

Daytrippin' on the GBR

with Tim Rock

As my home is in Guam, I often get asked by friends traveling through Micronesia if its worth their time to stop here for a few days for diving. Normally Palau or Yap are the big regional attractions, but many folks figure since they've come all this way, why not cram in a few dives at another destination? I think Guam is a very well-kept secret and I try my best to steer them to the best land sites and the dives. Given Guam's past, history buffs love it and the water here is always clear and warm.

And so it was just a couple of months ago I found myself in somewhat the same predicament as my friends. I was going to Cairns to do some topside photo work that included taking in numerous attractions. This included visits to wooded preserves and sanctuaries, great rain forest tracts and the edge of the wild Outback. I was fortunate to see koalas, wild wallabies, kangaroos and a kookabarra! Crikey!

There were huge crocs up in the Hartley's croc farm and we took in some highly entertaining cultural shows from Aboriginal and Trobriand islanders. And one invigorating morning we even saw the sun rise from 3,000 feet up while resting in the basket of a hot air balloon. And we spent one evening listening to the waves lap in at the shores of cozy Palm Cove.

This combined with a big festival in



All underwater images were taken with an Aquatica AD90 Housing, Ikelite DS 125 Strobes & chords, Nikon D90 Camera, Tokina 10-17 lens



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downtown Cairns that included a parade and fireworks kept me pretty busy. But, I did have one daytime period somewhat free and I've always wanted to have the Great Barrier Reef as an entry in my Indo-Pacific saturated logbook. So prior to the trip I contacted Lisa Monks at Tropical North Queensland and she confirmed that I could indeed get the log entries I desired with relative ease. She put me in touch with Reef Magic Cruises. They told me they supplied everything (tanks, weights, a 3mm shorty wetsuit, BC, reg, (even fins and mask if needed)).

The Great Barrier Reef runs the greater length of Australia's central eastern to northeastern coasts. It's considered the world's largest natural coastal coral barrier reef. Waters are generally clear on the outer wall and the chance for fish schools, healthy corals and good Pacific diversity abounds.

So I packed just my trusty fins, mask and



snorkel. I had a new Aquatica D90 housing, which is light, compact and easy to hand carry onto a plane. I put a 10-17 Tokina wide angle zoom on the Nikon D90 body and packed a pair of Ikelite DS125 strobes in my carry-on camera case. Flying Continental, I didn't have the hassle of the luggage restrictions that you get with most Australian and New Zealand carriers. But it was still easier just to hand carry everything in case of a baggage mix-up. The camera was easy to sport as a back-up for the other assignments. When the dive day came, I assembled the kit the night before. I was staying at the new Shangri-La Marina that has a great harbor view and is within spitting distance of the Reef Fleet Terminal at the Cairns boat basin.

So I boarded a rather spacious and well-provisioned catamaran, the Reef Magic. On the trip out I was given a procedural briefing by some friendly instructors, signed the waiver, showed my dive card and was told a bit about the dive sites we would visit. Three dives were planned, one to a wall and crevice area not often seen, one in a channel and one along an outer reef wall. Anticipation. A little over an hour later I was watching the crew hook up to a permanent mooring just inside the vast expanse of the GBR.

Things happened quickly. The ship sits at the mooring for five hours and we had three planned dives, so we had to get outfitted and on the dive boat quickly. All went smoothly and the next thing I knew I was taking a giant stride and heading down through a crevice that opened to a wall and the outer reef.

This first site had plenty of swim-throughs, some big gorgonians fans, a few nudibranchs (which I didn't try to shoot with the 10-17) and a very healthy upper reef. We got back in time



for lunch. I had some nice bar-b-q (what else, it's Australia), salads and other fresh veggie offerings and we were off again before I could say Waltzing Matilda.

The second dive was hyped as "going to be good" as it was in a barrier reef pass and the tide was going out. It didn't disappoint. We saw large groupers and barramundi. Sea turtles swam across the sea floor. Our guide took us over to a school of yellowtail barracuda and then into another school of juvenile blackbar barracuda. We stopped at a bommie with a sea fan so big four divers could hide behind it and ended at yet another nice upper reef area with tons of surgeonfish and nice hard table coral growth.

We did have time to throw in a snorkel. The mooring is next to a reef that has a very tame and photogenic Napoleon (Maori) wrasse. The fish is very used to people and makes a great subject.

The third dive was also a quick turn around and a nice drift along an outer reef wall.

We also wanted to take an optional helicopter ride. It flies below 2000 feet so the chance of bends is nil and offer the opportunity to spot mantas, tiger



sharks and other big critters from the air as well as photograph the vast reef and its inner islands and sea mounts. But, we were too late to do that. Maybe next time.

Before I knew it, I had three logged GBR dives and was watching as we headed back past islands and bays. Then, the main coast started to come into prominent view. We did keep a watch out as we were told this was also humpback migration season in the area and there was a pure white



humpback seen breaching just days before. Whale watching just finished its first full season in Cairns with a very high success rate for whales and other marine mammals and it appears it will be a go again in 2010 during the June through August period. So if you're an ocean person, you've got diving, snorkeling and whale watching all at your disposal.

That night we headed up to the quiet and cozy Palm Cove. Wild roos and wallabies were feeding in the fields as we rolled down the highway as dusk approached. Our colorful driver Steve told tales of big crocs in the rivers. We had dinner under the stars and recounted our day on the GBR. While it may not be a live aboard week of nice diving, Cairns area has lots to offer and a dive day can fill a few logbook pages if you choose to daytrip dive Tropical North Queensland.

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