

South West Rocks: Where Currents Meet

by Nicolas Remy

When fellow divers find out that underwater photography is what I do for a living, the conversation almost always leads to one question: What are your favourite places to dive?

After years of diving across tropical and temperate waters, my top-five list always includes these three words: South West Rocks.

This unassuming coastal town, nestled on Australia's mid-north coast in New South Wales, sits in the heart of the Great Southern Reef—a vast chain of temperate ecosystems stretching thousands of kilometres around the southern half of the continent. South West Rocks is the gateway to Fish Rock, a lonely island two kilometres offshore that shelters an astonishing diversity of marine life and the world's longest swim-through ocean cave simply known as Fish Rock Cave, with 125m in length. Declared a Mission Blue Hope Spot in 2021, it's one of those places where tropical and temperate species cross paths, carried by the currents that define the region.

With just 5,500 residents and limited urban development, South

West Rocks has kept its easygoing, small-town charm. There are no high-rise buildings here—mostly low-slung houses, pristine beaches, and the lush green of surrounding national parks. Kangaroos sometimes graze by the roadside, cockatoos screech from the trees, and white sea-eagles are regularly spotted when you take a stroll by the ocean.

The Road (and River) to the Rock

Every dive trip begins the same way: loading the boat on the Macleay River, under the curious eyes of pelicans, then cruising downstream toward the open sea. The ride to Fish Rock takes about 30 minutes, an opportunity to admire a stunning, untouched coastline, where rolling green hills and golden sandy beaches stretch as far as the eye can see. There are no construction in sight for dozens of kilometers, except for the white beacon of Smoky Cape Lighthouse. It's a rare and calming landscape, perfect for daydreaming, only occasionally interrupted by dolphins passing by or a humpback whale spotted during its migration (between May and



Grey nurse sharks in the entrance of Fish Rock Cave. Nikon D500, Tokina 10-17mm, 2x Inon z240. Nauticam housing. 1/160, f/8, ISO 320



November).

With such a view, the boat ride goes by in a flash—provided you're not prone to seasickness (don't forget your tablets if needed). Before long, you'll spot Fish Rock, a rocky outcrop rising from the Pacific, and the only island in sight for miles. Time to zip up the wetsuit: the real magic lies below.

A Crossroads of Currents

Fish Rock may look small—barely 170 metres long above water—but beneath the surface it expands into drop-offs, gullies, and canyons plunging to 35 metres. It lies directly in the path of the East Australian Current, the same “EAC” that Marlin and Dory surfed in *Finding Nemo*. This warm current sweeps south from the Great Barrier Reef, bringing with it a shifting mix of nutrient and some migratory species.

The island's resident celebrities are the grey nurse sharks (*Carcharias taurus*), which are also called sand tiger or ragged tooth sharks outside of Australia. Dozens can usually be most of the year except for a few weeks where the water gets too warm (around February-May). Gliding slowly through gullies or hovering in the lee of the rocks, these sharks spent the day resting, half-asleep to conserve energy. They only fully wake up at night when they may go hunt for a meal, their diet includes fish, as well as cephalopods, crabs and lobsters. Despite their toothy, intimidating grin (they can't fully close their mouth), they are harmless to humans, unless provoked. It's one of the most photogenic shark species, and one that you can approach near touching distance without any baiting, provided you remain calm and minimise any movement.

Sharing the same real estate are two of



Grey nurse sharks aggregating. Nikon D500, Tokina 10-17mm, 2x Inon z240. Nauticam housing. 1/250, f/9, ISO 320

the largest wobbegongs species in the world (the spotted wobbegong and gulf wobbegong). These are cousins of Raja Ampat's iconic tassled wobbegong, only much bigger, with some individuals reaching 3 meters in length. Despite their laid-back appearance, these carpet sharks are ambushed predators and can launch a lightning-fast strike passing prey. They are a near guaranteed sighting all-year-round at Fish Rock.

Out in the blue, bronze whalers, bull sharks, and even scalloped hammerheads may occasionally be spotted swimming by. During the hammerhead season from October to January, schools of two hundred individuals been sighted by lucky divers. The water gets at its warmest in March, which brings the elegant leopard sharks, found either resting on the sand or swimming gracefully. Another photographer's favourite is marbled stingrays, the

size of dining tables, which are found cruising around the rock and through Fish Rock cave during the whole year. Blue groppers patrol the reef and will approach you at arm's length, as they used to be fed urchins by divers. Turtles, eagle rays, cownose rays and the occasional XXL Queensland grouper complete the picture at different times of the year.

Fish Rock really is a wide-angle playground, though there are various nudibranch species, a few anemonefish and even the odd blue-lined octopus seen from time to time, if you must get your macro fix.

Even though the EAC flows North to South, wind, swell and Fish Rock's topography means currents are ever-changing along the dive sites surrounding the island. A location that's calm in the morning can be swept by strong flow in the afternoon. Visibility may vary anywhere from three to thirty metres, shifting with plankton blooms, rainfall, or changes in wind and swell direction. These fluctuations constantly reshape the sites, ensuring that no two dives are ever the same. I once watched the water transform from clear blue with twenty metres of visibility to a green ten within minutes as the current turned—but that murk brought with it a sudden swarm of fish life, including two photogenic leopard sharks! At Fish Rock, there's always a silver

lining, and always something worth photographing. Let's now discuss the dive sites you might be visiting there.

Into the Cave

Nothing defines Fish Rock like its cave, a tunnel that cuts straight through the island from eight to twenty-four metres depth. The upper entrance is a broad, five-metre cavern where wobbegongs are often found resting on the bottom, careful with your fins! When the water cools down and forms a thermocline, grey nurse sharks sometimes move inside the cave seeking warmth, and creating unique photo opportunities.

Entering the cave, you'll immediately feel the surge pushing and pulling—a living breath of the ocean. Depth gauges flutter as pressure waves sweep through, and the pulse of the sea presses gently against your eardrums. The first eighty metres slope gradually into darkness, where torch beams reveal large lobsters crawling across crevices and walls. The tunnel then narrows to a single-file squeeze before dropping ten metres down a vertical chimney, leading into the final horizontal passage.

As you continue, a faint glow of daylight begins to appear ahead, filtering through a shimmering curtain of glassfish that conceal the exit and part as you approach. Beyond them,



My heart started pumping when I crossed paths with this large bull ray in the narrower section of the cave. Nikon D500, Tokina 10-17mm, 2x Inon z240. Nauticam housing. 1/125, f/8, ISO 200

you'll arrive at the bottom of an underwater canyon with steep walls—sometimes patrolled by ten or twenty grey nurse sharks gliding silently, as if welcoming you back to open water. Follow the gorge, and you'll arrive at another of Fish Rock's treasures: Fish Bommies.

Fish everywhere!!

Fish Bommies nearly always hosts dense gatherings of marine life. Here, a mix of schooling fish species – which vary with seasons - swirl in

an underwater choreography that is mesmerising to watch. It's easy to get distracted and lose track of your buddy in this moving maze, but keep an eye to your gauge as some bommies sit in 25 to 30 meters depth. Large wobbegongs lurk surrounded by moving fish and are fantastic photo opportunities.

Further south, a couple of parallel canyons known as the Shark Gutters provides sanctuary to yet more grey nurses. The sandy floors lie around 25 metres deep, the walls



A critically endangered whitespotted guitarfish, resting in the current, off Green island. Nikon Z9, Nikon Z 24-50mm, Nauticam WACP-1B, 2x Retra Flash Pro. Nauticam housing. 1/60, F/11, ISO 250

rising to fifteen. On days of limited visibility, the sharks tend to appear at the last minute and can get your heart rate up! Permanent moorings are setup in this site, and during safety stops batfish sometimes come and hang out with divers there.

The Aquarium, on the island's southern flank, lives up to its name. Between twelve and eighteen metres, the beginner-friendly site is a constant blur of motion, with stripeys, diamondfish, yellowtail scads and other species sweeping in all directions. Within the confusion, a

turtle glides through, a bull ray zooms by or a grey nurse appears for an instant before disappearing into the crowd. The site can be current-swept, but then nearby Shark Gutters or the cave entrance would offer calmer refuges.

To the north lies the Submerged Pinnacle, a reef that rises to eight metres from the surface and attracts all sorts of pelagics and turtles. When current allows, experienced divers can drift along Colorado Pass, tracing the island's northern wall and eventually looping back toward Fish Bommies—a



Schools of fish cross paths at Fish Bommies. Nikon Z9, Nikon 8-15mm fisheye, 2x Retra Flash Pro. Nauticam housing. 1/80, f/13, ISO 320

thrilling navigation best attempted with a local guide who knows how to read the currents.

The Sound of Whales

One of Fish Rock's hidden pleasures is auditory. Between May and November, the calls of migrating humpback whales are often heard as they reverberate underwater. On one dive, the sound grew so powerful I felt my chest vibrate; our skipper later said a whale had passed within a hundred metres. On another, a shadow the size of a bus slid past at the edge of

visibility—silent, majestic, and gone in seconds.

Each dive here feels unpredictable, charged with the sense that anything might appear from the blue. It's that combination of familiarity and surprise that keeps drawing me back.

When the ocean gets agitated

The South Pacific ocean is wild and of course, doesn't always cooperate with dive plans. With no barrier reef to break the swell, rough conditions sometimes cancel boat



An inquisitive blue groper having no idea about personal space! Nikon Z9, Nikon 8-15mm fisheye, 2x Retra Flash Pro. Nauticam housing. 1/100, f/13, ISO 320

dives. Fortunately there are still a few good options for outdoorsy travellers. Depending on the swell's direction, a snorkel from the Trial Bay Gaol boat ramp can be excellent for turtles, wobbegongs and small fish schools.

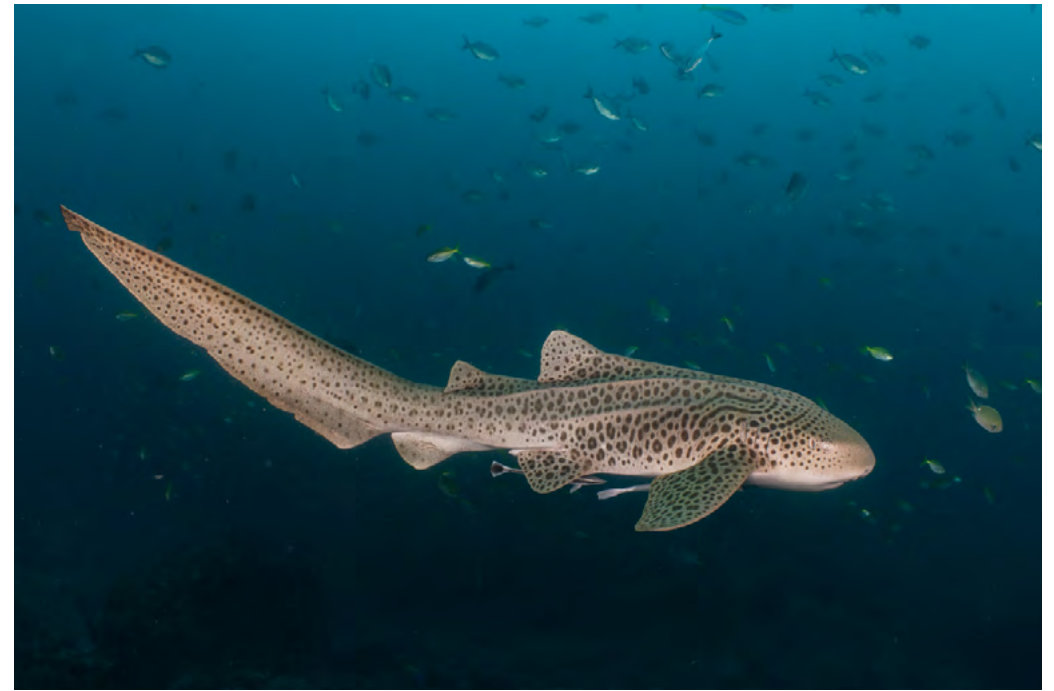
Topside, the region offers plenty to explore. Arakoon and Hat Head National Parks provide walking trails through eucalyptus forest and along stunning beaches that can be surprisingly empty, school vacations aside! Hat Head's headlands are excellent whale-watching spots during migration months. The Smoky Cape Lighthouse offers one of the finest

coastal views in New South Wales, some picnic tables and a good chance to spot a white sea eagle.

Foodies will appreciate the nutty-flavoured oysters farmed in the Macleay, and the local beef is famous across the state. On hot afternoons, join locals for a swim in South West Rock Creek, where teenagers leap off the bridge into the cool water.

Hiding in plain sight: Green Island

Most divers come to South West Rocks only wanting to dive Fish Rock and miss out on Green Island, a



The elegant leopard shark passing by. Sony A1, Sony 28-60mm, Nauticam FCP-1, 2x Backscatter Hybrid Flash. Nauticam housing. 1/50, F/11, ISO 400

hidden another midway between the town and its iconic rock. With the right conditions, Green island's East flank offers a shallow drift dive between ten and fifteen metres, with marine life surprisingly different from Fish Rock.

If luck is on your side, you may see the critically-endangered whitespotted guitarfish—flat-bodied rays with shark-like dorsal fins that can reach three metres long. They're timid; approach too fast and they'll be gone in the current in no time. During late summer, leopard sharks rest serenely on the seabed there, while we've seen schooling eagle rays

in Winter and chunky Queensland groupers round the year, together with the usual suspects: wobbegongs and bull rays (large smooth stingrays). On a calm day with clear water, this truly is world-class diving.

Planning your trip

South West Rocks lies roughly five hours' drive from both Sydney and Brisbane (both have international airports), or just one hour from the smaller airports of Port Macquarie or Coffs Harbour. Once there, visitors find a mix of holiday parks, motels, and AirBnBs, two supermarkets,



Curious batfish hanging in the shallows. Nikon Z9, Nikon Z 24-50mm, Nauticam WACP-1B, 2x Retra Flash Pro. Nauticam housing. 1/160, F/13, ISO 250

and several cafés and a few good restaurants. Enjoy the welcoming & unpretentious atmosphere typical of an Aussie coastal village.

Diving is possible year-round, but timing shapes what you'll see. Grey nurse sharks peak from end-May through January, migrating South when the water warms above their comfort zone. Hammerheads are occasionally spotted from October to January, while humpback whales are around between May and October. Water temperatures swing from 17 °C in winter to 25 °C in summer, and thermoclines can drop it suddenly.

Visibility, too, can change quickly, part of Fish Rock's changing charm.

Two professional operators—Fish Rock Dive Centre and South West Rocks Dive Centre—go to Fish Rock and know the island intimately.

Conditions can be demanding, but in skilled hands they're managed safely, allowing divers to experience one of Australia's most extraordinary dive destination. I have done 12 trips with Fish Rock Dive Centre and keep diving with them - we share the same passion for underwater photography. I will be running two 4-days trips with them in October 2026.



A lone grey nurse shark cruises peacefully amongst a myriad of fish. Nikon D500, Tokina 10-17mm, 2x Inon z240. Nauticam housing. 1/80, f/8, ISO 400

Nicolas Remy

www.nicolaslenaremy.com

www.fishrock.com.au

www.swrdive.com.au



www.theunderwaterclub.com

