

EXPLORING THE REMOTE ROWLEY SHOALS

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Beautiful soft corals and gorgonians are a feature of the Rowley Shoals.



Schools of five-lined snapper at Jimmy Goes To China.



Frances Warne photographs a friendly broadclub cuttlefish at Clerke Wall.



Brilliant soft corals sprout from the bottom at Blue Lagoon.

I had barely hit the bottom and already had a dozen sharks zooming around me. It was great to see such a healthy shark population, but that wasn't all as the corals before me were spectacular, beautiful soft corals and gorgeous gorgonians. And if that wasn't enough there were also thick schools of snapper and fusiliers swarming around me. There was so much colour and action I didn't know which way to point the camera. This was the explosive start to a dive at Jimmy Goes To China, just one of the impressive dive sites I recently explored at the incredible Rowley Shoals.

Like the Coral Sea Reefs off the east coast of Australia, Western Australia also has a series of remote offshore reefs that were once the peaks of an ancient mountain range during the last ice age. The best known, and the only ones regularly visited by liveboard charter boats, are the wonderful Rowley Shoals.

Located 300km west of Broome, the Rowley Shoals consists of three large oval-shaped reefs – Imperieuse Reef, Clerke Reef and Mermaid Reef. These wonderful reefs are only visited by a handful of charter boats each year, and only in spring, when the winds are light and the seas calm. One of those vessels is True North, which I joined for a six night trip to the Rowley Shoals in September.

True North is easily the most luxurious and well-appointed liveboard vessel I have ever been on. The 50m long vessel has large cabins, a huge dining room, a spacious lounge room, a well-setup dive deck and even a helipad. Aimed at the high end of the market, True North is a not a cheap boat to join for a dive expedition, but if you are after a dive holiday with the comfort and style of a five star resort, then True North is the vessel for you.

After a day looking around Broome, a very colourful town and the centre of the pearl industry, I boarded True North late in the afternoon. True North doesn't just cater for divers, in fact divers are often in the minority on these trips, as I discovered when I met my fellow

passengers, as many were snorkelers and anglers keen to explore this remote and unique part of Australia. I also quickly discovered that more than half the passengers had been on True North before, returning to once again enjoy the wonderful service and style on this special vessel.

We soon got underway, watching the sun sink into the Indian Ocean as we enjoyed a champagne and later the first of many incredible meals cooked by the three chefs. For this voyage to the Rowley Shoals we had 32 passengers and 19 crew, but at no point did the vessel, or the dive sites, ever feel crowded.

After a very claim ocean crossing we arrived at Clerke Reef the next morning. This was to be our base for the next four days of diving, snorkelling, fishing and exploring. All three reefs at the Rowley Shoals have spectacular diving, but True North generally visits Clerke Reef and Mermaid Reef, as they both have a sheltered lagoon for overnight anchorage. While all the reefs are marine parks, Clerke Reef has both green and general use zones allowing the anglers to fish and the divers and snorkelers to explore a huge range of sites.

After our skipper Gavin expertly navigated True North into the lagoon, via a very narrow channel, we got ready for our first dive at the Rowley Shoals. All the diving off True North is done with tender boats, and with six tender boats these were shared equally between the divers, snorkelers and anglers. For our first dive we headed to a brilliant dive site called Blue Lagoon.

This amazing dive site set the standard for the rest of the trip – 40m visibility, 26°C water and a great variety of corals, fish and sharks. This site has gutters, bommies and coral gardens in depths to 25m. Exploring Blue Lagoon we saw schools of barracuda, trevally, fusiliers and sweetlips. However, this site was also home to garden eels, whitetip reef sharks, grey reef sharks, coral trout, mackerel, potato cod and a good variety of reef fish. I was also impressed with the corals; healthy hard

corals and beautiful sea whips, gorgonians and soft corals. The soft corals proved to be a real highlight of the Rowley Shoals, with each site richly decorated with these spectacular corals. I always thought Fiji had the best soft corals, but the Rowley Shoals set a new benchmark for me.

Our next dive was at Clerke Wall, a large site we explored over three dives, each time at a different section. This wall drops to 60m and is covered in lovely corals and masses of fish. Drifting along the wall we saw turtles, jobfish, mackerel, wahoo, trevally, Maori wrasse, grey reef sharks and plenty of whitetip reef sharks. Amongst the coral were also moray eels, sea stars, nudibranchs and many colourful small reef fish. Another feature of this site is the coral canyons in the shallows, which were a lot of fun to explore at the end of the dive.

Each day we did three or four dives, not hard core diving, but balanced with a visit to Bedwell Island to see the nesting red-tailed tropic birds, snorkelling, relaxing, eating and being spoilt by the very attentive crew.

On day two we did a drift dive down the main channel from the lagoon to the outer wall. This was a little average as the visibility was a bit low on the outgoing tide, but improved once we dropped down the outer wall. We followed this up with a wonderful dive at The Bommie, exploring a coral wall and one massive bommie. This bommie was swarming with schools of fusiliers, and we also encountered Maori wrasse, rainbow runners, trevally, coral trout and many other species. At South Park we explored another fantastic wall, seeing moray eels,

rabbitfish, parrotfish, surgeonfish and other wonderful reef fish. Fish photography at the Rowley Shoals proved to be a real challenge, there were plenty of fish about but they see so few divers that they were camera shy!

Day three we dived Jimmy Goes To China, a wonderful dive with strong currents. This was a very sharky dive, with a dozen grey reef sharks and two silvertip sharks zooming around us at the start of the dive. This wall was also covered in beautiful soft corals, sea whips and gorgonians, plus home to schools of five-lined snapper and fusiliers. Hitting a maximum depth of 40m our bottom time was a bit limited at this site, but it was an unforgettable experience.

Returning in the tender after this dive we came across two feeding manta rays. We briefly snorkelled with these gentle giants as they collected mouthfuls of soupy plankton on the surface. It was too murky for photos, but still great to see these huge creatures. We saw manta rays almost everyday on the surface, but none while diving, plus numerous humpback whales, jumping eagle rays and the anglers even hooked (and released) a sailfish.

During our four days at Clerke Reef I enjoyed two night dives. The first in the lagoon was a little average, as the visibility was poor and all the crustaceans and molluscs appeared to be sleeping in. But the second night dive on the Main Channel Wall was much better. On this dive we saw sleeping parrotfish, feeding basket stars, hunting trevally and lots of shrimps, crabs, sea stars and feather stars.

All too soon our final day at the Rowley Shoals arrived. We started with another dive at

Clerke Wall and couldn't believe the visibility, almost 60m! We then dived a fabulous site called Plectropoma Pass, named after the abundant coral trout at the site. The drift dive at this site was sensational, cruising through coral gardens, around bommies and along a wall. This site had the best collection of soft corals I have ever seen, but was also home to reef sharks, trevally, Maori wrasse, garden eels, snappers and sweetlips.

For our last dive we returned

for one last dip at Clerke Wall. It was another wonderful dive that ended with a close encounter with a very friendly broadclub cuttlefish. After surfacing from this dive we were all reluctant to head back to True North, and fortunately a distraction was spotted as heading towards us was a pod of 20 or more humpback whales. It was an incredible sight to see so many whales travelling together and a special way to end our Rowley Shoals adventure.



Spectacular gorgonians are common on the walls around Clerke Reef.



A whitetip reef shark found in a cave at Blue Lagoon, note the fresh wounds on the gills from recent mating activities.