

Great Barrier Reef Trip Report: 26-29th July 2011

Jamie Obern

A good diving instructor does more than simply teach the basics. They act as equipment counsellors, explain further training opportunities and most important of all, try to convey their passion and enthusiasm for diving. Done well this last attribute is surprisingly powerful and often has a lasting effect on students, particularly when an exciting diving destination has been highlighted. Although more than 20 years ago now, I still remember my NZ based Open Water instructor waxing lyrical about the Great Barrier Reef. He showed a few grainy washed out pictures he'd taken (no digital cameras or computer software available back then), but it was enough to firmly place the GBR on my 'to do' list. After completing my backpacking tour of NZ my next stop was Australia and I very nearly got to the GBR, getting as far as a couple of dives at Byron Bay (close to the border between Queensland and NSW) before being thwarted by massive flooding. Unfortunately my time was limited and I had to leave Australia and head back to the UK before the floods subsided. Although I continued to dive regularly in the years that followed, the GBR somehow slipped down the priority list, almost forgotten as I explored other sites around the world.

However, whilst planning a recent trip I realised our route would take us in and out of Cairns and because we were using two separate airlines it was possible to break our trip at no cost. Hmm – we're in Cairns, we have enough time to extend our holiday and it's by far the most popular place for heading out to the reef – finally I had the perfect opportunity to deal with one of my longest standing 'to dos'. As several of our friends had visited this area before we asked for their advice and booked a live-aboard. Diving in this way has three major advantages – you avoid the crowds, you generally get more time underwater and you get to see reefs which are much further out, which usually means better visibility and better coral conditions due to less diver damage. We booked a four day trip through Deep Sea Diver's Den in Cairns, heading out on a boat called Taka Dive. Our itinerary would give us a maximum of 10 dives and take us as far north as Cod Hole. (To get out to Osprey Reef you need a 5 day trip.)

We joined the boat at the main wharf in Cairns at about 4pm on the first day. After finding a spot for our dive gear and getting a safety brief the boat headed out for the overnight passage up to Cod Hole. There was a stiff breeze and some swell, particularly when we were outside of the reef, but as much of the trip is in the lee of the reefs it was easy to get some sleep. The next morning we awoke at Cod Hole, raring to get in the water. As usual the first dive of any trip is set aside as a shake down, but because Mel and I had been diving only 3 days earlier we were able to head off and enjoy the whole dive. The visibility was great, there was only a very slight current and navigation was easy.

The second dive of the trip was at the same site and was the signature dive of this 4 day trip – the Cod Feed. Everyone goes in together and forms a big circle in the sand, at about 10m, while the guide feeds the large Potato Cod, trying to ensure they get the food and not his fingers. During the dive the guide moves around the



circle bringing the food with him, so everyone gets a close up view of the feeding cod. After about 15mins everyone was free to head off and explore the reef, although we hung around for a bit watching as the smaller fish cleaned up the scraps.



And then we started our long trip back towards Cairns, diving at various spots along the way. We did two more dives on this second day, one of which was a night dive. On our third day we did two dives at Steve's Bommie, probably the most colourful spot on the trip and also where we saw the most life. We ended day 3 with another night dive, which had some entertainment, with the small inquisitive white tips scaring several of the more nervous divers when they suddenly appeared out of the darkness. On day 4 we did our last two dives on the reefs closest to Cairns and then headed back into port, getting in at about 2pm. This

gave the crew only a couple of hours to clean, refuel and re-provision, before the next lot of guests arrived at 4pm.

The Highlights

First and most important for me, I saw sea life I hadn't seen before; a sinuous olive sea-snake, several new species of reef fish and the Potato Cod (for which Cod Hole is famously named). These fish were impressive, especially up close during the feeding dive. And we also got to see quite a lot of sharks, both during the day and at night. Although I've seen sharks hundreds of times before, they are always wonderful to watch. On one of our dives on Steve's Bommie we were lucky enough to have a couple of Grey Reef Sharks circling us for the entire 60min dive. On one of our two night dives we were joined by a big school of snapper, grouper, trevally and other predators, which used the light from our torches to hunt the now sleepy day time prey. Once I had seen a couple of small fish torn apart I took great care not to let my torch beam linger on any other small fish. It was also uplifting to see the coral in such good condition, particularly as the great visibility (30m+) allowed us to take in large swathes of reef in one big panorama.

I also liked the organisation of the boat. The dive area is well arranged, giving everyone plenty of space, even with 18 paying guests and the crew all diving at the same time. We didn't have to dive in a group (something I passionately hate) and we had nitrox for all our dives – really great when you are doing 4 dives a day. Plus all the crew were very friendly, helpful and relaxed – and the food was good.

The Niggles

Of course everything can't be perfect and there were a few niggles. As an experienced diver I found the rules around the diving somewhat wearisome. Each dive was a maximum of 60mins duration, regardless of how much gas you had left and 50bar was the minimum reserve, even if you were simply exploring the very top of the reef in only a couple of meters of water. (At one stage I thought they were trying to ensure I didn't overstay my time by giving me a 9 litre tank – but this got changed after a couple of dives.) And the 4th dive of

the day was a maximum of 14m, regardless of what your computer or tables might allow. But the rule I disagree with most was the 'no reverse profiles rule', which is a Queensland government mandate. The problem with this rule is that although it is supposedly there for safety reasons it actually leads to dysfunctional and unsafe behaviour – with bounce profiles being recommended, simply to get a particular depth registered on your computer, so your next dive isn't restricted. Spending 15mins at 10m during the feeding dive, bouncing to 25m for a few seconds and then spending the rest of the dive above 15m doesn't really count as a 25m dive in my book....

However, my biggest issue with the trip was that although I got to see some new stuff, I was very disappointed by the general lack of life on the reef. Apart from a couple of isolated little spots the life was nowhere near as prolific as many spots I regularly dive in New Zealand and have dived elsewhere. The last two dives of the trip, on the reefs close to Cairns where the day boats go, were particularly dreadful – damaged coral, bad visibility, almost no life (except a couple of enormous green turtles) – which meant we ended the trip on a bit of a damp note, if you pardon the pun. And don't look forward to getting the DVD at the end of the trip – although the footage is ok I think it is totally overpriced at AU\$120.



Other points

Although we did our trip during the period where Dwarf Minke Whales are usually spotted we weren't lucky enough to see any, but that's diving in my experience. Sometimes you get lucky sometimes you don't, I have no problems with that. On our trip back the weather was quite rough, which was again no problem for those of us who retired to our cabins early, but a big problem for those who stayed up to watch the film and were then trapped in the lounge for several hours until the boat crept back into the shelter of the main reef. The boat itself is a bit basic, think backpackers hostel, so if you are used to luxury it is not for you. Finally if you are experienced I strongly suggest you bring a dive buddy with you, as you can easily get paired with someone you really don't want – either very inexperienced, or even worse a photographer.....! Taking Mel with me meant I had no such problems.

Conclusions

I'm glad I have now seen the Great Barrier Reef and I did enjoy seeing the Potato Cod and the sharks, but have to admit I'm in no hurry to go back. After 20+ years of diving I'm lucky enough to have visited many great locations and unfortunately don't rate what we saw on this trip in my top 30, primarily due to the general lack of life. I think if I had done this trip straight after my Open Water course I would have been blown away by the visibility, the coral and the life I saw – plus the more back-packer-ish style of the boat would have seemed plush. The whole set up is specifically designed to cater for newly qualified divers and the costs of the trip partly reflect how many crew and helpers are needed for this. However with the experience I have now I felt the trip was over-priced, especially when compared to many other options. In summary I think that if I ever teach an Open Water Course again I will certainly mention the Great Barrier Reef, but I might wax lyrical about a few other south pacific destinations first.