

How far can you go?

by Beth and Shaun Tierney

It's always there isn't it? That craving, the hunger for different and better diving, with more opportunities to capture the experience on film. And without the trials and tribulations of dives inundated with people, where the majority of anything you see is fins. But how far can you go to chase that elusive dream?

We're not really sure what first attracted us to Christmas Island and Cocos Keeling, two isolated Australian outposts in the Indian Ocean. But it was amusing that once we'd found them, no one else knew where they were - Christmas Island being confused with Kiribati and Cocos with, yes, Cocos. This seemed like a good sign - surely these destinations wouldn't be crowded? Our plan was to spend a week in each place.

Cocos Keeling has that familiar Indian Ocean look: a horseshoe shaped lagoon is a bright turquoise and ringed by spits of land covered with a deep green shroud of coconut trees. There isn't much of a population, just about 600 localised Malays and peace-seeking ex-pat Aussies. Our dive hosts, Dieter and Karen, were looking forward to introducing us to their marine realm. The sub-aqua reputation is for big stuff - being in the middle of nowhere, the atoll attracts pelagics who feed on smaller species that inhabit the reefs. There are two styles of diving, sites inside the atoll and those around the rim.

We were delighted to discover we were the only divers that week (the following was fully booked) and a little surprised by our first lagoon



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dives. Affectionately known as 'diving the desert' the seabed is sculpted by currents and tidal surges. However, the fish life is strangely prolific with substantial schools of yellow snapper, rainbow runners and pyramid butterflies.

At The Cannons, there were three wary whitetip sharks resting on a sandy slope and as we finned towards them a manta flew past! We fired off a few shots, with no one in the way, but she faded swiftly into the blue. Later we came across three cannons dumped onto the sea floor. Their history is unknown but they sit close to the coral-encrusted, WWII telecommunications cables that stretch across the seabed. Nearby, was a great little wreck sitting upright on the sand, the remains of a fibreglass refugee boat. The engines and some of the structure is still intact, but the hull is slowly disintegrating. Grouper, sweetlips and rabbitfish take the opportunity to shelter from predators.

The underwater scenery changes dramatically once you head outside the lagoon. The atoll's outer walls are densely coated in hard corals and interspersed with sandy shelves. At Lane Cove, beds of garden eels poke up from the sand and



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we could see several wary barracuda hanging off the wall. They followed us for the entire dive but kept their distance. There is a constant array of big animals - turtles, tuna and sharks - yet they didn't always come that close except on one occasion. We had dropped to the base of the wall to see Karen's favourite peach coloured fans and had only been there moments when we heard her squawking through her regulator. We looked up to see her laughing so hard her mask was flooding.



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Behind us were two young whitetip sharks. They'd been sniffing our fins - literally - when one of us had given a solid kick and frightened them off.

Photographically, Cocos was a straightforward destination. The beautiful white sand reflects lots of sun light so even when a storm blows in like it did during our visit, visibility remains pretty good. One housing was set up with a 17-35 zoom lens which covered almost every option, while the 60mm macro got dunked once or twice for a change of pace. However, our most educational photo moment came along right at the end

when Dieter met a pod of bottlenose dolphins. He chuckled us into the water, then took the boat off to play with them, spinning it - and the dolphins - around us. There is nothing in the world like looking a truly wild dolphin in the eye and having him smile right back. Plus we discovered that our tiny Nikon 5200 digital camera really came into its own. For a spontaneous moment like this, its size and manoeuvrability were perfect. OK, you can't really see what you're doing as you fin madly after a bottlenose who's laughing at you, but click away and the results are great!

Cocos had lived up to its promise of uncrowded diving and with only one dive centre and only ever one boat the only thing likely to get in your way is a school of fish. The solitude had been blissful so we wondered what Christmas Island would bring.

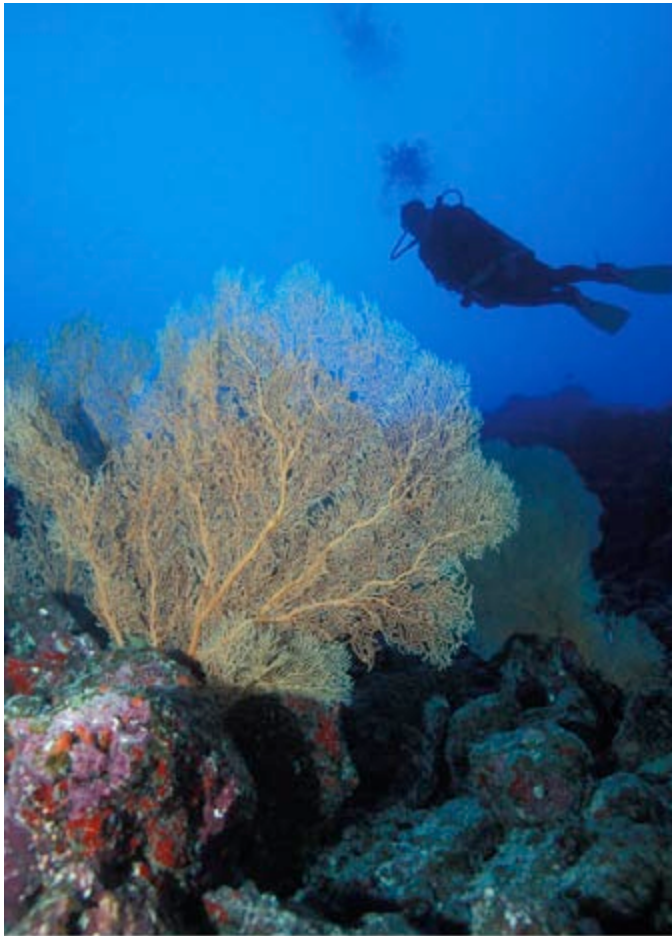
A day later we flew there and found a totally different island. Christmas is covered in a rainforest that houses almost as many endemic species as in the Galapagos. Rare birds, unique bats and Christmas's biggest claim to fame, the red crab migration. For that, you have to be there when the weather patterns are just right, and we weren't, but underwater, we discovered just how exceptional the island is.

Our first day was full of good omens. Just a few minutes from the dock our boat was surrounded by an enormous pod of Spinner dolphins. We slipped into the water with our snorkelling kit to see what seemed like hundreds. We watched a group of males try to mate with a female, another female suckling her babe and a young male play catch with a plastic bag. The bag wasn't so hot but watching him toss it from his nose to his tail with such glee seemed to mitigate its presence. Thirty seven frames were wound through the housing, then the digital took a bashing - between us we managed to

fill a whole card.

Once we donned tanks we discovered that the underwater scenery was a complete contrast to Cocos. This island is mostly limestone so there is little sand. Steep walls drop way off into the abyss. Giant fans grow in parallel rows to catch the light like solar panels and as you fin along you encounter a wide variety of colourful soft corals that hang out into the blue. The walls are patrolled by reef sharks, schools of jacks and midnight snapper and it was here that we realised that every camera has its place. The fisheye lens on the housing was the perfect tool for capturing such incredible vistas.

One of the most captivating dives we have ever done was Thundercliff - a dive, a swim and a walk. We descended over a shallow section of reef and swam under an overhang and into a wide mouthed cave. A rock jutting up to the surface was mobbed by several hundred silver snapper. Our guide, Marcus, then led us into a dark cavern where we surfaced to admire impressive stalactite formations before descending again into a narrow passage. This led to a second, much larger cave with cathedral like limestone structures. We ascended and climbed onto some rocks, then dekked. Our next treat was a walk through the cave to a small pool of brackish water. Inside the pool



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is a rare red shrimp that was attracted to our torch beams. Photographically, this triple-dive was quite a challenge. We suspected that the results would be hit and miss on film, so used the digital to give an indication of how to approach the shots. However, its little housing kept fogging in the continually changing temperatures.

Critter life appears less evident around Christmas, mostly because we were too busy admiring the amazing geography to nose around



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for small stuff. However, a shore dive in Flying Fish cove, is a chance to slide on a macro lens and capture octopus, leaffish, puffers and strange jellyfish. Kelana's Mooring, a bit further out in the bay, is the time and place to see the endemic dragon moray. At about 25 metres, there's a bommie that just rages with morays. There are at least five different types tucked down inside along with some Debelius shrimp. The rare dragon moray can be spotted by those in the know, and divemaster, Claire found one in hiding. This is one very impressive creature but very shy of the lens.

Again on our last day, we had a final treat. Returning to dock we encountered some bronze whalers. We peered at them from the boat until Marcus asked why we weren't in the water, so we grabbed masks and snorkels, slipping in to find three inquisitive sharks. They swam right up to our faces, almost bumping into us, but we were assured by Marcus that they were simply curious.

Christmas had definitely lived up to the standards set by Cocos. Our hosts were immensely



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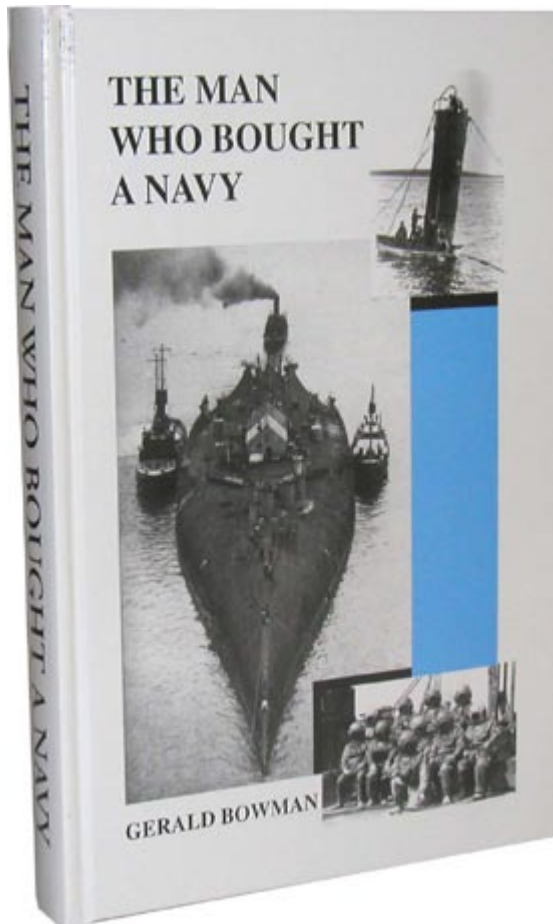
professional and although we did have to share our boat a few times with other divers, we really enjoyed the almost private diving. Both islands had been a welcome return to a more interactive style, one where you join in every aspect of your dive day from launching the boat to setting up a picnic lunch. Facilities at both destinations are limited, but for divers and photographers who want something that bit different, this may well be it. Well, it was for us.

For Cocos contact Cocos Dive, www.cocosdive.com and Christmas, the Indian Ocean Diving Academy, www.ioda.cx. Both companies can help with accommodation and flight bookings. Flights with National Jet Systems are from Perth, www.nationaljet.com.au, plus there is currently a weekly flight from Bali with AustAsia, www.austasiaairlines.com

Beth and Shaun Tierney are the authors of forthcoming Footprint guide, *Diving the World*. www.seafocus.com/DivingTheWorld.html

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