possible any afternoon year-round, especially around Beqa Lagoon. The year-round average temperature is 80 or above; nights average 69 degrees in winter.

Beqa Lagoon

AquaTrek, The Pearl South Pacific, June 2006, Sherwood and Judith Smith (sierradeux@comcast.net), Olympia, WA. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 60 Feet. Water: 81 to 82 F, choppy. Pearl South Pacific was the venue of the 2006 SPUMS (South Pacific Underwater Medicine Society) meeting. AquaTrek Divers manager, Derrek, was helpful and well organized. (He even attended our airway/resuscitation workshop.) Our group of some 50 divers was split among four boats, and things went pretty well. We did two tank dives every morning in Beqa