

Enter the Dragon

by Anita Verde and Peter Marshall

Like many people, we hadn't really thought much about diving in our local temperate marine environment. Cold water, kelp and often low visibility didn't really sound appealing when compared to the clear, warm, tropical waters we so regularly dive. Yet in the green shallow waters just over an hour from Melbourne, Australia; you'll find one of the most incredibly fascinating creatures, the Weedy Sea Dragon (Phyllopteryx taeniolatus).

Only found in the relatively shallow coastal waters from Port Stephens in NSW, through Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia, and Geraldton in Western Australia, these captivating animals are every bit (if not more) as wonderful as any species we've seen in the tropics.

The best place to see these guys in Victoria is no doubt the local pier in the small hamlet of Flinders, a mere 100 km from Melbourne's CBD. And while the pier is also home to cuttlefish, smooth rays, crabs and plenty of other critters, the real stars of this dive are the dragons. So much so that the BBC's Natural History Film Unit spent three weeks at Flinders Pier in January 2016 to get

footage of the dragons for Episode 5 of Blue Planet II.

The pier has a grassy bottom which is why it's the perfect home for the dragons. There are dozens of dragons here, and during the right season you might even see the males delicately carrying their eggs around. Like their close relative the pipefish, the male dragons take responsibility when it comes to child rearing. Each year in the spring, an elegant dance takes place, where the female's bright pink fertilised eggs are transferred to the male's tail. He will carry these eggs for around 8 weeks until the fully formed baby dragons hatch and venture into the green seas to fend for themselves by taking shelter in the sea grass.

Often invisible to the untrained eye, finding these guys for the first time can be a little challenging, but as soon as you've spotted your first one, more and more just seem to magically appear.

You'll often find them hovering around fish larvae and plankton, constantly feeding and often unaware of your presence. Given they don't have a proper stomach, they have to constantly forage for food, sucking



their meal through their tiny mouth located at the tip of their snout.

While the pier can be dived at any time, it's best avoided in strong Easterly or North Easterly winds, as when the sea is rough the surge and subsequent poor visibility can make it unpleasant. Visibility will of course be at its best when there hasn't been recent rain. You can enter and exit from one of the many ladders on the pier itself, or from the





shore - depending on the tide. This is a shallow dive (around 5 meters) even when the tide is high, so it's best dived on an incoming tide if possible. See Tides Chart or WillyWeather to plan your dive.

When diving, practice good buoyancy and be careful to stay off the weedy bottom as this is the dragons habitat. The pier's pylons also have lovely growth and are home to many other critters, so be careful not to kick the pylons as you move throughout the dive.

As with most piers in Australia, fisherman are often present, so be sure to take your dive knife to de tangle yourself from potential hazards like fishing line, hooks and lures. Be sure to stay underneath the pier at all times to avoid fishing and boat traffic, and be mindful when surfacing. If you have a dive flag to alert people of your presence that's even better!

The water temperature in the summer months ranges from 16 - 19 degrees. We dived in late January in 19 degree water temperature with a 7.5 mm suit, hood, boots and gloves.

The diving culture in the region is very independent, so if don't have your own tanks or equipment, or you're a visitor, you'll need to hire these. Both the Scuba Doctor and Extreme Water Sports are open from 7.30 am in the summer months and

can provide you with everything you need, including tank and equipment hire.

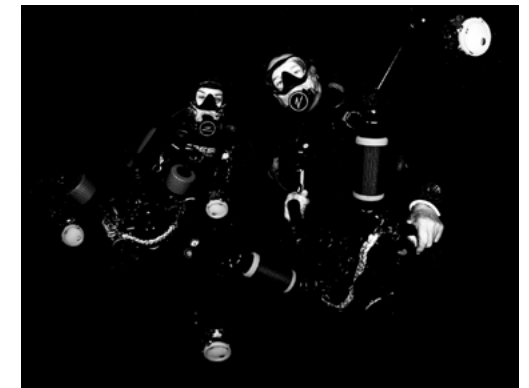
So that's it. Don't let the logistics and cold water turn you off, because once you encounter these beauties you'll be totally in love! And it's a great little side trip to add to your next visit to Melbourne!

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*Photo credit: Julia Sumerling
Mike Ball Dive Expeditions*