

AUSTRALIA

Cairns, the jumping-off spot for the Great Barrier Reef, is a youth-oriented, tropical city with plenty of hotels and restaurants as well as an assortment of day boats going to the Reef and overnight trips to Cod Hole. Cairns' "beach" is a mud flat dotted with roseate spoonbills and other tropical birds, and you can visit the reptile farm to gawk at saltwater crocodiles eating chickens or take the Kuranda Railway for a look at a magnificent waterfall. Be sure to order a hamburger "with everything" to see how it's supposed to be done. . . . The best diving, with pristine reefs and oodles of fish, is to the north, reachable only by live-aboard during their summer months, roughly November to March. The Ribbon Reefs are known for big sharks — lots of them, including fleets of bronze whalers.. . . Pack safety sausages, whistles, strobes, mirrors, and any other safety devices that would make you noticeable if a current carries you too far from the boat. . . . Pricey Lizard Island is the northernmost land-based operation; they have day trips to Cod Hole to pet friendly, refrigerator-sized potato cod. To the south, the wreck of the *Yongala* out from Townsville may be the best fish-covered wreck in the world. . . . Summer weather is sultry and oppressive, with tropical showers. . . . Water tempera-

ture is below 80 and colder in their winter, so bring rubber; visibility can at times be in the 50-foot range. Moving from Queensland south, you'll pass from full-on tropics, through temperate water, to chilly water in Sydney, and finally into the really cold stuff when you reach Tasmania. . . . Don't worry about the Great White in the GBR; they hang around south of Sydney. . . .

AK Falie, Rodney Fox, Adelaide, September 2000, Ernie Krumbein, Munster, IN. Vis: 60-90 ft. Water: 57-59 degrees. Dive restrictions: Cage diving. This was cage diving with the Great Whites. That's why it was as good for beginners as it was for advanced. Super operation and wonderful experience. Highly recommended!

Dunk Island/Mission Beach Quick Cat, February 2000, John and Darcy Halloran, Kenmore, WA. Vis: to 60 ft. Water: 87 degrees, calm and flat, choppy. Dive restrictions: so shallow it didn't matter. Dive boat goes to permanent anchor at Beaver Cay, which is inside edge of Great Barrier Reef. Operation set up for multipurpose (glass boat, beginner snorkelers). Greatest depth to sand bottom was 39 ft. Divemaster frequently grabbed coral, often picked up creatures to show us, brought food to feed fish, would poke giant clam hard until they closed up. (61 70-68-8199; Fax 61 70-68-8528)

Dunk Island, February-March 2000, James Pinkham, Mill Creek, WA.

Vis: 50 ft. Water: 82 degrees. Stay with guide. To really see the Great Barrier Reef you have to live-aboard. Day trips from Dunk or other islands don't make it. Some days were great, others were rainy or stormy. We got a stormy day. The boats don't go out daily and our schedule was such that we only went out one day. Two dives. 40-60 feet. The sand was stirred up, people were seasick. Most of the people were snorkeling. There were 4 of us diving. We were all experienced divers but were treated like beginners at first. The dives were nice, but not my expectation of GBR.

Heron Island

Heron Island, October 1999, Kevin Baily and Lorraine Dillon (kevcbailey@hotmail.com), Croxley Green, Herts, UK. Vis: 20-70 ft.

Boat: large dive boat. Visibility: 20-70 feet. Water: 24-26 c. Dive restrictions: Max 18 metres and 45 mins. bottom time. All dives meticulously logged by staff, i.e. Dive time, depth and air used. We did 11 dives in four days. The Island has various types of accommodation to suit most budgets. Food was excellent and staff very friendly and helpful. If you're a light sleeper take ear plugs as the birds are very noisy at times. Plenty of other activities on the island for non divers. We were told that this was some of the best diving in Australia, it was some what a bit of a disappointment. The coral was not in that good a condition that did not surprise us after diving with some very poor divers. Examples are one diver who had no buoyancy

control whatsoever running along the bottom with his camera, in hand, holding onto coral unnecessarily to take his picture. One diver stood on a large section of brain coral and launched himself off it, not once but twice! Divers going feet first with a strong current and bashing into coral and a very large turtle as they couldn't see where they were going. Other divers regularly banging into you for a lack of buoyancy control. Too many divers on each dive, 18 was the minimum and 24 once with just one dive leader. Once there were two boats going out the first was a single dive and the second a double dive. As the double dive boat was not full they combined the two boats to make 24 divers crammed onto one boat and got rid of one dive leader. This was to save the cost of a ten minute boat trip! All the dives were drift dives and the current ranged from slow to very strong. Visibility ranged from 20 feet to 70 feet. There did not seem to be a great choice of dive sites, we went to the same one three times in three days and another twice in three days. However the fish life made up for the poor coral and bad visibility on most days. On one dive we saw a Wobbegong that had settled in the sand just below the dive boat, however as the 18 other divers arrived and pushed me out the way, the Wobbegong finally had enough and quickly disappeared. There were plenty of different types of Nudi-branches and flat worms and other fish life of all different types. Only saw one shark that was a white tip reef shark. Saw turtles on most dives, six

on one dive alone. Also saw lots of large Gropers, Morays, Pipe fish, various stingrays, Longnose Hawkfish, Angel fish, Bat fish, Shrimp and Goby combinations in the sand. The diving was cheap and good value for money and a good place for beginners. Getting to and from the Island was very well organised with either a helicopter trip or catamaran, the staff organising the helicopter trip couldn't have been more helpful.

Heron Island, November 1999, Michael Fox, Shinkawa, Tokyo Japan. Water: 65-72 degrees. Dive restrictions: Maximum depth about 70 ft. Water: Calm/flat 75%, choppy 25%. Dive Own Profile: No, follow the divemaster. Season for turtles to lay eggs and to watch them on some nights. Observed as many as 30-40 drag themselves on shore and start digging in the sand to lay their eggs. No flash photography while turtles were either coming on shore or laying eggs. Ferry from Gladstone was about 2.5 hours and a little rough, the helicopter option may be a better bet though runs about \$125 US more. Many types of rooms at different prices and were in good shape. Restaurant had a variety and good quality. Dive operation had a choice of one or two tank dives in the morning and a one tank in the afternoon. Operation safety conscious and dive briefings thorough. Boats not crowded (about ten divers average). Fish life had lots of variety but not the dense schools of say Palau. Pam's Point was fantastic, on one dive, 5 mantas hung around for 15 minutes performing loops

and dances, with 2 cobia and a large potato cod, and two (mating?) turtles. Many 2.5 ft Oriental sweetlips. From the dive boat, I could see schools of eagle rays in the boat harbor (no diving allowed in the harbor). Depth pretty tightly enforced but with a sloping sand bottom, there wasn't much of a reason to go any deeper. Dive masters helpful, friendly but not overbearing. Snorkel boat was also a lot of fun.

Heron Island, February 2000, Edwin and Diane Elton, Ridgewood, NJ. Vis: 15 to 25 feet. Water: 76 to 78 degrees, choppy. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: depth limits. The resort is a bird sanctuary. The rooms are very nice and food is plentiful and above average. We were there in turtle laying season and saw laying and small turtles. Saw lemon shark and many reef sharks. Lots of bigger fish. Corals were not very colorful. Diving was max. of 60 ft. but no reason to go deeper. Divemasters were bored and not attentive. However, a couple of dives compared with the best due to mantas and large fish. The divemasters ignored a diver on his first open water dive, after he repeatedly expressed apprehension.

Whitsunday Islands

Oceania, Airlie Dive, August 2000, Pat Halter (phalter@usa.net), AZ. Vis: 20 to 35 Feet. Water: 72 to Fahrenheit, calm. Dive your own profile: yes. Dive restrictions: Had loads of new divers but those with computers could do own profile — depths not an issue as sites and life were best at under 80 ft. The

dive instructors, crew and sites were OK — not great but OK for a 3-day trip. Food and preparation were horrid. Cold cereal for breakfast, cold cuts for lunch, zero snacks (they counted out the cookies that went in a jar next to the instant coffee), and ran out of food every meal. Our trip had 30 people; except my husband and I, all young people who went starved the whole time. Procedures are an accident waiting to happen. We did several drift dives, with all (again, except us) new divers. The tender dropped us off, went back to mother boat and tied up, waited for us to surface and signal and then came after us. If anyone had any trouble there would have been no assistance. I've had over 400 dives and never seen such lax procedures. All the new divers also had a night dive and swam 50 yards to go down by buoy and back with no tender near by; two tenders that were always tied up to boat could have been used for night dive, drift dives etc. but were not. (61 79-46-6032, 61 79-46-7446; Fax 61 79-46-7446)

COOK ISLANDS

Tucked between French Polynesia and Tonga, the Cook Islands have from time to time tried to promote themselves as a dive destination. They've never really succeeded in doing so — even though the main island of Rarotonga has good food and a wide variety of places to stay. There are occasionally excellent airfares offered from the States, and there's even a decent dive through a cut into the lagoon that has good sharks and strong current.

Cook Islands, March 1999, Dick Hess and Diane Canfield. CI great place to get away, surprisingly good prices for remoteness. Got good fares from Air New Zealand, whose coach service is quite good. Food: So few places on any island, you'll pretty much do them all. Entertainment: on Aitutaki, go to at least two "Island Nights." Singing, dancing, and hospitality. Afterwards, watch out for tipsy scooter-drivers so slow they fall over. On Rarotonga, stayed at Central Motel. Basic, pleasant, walk to everything. Best event: learning traditional survival skills chez "Piri," a local who promotes a barbecue at his place. Did not dive on Raro, but heard good stuff about two dive ops there. On Aitutaki, stayed at Rino's cottages, who offer a very good deal. Get one of the beach front ones. Rented scooter from Swiss, just up the street. Good deal. Best events: Bishop's Lagoon cruise, and Tau Ono's reef walk (outstanding!). Snorkeling fabulous in 12,500 acre lagoon, home to zillions of juvenile reef fish. Lots of lagoon so shallow you 'snorkel' on hands and knees (hint: soccer knee pads helpful), around tons of tiny coral heads. Dove with the sole operator, Neil Mitchell. He hopped in water first and let us struggle with gear in rolling boat. Knew names of no fish or coral. Basically, took us out and back, but no "service." Reefs looked great, and you could see way more than 100 ft. I'd love to dive it right, someday. All those juveniles in the lagoon promise even more than the brief sample we saw, and the place is virtually undived.