

'I HATE TO USE THE WORD PRISTINE AS IT TENDS TO BE OVERUSED, BUT...'



**FROM MY FIRST DIVE** at the Rowley Shoals I knew I was exploring somewhere very special.

For a start, there were fish everywhere – colourful reef fish and large pelagic fish, plus a very healthy population of sharks. However, because these creatures see so few divers at this remote destination, they proved to be extremely camera-shy.

Less shy were the corals – fabulous gardens of hard corals, beautiful gorgonians and spectacular fields of soft corals. I hate to use the word “pristine”, as it tends to be overused and not appropriate to most dive destinations, but this was the perfect word to describe this underwater *smorgasbord*.

**Left:** Pristine corals are a feature of the Rowley Shoals.

**Above:** Soft corals and schools of five-lined snapper at Plectropoma Pass.

**Below:** *True North* moored in Clerke Reef Lagoon.

First discovered by Anglo-Irish naval officer Captain Josias Rowley (later Admiral Sir Josias Rowley, 1st Baronet, GCB, GCMG) from the ship HMS *Imperieuse* in 1800, the three reefs of the Rowley Shoals lie 190 miles west of Broome, off the northern coast of Western Australia.

Like the wonderful Coral Sea Reefs found off the country’s east coast, the Rowley Shoals were once the peaks of ancient mountains, which slipped beneath the waves after the end of the last Ice Age. Located on the edge of the continental shelf, these reefs rise from deep water and attract a great variety of ocean wanderers.

A marine park, Rowley Shoals consists of the Mermaid, Clerke and Imperieuse reefs. Each of these is oval-shaped and covers an area of around 35sq miles. The reefs lie 20 miles apart, and while all offer spectacular diving, Clerke and Mermaid are the most popular with visiting charter-boats, as they have sheltered lagoons for safe overnight anchorage.

Divers first started to explore the Rowley Shoals in the 1970s, and discovered reefs very different to those elsewhere in Australia. They comprise a mixing pot of species from both Australia and Asia, with more than 230 species of coral and close to 700 species of fish.

Only a handful of liveaboards visit these remote reefs each year, and only in the months of September, October and November, when calm conditions prevail.

**ONE LIVEBOARD THAT** makes the journey is *True North*, which I joined for a six-night trip in September. *True North* is easily the most luxurious and well-appointed liveboard I have been on.

The vessel is 50m long, and has large spacious cabins spread over three levels, plus a huge dining room, comfortable lounge, bar, helipad, alfresco dining area and a massive dive-deck. It operates



**NIGEL MARSH** has just visited one of

the most remote dive destinations in Australia, to discover a collection of corals, fish and sharks that blew his socks off

# UNDERWATER

# SMORGASBORD

only a limited number of trips to the Rowley Shoals each year, as it also ventures to Kimberly and other parts of Australia, and makes trips to Indonesia and Papua New Guinea.

After a day spent seeing the sights of Broome, I boarded the boat in the afternoon and met my fellow-passengers, a mixed group of divers, anglers and snorkellers. I quickly discovered that this was a typical mix for a voyage on this vessel, and more than half the passengers were repeat customers.

We were soon underway, enjoying a glass of champagne as the sun set, and then the first of many fabulous meals cooked by the three chefs.

The overnight crossing was very calm, and the next morning we arrived at Clerke Reef to be greeted by a pod of migrating humpback whales. Once moored in the lagoon the six tenders were launched and we got ready to explore.



**OUR FIRST DIVE** at Blue Lagoon set the scene for four days of brilliant diving. This was our check-out dive, but unlike any check-out dive I had done before.

The site offered coral gardens and coral heads to explore in less than 25m, and I was first impressed by the fish life – schools of trevally, barracuda, sweetlips, fusiliers and snapper, plus potato cod, coral trout, mackerel, wahoo, garden eels and a great range of reef fish.

I was also impressed to see numerous sharks – several whitetip reef and grey reef sharks zooming around the reef.

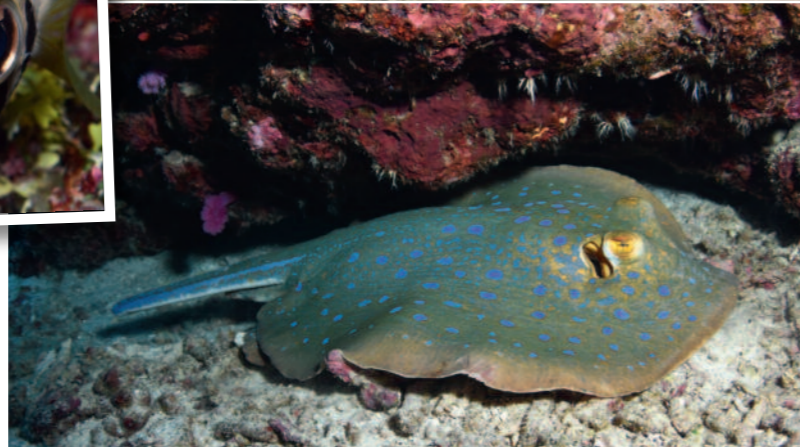
And finally, the corals made a big impression. Healthy hard corals, gorgonians, sea whips, whip corals and, best of all, spectacular soft corals. I love

**Top:** A whitetip reef shark emerges from a cave at Jimmy Goes To China.

**Above:** A black-blotched porcupinefish surprised on a night dive.

**Right:** A blue-spotted lagoon ray shelters under a coral head at The Bommie.

**Below, from left:** Schools of fusiliers at The Bommie; colourful soft corals.



spiky soft corals because they have the most exquisite colours, and all around me at Blue Lagoon were red, pink, yellow, white and orange examples.

Not only that, but the water was warm at 27°C and the visibility was more than 40m. Now I could see why divers raved about the Rowley Shoals.

Blue Lagoon was typical of the dive-sites we explored at Clerke Reef, because each one had great corals, wonderful fish life and numerous sharks.

Another site with wonderful coral gardens was Plectropoma Pass, which had an even better collection of soft corals, and I was surprised to see a gang of six juvenile grey reef sharks that were less than 50cm long.

It was good to see so many sharks on each dive, even if they were frustratingly camera-shy. Whitetip reef sharks were particularly abundant, and several of the females were observed with fresh mating bites around their gills, a good sign for

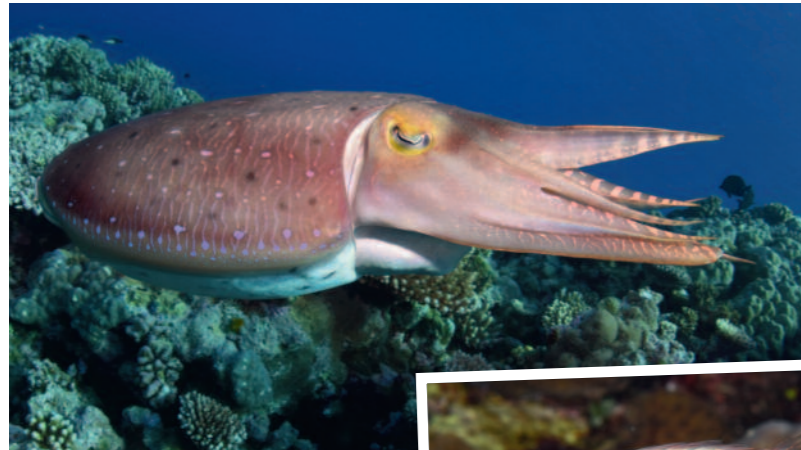


the future generations.

At other dive-sites we explored dramatic coral canyons, but with Clerke Reef rising 390m above the surrounding seafloor, most dives were wall dives. Drifting along Clerke Wall there were wonderful corals to be seen – large gorgonians, sponges, whip corals, sea whips and more beautiful soft corals.

Numerous reef fish were on show, plus a constant parade of pelagic fish such as Spanish mackerel, trevally, dogtooth tuna, rainbow runners, wahoo and jobfish.

I found myself constantly scanning the bluer, hoping to see either a humpback whale – which we could hear singing on every dive – or some other magnificent beast of the deep. The anglers were fortunate to hook, and duly release, a sailfish, but we divers didn't get to see



**Above:** Broome is famous for its oyster pearls.

**Left:** A broadclub cuttlefish encountered at Clerke Wall on the final dive.

**Below:** This Forsters hawkfish was one of the few fish that was not camera-shy.



one of these incredible creatures.

Also cruising this wall were grouper, Maori wrasse, humphead parrotfish, turtles, whitetip reef sharks and grey reef sharks. The crew informed me that manta rays also appeared – we saw none while diving, but quite a few feeding on the surface, and managed to snorkel with two.

On other wall dives at the Bommie, South Park, Sheer Delight and Main Channel Wall we saw moray eels, sting rays, groppers, sweetlips, coral trout, schools of snappers and fusiliers. I didn't see that many invertebrate species, but confess that I mainly used a wide-angle lens, so wasn't looking that hard.

I did see coral and hermit crabs, clams, feather and seastars and a few nudibranchs, and a night dive revealed an assortment of crustaceans and molluscs.

**THE MOST EXCITING** wall-dive we did was at the northern end of Clerke Reef, at a site called Jimmy Goes to China. Strong currents rip around the reef at this site, and we dropped down the wall to 40m to be surrounded by a dozen grey reef sharks and two larger silvertip sharks.

This site also had wonderful corals and schools of barracuda, snapper and

## Built on pearls

Broome is a very colourful town with a history to match, and it's one that many divers will find interesting. It was established in 1883, after pearl oysters were found to be abundant in the surrounding waters. The area quickly grew to have the largest pearl lugger fleet in the country.

The pearl oysters were collected to be turned into buttons, and were first gathered by Aboriginal freedivers. Later Japanese divers arrived and used standard dress to collect the shells.

Many died from the bends or drowning, and today rest in the Japanese Cemetery.

During World War Two, Broome was attacked on four occasions by Japanese aircraft and not long after the war the pearl-shell industry collapsed



when plastic buttons were invented.

However, the town survived and is today famous for its cultivated pearls.

It's one of the only places in the world where pearl-divers are still employed to collect shells.

Broome is located some 1400 miles north of Perth and is a popular tourist town, with people coming to see the pearl farms, the famous Cable Beach and to explore the nearby Kimberly region.

a feast of food. Many of the divers also enjoyed the snorkelling and fishing, and whale-watching was also popular, with many pods of migrating humpback whales spotted each day.

We also visited Bedwell Island, a long spit of sand that is home to hermit crabs and nesting seabirds.

The crew hosted sunset cocktails on the island one afternoon, which led to a few sore heads the next morning.

Our final dive at Clerke Wall provided a nice farewell to the Rowley Shoals. Drifting along the wall we saw the usual pretty corals, reef and pelagic fish and reef sharks, but right at the end of the dive we found a fabulous broadclub cuttlefish.

This wonderful cephalopod was unconcerned to have three excited underwater photographers blasting it like a group of paparazzi, and flashed a dazzling array of colours.

After five minutes with this amazing creature we reluctantly surfaced, sad to be departing the Rowley Shoals when we had so much more to explore. But with only a few hundred divers getting to enjoy these spectacular reefs each year, I felt I had joined a very exclusive club. ◀

## FACTFILE

**GETTING THERE** ▶ Charter-boats visiting the Rowley Shoals depart from Broome, which is regularly serviced by domestic flights in Australia by Qantas and Virgin Australia.

**DIVING & ACCOMMODATION** ▶ True North has been taking divers to the Rowley Shoals for more than 30 years, [www.northstarcruises.com.au](http://www.northstarcruises.com.au)

**WHEN TO GO** ▶ Trips are generally offered only in September, October and November.

**CURRENCY** ▶ Australian dollar.

**PRICES** ▶ A six-night Coral Atoll Cruise on True North starts from AU \$5695 (around £3500 at the time of writing). Return flights London-Broome from next September from around £830.

**VISITOR INFORMATION** ▶ [www.westernaustralia.com](http://www.westernaustralia.com)

