

For Muck's Sake

by Michael Gallagher

Most visitors readily concede that Sydney is one of the world's best cities. Fabulous beaches, trendy bars, great restaurants, a magnificent harbour, hot summers, the list goes on. But surely the list doesn't include world class muck-diving?

My day started early, my jet-lagged daze evaporating the instant I remembered why I had set such an offensively timed alarm call. Dive conditions in Chowder Bay - a small bay on the north side of Sydney's inner harbour, not far from famous Taronga Park Zoo - were forecast to be at their best early morning. That was all the motivation I needed to spring out of bed with the sun barely above the horizon.

I deliberately chose midweek to dive, betting that most Sydneysiders would be at work and that visitors rarely found their way to this particular part of Sydney. Not that I have anything against other divers, but it doesn't take much for Chowder Bay's delicate silty seabed to be stirred up and visibility destroyed. As luck would have it, I was to be the only diver in the water that morning, together with Ronnie my Glaswegian guide.

I must confess that things between Ronnie and me didn't start well. During early pleasantries I joined what I suspect to be a long line of punters who adjudged his accent to be an open invitation to discuss the legendary Scapa Flow. As it turned out, Ronnie had never dived Scapa Flow and was clearly pained to be asked about it for the trillionth time. I quickly changed the topic to the underwater residents who awaited us.

The list of potential sightings, according to Ronnie, was tantalising - anglerfish, pipefish, sea horses, moray eels, flounder, snake eels, the deadly blue ringed octopus, cuttlefish, dumpling squid, frogfish, and more. I had my underwater camera set to macro and an itchy shutter finger. Needless to say, kitting up was swift and we were soon giant-striding off the jetty into the 18 degree water. The dive conditions which met us were

All photos were taken with a Canon 20D plus 60mm macro lens in an Ikelite Housing with double DS-125 substrobes both set to TTL. Camera set manually to (approx) f22, 1/160s, ISO 200.



Striped Anglerfish



Octopus



Snake Eel



Sea Horse

excellent, with visibility never less than 8 metres or so. Nor was there any unpleasant surge which has typified my experience of Sydney diving.

Chowder Bay has a long history (by Australian standards at least) of use for military purposes, which explains why the silty seabed is strewn with all manner of associated debris. It is amongst the large admiralty anchors, small boats, rail tracks, crates, cages and pipes (even a motorcycle!) that we conducted our search for Chowder Bay's critters.

Immediately upon descent we were met by a family of cuttlefish - Mum, Dad and Junior. Being just the size of my hand, Junior was clearly nervous, and anxiously squirmed his way between Mum and Dad, doing

his best to hide behind their tentacles. Mum and Dad were having none of us though, flashing their warning colours and coolly staring us down until we moved on.

We didn't move far before Ronnie stopped to inspect an algae-covered metal cage, then gestured to me enthusiastically. I had never seen a sea horse before, and was struck by how small, delicate and perfectly camouflaged it was. Such a noble head, such an amazing gripping tail. Fantastic! We were to admire another 5 or 6 sea horses on that first dive, all the same species (hippocampus whitei) but each a different size and colour to the last.

As we carefully picked our way further out into the bay, we encountered all manner of other critters amongst the debris and in the muck. A snake eel stared curiously at us from the safety of his perfectly formed hole in the sand. A small moray guarded the entrance to an abandoned pipe. A tiny shrimp perched upside-down on the gunwale of an overturned dinghy. A flounder hid half-buried in the silt, just eyes and lips protruding, invisible to all except Ronnie. An octopus peered at us from his burrow, drawing back rocks and shells for additional protection as we closed in. A pipefish lay curled up in the sand, making no effort to retreat or hide but tough to spot nonetheless.

All too soon it was time to surface. We sipped flat whites (Aussie coffees) in the sunshine, chattering like excited school kids about what we had just seen. Talk then turned to the dive which lay ahead, and our chances of seeing an anglerfish, that superbly camouflaged benthic carnivore which uses its modified dorsal fin as a lure, wriggling it at nearby fish to entice them within range of its enormous mouth. Ronnie was not hopeful - he hadn't spotted one in the bay for months. Gloved fingers and bootied toes were crossed as we re-entered the water.

It was a thorough search - every

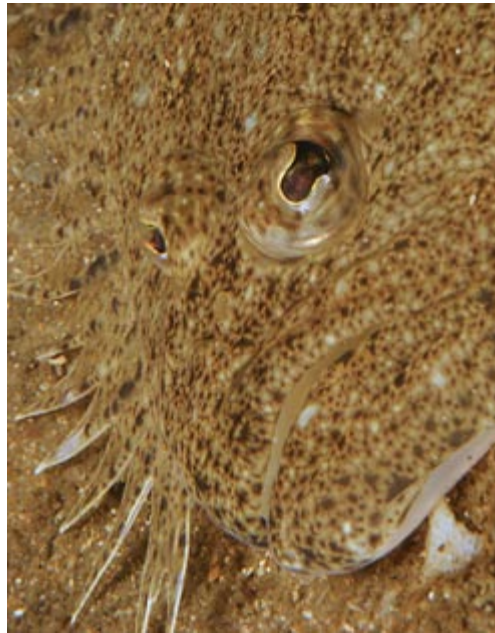
possible anglerfish hiding spot was investigated, whilst every anglerfish sized lump was closely scrutinised. Finally, towards the end of the dive, Ronnie punched the water above his head triumphantly. There, lying in the silt in front of us, was a magnificent striped anglerfish. These fish can be any colour, from black to white and anything in between, but ours presented itself in spectacular orange to match some nearby sponges. So broad was my smile that the seal on my mask started letting in water at the sides! After many minutes of admiration, and dozens of photos, we reluctantly headed back.

Yet Chowder Bay was to yield one more secret to us before the end of the dive. Under the jetty, as we were preparing to ascend, the tiniest flicker of movement in the silt caught my eye. This painted anglerfish, a smaller species than the striped anglerfish we had met earlier, was so perfectly camouflaged that it would have been invisible but for its lure which wriggled hypnotically at a nearby school of tiny fish. Ronnie and I were equally hypnotised, enthralled by the swishing of the lure and the prospect of witnessing a strike. Sadly it wasn't long before our dwindling air supplies forced us to return to the surface, confident though that the painted anglerfish wasn't going to miss out on lunch.



Painted Anglerfish

As I demolished my own lunch, I mused over the very quirky type of diving on offer at Chowder Bay - close encounters with unique and often flamboyant critters in the muck, an underwater photographer's paradise. This may not appeal to many divers I know, given that there is no "big stuff" like sharks and turtles, no tropical reef paradise, no famous wreck. Yet after my own highly memorable and richly rewarding experience, I understood why a Scot would shun the famous World War I wrecks in his own backyard and devote himself instead to diving on the other side of the world at Chowder Bay.



Flounder

As for Sydney itself, well, the list of accolades just got a little longer.

Michael Gallagher



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