

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-aboards 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 temperature is in the 70s so bring rubber. North American divers are beginning to discover diving south and west of Sydney.

Lady Elliot Island Divers, May 2006, Beverly Coburn (bevanddavecoburn@msn.com), Montrose, CO. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 90 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 F, calm. Our family of four including boys 8 and 10 spent a week on Lady Elliot Island, the southernmost island on the Great Barrier Reef. During this trip, we experienced the best snorkeling of our lives, easily accessible from shore and perfect with our children. We only did a few dives since the snorkeling was so superb and our kids could enjoy it with us. During both dives and snorkels, we encountered huge schools and swirling fish tornados of various barracuda and jack, white tip, black tip, and bronze whaler sharks, huge bull rays, leopard rays, and shovel-nosed rays, eels, and more turtles than we could count. The corals were spectacular; intact, colorful, and teeming with life. While diving

and snorkeling were the highlights for us, the resort offered much more in the way of fun and education. Guided educational activities included star-gazing, historical walks, fish-feeding, reef-walking, flora and fauna, and more. Wayne Fox, the general manager of the resort, presented entertaining and informative slide shows about the local sharks and turtles. David Ireland, the "original Crocodile Man," was there filming a documentary on manta rays, so he gave a lively presentation one night and entertained informally other evenings (think "coconut bowling" and "reef bingo"). The reef education center, mini-golf, ping pong, and extensive library of films, book, and puzzles, provided us with hours of fun above water. There are numerous flights daily from the mainland. We found the food to be plentiful and satisfying, especially the seafood buffet. Accommodations were simple, clean and adequate, located right above the water line, overlooking the lagoon. The staff, who live on the island, were hard-working, knowledgeable, personable, and a lot of fun to be with. My older son got his "Bubble-Blowers" certificate in the pool with the kind and patient dive manager. A side trip to Frazer Island (the largest sand island in the world and a World Heritage-listed site), can be easily arranged out of Hervey Bay, also a gateway to Lady Elliot.

Lady Elliot Island, December 2006, Lee Thé (bizthe@comcast.net), Palo Alto, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 Feet. Water: 70 to 71 F, choppy. Strong, steady wind precluded diving anywhere but in the lee of this little island (roughly the width of the landing strip). So we wound up visiting several sites repeatedly, including the only wreck, a yacht with a fair amount of life around it. Diving was safe and

easy, with no walls and the bottom no deeper than 85 feet or so — albeit with pretty slim pickings compared to Indonesia. For the afternoon dive we had to wade over the reef in a foot or two of surging seawater for about 50 yards, carrying all our gear, to reach the boat. Morning dives during high tide let the boat reach the shore and let its nose ramp down. No dock. Apart from this death march and the chilly 71-degree water, it's a great place for newbie divers. No big currents, close supervision by the divemasters, long surface intervals, and a saltwater pool for initial checkouts. You will need a full 5 mm suit with hood. For experienced divers it's galling to be so micromanaged by the divemasters. You rig your own gear and schlep it, though they do take you from the dive center to the shore where you embark via stretch golf cart. However, you will see some big fish, lots of turtles in water and some on land at night, good snorkeling in between dives — including turtles — and some nice white sand beaches by the best snorkeling area help. Lady Elliot Island is at the southernmost tip of the Great Barrier Reef National Park. Small planes fly there regularly from as far south as Brisbane. Accommodations were OK. Buffet breakfasts and dinners featured all you can eat hearty Aussie fare and a chance to meet dozens of other divers and families of nondivers there for the birds and turtles and small island ambience. No AC but the sea breeze did the job. Our room was spacious. No TV, of course, and no internet — the island's about 70 miles offshore. They also have tent cabins. Birds cover every horizontal surface and fill every tree during nesting season — which was in full swing in early December. Also, Lady Elliot Island is probably the most economical of GBR islands you can

stay on and dive from. We did stay on the island's windward edge by a largish shallow lagoon that you could snorkel except at low tide. The snorkeling there was great — lots of fish + turtles to see and not that far below due to the shallowness. Steady, mild current. I'd snorkel-drift to one end, walk back to the other, then drift down again. Despite normally just having two dives a day, they did offer a few night dives, which were pretty good. I felt quite safe in the Cessna Turbo Commander we flew out and back on. It was quite comfortable, and had plenty of power for takeoffs from that short gravel strip. Try to get this plane — it's better than the other one they fly. Tight luggage limits, though. However, they will store luggage you don't need on the island for free at the airport. And it's easy to catch a shuttle to a train station if you want to take one of those great Queensland trains before/after. Warning: don't buy the DVD of UW pics sold by the gift shop unless you can verify that every single pic doesn't have a big fat watermark through the middle of it. We complained about it after getting home and they sent us a make-good disk. But it wasn't much better. We should have taken the refund they offered. Not so hot and reefs/fish so-so, but abundant turtles during breeding season at least (hawkbill, loggerhead, green), fair number of big fish due to strict fishing ban actually enforced unlike in 3rd world country national parks; big fish include leopard sharks, mantas, groupers. Plus you have opportunity to shoot turtles onshore laying eggs, and >90,000 birds on island during breeding season offers terrific opportunities for bird photography — several species of terns nesting along with tropic birds, silver gulls, rails, more.

Taka Dive, June 2007, David Shem-Tov (david@stubbs.co.uk), London, NA.

Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 10 to 20 Meters. Water: 25 to 26 C, calm, choppy, currents. A previous correspondent named this dive operations previous boat as the 'Kaka'. Unfortunately, her description is still apt. This operation is targeted at inexperienced backpackers. Many are enticed by last-minute discounts, ensuring that the boat always leaves full. The boat operates on a tight back-to-back schedule, requiring passengers to vacate their cabins several hours before return to port so that they can be serviced by the crew. Great food and fairly attractive cabins on a well designed new boat could not make up for the most unpleasant cruise director and dive crew we have ever encountered on a live-aboard. Had there been an option to disembark during the three-day cruise, we would not have hesitated. We booked this cruise because it was operating during the minke whale season. Unfortunately, one of the two encounters with these skittish creatures was swiftly terminated by a crew member who donned scuba gear and jumped into the water (in contravention of Australian law) and ensured the immediate flight of the whale. UW Photography Comments: No electrical facilities except those in your cabin. Rinse tank was used for everything.

COOK ISLANDS

Tucked between French Polynesia and Tonga, the Cook Islands have a breezy South Pacific atmosphere. The main island of Rarotonga has good food and a variety of hotels. There's decent diving through a cut into the lagoon that has sharks and

strong current, but overall the diving falls short of other South Pacific locations. Even most New Zealanders, their closest neighbors, pass on the diving.

Amedee Diving Club, dove while on a cruise, February 2007, Dee Wescott (diverdee@mac.com), Waikoloa, HI.

Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 120 Feet. Water: 78 to 79 F, calm. I found them because the company I contacted (from the cruise ship) was closed on Monday, so they turned us over to Amedee. You do need to know that you will be gone over lunch and they only provide tea, coffee and excellent pastries, so if you need more than that, bring it. They really try hard. The subjects available to shoot made up for any shortcomings on the part of the boat or operators. There was nothing much done for UWP, but they didn't know that we were UWP before we came and when they set the boat up.

FIJI

For left coasters, it takes about the same amount of time to get to Fiji as it does to the Caribbean: ten 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