



# SEA BRAGGIN'

## St George Scuba Club

### Newsletter

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*Shaun Reynolds*

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## **"CAROL": MANTA #629**

Earlier this year I was lucky enough to get the following pictures of a new manta not recorded in the Project MANTA database. I only wish I had taken them now after improving my camera skills. Hopefully she comes back to Byron this year and I can get some better ones.

As she is a girl and "Renno the Great" was not appropriate, (and probably taken anyway), after talking about it with Sharon Donoghue, we decided it would be fitting to name her "Carol", in honour of Carol Martin.

[For those who didn't know Carol, she was a dear friend of the St George Scuba Club, who passed away on 3 February 2011 diving at Bare Island in Sydney.]

You never know, "Carol" might make an appearance for the club trip next year!

**Shaun Reynolds**

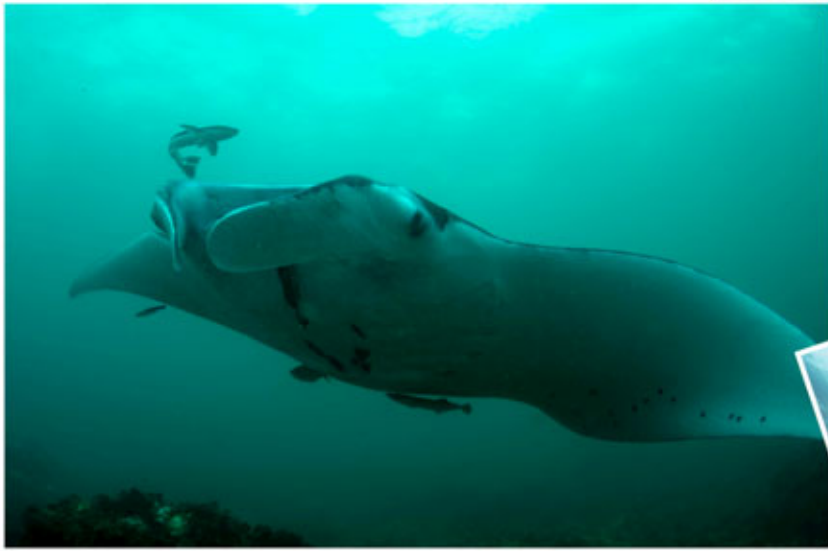




From the Project Manta website: <https://sites.google.com/site/projectmantasite/>

### Photographs of "Carol" courtesy of Shaun Reynolds

Project MANTA is a multidisciplinary study of manta rays, established in 2007, that aims to provide much needed biological and ecological information about the species in eastern Australia. This research heavily relies on community support to provide manta ray sighting information and photographs.



Photos are utilised for photo-identification of manta rays and are integrated in a photograph database which includes all pictures of manta rays recorded on the eastern Australian coast.

Individual manta rays are recognisable by a unique pattern of dark markings on a belly surface and by other permanent features such as shark bites. These spot-patterns can be used in photo-identification of rays for population analyses.

This methodology comprises taking photographs of a manta individual belly and comparing them with a photographic database to discover if this individual has







been photographed previously, and if so, when and where has it been seen.

Photographs are generally analysed and individuals are matched by eye.

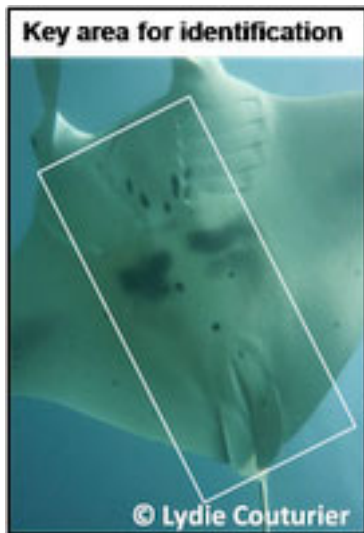
The ventral surface of the manta rays is the key area for identification:

3 key areas:

1: Between the gill slits

2: The belly

3: The pelvic fins (sex of the animal)



Any photos with these 3 key areas visible are perfect for identification and any dorsal shots are also useful as these can show special pattern and bites that are recognisable. Project MANTA requires a large amount of data to be collected and analysed. The scale of the task means that scientists cannot do it alone. In response



to this challenge the database will be web-based and divers or snorkelers from around the world will be able to upload their photographs into the database.

The information gained from these photographs will allow research scientists to:

- calculate the population size
- determine the sex ratio and any spatial/temporal variations
- determine how animals move along the coast through time
- determine the size-frequency pattern for this population
- explore growth rates
- determine recruitment rates (pregnant females and pup numbers)

The Manta Identification Database will provide the best available source of data on which to base decisions about species and habitat management plans. An example of how the database could be utilised would be in providing the data necessary to reliably inform government,





conservation agencies and commercial operators about how best to protect manta populations while increasing the opportunities for ecotourism.



As the most developed nation in the Pacific region Australia has an obligation to set high standards of conservation based on sound science. Data that underpins species and habitat conservation in Australia can have significant positive impacts around the world. For example the identification process and database developed for Project Manta can be replicated across a number of different species. The spot patterns of whale sharks, sunfish and leopards and the whisker patterns of polar bears can all be used to identify individuals of those species.

Manta rays are gentle giants and they don't have a barb on their tail. They are one of the biggest fish in the world, but feed on plankton, the smallest creatures of the ocean.

Divers can be involved with Project MANTA and contribute to the conservation and protection of manta rays and their habitat by sharing their manta ray photos and completing a sighting report at [project.manta@uq.edu.au](mailto:project.manta@uq.edu.au)

If a new individual is identified from contributed photographs, the photographer will be able to name the mantas pictured.

**For more information contact [project.manta@uq.edu.au](mailto:project.manta@uq.edu.au), or visit Facebook "Project MANTA – The Manta Rays of Eastern Australia"**

### Interesting related links:

[http://www.earthwatch.org/australia/our\\_work/companies/brother\\_ew\\_part/br\\_proj\\_supp](http://www.earthwatch.org/australia/our_work/companies/brother_ew_part/br_proj_supp)

[http://www.earthwatch.org/australia/our\\_work/companies/corp\\_partner/brother\\_ew\\_part/br\\_proj\\_supp/project\\_manta\\_id/](http://www.earthwatch.org/australia/our_work/companies/corp_partner/brother_ew_part/br_proj_supp/project_manta_id/)

<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/programs/projectmanta.htm>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-cWeUTUJocM&context=C31bb0a3ADOEgsToPDskKJUgBfGAcSFUXYBF0BFf5n>

<http://www.earthwatch.org/FieldReportpdf/casestudy/project-manta.pdf>







## MAJOR MILESTONE

Oct 2012 marks my 30 year anniversary as a PADI Dive Instructor.

The diver in the photo is me, circa 1982, with a female Common Octopus which had completed laying its eggs. Leatherjackets were eating it alive. It had half of 4 legs chomped off. My guess is that its colour pattern is the death throes of a dying octopus.



Mike Scotland



## “WORLD’S BEST DIVE”

### By one of the Club’s newest members

Recently I completed a 9000Km trip to the top end by my light aircraft – a fast 150Kt, aerobatic sports cruiser-RV7 (pictured here at Bellburn airport in the Purnululu National Park with my long time dive buddy Peter). Among other things, we toured the Alice and its Desert Park and ventured the 70kms down river from the Ord Dam to Kununurra.

Peter and I are seasoned divers, travelling all over Australia and in the Indo-Pacific for the best diving. I visited the Yongala 15 years ago after two attempts on live-aboard vessels. That was fairly early in my diving experience and I remember the rough conditions, beautiful coral and big fish.

We left our flying mates in Kununurra and headed for Ayr airport, where we were picked up by Yongala

Dive and transported to the Dive Lodge at Alva on the beach south of Townsville. In my view, Peter had a big hole in his diving experience, even though he has notched up thousands of dives. So I booked us into the Yongala Dive lodge for 3 nights and 2 days of double dives, intent on doing my 1200th logged dive on the Yongala Wreck.

The Yongala went down with all on board in a cyclone 90 years ago. It was well protected by prolific coral growth until 18 months ago, when another cyclone blew off some of that coral so that it is now a little more exposed. The force of nature prevails: it went down in the main shipping lane in 30 metres of water. It is exposed to currents and the cyclone 18 months ago recorded waves of 16 metres.



Despite best efforts, the cyclone did not blow away the wildlife. It is amazing, but I will not show pictures other than the fast dive boat launched by a tractor, which takes 30 minutes from Alva beach.

If you want to take pictures here, make sure you take a wide angle lens because there is nothing macro about the fish here.

Now looking forward to Wooli!

**Rob Chenery**





## Pacific Jewel "Live Aboard" Cruise and Dive Trip

Tuesday 9 July – Wednesday 18 July 2013

Cruise the Pacific and dive at each port!

The plan is for group of St George Scuba members to travel on the same Pacific cruise and to dive at all the ports along the way. With a minimum group of six divers we can pre-arrange the dive centres to pick us up directly from the wharf at each port, ensuring the maximum amount of dive time.

While in port, any non-diving partners will be able to arrange other activities either by themselves or together, making this trip ideal for members with non-diving partners!

As there is in effect no weight limit you can bring as much dive gear as you want, cameras and all. I have even taken my own lead on past trips (trim weights only)!

While many members may have dived in Vanuatu before, not many may have dived at Easo on Lifou. Lagoon Safaris is a boutique operation, in a pristine location, run from a shipping container by expat Annabelle. Lifou is part of the Loyalty Islands group: <http://www.lagoon-safaris.nc/>

With return airfares costing about the same as the whole trip it is a rare opportunity to sample diving at the Isle of Pines: <http://www.kunie-scuba.com>

In Port Vila, Vanuatu we may possibly dive with the new dive operator, Devil's Point Dive: <http://www.devilspointdive.com>

While on cruises I have scuba dived many times overseas and there is a lot to be said for it. No luggage limits; no need for non-diving days when travelling at sea level; personal fibreglass lined shower for washing and drying your gear. Also, you arrive where you dive (the Ocean) so direct transfer is possible and you get to sample multiple locations.

Finally, you have limited guilt over non-diving fellow travellers!!

Pricing and itinerary on next page...

**Contact Marc Werner Mob: 0407239080**





## Pacific Jewel "Live Aboard" Cruise and Dive Trip Tuesday 9 July – Wednesday 18 July 2013

### Preliminary costing twin share

\$1200 non diver (cruise only twin share)

\$1550 diver (as above + 3 double boat dives) including tanks, weights and cruise ship transfers

### Itinerary

Tuesday	09JUL2013	Depart Sydney 1600hrs	Australia		
		at sea			
Saturday	13JUL2013	Vila	Vanuatu	TBA	Double
Sunday	14JUL2013	Lifou	Loyalty Islands	Lagoon Safaris	Double
Monday	15JUL2013	Isle of Pines	New Caledonia	Kunie Scuba Center	Double
		at sea			
Wednesday	18JUL2013	Arrive Sydney 0700hrs	Australia		

Anyone with questions on this trip or diving while cruising contact Marc Werner.



Contact Marc Werner Mob: 0407239080





## BARREN'S HUT

17th October 2012

On Wednesday 17 October 2012 I was diving with Michael McFadyen and other guys on his regular Wednesday boat dive. We met at the Yowie Bay boat ramp at 7:30 am as usual but left the marina around half hour later as there was a big boat transporting construction trucks, therefore all boats were just waiting at the boat ramp.

After a long wait, we first went to Middle



Ground, because Michael wanted to show me some new dive sites. Arrived there at around 8:30am, but "we noticed that the current is from the North and winds are from the

South, which means that we drifted West and could not anchor despite a number of goes." (quoting Michael McFadyen's website). Finally we arrived at Barren's Hut and successfully anchored there, although it took some effort. We had 6 divers on the boat. Michael, Kelly and me were the first group into the water. Before getting into the water the sea became very rough. M & K jumped in first and I followed, and we quickly descended to the

bottom by following the anchor line. The water was really milky in the first 20 metres but when we reached the bottom the visibility was not too bad (I say 8-10m). However, it was freezing cold (computer showed 14 degrees). We did the normal route, I found myself using air a bit faster than usual, that might be due to the cold temp or I was trying too hard to take some good shots.

When I reached 50 bar we swam back to where the anchor was and prepared to ascend. When we went up to around 10m the water was very rough. I could feel the huge waves on the surface, so we were all holding the anchor line and doing the safety stop. It was very hard to hold the line as there was a lot of power pushing us up.

For some reason I let go of my camera for just 1 second. Luckily, it was not too bad because it didn't descend too much thanks to its buoyancy, so I kicked my fins hard and let go the anchor line for 1 second to catch my camera. When I looked back, I was terrified – M & K were now around 20m away from where I was! I tried really hard to swim towards them, to keep them in my vision at least. I



tried for roughly 1 minute. But due to the strong current, it didn't work at all and I also noticed that I was ascending gradually from 6m to 3m. We usually do a 5 minutes safety stop during boat dives, but the computer showed that I only did 2-3 minutes. I made the decision to stop swimming towards M & K and just kicked my fins to maintain my depth. However, the waves were too strong and it was so hard to control buoyancy under those circumstances without holding onto something. Finally I did a 3.5 minutes safety stop and been pushed to the surface by current. I noticed that I was around 50m away from the boat and the second group had already jumped into the water, and M & K were not out yet. I was trying so hard to swim to the boat but the waves were more than a metre high and it was just too hard for a pair of fins against the power of waves. After a minute, M&K were back on the surface and on the boat. They knew I was trying very hard to get back to the boat but it didn't work, but they couldn't move the boat because it was anchored and there was still another group under the water. So Michael threw a buoy to me with a loop. Finally I caught it and was towed back by Michael. When I reached the boat, I felt just exhausted and had terrible sea sickness because I was floating on the surface for long time.

It was so lucky that I didn't drift by the current too far away and had to stay on the surface for too long. Otherwise it could put me in a very danger circumstance. Unfortunately, I threw up before the second group came out, but it was not too bad as I was at least in the boat!

So, remember guys, always secure your accessories to your D-ring when you ascend and when you cannot properly look after them. Otherwise, some incidence like this could happen to you too!

Thanks again Michael and Kelly for rescuing me.

Safe diving, everyone!

Tong Zheng







## NEVER DIVE WITH MURPHY

20th October 2012

(All names have been changed to protect the guilty)

Let me tell a story about two club members and avid divers, “Roger” and “William”.

On Saturday 20th October they set out on their weekly dive. As the weather was looking good, they decided to dive the Tuggerah Wreck aboard William’s boat “Ok Honey Too”. At the car park there was plenty of parking, for both cars and trailers. Things were looking good, sun was out, wind had dropped. It just doesn’t get any better than this, they thought... or does it?

After launching the boat and parking the cars, Murphy decided to tag along for the ride...

First of all, Murphy stole a set of Roger’s regs. Not so bad – out come the spare set, reconfigured for stage tank. All OK. Then Murphy decided to replace one of Roger’s fins with a smaller sized one. OK, so the spare fin came out. Not so bad, but now apparently Murphy was getting angry.



With everything sorted out they set course for the Wreck. An easy trip out with only a few fishermen around 100 metres from the anchor point. They dropped anchor with a 9lb weight attached, checked the GPS and decided all was OK and started to set up the deco station. Murphy decided to tangle all the ropes. It took a few minutes to untangle all the ropes. Now with the deco station set up, cross over line down the anchor, mermaid line out, dive flag up, they noticed that Murphy had dragged the boat 50 metres away from the wreck. They checked the current with the mermaid line and agreed that it was quite strong. (Murphy had a hand in this, blocking William’s memory to check the current before dropping anchor). They decided to lift the anchor and head for the



Undola. William now knows it's a hard slog lifting an anchor with Murphy holding it on the bottom, 8 metres of heavy chain and a 9lb weight, 45 metres to the surface.

Over to the Undola, check the current. It is mild. Drop anchor, set up deco, crossover and mermaid lines and set dive flag, gear up and finally check GPS. They both think to themselves, "What happened to Murphy?"

William dropped over the side first, and Murphy grabbed and dragged him under the boat away from the mermaid line. He finned hard and managed to grab the dive ladder and called out to Roger to grab a "pull line" before falling in. A pull line is a rope attached to the front of the boat and loops into the water and attaches at the rear of the boat. Makes an easy pull along the side of the boat to the anchor line.



Roger then, with pull line in hand drops over the side. At this point William noticed that Murphy ripped Roger's mask from his head and threw it into the water. William quickly looked under the water and watched the mask sinking. Murphy then decided to insert quite a green murky substance into the water to stop William from seeing the mask. But William let go of the dive ladder and swam down the 3 metres and grabbed the mask. He knew that the current was mild and Murphy, being a strong swimmer, dragged him away from the boat. But Roger with no mask wasn't going anywhere so he climbed aboard, lifted the deco station, tied a float to the anchor line and headed south the 150 metres to rescue William.

Once William was rescued, they headed back to the Undola, found the float, William geared up and followed the anchor line to the bottom, used a lift bag, and after taking a mandatory photo of the "Head" (That's nautical for dunny), ascended safely to the surface.

Both divers, buggered, headed north, where they came across another Club boat, "Ocean Jack" near Wattamolla, and decided to join them for a cuppa under the protection of the Wattamolla headland. I am sure the crew of "Ocean Jack" will not disclose the identity of the divers.

With Murphy now left behind and a well earned rest, Roger and William both dived Barren's Hut with visibility around 15 metres and no current.

Wayne Heming

<http://dive.hemnet.com.au/>





## TULAMBEN DIVE WEEK

### September 2012

After getting off the Mermaid II, Jason, Rox, John, Paul P, Eddie, Paul W, Katherine, Greg, Shelley, Brian, Kelly and I headed off to Tulamben by vehicle. Robbie and Janine also headed off there, but they were staying with another dive operator so they went in a different vehicle.

Tulamben is on the north-eastern coast of Bali. It is only 90 kilometres from the marina, but it took us 3 hours as the traffic for the first 50 kilometres was horrendous and the last bit is on a very winding road.

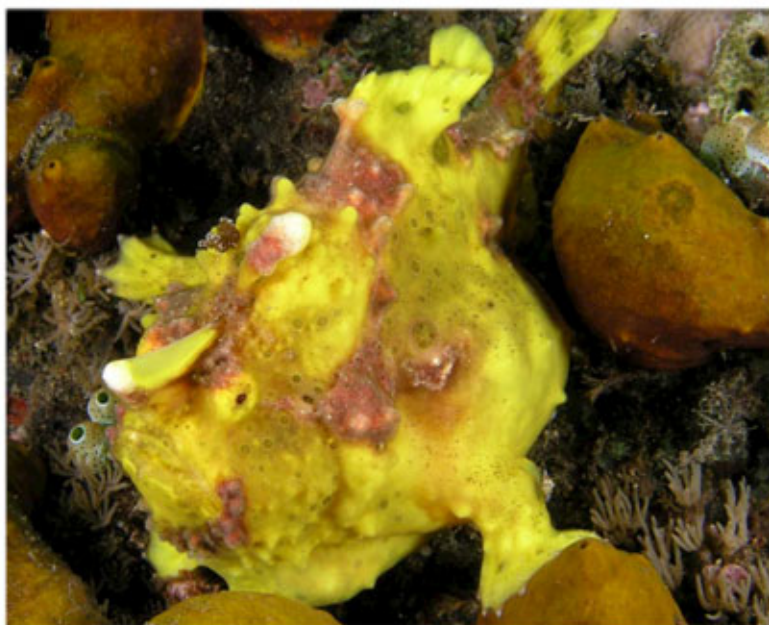
We arrive at Tulamben Wreck Divers and it is very hectic and seemingly disorganised. We are staying in three different places: some are in the accommodation behind the dive shop, some just down the street behind their restaurant, and Kelly and I are staying at their beach front villas. We finally get it all worked out and Kelly and I are transported to the villas. These are out of town a bit but are huge and beautiful. We have a view out over the pool and ocean.

The only trouble with being here is how do we get back to the dive shop and town? Not only is it a bit too far to walk (considering we will have to carry some things), we would have to walk on the very busy road for part of it. The Australian part-owner of the dive

operation lives at the villas and we are talking to him when he says a free scooter comes with the villa. Our transport worries are over – we now have a small Yamaha scooter to zip back and forth.

We ride back to town and go to the shop's restaurant for lunch. This place had pretty good food at great prices. You could have a main meal and a soft drink for under \$5. After lunch we went to the small supermarket and

stocked up on beers, tonic and soft drink as well as some snacks. Very cheap. Everyone except us decides to do a dive on the Saturday afternoon on the wreck of the USAT Liberty. This was a 125 metre long US Army freighter which was torpedoed by the Japanese in January 1942. It is the main dive attraction you read about when researching Tulamben, but in reality this is only one of a dozen different dive sites in the immediate area.



Sunday morning sees us all at the dive shop at 6:15am for an early dive. The wreck gets extremely busy later in the morning as bus after bus arrives from the Denpasar/Kuta area with divers on day trips. The plan is to get in and out before they arrive. Even doing this, there are dozens of divers either already in the water or getting ready, but we see few underwater.

After arriving at the dive shop, we put on our wetsuits and then put on our weight belts and carrying our fins, mask, torch and camera, we walk the short distance to the





dive site. Meanwhile, our dive gear is transported there. Sometimes the gear is taken on motorbikes (one on the back of the rider and the other between his legs) and then carried from the car park to the beach by ladies who carry two tanks and BCDs on their heads. Other times the ladies carry the tanks (two) from the shop! Amazing!

The dive on the wreck is brilliant. The wreck itself is only average, it is very broken up and little resembles a ship. The only really intact sections are the bow, the stern and some of the middle section. What makes this dive special is the fish and marine life. As per all the sites around here, the bottom is black sand and this is home to an amazing amount of marine life. The wreck itself has lots of gorgonias on and near it, as well as barrel sponges and sea whips.

On this first dive we see pygmy sea horses, orang-utan crabs, many species of shrimp and nudibranch, as well as

garden eels. Visibility is 25 to 30 metres (as it is on nearly every dive) and the water temperature about 27°C.

After the dive, we walk back to the dive shop, wash our wetsuit and hang it up. We decide to leave our cameras and torches in John's room to save us carrying them back and forth on the scooter.

Back at the villas, we have breakfast (included in cost). This was quite good and was overlooking the ocean. What a hard life! After breakfast we read and then head back to the dive shop for a 10am dive. This is at The Drop Off. This is in the other direction from the wreck and about a five minute walk. A brilliant dive that Paul W and Michael W will later do and go to the bottom of the wall at 55 metres. Michael W and his girlfriend Keisha arrived later that night. Keisha flew in that afternoon and was collected by Michael, who stayed the previous night in the Kuta area.





The days settle into an early dive on or near the wreck, followed by a late morning or early afternoon dive, and then another afternoon dive. Some are doing four dives a day, others only three. It is quite relaxing, the dive operation is well run and organised, despite how it appeared the day we arrived. We do dives at a couple of locations about three kilometres south and north of Tulamben. For these we travel via ute and do shore dives. We even do a couple of boat dives out of little outrigger boats that take us the few hundred metres to spots not really accessible by shore.

We are diving in about four groups so we are mostly not diving at the same time or at the same spot as the other groups. Kelly and I end up diving most of the time with a bloke from Brisbane. We have a guide for all but a couple of dives. You do not have to use one, but they know where all the great marine creatures are, so you would certainly miss seeing lots of things without them. Things we saw during the week were tiny anglerfish (heaps), robust and ornate ghost pipefish, pygmy sea horses, cleaner shrimp, pipefish, pom-



pom crabs, various shrimp and crabs, more nudibranchs than you can poke a stainless steel stick at and more. There were also many sightings of turtles, barracuda, hump-headed wrasse, sharks and huge tunas.

There are probably over a dozen dive operations/resorts in Tulamben, so there are plenty of divers around. Despite this, it is not too crowded except after about 9am at the wreck. We even ran into Robbie and Janine a couple of times at their resort.

As well as being able to eat at the resorts, there are also a few restaurants in the main street. We try plenty of places and apart from one average meal Kelly had, and one very bad restaurant that Jason, Rox and some others went to, the food is both very nice and cheap.

Food was a mixture of Indonesian (not many choices really) and quasi-western food. Most of the menus were identical but it was all







cheap. As an example, one of the cheaper dinners Kelly and I had was a nice meal at the Mata Hari including a gin and tonic and a beer for 139,000 rupiah (\$13.90). This restaurant even had water views!

Towards the end of the week Shelley, Kelly and I had ear problems and missed some dives, but we all made it to the last dive on the Friday.

By the end of the week Kelly and I had done 31 dives between us, some had done well over 20 dives. I think I can say that not one of the dives was anything less than amazing. The whole week cost Kelly and I well under \$1000 each (all meals, accommodation, diving and drinks) and we had the most expensive accommodation. You could easily do the week for closer to

\$800 if you went for the cheaper accommodation and did not use a guide. The last day saw a few of us (Jason, Rox, Brian, Michael, Keisha, Kelly and myself) leave early and do a bus trip through the centre of Bali. We visited a Hindu water temple, the Mother Temple of Besakih. The water temple was great, but there were too many hawkers and harassing "guides" at the Mother Temple and they were extremely annoying. We also went to a huge volcanic crater which has an enormous lake in it. Here we had lunch overlooking the lake and volcano.



We stopped at a coffee plantation, where Jason, Rox and Michael tasted the luwak coffee. This is made from beans eaten by the luwak, a sort of cat, and then pooped out. They reckon it was great coffee! The cost was \$600 a kilogram for the beans. We also visit Ubud and then end up at Kuta where we have dinner before getting dropped off at the airport. A long but interesting day.

Here we meet up with all the other members returning home, including Ian and Mel Roffey and Mark and Vera who have been staying elsewhere.

Our planes all leave on time and Sunday morning we get home. What a great week. What a great two weeks. Even if you cannot do the liveaboard dive trip, I would recommend a week or even two at Tulamben; it is cheap and fantastic diving.

Once again, thanks to Jason for organising the trip.

Michael McFadyen





## BARREN'S HUT

19 October 2012

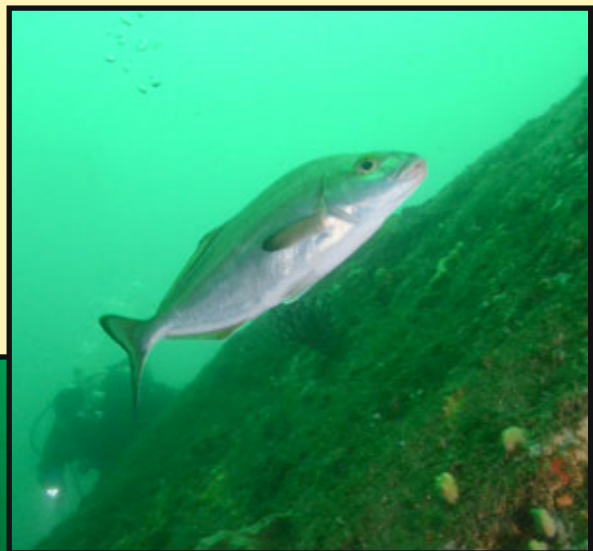
Peter and I set out for a nice morning dive to Barren's Hut on Sunday morning. We anchored in the sand just off the reef. Peter was first down and managed to pull the anchor around a rock near the reef. By running a line from the anchor he left a trail for me to follow to the reef. The edge of the reef is in about 25m of water.

The edge has a lot of growth of marine sponges and sea whips. Back from the edge up to about 21m there were large rocks and it was in among these rocks that we found most of the fish. There were lots of large Morwong, Blue Groppers and Mulloway. They seemed to be asleep and not moving much. Maybe the temp had something to do with it, as it was only 15 degrees on the dive!

Beneath the rocks I found a medium sized cuttlefish, but as I got closer it backed into the slit in the rock. All too soon the dive was over. Thankfully I had 32% Nitrox so no deco time to spend in the cold water.

Ian Roffey

Photos by Peter Beaumont







## OAK PARK CLUB DIVE AND BBQ

**Saturday 20th October 2012**

On this Saturday, 13 divers met for a shore dive at Oak Park. It was a beautiful sunny morning, the ocean was flat and a slight breeze was blowing. We all geared up



and went in at the back of the pool.

Most of us followed the first reef and then came back on the second reef. The visibility was not so great, around 5 metres, and the water temperature was 17 degrees. We saw the usual critters: many different types of nudibranch, an octopus, a fiddler ray. The blue groppers were also quite inquisitive – one of them got fed a sea urchin while another got patted. A decent sized bullray was also spotted just before the exit.

After the dive, we had a nice BBQ. Debbie and Shalene had set-up our “camp” next to the BBQ area and under the trees. We all chatted about our dive while eating chicken skewers, sausages and salad. Overall, we all had a very relaxing day.



**Nancy Scoleri**





## DIVE TRIP – SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA

**September - October 2012**

When thinking about dive destinations, few Australians would think about the cold water diving off the California coast, but if divers are willing to give the cold water a go, they will be greatly rewarded with a different experience than the usual tropical resort. This report will review two recent 4-day dive trips I made. The first was from 30 Sept to 3 Oct to Cortez Banks, the most remote and mysterious pinnacle in California; followed by a much more tranquil 4-day trip to Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa Island. For those who want to check out the pictures of what you can see in Cortez take a look at these: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/johnbibb/sets/72157631760023780/show/> And yes, it's very different from a warm water reef!

Truth Aquatics ([www.truthaquatics.com](http://www.truthaquatics.com)) operates three liveboard boats: the Truth, Conception and Vision, which operate much the year going to the off shore Northern Channel Islands near Santa Barbara. Although all the sleeping is done in bunks, they are still comfortable dive boats specifically designed for diving.

The captains and crew really perform well and are some of the best I've ever seen.

The usual islands visited are Anacapa, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa and San Miguel, as well as other destinations in the area on a more seasonal basis. Because the diving is often shallow (<20 metres), one can usually get a lot of dives in, and I did 24 dives on each of the two trips.

Cortez Banks is an isolated pinnacle over 160km off shore and is known for 30 metre monster waves that attract only the most hardy (or fool hardy) of surfers. If it gets rough out there, it's eight to ten hours to the closest island, San Clemente, so divers only go there when the forecast is flat – and that isn't often. Possibly only 10% of the few boats scheduled for Cortez Banks actually make it there, and most end up at other islands with better weather. But when the stars align, anything is possible.

The trip I was on was the lobster season opener so the search was on for “bugs” – those wonderful, spiny lobsters we in NSW can only take free diving. Rumours of man-sized bugs at Cortez Banks keeps plenty of punters willing to take the risk to get out there. The forecast for our trip was marginal, but thankfully the captain knew all the divers on board to be experienced Southern California divers, so he knew that whatever the conditions, we could cope with them. After a long, 12 hour trip out, we woke the first day to pretty reasonable conditions at Cortez Banks.



We got in the water quickly and were met with the surge. When the rollers came overhead, they pushed you horizontally 10 to 15 metres one way then back again – even at 15 to 20 metres deep. If you know how to dive these conditions, you're fine, but if not, one would find it a bit of a challenge.

There was no stopping us, because there were bugs to grab. And grab them we did: 470 of them over the four days, which is quite possibly an all-time record for a single dive boat in Southern California. With 18 divers on board, most divers “limited out” their trip bag limit of 21 bugs, and the crew took almost 100 bugs as well. Overall, we spent three full days diving at Cortez Bank (anchoring in open water at night), which is the longest time any dive boat has successfully spent there. Plenty of



Yellowtail and even a few Bonita were speared, which made for great sashimi for afternoon teas.

The dive sites were pristine, lush and full of life. With no coastal run off to contend with, visibility was reasonably good, often up to 20 metres. (Photographers, notice the lack of particles in the water in the online photos above.) Although the first day was somewhat rough, by the third day, it was close to placid “swimming pool” conditions and we go into some of the shallower spots right under where the 30 metre waves usually hit. One of these is a wreck at 10 metres, which is surprising intact and makes for easy penetration. And yes, it was full of bugs when we went in there!

The second 4-day trip was much more laid back and focused on sightseeing. And there was plenty to see in terms of dramatic dive sites covered in kelp. One of the unique features of Southern California diving is *macrocystis pyrifera*, or giant kelp, which grows in large forests around the Northern Channel Islands. Though

Tasmania and the South Island of New Zealand have pockets of this kelp, the only large forests in the Australasian region are around the inaccessible Auckland Islands south of New Zealand. But the Channel Islands’ unique position on the edge of the continental shelf makes for rich, cold water upwellings, and the kelp can grow at up to three metres a day!

The kelp is the start of a long food chain, which means there’s plenty of life in these waters. That is, everything moves here. Some divers are afraid of swimming through kelp and getting tangled up, but one can easily come loose from the kelp, by simply folding back the stalk until it snaps and breaks. Once divers get the hang of the kelp, they realise that swimming through these forests is like flying. The kelp forests around the Northern Channel Island are thicker than the above photographs of Cortez and there’s literally nothing like it. Night diving in kelp is wonderful, and when you turn off your light to dive by moonlight, which I did, the kelp

swings gracefully, outlined in bio-luminescent fireworks.

We spent the majority of the time on this second trip encircling Santa Cruz Island, which is famous for its sea caves, and the western front side is littered with them.

Although cave diving needs specific training, these caves are a genuine treat, full of interesting rock formations, air pockets, rays, sharks, and (of course) lobsters. Sea lions often like to play at the entrances to the caves, surfing on the surges in and out of them, and the juveniles are always happy







for a diver to join them!

We made it fully around Santa Cruz and ended up rounding Santa Rosa Island as well. Usually, the best bug hunting is Talcott Shoals, northwest of Rosa, but there were few bugs around there on either trip. The second trip only got seven “legal” bugs for the whole boat over the four days, and five of them were taken by me. I grabbed and put back another dozen “short” bugs, but there also were plenty of shell moults around, which meant the bugs were nearby, even if we couldn’t see them. The water was unusually warm, suggesting a late moult, and the bugs usually hide out until their new outer shell hardens. Maybe November will be a good bug month!

The best weather to go is July to November. Note that October and November trips are usually lobster hunting oriented and therefore boats focus less on sightseeing and more on game potential. Santa Barbara is only an hour and a half’s drive from Los Angeles, and I usually rent a car in LAX and drop it off in Santa Barbara, and then rent a different car for the return. Shuttles are also available, but rental cars offer more flexibility for not much more money, and the chance to stop off at local dive shops like Sports Chalet in Marina Del Rey or Oxnard. Based on the number of dives taken, Southern California ranks as one of the most dived places on earth (it is no surprise PADI is located in San Diego), but few outside the Southern California dive community have experienced its pleasures, turned off by the cold waters. But those same cold waters provides for a profusion of life that supports a productive fishery that keeps divers like me coming back, even from the far side of the Pacific.



The attached photos are:

- Dolphins surfing the bow of the boat, which is a frequent occurrence in the Channel Islands.
- Kelp with fish at Cortez Banks.
- Abalone – a very healthy and large specimen.
- Me with my old dive buddy. We had not dived together for over 20 years, but we made it for this trip (the one that made it to Cortez Banks).

Scott Koslow





# It's out there again - Let's do it!

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and Drive is on again

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2012

Come along and have some fun in  
the dunes.

Dive the bridge with dive time to  
be confirmed  
(will be approx. 8:30am hit the  
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Email back to me if you want to  
come along and I will add you to  
the growing numbers.

Camp overnight!

Contact Ray at [rayscases@aol.com](mailto:rayscases@aol.com)







## WHAT'S COMING UP?

WHEN	WHAT/ WHERE	CONTACT	WHEN	WHAT/ WHERE	CONTACT
Sun 11 Nov - Fri 16 Nov	Wooli	Mark Ridsdale <a href="mailto:msrconsulting@aol.com">msrconsulting@aol.com</a>	Sun 17 Nov	Boat Dive Pizza Reef	Tricia Henry <a href="mailto:thenry456@bigpond.com">thenry456@bigpond.com</a>
Sun 18 Nov	The Leap	Paul Pacey <a href="mailto:paul.pacey@iinet.net.au">paul.pacey@iinet.net.au</a>	Wed 21 Oct	Club Meeting Rowers on Cooks Club	Jason Coombs <a href="mailto:j.combs@unsw.edu.au">j.combs@unsw.edu.au</a>
Sat 24 Nov	Boat Dive Barren's Hut	Ian Roffey <a href="mailto:ian.roffey@team.telstra.com">ian.roffey@team.telstra.com</a>	Sat 24 - Sun 25 Nov	Stockton Beach 4WD, Camp and Dive	Ray Moulang <a href="mailto:rayscases@aol.com">rayscases@aol.com</a>
Sat 1 Dec	Deep dive SS Tuggerah/ Undola	Michael McFadyen <a href="mailto:michael@michaelmcfadyenscuba.info">michael@michaelmcfadyenscuba.info</a>	Sun 2 Dec	Club Xmas Party Dive & BBQ Frenchmans Bay	Natasha Naude <a href="mailto:natasha@bluecumber.com">natasha@bluecumber.com</a>

## CLUB COMMITTEE

President	Jason Coombs	9345 4599	<a href="mailto:President@stgeorgescubaclub.org.au">President@stgeorgescubaclub.org.au</a>
Vice President	Peter Flockart	9371 0265	<a href="mailto:pjfflockart@speednet.com.au">pjfflockart@speednet.com.au</a>
Secretary	Digby Naude	0403 896 985	<a href="mailto:secretary@stgeorgescubaclub.org.au">secretary@stgeorgescubaclub.org.au</a>
Treasurer	Kelly McFadyen	9545 5596	<a href="mailto:treasurer@stgeorgescubaclub.org.au">treasurer@stgeorgescubaclub.org.au</a>
Assistant Secretary/ Treasurer	David Casburn	0405 186 184	<a href="mailto:dcasburn@iinet.net.au">dcasburn@iinet.net.au</a>
Webmaster	Michael McFadyen	9545 5596	<a href="mailto:webmaster@stgeorgescubaclub.org.au">webmaster@stgeorgescubaclub.org.au</a>
Newsletter Editor	Natasha Naude	0410 074 677	<a href="mailto:newsletter@stgeorgescubaclub.org.au">newsletter@stgeorgescubaclub.org.au</a>

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