

The Wonderful West

by Tammy Gibbs

I live in Perth, Western Australia - famous for our white sandy beaches, amazing weather and climate, and fantastic lifestyle. Western Australia must have some of the most diverse diving on this planet. From coral reefs to wrecks, seadragons to sealions, tropical to temperate waters, there is something for everyone in this beautiful state.

Australia is the Earth's largest island but smallest continent and the sixth largest nation by land area. Australia's ocean territory is the third largest in the world, spanning three oceans and covering more than 12 million square kilometres. More than 2.3 million square kilometres of ocean environment is now protected as marine parks.

Western Australia is the largest state and home to around 2.3 million people, who live on more than 2.5 million square kilometres of land. Much of it is desert but there is almost 13,000 kilometres of the world's most pristine coastline. The Indian Ocean is our playground.

There are plenty of dive sites close to the capital Perth but the most popular dive location by far is Rottnest Island. Around 19

kilometres off the mainland, Rottnest offers both shallow and deep sites of limestone caves, ledges, crevices and swim-throughs with kelp, soft corals, sponges and diverse fishlife. Migrating humpback whales pass the island in spring and it's also a popular place to dive for Western Rock Lobsters during the seven and a half month fishing season.

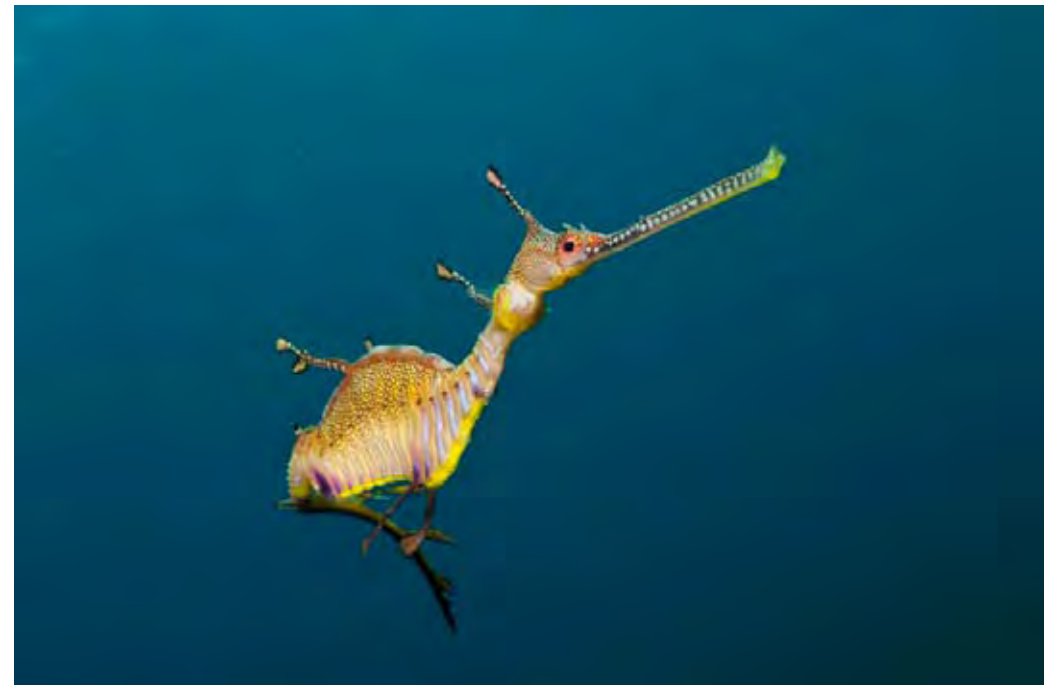
One of my favourite Rottnest sites is the grey nurse shark cave known as "The Nurses Quarters". Located at the Western-most point of the island, the 'secret' site is subject to strong currents and swell, so can only be dived when conditions are really good.

In Australian waters, the east coast population of grey nurses is listed as critically endangered, the west coast population is listed as vulnerable. Despite their scary appearance, grey nurse sharks are considered harmless unless provoked. Their large size and row-upon-row of sharp teeth have earned them an undeserved reputation as a man-eater. This led to indiscriminate killing of the species in Australia until they became the first protected shark species in the world, declared in the



The famous Busselton Jetty at dawn. Nikon D300, Nikkor 18-200mm lens f13, 10secs, ISO200

Weedy Seadragons are often seen along the WA coast including Albany, Esperance and around Perth. Nikon D300, Tokina 10-17mm lens, Sea&Sea housing, 2 x Inon Z240 strobes. F10, 1/200sec, ISO200



state of New South Wales in 1984. Today they are protected in four states, including Western Australia.

The shark cave is open on two sides and at certain times of year is home to around a dozen grey nurses, mostly females. They glide effortlessly in and out of the cave and are quite content sharing their space with divers, as long as you stay outside of the cave.

Rottneest has many other well-known sites including Crystal Palace, Swirl Reef, Parker Point and Kingston Spit plus the many wrecks that can be found around the island. But we've found some of the best sites by using the sounder to look for bommies rising from the sea floor. These sites can be deep, up to 40 metres, but they aren't visited by the commercial charter boats so they are pristine and full of life.

Much of the Rottneest reef is coloured by sponges, telesto coral, ascidians and anemones. You only need to fire off a few shots with your strobe to see the amazing colours clinging to the limestone. Caves and ledges create safe homes for wobbegong and Port Jackson sharks, Western blue devils, schools of bullseyes and pomfrets, nudibranchs, lobsters and crabs, and larger fish like baldchin groper, dhufish and samsonfish. Curious buff bream and footballer sweeps often follow you on your dive.

Along the Perth coast, there are many shore dives that provide excellent photographic opportunities. The Ammunition Jetty south of Fremantle has a maximum depth of around 8 metres and it's not uncommon to spend in excess of two and a half hours under the jetty. The pylons are covered in telesto coral and sponges with bottles, chairs and other junk providing make-shift homes for little creatures. On an average dive under



West Australian Seahorse's are often found under jetties, in the Swan River and on the wreck trails. Nikon D300, Nikkor 60mm, Sea&Sea housing, 2 x Inon Z240 strobes

the jetty you can expect to see several types of nudibranchs, cowfish and boxfish, baby cuttlefish and squid, mouth-brooding cardinalfish, prickly, fan-belly and pygmy leatherjackets, blennies, Western Australian seahorses, schools of baitfish,



A Western Cleaner Clingfish on a sponge in Esperance. Nikon D300, Nikkor 105mm, Sea&Sea housing, 2 x Inon Z240 strobes F14, 1/250sec, ISO200

Port Jackson sharks, and if you're lucky, a dolphin or two. Lionfish and batfish as well as blue-ringed octopus have even been spotted here.

Not far up the road, and accessed via a harsh walk over the 'sandune of death', is Robb Jetty. No



A 3m female Grey Nurse Shark at Rottnest Island. Nikon D300, Tokina 10-17mm lens, Sea&Sea housing, 2 x Inon Z240 strobes F5.6, 1/80sec, ISO200

actual structure exists above the water line but the submerged cut-off pylons extending from the shore provide a habitat for many creatures. Larger fish like dusky morwong have been seen here, along with many of the same critters seen at Ammunition Jetty. At night, dumpling squid can be found on the sandy patches either side of the pylon's path.

Further south is the Rockingham Wreck Trail, a favoured site for diver training as the slope drops away to around 16 metres in depth. Ropes connect several boats, planes and

other structures for an easy-to-navigate dive. The wreck trail is the best site for seahorses, their tails gripping the ropes both day and night. Not far off Rockingham in shallow water, and accessible only by boat, is the Orizaba wreck, a largely intact ship that sank in 1905.

Ningaloo Reef is known throughout the world as a diving mecca. It's the place to snorkel with whalesharks but Ningaloo offers a lot more than the ocean's largest fish. Ningaloo is a world heritage-listed site spanning thousands of kilometres



Playful Australian Sealion at Jurien Bay, Nikon D300, Tokina 10-17mm lens, Sea&Sea housing, 2 x Inon Z240 strobes F14, 1/200sec, ISO200

of State and Commonwealth marine park. It is home to the only example in the world of extensive fringing coral reef on the west coast of a continent.

I dived the reef in May 2010 on the Western Australian Underwater Photographic Society's annual trip. Our base was Coral Bay. Due to the weather, we mostly dived the inner reef but this wasn't in any way a disappointment. Quinn's Bommie is a large structure of porites coral on a flat seabed and is a haven for marine life with eels, angelfish, hunting lionfish,

nudibranchs, giant lobsters the size of dogs, sabretooth blennies, and frogfish peeking out from their holes.

Asho's gap was another top site with schools of barracuda, anemonefish, boxfish and many types of healthy coral. At a cleaning station, reef sharks approach the large patch of cabbage coral, and virtually standing on their tails, they open their mouths and gills for the little cleaner fish.

On the outer reef, large fan corals hung from walls and big manta rays circled us, gliding past to have their photo taken.

North of Coral Bay lies Exmouth, an alternative access point to the Ningaloo Reef. Another famous site here is the Navy Pier, considered to be one of the top ten shore dives in the world. Located on a working US Navy base, access is restricted and security is tight so photo ID is required to be admitted to the pier. The maximum depth is 14 metres and dives are timed during slack tide. The giant stride entry off a high platform requires a little courage. Whilst we had limited visibility (around 3-5 metres) the day we dived it, the marine life on the pier is extraordinary. Wobbegong sharks and white tip reef sharks sleep on the bottom whilst a grey nurse shark was spotted cruising the pier. Huge potato cods and gropers hide amongst schools of trevally and barracuda. Nudibranchs, moray eels, flatworms, angelfish and lionfish are visible at every turn. This site is teeming with life and is a must-do dive if you are in the area.

A couple of hours north of Perth is Jurien Bay, where colonies of one of the world's rarest sealions can be found. The Australian Sealion lives only in Western Australia and South Australia, and nowhere else in the world, with a population of only 10,000 to 12,000. A day trip to visit them at Essex Rock is an unforgettable experience. As they boat approaches, they stir from their lazy slumber on the beach to rush to greet their visitors. Oozing personality and energy, they are incredibly playful and inquisitive. The sealions relish the opportunity to interact with humans and zoom back and forth to grab your attention. But watch your back, they sneak up when you least expect and cheekily bite your fins. I even had one bite the float off my strobe arm!

Other popular northern dive sites include



False Tasmanian Blennies are often found living in sponges, discarded mussel shells and wreck handrails. Nikon D300, Nikkor 60mm, Sea&Sea housing, 2 x Inon Z240 strobes f9, 1/250sec, ISO200

the Abrolhos Islands off Geraldton and the Rowley Shoals Marine Park, 300 kilometres west of Broome. The Abrolhos has 54 shipwrecks, including the historic Batavia - part of which has been excavated and now stands in the Maritime



A Western Red Scorpionfish yawning at Rottnest Island. Nikon D300, Nikkor 60mm, Sea&Sea housing, 2 x Inon Z240 strobes F8, 1/250sec, ISO200

Museum in Fremantle - which is best known as the site of the most horrific mutiny in maritime history. I have yet to visit these places, but they are definitely on my bucket list.

The temperate waters of southern WA offer

excellent visibility and some of the country's best wreck dives. The 174 metre Sanko Harvest sank off Esperance in 1991 when it hit the reef at night, ripping apart the hull and creating a major environmental disaster when oil, fertilizer and fuel spewed into the ocean. Today, the Sanko is the second largest dive wreck in the world with depths varying from 13 to 44 metres. Large fish inhabit the wreck including big blue groper and tuna. But she lies in an exposed part of the Southern Ocean and the strong winds and swell have taken their toll, with the ship now divided into three sections. The wreck can only be dived when the conditions are right, April being the best time of year when winds tend to be lighter. Esperance is known for its crystal clear waters with the many islands scattered off the coast offering pristine boulders and walls dripping with colour, as well as macro critters and big fish (we were followed by several curious six-foot blue groopers).

The purpose-sunk HMAS Perth in Albany and the HMAS Swan in Dunsborough are also fantastic dives. The guided missile destroyer Perth was scuttled in King George Sound in November 2001. Sitting upright in 35 metres of water, with her mast protruding above the surface, the wreck still has her stern gun in place as well as the captain's chair in the bridge. Much of the structure is covered in growth with hot pink jewel anemones covering many of the handrails. At 5 metres, the crows nest acts as the perfect safety stop while searching for blennies and nudis. The Cheynes III whalechaser off Albany's Michaelmas Island was sunk in 1982 and whilst she is somewhat broken up these days, she attracts a lot of life including weedy seadragons in the seagrass beds surrounding her. The dragons are well camouflaged in the grass but easy to spot

once you have your eye-in.

Tucked inside Geographe Bay, under the watchful eye of the Cape Naturaliste lighthouse, lies the HMAS Swan. A 113 metre naval destroyer, the Swan has been sitting on the 35 metre seafloor since 1997. The ship was painstakingly stripped and cleaned prior to sinking with access holes cut along the length of the hull. Sponges and corals have covered the wreck and schools of bullseyes, nudibranchs, big samsonfish and even sharks have been spotted on the wreck.

Also inside Geographe Bay is the famous heritage-listed Busselton Jetty, the longest timber-piled jetty in the southern hemisphere. The jetty re-opened in February 2011 following a \$27 million refurbishment that saw 50% of the 1.8 kilometre jetty structure demolished and replaced, with the remaining half undergoing substantial repairs. More than 300 new timber and steel piles were erected. The jetty is home to more than 300 individual marine species including colourful sponges and corals, schools of old wives and bulleyes, stingrays and octopus, nudibranchs, pineapple fish and I even spotted a well-camouflaged velvetfish during one dive. The jetty is just as stunning at night. An underwater observatory at the end of the jetty allows non-divers to share in the wonders of the underwater world.

This is just a taste of the diving in Western Australia. There is something for everyone – shallow and deep, reefs and wrecks, weird and wonderful critters, macro and wide angle.

Should you ever find yourself in Perth, don't hesitate to get in touch with the Western Australian Underwater Photographic Society – we'd be very happy to take you for a dive.



The purpose-sunk HMAS Perth in King George Sound in Albany. Nikon D300, Tokina 10-17mm lens, Sea&Sea housing, 2 x Inon Z240 strobes F8, 1/160sec, ISO200

Tammy Gibbs

www.waups.org.au
president@waups.org.au

We've got you covered!



Magic filters are now available in 3 options.
Original Magic for use in blue water with DSLR and compact cameras with Manual White Balance,
Auto-Magic for compact cameras in automatic point and shoot mode.

GreenWater Magic for use in green water with DSLR and compact cameras with Manual White Balance.

Prices start at just £19.

The Auto-Magic formula is now available in a Plexiglass filter that can be added or removed underwater.

www.magic-filters.com