

30<sup>th</sup> April to 1<sup>st</sup> May 2011

# Whitsundays Dive Trip Report

This dive trip had been organised in the months after the bad weather of February and March, and we were looking for an area of the reef left untouched by T.C. Anthony and Yasi.

On Friday 30<sup>th</sup> April, Ian, Robyn, Bradley, Jeff, Susie and little tacker, Tony, Chris, and I left Townsville on our way to the Whitsundays to begin our live aboard trip with Max and Sylvia of M.V. Yaran Charters.

We meet Max at the Able Point Marina on Friday afternoon, loaded our dive gear, and had a good look over the boat. The M.V. Yaran is a very sturdy 18m monohull vessel which can accommodate eight passengers and cruises along at around 10 to 12 knots.



M.V. Yaran with tender 'Betty' in tow

That night the group assembled at one of the local pubs for a few drinks and some excellent meals, and the girls saw the royal wedding on big screen, while others had an encounter with a small snake on the way back to our rooms!



Ian on the surface off Hook Island

The next morning we left the marina at about 8am, and by 10:30am we had arrived at our first dive site, Manta Ray Bay off Hook Island. This was a good opportunity for us to become familiar with the boat and the M.V. Yaran diving procedure. We dived this site as an easy little wall dive, and we found some quite good fringing coral, although the visibility was quite poor. One of us even discovered that a finger spool is a great piece of safety equipment if you plan on tethering yourself to the boat that you're diving from!

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Bat Fish behind soft coral

We left the shelter of Hook Island shortly after lunch and by 3pm we arrived at a site known locally as 'The Steps', on Bait Reef. This site gets its name from its aerial view, where the structure appears as a series of giant sized steps which gradually rise to the surface.



Ian doing his starfish interpretation

As soon as we descended on our first dive at Bait Reef, we could tell this was a pretty special reef; we had 20m visibility, saw plenty of fish life, and the coral appeared to be both healthy, and really well

developed. Our dive guide took us through some swim-throughs in between bombies that came up to the surface from 25m, and we found lots of good size Coral Trout, Maori Wrasse, plenty of anemones, and a big Cow Tail Ray.

I was also surprised at the number of Crown of Thorns Starfish at this site. They didn't seem to be causing damage to the coral further than where they were immediately located, but it was a bit unusual seeing one every three to four minutes during the dive.



Crown of Thorns on Bait Reef

Our next dive was a night dive on a Structure called 'The Cluster'. This site consists of four large bombies arranged into a cross which lie at the end of 'The Step'. Our dive guide told us to expect plenty of turtles, as the local turtle population uses this area as a sleeping ground.

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We had a somewhat interesting trip over to the site from the main vessel in the tender, and there were some fairly unorthodox water entries, but the pre-dive prediction of turtles proved spot-on. We found heaps of turtles under the ledges at the base of each of the four bombies, and they seemed to wedge them selves in for the night, using their upper shell to deny access to any unwanted visitors.

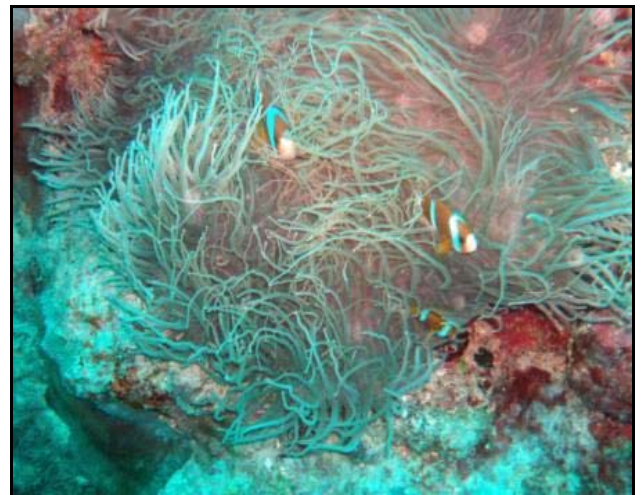
Ian and I found a small reef shark that seemed quite agitated by our lights, but what made this dive exciting were the number, size, and behaviour of the Giant Trevally on the site. These GTs are as big as the S.S. Yongala population, and have absolutely no fear of divers! In fact, they were using us to aid their hunting, by hovering in the dark, waiting for our torches to light up small fish, and then rushing in to feed. At one point in the dive Jeff found him self right in the action as several GTs bumped, nudged, and pushed at him in their efforts to get at the small fish!

Near the end of the dive we found two really big Flowery Cod, and a free Swimming Moray Eel. This was an excellent site for a night dive, there was plenty of structure, heaps to see, and at about 15m it wasn't too deep.



Our dive guide filming a Cow Tail Ray

The next morning we began our first dive of the day at gentleman's hour on 'The Steps'; although, this time our guides planned to take us to a feature called 'The Chimney'.



Here's Nemo and his two little buddies

After about 10 minutes into the dive, both groups meet at the entrance to a swim-through in about 12m. We entered the swim-through in single file, and at the start this structure seemed similar to other swim-throughs; however, this one had a ceiling which began about 5m from the entrance. The swim-

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through was graduated slightly uphill and after swimming another 10m the passage opened up into a circular chamber with walls that continued up to the surface. The chamber was big enough to fit two or three divers, and we each did a lap before moving out for the next divers.



Barramundi Cod under coral ledge

This was a spectacular dive, probably the best one of the trip to that point, and we certainly earned our breakfast with a long swim back to the main vessel.

For our next dive, the skipper moved us to a site called 'Hawaii', and after the swim from the previous dive the crew was pretty keen to use the tenders to get us to the start point for the dive. Unfortunately, I was a tad overzealous exiting the tender, and we were unlucky to catch the skipper on a week end where he didn't have his regular inflatable

tender, as this one was temporarily out of action for repairs. These two factors combined to make a very interesting and memorable start to the dive! After some regrouping and repositioning, we were amused to find Chris had become new best friends with a gecko that had decided Chris's head was a stable platform!

We continued our dive, and our guide did a fantastic job navigating us around the site and back to the main vessel. During the dive, we saw more excellent structures, and I felt the variety of fish life here even surpassed Wheeler in its pre-Yasi glory. Ian found a massive trout which he followed with the attention of a very keen fisherman, and I was kicking myself for forgetting to charge my camera battery!



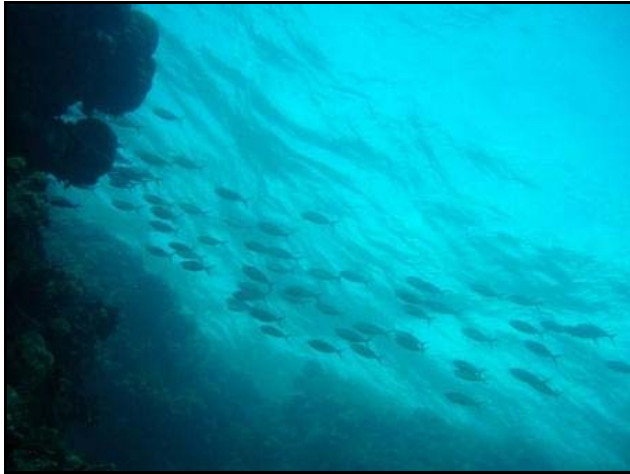
My last shot before my camera battery died!

This is the first trip the club has done to the Whitsunday region in a

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few years, and I would like to thank Ian and Robyn who did a great job helping me plan and organise the finer details. We are now familiar with the area, and the M.V. Yaran operation, and we are already considering another trip later in the year to coincide with whale season.

Simon Penprase  
NQUEC Vice President



Thanks very much to Max and Sylvia for taking us to some brilliant sites and feeding us good food, and well done to our two dive-guide instructors Harry and Max, for without your detailed knowledge of the sites, we would not have seen all the interesting structures and swim-throughs.

So if you fancy a live-aboard trip on a large comfortable vessel, diving pristine coral during a cooler but traditionally calmer season, with heaps of visibility, and the chance to see breaching whales, register your interest with the NQUEC committee and keep an eye on the website.