

Ribbon & Osprey Reefs, GBR

By Nigel Marsh

It is amazing how many people think the Great Barrier Reef is dead. Every time I am overseas, I talk to divers who have avoided visiting the Great Barrier Reef because they have heard misleading and often false reports in the media about the state of this natural wonder of the world. Well, I can inform you that the Great Barrier Reef is not dead and in fact it still offers some of the most spectacular diving on the planet.

The Great Barrier Reef is huge, stretching over 2300km and comprising over 3000 individual reefs. Over 1600 fish species and 450 coral species inhabit the reef and it is also home to healthy populations of turtles, sharks and rays. The Great Barrier Reef, like all coral reefs around the planet, has suffered from more frequent coral bleaching events in the last decade due to climate change. Fortunately, most of these events are localised and much of the coral recovers, which is never reported by the media.

Access to the Great Barrier Reef is from several coastal Queensland towns. In the south, Bundaberg and Gladstone are the step off points to explore the wonderful coral cays of

Lady Elliot Island and Heron Island, which are great locations to see manta rays and turtles. Unfortunately, liveaboard options in this area have almost disappeared due to the tourism decline, which is a shame as the Capricorn and Bunker Groups and Swains Reefs offer incredible diving. Day trips to the reef are also available from Airlie Beach, Townsville, Port Douglas and of course Cairns. The diving is quite good on some of these day trips. However, if you want to see the best of the Great Barrier Reef, I recommend a liveaboard vessel out of Cairns to explore the Ribbon Reefs and Coral Sea Reefs.

Two world class liveaboard vessels offer these trips, SpoilSport and Spirit of Freedom, and they are equally good, offering five dives a day, amazing chef prepared meals and first-class service. I have dived this area on eight liveaboard trips over the last thirty years, with my most recent trip on SpoilSport completed over the new year.

Wonderful hard coral gardens at Cod Hole - 1/125, f11, ISO 200, Nikon D500 with Tokina 10-17mm lens, Isotta Housing and Inon Z330 strobe





Trip director Kieran giving at dive brief - 1/160, f6.3, ISO 400, Nikon D500 with Nikkor 18-300mm lens

Spoilsport is a 30m long catamaran operated by Mike Ball Dive Expeditions that caters for 26 guests. The boat was launched in 1989 (I was on its second ever trip) and it still feels new due to meticulous maintenance and regular refits. Each week they offer a three-day Ribbon Reefs trip and a four-day combined Ribbon Reefs and Osprey Reef trip, or you can do both. They also offer special trips to the Far Northern Reefs, SS Yongala shipwreck and to the Coral Sea Reefs, like Osprey, Bougainville and Holmes Reef, that have 1km drop-offs, oversized corals and abundant sharks.

My new years trip was scheduled to explore the Coral Sea Reefs. Unfortunately, unseasonal and unpredictable northerly winds changed our trip back to a more regular Ribbon Reefs and Osprey Reef voyage, a fall back that I was more than happy with.

Boarding Spoilsport late in the afternoon, the guests and crews were a mixed group from around the planet. After briefings, and complimentary wine and nibbles, we got underway and headed north to the Ribbon Reefs.

The Ribbon Reefs are located



Schools of yellow-finned goatfish and healthy hard corals on the peak of Two Towers - 1/125, f11, ISO 200, Nikon D500 with Tokina 10-17mm lens, Isotta Housing and Inon Z330 strobe

over 100km north of Cairns and consist of ten elongated barrier reefs stretching over another 100km. Over one hundred dive sites are found in the area, and new sites are still being found each year. At the Ribbons you can explore coral gardens, sloping walls, vertical walls, sheltered bays and numerous stunning pinnacles. These reefs can be explored year-round, and are very popular in June and July, when dwarf minke whales are in residence and take great delight in visiting boats and circling snorkellers. However, diving

at anytime of the year you will see healthy coral gardens, abundant reef and pelagic fish, sharks, turtles and groppers.

I woke the first morning to find us anchored at Ribbon Reef No.3 at a site called Summer Bay. The two dives here were easy and very enjoyable, exploring a sloping reef with 30m visibility. On previous Ribbon Reef trips I have mostly stuck with my wide-angle lens, as there are so many large subjects to photograph. However, on this trip I was mostly aiming to focus on macro, especially fish portraits, as I



Nudibranch at Steve's Bommie - 1/125, f16, ISO 200, Nikon D500 with 60mm lens, Isotta Housing and Inon Z330 strobe.

am working on a new fish book.

Over two dives we explored pretty coral gardens, coral heads and areas of sand and rubble, finding spotted garden eels, schools of sweetlips, coral snappers and fusiliers, and a good variety of invertebrates. There were abundant reef fish everywhere, including angelfishes, butterflyfishes, parrotfishes, wrasses, tobies, filefishes, boxfishes, rock cods, hawkfishes, dottybacks and many others.

The afternoon and night dive on



Giant clam at Two Towers - 1/125, f11, ISO 200, Nikon D500 with Tokina 10-17mm lens, Isotta Housing and Inon Z330 strobe

Ribbon Reef No.5 saw us diving a new site, due to the northerly winds, called Clam Beds Wildside. This wall on the southeast side of the reef is rarely dived, and dropping from 2m to 25m it was covered in lovely corals and interesting fish life. I spotted grey reef sharks and pelagic fish, like mackerel, batfish and trevally. However, it was the smaller subjects that kept my camera busy, such as morays, nudibranchs, clown triggerfish, tobies and boxfishes. I was very surprised to find a male swallowtail angelfish, as I had never seen this species on the Ribbon Reefs before.

Day two found us at Ribbon Reef No.10, exploring the delightful coral gardens at Coral Kingdom. I missed the reef manta ray, spotted eagle ray and bowmouth wedgefish that other divers observed, instead seeing a massive school of bumphead parrotfish and several reef sharks. The next two dives at Two Towers were far more impressive, with these two pinnacles of coral rising from 25m to 3m. These pinnacles swarm with fishes, including schools of barracuda, trevally, coral snappers and fusiliers. I also encountered green turtles, whitetip reef sharks, giant Maori

wrasse and two huge giant clams. The highlight was the lovely hard coral gardens on the peak of each pinnacle that were shrouded by schools of goatfish and coral snappers.

At Pixie Wildside later that day we explored another wall that is rarely dived, and I was delighted to see more swallowtail angelfish. I now know where these rare fish live, on the rougher exposed southern reefs and walls that are rarely visited.

The Spoilsport crew are second to none. Trip director Keiran gave wonderful dive briefs and kept us up to date on the daily activities. You can use air or nitrox, and the fills are super-fast. You can follow a guide or do your own thing with your buddy, and if suitably qualified you can solo dive. Also, the average dive time is between 60 and 80 minutes. They are also incredibly safety conscious, signing everyone in and out, and provide every diver with a GPS for an emergency.

The next morning, we explored another classic Ribbon Reef pinnacle at Lighthouse Bommie. This totem pole of coral rises from 25m to 5m and abounds with fish. Over winter it is also the premier spot to encounter dwarf minke whales, and last time I was here we had six of these friendly whales swimming around us for over two hours. While the others marvelled at the schools of



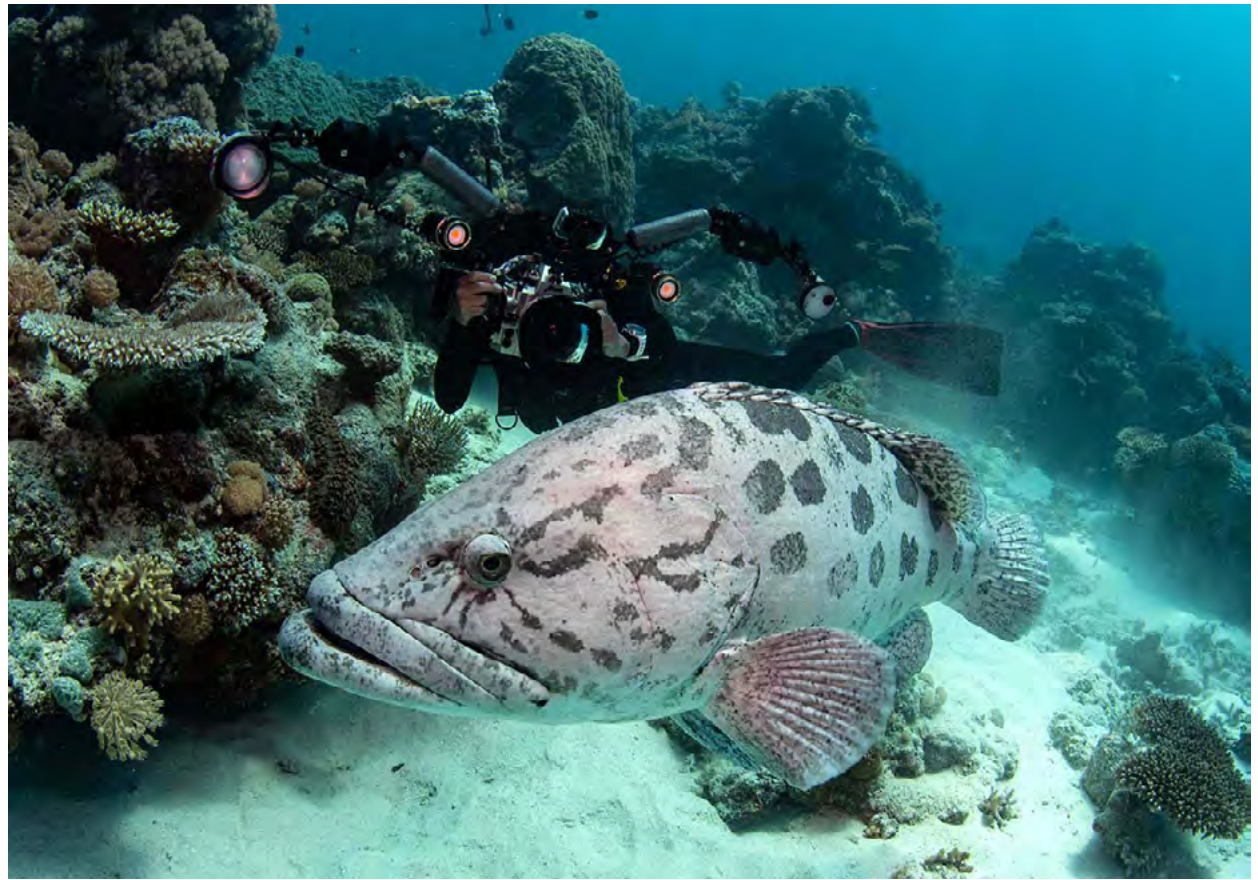
Resting whitetip reef shark at Osprey Reef - 1/125, f9, ISO 200, Nikon D500 with 60mm lens, Isotta Housing and Inon Z330 strobe

trevally, barracuda and coral snappers, I concentrated on the smaller fishes, finding lavender dottybacks, a juvenile emperor angelfish, pink anemonefish, blennies and scissorfish.

Cod Hole was our next stop for two dives. Famous for its population of large potato cod, the number of friendly gropers has declined since they are no longer fed. We still saw two, including one that followed us around like a lost puppy. While there were large schools of fish and several reef sharks to be seen, the highlight of Cod Hole are the wonderful hard coral gardens

in the shallows, all healthy and very photogenic. After two lovely dives at the Snake Pit, unfortunately with no sea snakes to be seen, we got the good news that we would be heading out to Osprey Reef overnight, sadly just for the day.

The 120km overnight cross was surprisingly calm, however, the unseasonal northerly winds limited the areas we could dive. We were going to miss the most famous site of North Horn, where over fifty reef sharks gather for a shark feed. However, I was very excited that we were to dive the rarely



One of the friendly potato cod at Cod Hole - 1/125, f13, ISO 200, Nikon D500 with Tokina 10-17mm lens, Isotta Housing and Inon Z330 strobe

visited Rapid Horn, at the southern tip of the reef.

Exposed to powerful ocean swells, the hard corals here were packed in tight on the coral ridges we explore. We also ventured to the edge of the drop-off, where it plunged from 20m to 1000m. Here we watched reef sharks and pelagic fish cruising. I

was particularly interested to see what unusual fish I could find, as these Coral Sea Reefs are renowned for fishes not normally found on the Great Barrier Reef. And I was not disappointed, finding reticulated butterflyfish and two rare angelfish – a flame angel and a Woodhead's angel.

We then did two dives at False Entrance, exploring coral gutters and a plummeting wall covered in exquisite corals. There were even more sharks and schools of pelagic fish at this site, including a pack of four whitetip reef sharks following a giant trevally around. We saw bumphead parrotfish,



Another rare find, a possum wrasse at Steve's Bommie - 1/125, f13, ISO 200, Nikon D500 with 60mm lens, Isotta Housing and Inon Z330

spiny lobsters, mackerel and barracuda. I also found some more rare fish - blueheaded tilefish and a Watanabe's angelfish.

The next morning, we were back on Ribbon Reef No. 10, exploring the sites around Pixie Reef. Pixie Wall was a nice start to the day; however, my favourite was Pixie Pinnacle. This coral tower rises from 30m to 3m and is home to a wonderful variety of fish and invertebrates. I found an endless supply of subjects for my camera, including gobies, angelfishes, butterflyfishes, lionfishes,

tobies and boxfishes. The hard corals on the top of the pinnacle are not only pretty, but also hide some interesting fishes, such as blennies, rock cods and anemonefishes. My attentions were drawn to one coral as it was playing host to spotted crouchers and a fish I have always wanted to see, a flame hawkfish. This shy fish avoided by camera for fifteen minutes before I finally got a decent, in focus shot.

The afternoon dive at Vertical Gardens was a new spot for me, as it can only be dived with northerly winds. The wall at this site



Green turtle at Two Towers - 1/125, f13, ISO 200, Nikon D500 with Tokina 10-17mm lens, Isotta Housing and Inon Z330 strobe

drops from 3m to 30m and is covered in the most beautiful corals I have seen on the Ribbon Reefs. I wished I had my wide-angle lens until I saw the amazing variety of fishes at this site. I photographed Lamarck's angelfish, strawberry rock cods, netted tobies, yellow boxfish, blue tangs and a friendly leopard blenny.

Heading south overnight our first dive was on another amazing pinnacle off Ribbon Reef No.5 called Crack-A-Jack. This was another new site for me, as this pinnacle was only discovered a few years ago,

and rising from 35m to 10m it was stunning. Like other Ribbon Reef pinnacles it was coated in sea whips, sponges, gorgonians and soft corals. However, the fan on this site contained something special, a tiny Bargibant's pygmy seahorse. Other wonderful small subjects including a leaf scorpionfish, a Morrison's dragnet, seawhip gobies, nudibranchs, dottybacks, longnose hawkfish and a good variety of pygmy angelfish.

I finished my diving

with two wonderful dives at the always amazing Steve's Bommie. This large pinnacle rises from 30m to 3m and it never disappoints with its schooling fish and abundant reef fishes. There were reef stonefish, blennies, tobies, boxfishes, wrasses, lionfishes, anemonefishes and a giant moray. I ended the trip on a high, finding a very rare possum wrasse, a new record for this area.

We may have missed spending the entire trip on the Coral Sea Reefs, however, this still ended up being an amazing trip on the always magic Ribbon Reefs.

Nigel Marsh

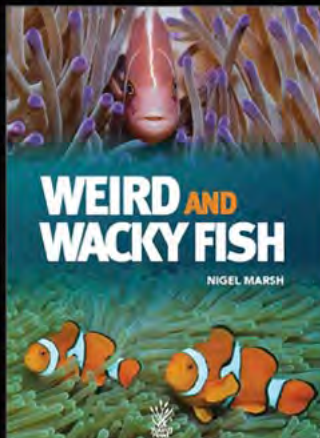
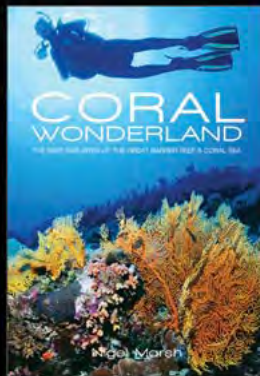
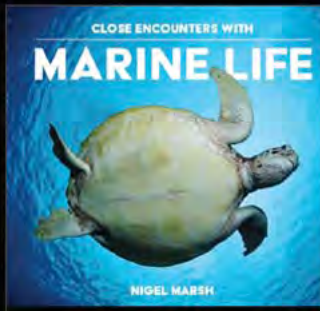
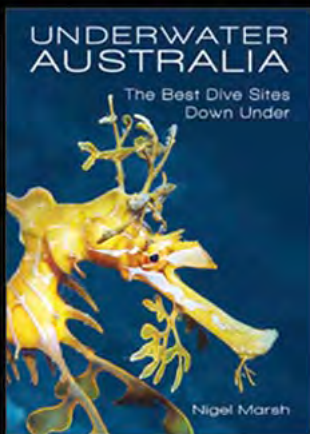
Nigel Marsh has authored over a dozen books on marine life and dive sites, and each year leads special photography group trips to dive destinations across the globe. On these trips Nigel is on hand to help improve your underwater photography and does regular talks on photography and marine life – visit his website for details.

www.nigelmarshphotography.com

NIGEL MARSH

Photography

Nigel Marsh is an Australian photojournalist, underwater photographer and author. Working with New Holland publishers, Nigel has produced a number of guide books for divers and snorkelers, and also a series of children's books with marine related themes.



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