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### How Great, is the Great Barrier Reef?

Why would any Kiwi bother flying to Cairns when they can drive three hours north of Auckland and have absolutely world-class diving at the Poor Knights? Although it's a lot warmer and a bit clearer there's now an extra reason; you can get cheap direct flights from Auckland with Pacific Blue twice a week. No doubt Air New Zealand will now try to compete with their low fares.

Of course the diving is nothing like the Poor Knights, but it is well worth the trip if you can drag yourself onto a live-aboard for a few days.

I have lived in Cairns for five years and we have great dive trips out to the reef, almost always on Mike Ball's Spoilsport, but I have also done trips on Taka and Spirit of Freedom too, the only three boats currently offering trips to the Ribbon Reefs, Cod Hole and the Coral Sea.

The trade wind season is winter, April to November when it can blow 15-25 knots day after day. However, for an awful lot of the rest of the year it also blows 15-25 knots day after day. Cyclone season is November to April and it's true, trips can be disrupted during this time if you are very unlucky, however some of the best and calmest weather is during this period.

To get our great trips, we watch the four day forecast at [www.bom.gov.au](http://www.bom.gov.au) There are other sites that will give you a longer forecast but for Australia you don't need it; you can see the high pressure systems coming in off the Indian Ocean, crossing the continent and disappearing into the Tasman. Troughs which extend north from lows further south (which clobber New Zealand) often don't reach this far north, but do give a lull between high pressure systems. So we watch, looking for a break in the trades. When we can see that there will be two or three days of light weather ahead, we phone around to see who has space on their live-aboards.

The dive boats hate this. They want us all to book our annual holidays a year in advance. So watch the weather, phone around a couple of days before you plan to come

and negotiate with the dive company direct. Book a flight and you can be here in five hours with a direct flight from Auckland.

You hardy Kiwi's probably only need a 3mm one-piece even in winter when the water can be down to 23°C (although you might be more comfortable in a 5mm) but in summer when the water is 27°C a 3mm is plenty.

It's hard to say what the best time of year is; every month is different. The diving is no worse when the wind is blowing, but for us delicate photographers, light winds are a joy. November is good but June and July are dwarf minke whale season. Unless you have seen these animals in action, they are hard to credit. When I heard how you have to dive with these animals, I thought "How stupid!" Imagine, the boat is moored or drifting, you put a long rope out the stern, and everyone hangs on the rope in snorkel gear, and you expect the whales to come and visit you. Duh! Are we that interesting?

Well, apparently yes. This technique really works. The whales are used to this because they have learnt that snorkellers welded to the boat are no threat and are thus confident enough to approach more and more closely. It's not uncommon for the boldest whales them to come within a metre of the snorkellers. Don't expect to get the whole whale in your pictures. And the whales will hang around for hours! On our last trip on Spoilsport right at the end of minke whale season we had four whales at once and some people had a great encounter.

Spoilsport does three day trips, Cod Hole and south down the Ribbon Reefs to Cairns and Cairns north to Cod Hole and the Coral Sea and Osprey Reef. For a Coral Sea trip you leave Cairns on the boat on a Thursday night. For the GBR trip you fly to Lizard Island on a Monday morning at low altitude in a chartered plane like a Cessna Caravan. They fly the scenic route rather than direct, so you fly over many of the Ribbon Reefs. I sat on the starboard side this trip and shot two pictures, my wife Darin sat on the port side and shot over a hundred. If you are flying back after an Osprey Reef trip, choose the starboard side of the plane if you want pictures. Really, they should take the doors off...

Three and a half days doesn't seem like a long time, but these trips are like a time tardis, they seem to go on forever. At the end of three days we need a holiday! However, if you are making the effort to come from New Zealand it's worth doing the GBR and Osprey trips back to back which will take a week.

One thing you'll have heard, is that the planet is warming, the coral is dying, bleaching, being eaten by starfish, being sold to tourists, abducted by aliens... Well the papers have to write something. Some of the day-boat sites out of Cairns are pretty crap frankly, which is a shame. However, the live-aboards go north to the Ribbon Reefs and in places the dive sites are simply gorgeous. My favourite is Challenger Bay. It's shallow, incredibly lush with beautiful hard coral with shoals of sweetlips and other fish. I keep looking for a myriad fish, (*Myriad jocularis*) mentioned in every article, but I have never seen one... I love Challenger Bay at 5pm when the reef is bathed in golden light. I could spend a whole trip there. It's a great place to be on your own.

When I first met Mike Ball, I thanked him for pioneering solo diving here. Queensland has a reputation for draconian dive legislation, but this doesn't really have any impact on your live-aboard experience. Show that you are competent and Mike has pony bottles you can take if you want to dive alone. I use one every dive, so if Darin gets cold, I can bring her back to the boat and continue alone until I am hypothermic. In the old days it used to be until we were out of film...

A GBR trip starts at Cod Hole, justifiably famous for the wonderful potato grouper which love to pose for photos. The skipper Larry said that unfortunately we had big tides (when are strong currents ever bad?) so we would drift dive from the ocean side round to Cod Hole. Darin and I elected to get dumped right in Cod Hole instead, so we could be on our own there for a while. Although the current was ripping round Spoilspport at about two knots, we barely had half a knot once we were on the bottom. And current is great, bringing clear ocean water to sweep away all the sand I have kicked up. There are pygmy seahorses at Cod Hole on the fans at about 30m, but I can't imagine a day when I'd shoot with a 105 macro lens at Cod Hole. This trip I used the Tokina 10-17mm every dive. It's a hard habit to kick.

We tend to skip the night dives. One feature of night dives at many sites is that the giant trevally have learned to follow the divers around, ambushing any unfortunate fish highlighted by your torch. If you shoot macro, the night dives are worthwhile.

I'd love to try this at Cream Gardens at the Poor Knights... You get a half litre plastic Coke bottle, take it down to 30m, put about one third water in it and the rest ambient pressure air, and then crackle the hell out of it between your hands. Sharks LOVE this sound. But be careful; have a good look around first. I know a guy who was bitten on the shoulder by a silver tip while doing this. A friend attracted a bull shark at Cod Hole, and bull sharks even at Cairns day-sites crackling a bottle. It's the real thing!

After Challenger Bay at dawn, on one trip we spent several hours at Lighthouse Bommie, which is the best place in the world to see dwarf minke whales. Quite often they will visit while the divers are down on scuba. The site has numerous olive sea snakes too and a couple of resident turtles which on one trip were gorging on *Thysanostoma thysanura* jellyfish. The turtles need the bommie as a security blanket; they won't just drift with a jellyfish, eat it and swim back. They will drag the jellyfish back to the bommie, eat a bit, drag it back again, eat some more so as not to lose touch with home.

Some of these pinnacles are a bit barren below 25m, but the tops are gorgeous. When there is an open deck on Spoilspport, use the opportunity to be at the top on your own, free of second-hand bubbles. Which sites you visit will depend on the time of day, the tides and the wind. Most of the pinnacles like Steve's Bommie, are great. I could spend a week shooting macro here, but as usual, I shot the huge shoals of fish instead.

Each site is different; Acropolis has great hard coral. and dense shoals of fusiliers. Not every site has a hero subject like Cod Hole and Lighthouse, but most are worth getting out of bed at 0630 for. And when you get home you can read in the Sunday newspaper about how coral reefs are doomed by a warming planet....

All boats have their idiosyncracies which change with change in crew. Spirit of Freedom was as good as Spoilspport. What impressed me most was that the trip director at the time, Paul Hogger, took one look at my camera gear and said, "You'll want to dive alone; how can we help you?" Last time we dived on Taka they were still banging on about no reverse profiles, unnecessarily loading up their guests with nitrogen by insisting they do their deepest dive first even if there was no necessity to go deep on that dive. Bob Halstead and I wrote to the owner to get this changed so by the time you are on board, hopefully they will have dropped this requirement. Taka is good, but with more backpacker-fare than Spoilspport or Spirit of Freedom which have restaurant quality meals. Taka is also less well set up for photographers; however it's easy enough to carry your rig to your room to charge batteries or change cards,

Getting out to Osprey Reef is an overnight trip and often a rolly one. Take seasickness medication if you need it. There are some great dives here; North Horn and the shark feed is the most famous. It's steep, deep and very clear. Everyone else sees hammerheads here; I always have my viewfinder filled with a huge soft coral, so I miss them. Trevor Jackson saw a thresher here - mind you he was doing a 100m rebreather dive... Round-the-Bend is another great site, a bommie with the top at almost 30m, detached from the main reef. Current and clear water and almost always manta rays makes this a thrilling dive, but far too short. It's the kind of place created for rebreather divers; on the outside it drops away steep and crystal clear. You can see sharks all the way down.

Admiralty anchorage and False entrance are another two Osprey dives, but they pale in comparison with North Horn and Round-the-Bend.

Our last trip over Valentines Day this year, we picked our weather and had two glorious days out at Osprey Reef with 5 knots of wind. Darin still complained she didn't get roses - there's no pleasing some people!

[www.flypacificblue.com](http://www.flypacificblue.com)

[www.taka.com.au](http://www.taka.com.au)

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