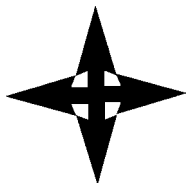


head and walked away. More importantly, however, the boat had O₂, radio, first aid, and well-maintained dive equipment.

I found Parguera because I was looking for "another" place, somewhere easy to get to and a reasonable addition to the Caribbean circuit. Its reef and fish life is interesting, and the dive sites rival the top-ranked Caribbean Wall Heavies. If Parguera becomes more popular and the demand for Efra's services increases, he'll have to strengthen the operation, which means newer and bigger boat(s), more personnel, and perhaps a glitzier dive shop. I like it the way it is, a bit funky but uncrowded, a relatively unknown getaway with plenty of walls and plenty of fun.

— K. B.



Diver's Compass: À la carte diving with Parguera Divers is \$360 for 6 x 2...There were no nitrox, photo processing, or camera or video camera rentals available...Their website is netdial.caribe.net/~divepr; the site has lots of info about the dive operation and the dive sites...Parguera Divers' packages are all with Posada Por La Mar, where the boat is docked. It's more dive-oriented than Villa Parguera, where I stayed. According to their website, Posada Por La Mar's packages run from \$732 (8 days/7 nights/6 days X 2 tanks) to \$878 per person...Book packages through Into the Blue at 1-800-6-GetWet (643-8938) or e-mail at divepr@caribe.net...Boat scuttlebutt was to spend the extra money on 4th-floor "deluxe ocean view" rooms...Villa Parguera is \$636.50 for 7 nights; for reservations call 787-899-3975; fax 787-899-6040 or see their website at www.elshop.com. There is no "package arrangement" between Parguera Divers and Villa Parguera. If you go to Villa Parguera, ask for a room in the section of the hotel that's on the left (as you're facing the water), where rooms have better views and are more open...For burgers and night life, try The Blues Café (easy walk from either hotel). There was live music sometimes and a nice deck for sitting out...La Jamaca, which looks like a converted house in the middle of a residential neighborhood, serves Puerto Rican/Continental food at an average of about \$15 per entree. It's cozy, and the owners trip over themselves to be of service.

Diving Western Australia's *True North*

it's more than just skurfing, whale sharks and waterfalls

It was a crazy Aussie who talked me into trying to stand on a surfboard while he got in a tinnie and towed me at warp speed across a lagoon in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Had I been able to stand up, it would have been great for my ego. But the pictures taken by all my dive mates -- well, they tell the truth.

As it turned out, I wasn't much of a "skurfer," as they call it. But I had ventured to Western Australia to dive, and let me tell you ... it's got it all over skurfing.

From Sydney, Australia's west coast is a five-hour cross-country flight. It's the quintessential Wild West, wide open and barely disturbed by humans. Cross the city limits of any town, and you'll find no power poles, no billboards, no traffic, no litter. Emus and kangaroos are the biggest travel hazards. But phones, doctors, and decent supermarkets are there for your pleasure. And so is good diving ... if you know where to look. Go too far north, and you'll swim with oceangoing crocodiles; too

far south, and the winter water temperature plummets. But the water between Exmouth and Broome is croc-free and temperate ... and home to Rowley Shoals.

After spending three days in the hot and humid quaint old pearling town of Broome, the other guests and I were rounded up at our different hotels by staffer Colleen McKay. She hauled my dive gear, took us booze shopping (this is a BYOB boat), and made sure we had everything else we needed. Then she drove us to the *True North*, a 60 ft., steel-hulled powerboat, where she introduced us to young Captain Craig

Howson. Reared in Broome, he's a bright, true-blue Aussie who loves his boat and is full of stories and fond of beer and diving. Once settled in, we headed for our seven-night, six-day adventure. Rowley Shoals is comprised of three atolls about 180 nautical miles northwest of Broome. I got a fitful sleep during the rough, 14-hour, dusk-to-dawn ride, but awoke to brilliant morning sun and an azure swimming pool the size of Manhattan. Welcome to Klerke Reef, the middle atoll.

Now I won't write much about the *True North*. You see, after my October journey she was replaced by a new, 114-foot craft holding up to 30 people. But key crew members remain, and so do the reefs, some of the best diving anywhere -- and I've been around, believe me.

The first day began when American Holly Tharp (Craig's sweetheart), giving a wink and a smile, laid out fresh fruits, yogurt, cereals, toast, and juices. Then we grabbed snorkel gear and loaded into one of two 12-foot, flat-bottomed, aluminum tinnies with carpeted benches for a ride to the channel. With the current ripping, we fell into the water and rode the channel at six knots for seven minutes along with angels, trumpets, parrots, butterflies, and sharks (mainly white

True North, Australia

Diving (experienced)	★★★★★
Diving (beginners)	★★★★★
Ambiance	★★★
Snorkeling	★★★★★
Food	★★★★★
Money's worth	★★★★★

★ = poor

★★★★★ = excellent

(World scale)

tips and black tips). The tinnies picked us up, and we went at it again. Returning to the boat, we discovered another breakfast: eggs, pancakes, bacon, ham, potatoes, and toast with more fruit and juices. (Holly has become tour director on the boat, replaced by what Colleen calls a "qualified chef.")

Then came the diving. C-cards were checked. Briefings were brief: it's this deep, the current is going this way, here's what you'll see, watch your time and depth. Australians from the east coast were nervous -- they knew well of the American divers who were left on the Great Barrier Reef -- but the efficient crew put them at ease. Each diver was religiously checked in and out of the water face-to-face with the keeper of the dive sheet, who logged name, time, and bar (psi). Take care of yourself, no babysitting, dive your own profiles (80

The New True North

The new *True North* is hardly small and rustic: the fully air-conditioned, 114' vessel travels at a maximum speed of 18 knots and boasts three decks, a galley, dining room, lounge, and library, plus two staterooms, six en suite double cabins, and seven twin-shares. It carries up to 30 passengers and 8 crew and features all the big-boat amenities, including daily maid service and mixed gas for nitrox-certified divers. The *True North* will visit Rowley when it's accessible, from September 25 through November 30, and from March through September will be making tours to the Kimberly region of western Australia more comfortable for guests while they explore some stunning coastline that's seldom seen. Exploration sounds easy enough: there are 5 runabouts and even a helicopter on board.

cu. ft. alum. tanks) but they'd say "let's make this 30-60 minutes, let's everyone be back on boat by 2." A down computer meant galley duty for the day -- no argument. P.S.: if you get bent, you wait for the Australian Navy to come get you.

Eight of the ten guests (Aussies, Kiwis, Japanese, and me, the lone Yank) were divers. Generally, the plan was to dive the deep outer walls twice in the morning and then dive the inner slopes during the afternoon and evening. Typically four, maybe five dives a day, with a night dive.

On the dive "Jimmy Goes To China," at 80 feet the wall dropped into infinite depths, most likely where Jimmy had gone. Hard corals at the surface gave way to a riot of whip, fan, rope, black, and flower corals. Because this wall is open-ocean fed, I saw sharks, bump head parrots, oversized groupers, giant trevally, and spotted sweetlips by the cubic meter. I even swam with a geriatric trio of human-sized tuna, moving slowly as if their scarred and tattered bodies were arthritic. Swimthroughs, cracks, valleys, and pockets make these dives a navigational nightmare but create dreamy topography. In one a coffin-sized cutout an enormous Queensland Grouper had a spotted puffer in his mouth, half swallowed and fully inflated. Indeed: a magnificent big-fish dive. (Visibility ran 40' inside the atolls and 150' outside, with gentle currents.)

Back on board, Holly brought on lunch: handmade dim sum, a fresh veggie salad with homemade dressing, a chicken stir-fry on a king-sized pillow of noodles, cookies, and slices of frosted cake.

A terrific snorkel is "The Aquarium" inside Klerke Reef. This untouched chunk of coral sitting in a bowl of sugar-white sand is filled with giant clams, five-fingered jacks (spider), helmets, thorny oysters, coral clams, trumpets, augers, cones, and too many cowries to count. The coral heads were clouded with puffs of brilliant fish, and garden eels, octopus, and tiny squid dwelled nearby. The water? A constant 82 degrees throughout the trip.

At the equivalent of the Great Barrier Reef's Cod Hole, my buddy and I were greeted by two spotted groupers, each of whom easily outweighed us. Eyeball to lens, I watched a funny underwater dance as fish and diver tried to see who could get the closest. Divemaster Greg Lee Steere came with a dead bait fish stuffed in his snorkel. The groupers flocked to him, extricated the treat carefully, then played tag. Fish-wise, everywhere there were unique ones: a skunk anemonefish with a broad white stripe that runs from head to tail. Then there were Chinese grouper, spotted unicorn, Indian steephead parrots, red emperors, and black and white snapper. Between dives, I strolled on deserted Klerke's Reef past nests of the Red-tailed Tropic Bird.

No Bad Weather Refunds

Reader Dick Bennett is one of a handful of divers who I have heard from over the past year who have experienced problems with trips they'd arranged aboard *Little Cayman Diver II*. His trip was scheduled early last November, shortly

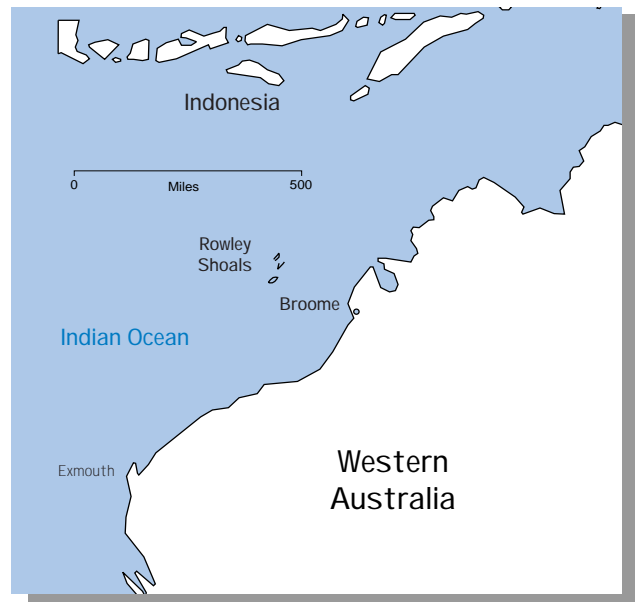
after Hurricane Mitch churned up the Caribbean, but, after he had reached the island, he was told that storm-related problems caused cancellation of the trip.

The LCD II's cancellation policy states that forced cancellations due to tropical weather are not refundable and that trips will be rescheduled at a mutually agreeable date. Since the boat only accommodates six to eight divers and cancellation by just a few can leave the boat half empty, the LCD II says its strict cancellation policy is its only economically viable alternative. They add that they're usually able to work with guests to reschedule trips at a mutually convenient time.

The effect of a no-refund clause like the LCD II's is to shift the risk of loss from the dive operator to the dive consumer. For us dive consumers, this amounts to betting our booking price on the weather, an all-or-nothing proposition. One option is to factor in the extra cost of trip cancellation insurance, especially if you're traveling during the hurricane season. I wouldn't book this boat without it.

— John Q. Trigger

Fish at Rowley were different than other places I've been diving. Where in Caribbean destinations such as Belize, Roatán, and Cayman you're likely to see a large school of a single type of fish, at Rowley you'd often see five different kinds of grouper, including Coral, Potato, Queensland, Freckled, and White Spot. While I wasn't quite as surrounded by fish as I've been in the Galapagos, the variety of fish life was stunning. So was the quantity, though there weren't quite as many fish as there were in Papua New Guinea, for example. While larger fish roamed outside the reef, the inside of the reef seemed to serve as a giant playpen for juveniles: I took one photo swimming through a solid mass of juvenile striped catfish about an inch long. Invertebrate life was also spectacular, as it tends to be in places that aren't dived a lot. There were lots of conch and cowries and many live shells.

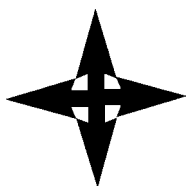


One night before dark the crew anchored buoys with glow sticks attached. We headed out in tinnies, the glow sticks reflecting off the water like double vision. When the engines were cut, the silence deafened. I could even hear the activity on the reef from the surface. Once down, I saw dish-sized basket stars, open and feeding, perched out on precarious coral cliffs. Potato cods cruised by like misshapen ghosts, and in the coral shell, covered critters began foraging. My video light drew inch-long, wormlike creatures that followed the beam to their deaths into the claws of tiny crabs and grasping polyps of corals.

Day four started early with a three-hour crossing to the isolated northern atoll, Mermaid Reef, where the coral was healthy and friendly fish seemed surprised to see us. When mantas swoop back around for a second look or turtles do a double take over their shoulder, you know they haven't seen many of us.

While our small vessel provided intimacy hard to replicate on larger vessels, the new *True North* will provide big boat amenities. This looks like a tremendous boat on paper, and I can vouch for the excellent crew. And that diving at Rowley? Having traveled the world, it rates among the top few in pristine character and big and unique fish. And where else will a bunch of happy Aussies let you have a hand at skurfing? Give it a go. And good luck.

– D.A.



Diver's Compass: For info on the *True North*, contact North Star Charters, P.O. Box 654, Broome, Western Australia 6725; phone 618 9192 1829; fax 618 9192 1830; e-mail truenorthwa@bigpond.com; web address is www.users.bigpond.com/truenorthwa... Cost of trip was \$1645/person (U.S.)...Always snacks available: crackers, cookies, popcorn, leftovers arranged on plate. Coffee, tea, and soft drinks available in big ice chests on deck, no diet Coke, BYO beer and booze; they stopped at a liquor store with you ahead of time...A hat party allowed us 4 hours to create a hat with materials on boat. We had fish parts, lights on head, colored pens, you figure ...While I flew from Sydney to Alice Springs to Darwin to Broome, an easier route is Sydney-Perth-Broome.