

The Coral Sea

A dwarf, a pigmy and a genie

By Troy Mayne

After all the planning for a photographic dive trip has been completed, most photographers comprise a wish list of the subjects they most wish to photograph. Rarely wish lists are fulfilled. I normally aim high with three shots or subjects, but they are difficult shots or rare subjects. If I manage to get one out of three I am content. Two out of three, extremely happy, one hundred percent, well I've never experienced that luck.

I had booked a one week live-a-board dive trip with Mike Ball Dive Expeditions (MBDE) on Australia's far northern Great Barrier Reef. I had high expectations, but my wish list was a tough one, Dwarf Minke whales, Lacy Scorpion fish and the Pigmy Seahorse. All but the Minke Whales are very tough to find, and it was at the end of the Minke Whale season so all three were a big ask.

My dive trip was to the Ribbon Reefs on the Northern Great Barrier Reef and Osprey Reef out in the Coral Sea. I have been out on MBDE in the past out to the Coral Sea to Flinders Reef. It is some of the best reef diving in the world so I was excited to see Osprey Reef.

Mike Ball pioneered Live-A-Board diving, with the world's first purpose built dive vessel. Being the first and only Dive operator to be inducted into the Diving Hall of Fame and having won numerous international awards for his diving operation, Mike Ball offers some of the best diving



around at a standard rarely challenged.

The flagship of MBDE, the MV Spoilsport, whilst an aged lady, is still one of the best purpose designed dive vessels going. With all the creature comforts, facilities and expert, professional crew, it's truly a brilliant dive experience, particularly for photographers. For a change, it seems photographers are the focus and everyone else is almost second class.

Spoilsport has camera only change tables with air blowers and numerous camera only rinse points, it makes the other side of underwater photography almost pleasurable.

Exceptional facilities and comfort aside, I am sure most divers would forego all of the comforts associated with a 5 star service for 5 star diving. Fortunately, on Spoilsport each goes hand in hand. With years of experience in the area, the crew have intimate knowledge of the sites and the creatures that inhabit within.

Professional dive briefs and plenty of crew to guide, divers are armed with the knowledge and



locations of a huge range of amazing wildlife to explore and photograph. So it was no surprise when I was told that there was a very good chance of my wish list being granted. So the Trip Director, Just like a genie, might be able to grant me my three wishes.

We ventured out into the wild blue beyond, the Coral Sea. Leaving the relative protection of the Great Barrier Reef, to venture far out into the Coral Sea. Of course, access to Osprey Reef is governed



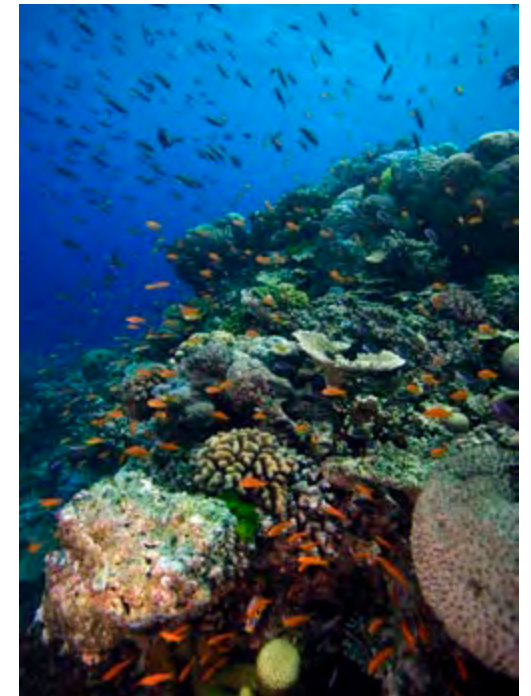
(Above) Lacy Scorpion Fish, Nikon D200 Sea and Sea housing, Nikon 18-70, f-9, 1/125, ISO 200, twin Sea and Sea YS 250 Strobes



(Top right) Silvertip Shark, Nikon D200, Sea & Sea housing , Sigma 10-20mm, f-5.6, 1/100, ISO 400, Sea & Sea YS 250 strobe

(Far right) Reef scene, Nikon D200, Sea & Sea housing, Sigma 10-20mm, f-7.1, 1/160, ISO 200, Sea & Sea YS 250

(Right) Peacock Mantis Shrimp, Nikon D200, Sea & Sea housing, Nikon 105mm VR, f-16, 1/125, ISO 200, twin Sea & Sea YS 250 strobes.



by the conditions, so an Osprey Reef visit whilst common, is still a privilege.

Once we had arrived, we were met with 40 metre visibility, large pelagic life, and pristine coral reefs. Having dived the Coral Sea

previously, I wasn't surprised and glad to be back. It wasn't long until my first wish had been granted, the elusive Lacy Scorpion Fish.

A shark feed is conducted on the northern end of Osprey Reef. Dozens of sharks congregate around the



(Above) Pigmy Seahorse Nikon D200, Sea and Sea Housing. Nikon 105mm VR, f-32, 1/125, ISO 200, twin Sea & Sea YS 250 strobes.



(Top right) Olive Green Sea Snake, Nikon D200, Sea and Sea housing, Sigma 10-20mm, f-6.3, 1/50, ISO 320, Twin Sea & Sea YS 250 Strobes

(Right) Hawksbill Turtle, Nikon D200, Sea & Sea housing, Sigma 10-20mm, f-5.6, 1/80, ISO 250, twin Sea & Sea YS 250 strobes



natural coral amphitheatre as divers take their place to view the exciting spectacle. Divers are amongst the action as the sharks are fed from a large bin. Very little food is actually given and the feed is conducted under fairly stringent safety conditions. This is an excellent opportunity to photograph sharks up close that may

not otherwise be available.

After Osprey Reef we travelled to Lizard Island to pick up and drop off passengers, then we made our way to the Ribbon Reefs. The far northern GBR has some of the best diving on the Reef. With sites like the world famous Code Hole and Steve's Bommie, there is no shortage of top

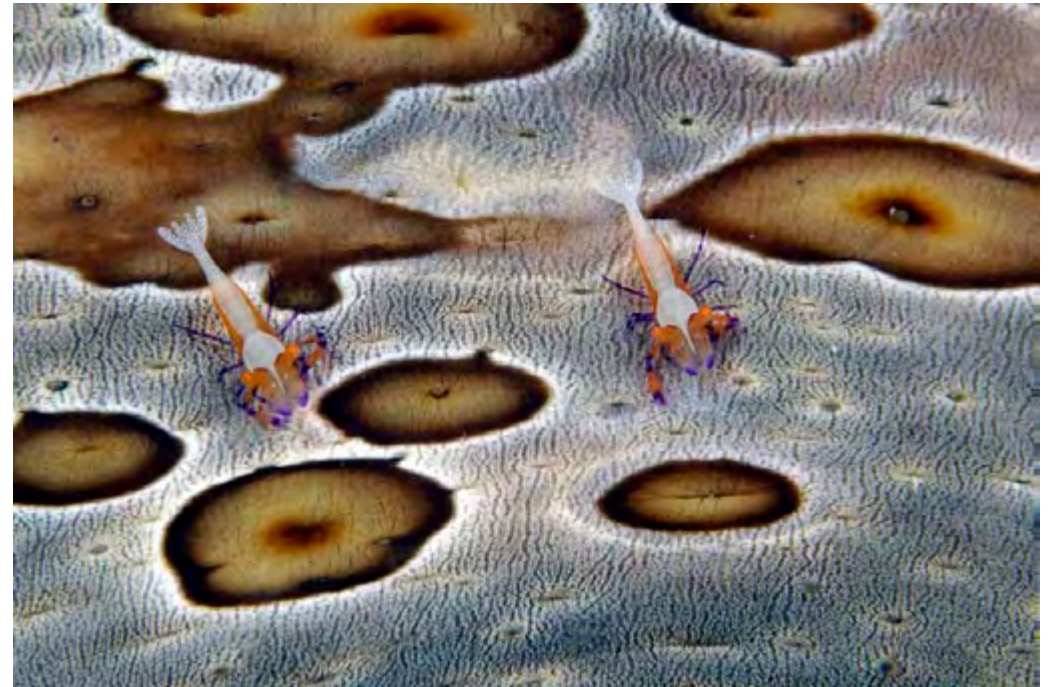


(Above) Dwarf Minke Whale, Nikon D200, Sea & Sea housing, Sigma 10-20mm, f-4.5, 1/80, ISO 200



(Top right) Manta Ray, Nikon D200, Sea & Sea housing, Sigma 10-20mm, f-7.1, 1/200, ISO 200, Twin Sea & Sea YS 250 strobes.

(Right) Emperor Shrimp on Leopard Sea Cucumber, Nikon D200, Sea and Sea housing, Nikon 105mm VR, f-14, 1/100, ISO 100, twin Sea & Sea YS 250 strobes



class diving. Whilst at the Cod Hole I was granted my second wish, the very beautiful and demure, Pigmy Seahorse.

There seems to be a greater diversity and greater proliferation of marine life the further north on the

Reef. The reefs are less visited so tend to be in a more pristine state than down more southern reefs.

Whilst at Steve's Bommie, we were visited by a very large and beautiful Minke Whale. The northern Great Barrier Reef is the only place in

the World where whales come to seek out human interaction. Each encounter we had, lasting over 3 hours, we exited the water before the whales left the area. The whole time they were around, they circled us, extremely curious, closely watching. They were truly an amazing encounter, and an awesome photo opportunity. Third and final wish granted.

There is a wide range of sites with a huge variation of underwater topography and underwater subjects. From pinnacles, reef flats, massive walls and massive platform reefs, the Reef expedition caters for all reef

diving tastes and has a great variation to prevent boredom.

As with any Coral Reef diving there is a wide diversity of marine animals, from large pelagic animals, to the smallest and cutest of reef critters, a diver is limited only by their own ability to find them. But with expert guides with intimate knowledge, divers may find animals that they may never find themselves.

The diving from Mike Ball's Spoilsport, is world class, and so is the service. It's a rare privilege to dive from a boat where every facet of the trip is setup to accommodate

photographers. The trip comes at a high end price, but the extra expense is worth paying when you get a high end trip.

Troy Mayne

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