

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 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. ... The best diving, with pristine reefs and oodles of fish, is to the north, reachable only by live-aboards during their summer, roughly November to March. The Ribbon Reefs are known for big sharks — lots of them, including 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 is sultry and oppressive, with tropical showers. ... Water temperature is below 80 and colder in their winter, so bring rubber. ... 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.

Lizard Island, October 2002, Wayne Leonard (aquamansf@aol.com), San Francisco, CA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 15 to 20 feet. Water: calm. We were dropped off at Lizard Island at the end of a 3.5-day live-aboard trip with Mike Ball Dive Expeditions. Lizard Island is an amazing island. There is only one hotel/resort on the island, and the resort only has 40 rooms. Very exclusive feeling and relaxing. Pricey, but worth it. The resort has dinghies that guests can take to secluded beaches and close outlying islands. Amazing to pull up on a beach/island and be the only ones there. A few good hikes are available too. The diving is fairly average (for the GBR), and the day dive that I did had about 50/50 split between snorkelers/divers. That said, there were mostly experienced divers on the dive with us. Crew was attentive. Lizard is also close to where they do the Cod Hole dive, so there are opportunities for giant potato cod encounters. I had also been asking about a night dive — and even though I was the only one who requested one, the resort took me out. I had a private guide all to myself. That blew me away that they would take care of me like that. When I commented to the manager about the service, his response was "Well that's what we do here on Lizard Island." (www.lizardisland.com.au/lizard)

Lizard Island, March 2003, Craig Young & Sharon Busey, Menomonee Falls, WI. Water Temp 84-86. Visibility 30-100 ft. Lizard Island is the northern most resort on the Great Barrier Reef. The resort itself is fantastic (as well as expensive). The resort has only 40 rooms. The room has ceiling fan, air-conditioning, mini-refrigerator, iron, and hair dryer, but no tub. Electricity 240v. Cookie jar, coffee and tea are refilled daily and included in room price. No door locks (deadbolt allows you to lock yourself in at night) and no room safe however, given the remoteness of the resort and the expense theft is probably not a problem. Rooms are quiet and have nice private balconies with hammocks. Very few mosquitoes. Beach towels available at water sports center. Meals are gourmet and each dish appears to be a work of art. The resort has an exercise center, a freshwater pool, a telescope and free Internet access. The beach directly in front of the hotel is adjacent to a great coral reef, Clam Gardens. Snorkeling is fantastic. Both the burrowing clams and giant clams are numerous and gorgeous. Also will find blue-spotted fantail rays, barrier reef anemonefish, dusky wrasse, 6-banded angelfish, beaked coral fish, blue-lined fang blenny, great barracuda, scallops, Rainford's butterfly, Harlequin tuskfish, coral rabbitfish and friendly turtles. You can also take dinghies with a pre-packed gourmet lunch (both included in room price) to many surrounding beaches most of which have some decent snorkeling. Note the limited luggage allowance for the small plane flight over 4 kg for carry-on and 16 kg for one

checked bag. (You can store luggage at Cairns Airport.) The dive boat carries both snorkelers and divers. Itinerary is a two-tank trip to the outer Great Barrier Reef (40 minutes away) every other day with one of the two dives always at Cod Hole. The other days vary between a one-tank dive in the morning to the inner barrier reef with either an afternoon trip to a nearby reef or a night dive. They supply dry towels, water, soda and beer (only "free" beer on the island) on the way back (you do have to pay extra for the dive trip). Lunch is included in the two-tank trip. Their rental equipment is in good shape and includes octopuses with dive computers. They do not rent tanks for shore diving. They have large clean rinse tanks and sinks at the base (none on the boat). Airfills 3000-3600 psi (200-240 bar). They'll carry your equipment to the boat and have it assembled and ready to go. They strongly request that you stay within sight of dive master. If you are a pokey diver who likes looking in all nooks and crannies (like we are) you may feel a bit pressured at times. They have a crewman on board the boat at all times. On moored dives a Zodiac is always in the water as a safety boat. The boat has radio, oxygen, 2 self-inflating lifeboats, camera table, large enclosed area, large covered area and marine head. Crew professional and friendly. Cod Hole is a world famous dive site and deservedly so. You will interact with huge (5+ feet), friendly potato cod and Maori wrasse. Other sea life seen include white-tip reef sharks (6+ feet), red bass, pennant bannerfish, phyllidia nudibranch, clown trigger, saddled puffer, sailfin tang, yellowback puller

many angelfish, triggerfish and filefish. Inner reef sites and North Direction Island also excellent with great coral and juvenile fish nurseries. Sea life included humbugs, Hector's goby, fox-face, titan triggerfish, bristly puffer, Solander's sharp-nosed puffer, Clark's anemonefish, batfish, goby and blind shrimp, thorny oysters, giant clams, burrowing clams. Only real disappointing site was night dive at Mermaid Cove: coral really bleached and dead. Only highlights were Russell's lionfish and cone shells. If you want to dive the Great Barrier Reef, relax away from the crowds, but not need to be on a live-aboard or have to spend all day traveling to and from the reef and have cash to spare this is an outstanding resort. Lizard Island is an expensive, luxurious, romantic resort with fantastic snorkeling and diving.

**Sea Quest (Dive Down Under),
September 2003, Joseph (joegallagh
@aol.com), Fort Wayne, IN.**

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 Ft. Water: 70 F, calm. Diving on day boats from Cairns can be very restricting. The operations tend to over control concentrating on getting to the reef (two hours away) quickly, getting the dives done and getting back quickly. As a result the dives are very controlled, often on the less vibrant landward side of the reefs where divers can more easily be watched and closely supervised. Sea Quest was a welcome change from that routine. We went as far out as possible to very healthy reefs, Norman and Hastings Reefs which had very active spots. The crew was accommodating, particularly compared to the poor

TUSA operation that I experienced the day before. The Great Barrier Reef has much to offer, giant clams, an abundance of corals and a tremendous variety of fish living off the corals. Maximum underwater time in a vibrant location is what an experienced diver should expect and the Sea Quest operation does its best to meet those expectations. The reefs, Norman and Hastings Reef, were vibrant and full of life. Sea Quest Captain picked out seaward healthy reefs. Because of my experience level I was paired up with a member of the boat crew who simply followed my lead.

Fiji

For Left Coasters, it's easier to get to Fiji than to the Caribbean: 10 hours nonstop from L.A. Airfare and an all-inclusive week at many excellent resorts can be had for under \$2,500 per person; air packages can be tailored to include New Zealand/Australia extensions at little extra cost. ... Fijians are polite, friendly, delightful, modest, and religious, so watch your language, and wear non-revealing clothes to town. Guys, have someone teach you how to tie a sulu so you, too, can go home in a skirt. ... Wetsuits are a staple year-round; currents add coolness, just like the wind chill factor. ... Taveuni has great diving, but it's terrible for beginners with difficult currents; bring a compass and carry both day and night emergency surface signaling devices (tubes, strobes). ... The weather