





Bay of Delights

While Shark Bay is not a well-known destination for divers, it is a wonderful place to explore the underwater world, and provides a diving experience unlike any other. Dugongs, whale sharks, sea turtles, humpback whales, massive Queensland groper, sharks, curious sea snakes, coral bobbies, seagrass and shipwrecks—this spectacular marine park covering a series of shallow bays has it all.

BY BRAD BARTON AND CAROLYN THOMSON-DANS

The embayments of Shark Bay Marine Park offer many shallow, but highly recommended, dive and snorkel sites. While there are many sites that experienced divers would find challenging, there are numerous very pretty coral gardens that you can easily explore equipped only with mask, snorkel and fins. Some of these are accessible from shore, so you don't even need a boat to discover the many marine delights of Shark Bay.

LARGE SEA CREATURES

One of the greatest thrills of diving is to encounter large and mysterious sea creatures. As well as being famous for its sociable dolphins, divers in Shark Bay may come face to face with turtles, dugongs, whale sharks and other large fish.

Divers and boaters frequently see marine turtles and dugongs. Green and loggerhead turtles are common in Shark Bay all year round. From October onwards, congregations of loggerhead turtles can be seen in the waters around Dirk Hartog Island as they prepare for the start of the breeding season. At mating time, males usually cluster around and compete for females, which inevitably breed with more than one male. The shallow marine environment of Shark Bay has one of the largest and most secure populations of dugongs in the world, with an estimated 10,000



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Main: Manta ray.

Insets from top: boating in the park; diving in a staghorn coral garden; yellow tail angelfish.

Photos – Clay Bryce

Left: A diver photographing Clark's anemonefish at Shark Bay.

Photo – Eva Boogaard/Lochman Transparencies

Below: A dugong calf stays close to its mother.

Photo – Geoff Taylor/Lochman Transparencies

animals. Their hearing is excellent, allowing them to detect boats and other disturbances at a distance, and they may respond to the presence of a boat by coming to investigate. They are extremely shy, however, and will move away at the slightest hint of a threat.

A number of whales enter the bay during winter, when you may be able to see them on the way to various dive sites. From December to July, whale sharks are a common sight in the deeper, warmer oceanic waters surrounding Dirk Hartog Island. One may even join you on the Monkey Rock dive in South Passage.

Queensland groper can weigh in excess of 300 kilograms and reach more than two-and-a-half metres in length. They are often curious and may even

approach you. These large predators lurk in caves and other good hiding spots. They are one of our marine wonders and conservation-minded divers will leave them unmolested for others to enjoy. They may live for up to 50 years so, because there are few in any location, large animals would take many years to be replaced.

THE WRECK OF THE GUDRUN

The *Gudrun*, the biggest wooden shipwreck found off Western Australia, sank at Shark Bay in 1901, carrying a load of jarrah from Bunbury to England. It was deliberately scuttled with more than a metre of water in its hold, after being sabotaged by the ship's carpenter. He admitted drilling a hole through its bottom. The wreck was rediscovered in 1989, when Paul Anderson, a Canadian studying dugongs in Shark Bay, found it on the





sand flats north of Cape Peron. Today, the wreck lies in about six metres of water. A special sanctuary zone extends for 500 metres around the wreck to protect the site. Artefacts can't be removed and line fishing and spearfishing are not permitted.

The wreck is 65 by 20 metres, with another 20-by-eight-metre section nearby, making it one of Western Australia's largest untouched wrecks in shallow waters. The hull is buried largely intact up to a metre in the soft sands, but anchors, fastenings, deck knees and so on are still visible. The remains, however, do not project much more than a metre from the seabed. Because of its relatively untouched wreckage, stunning marine life, remote location and history, Maritime Museum archaeologists rate it as one of the State's best wreck dives. It is now home to a rich variety of fish and marine animals, including turtles, giant groper and stingrays.

MONKEY ROCK

The fault line that runs from Steep Point out and around Monkey Rock is one of Shark Bay's best known dive sites, and can be reached by boat or from the land. However, the dive should not be attempted in other than optimum weather conditions. Due to the strong tidal movement in South Passage, the site should only be dived on a slack tide or incoming change. It is a difficult dive and definitely not for novices.

The site has a large swimthrough, starting at six metres and descending to 18 metres. This cavern is full of lionfish and other tropical fish. Lionfish are strikingly attractive, but their venomous spines can cause painful wounds, so divers need to look but not touch. This area is also home to two large wobbegong sharks that can be seen lazing in their crevices.

As the edge of the reef turns to the



east, some large coral bobbies rise from the bottom. Large cod and groper are usually seen here. The coral along the next section of reef is some of the best at the site, and here divers often encounter mackerel, samson fish, sailfish and manta rays. Manta rays can weigh more than two tonnes and are able to leap from the water.

Dive charters are available (by prior arrangement) and this is the recommended way to dive the site. It is a 60-kilometre boat trip from Denham and should only be undertaken in a boat at least five metres long. If you plan to

Top: Colourful invertebrates coat underwater surfaces within the marine park.

Photo – Eva Boogaard/Lochman Transparencies

Above: The zebra lionfish, or butterfly scorpionfish, has venomous spines that can cause painful stings.

Photo – Peter & Margy Nicholas/Lochman Transparencies

dive from the shore, you will need a four-wheel-drive. Steep Point is a long and rugged drive from Denham via the Useless Loop Road and would involve camping overnight.



BAR FLATS

Only three metres in depth, Bar Flats is a popular dive and snorkel site for Denham-based boats. Small fish species are abundant and, like many other dive sites in Shark Bay, a dugong could be encountered here.

This area is dominated by cabbage corals (*Turbinaria* species), staghorn corals and soft corals. Like reef-building corals, soft corals also have supporting structures of calcium carbonate, but this takes a different form from hard corals. They contain small spicules within their tissue, rather than a continuous skeleton. Other invertebrate marine life is abundant, and includes

sponges, sea anemones and yellow tubeworms, which live in tubes within corals or other underwater surfaces or animals. Divers do not see the body of these worms, just the feather-like feeding tentacles that protrude from their tube. The tentacles trap plankton, which is moved down grooves to the animal's mouth.

EAGLE BLUFF

Only 20 minutes drive from Denham, Eagle Bluff is one of the most prominent coastal features in the Shark Bay World Heritage Area. Expansive views of Henri Freycinet Harbour are available from the cliff top. Clear,

shallow (one to five-metre) waters around the base of the bluff are ideal for beginners and novice divers to view marine creatures close up. It is perfect for snorkelling.

You enter the water from the beach on the eastern side of the bluff. The shallow sandy bottom extends 30 metres out, where it meets the seagrass bed. People snorkelling along quietly can often get quite close to shovelnose rays and small school sharks, which cruise along the sand looking for food.

The seagrass beds are the driving force behind the diversity of marine life in Shark Bay. Here, watch for sea snakes, western butterflyfish and leatherjackets. About 100 metres from the south-eastern point is a sand patch with a number of coral bombies. Small wrasse, blue-lined emperor and tusk fish seek shelter and food around these outcrops. Sea stars, sea cucumbers and sea urchins hide among the rocks and coral.

Above left: The massive Queensland groper, which can weigh in excess of 300 kilograms, lives in caves within the Shark Bay Marine Park.

Photo – Peter & Margy Nicholas/Lochman Transparencies

Below: The shallow marine embayments of Shark Bay offer some excellent dive sites.

Photo – Clay Bryce



GREGORIES REEF

Gregories Reef lies offshore from Gregories camping area in Francois Peron National Park. It can only be reached by four-wheel-drive, but the limestone platform reef is accessible to snorkellers from the shore.

While the reef (in only two to three metres of water) supports only small areas of coral and some invertebrates, it abounds in fish life. Moon wrasse, black-spot tusk fish, dart, yellowfin bream and gold-spotted sweetlips are common. Schools of mullet swim along the seaward edge of the reef, ever wary of the bottlenose dolphins that frequent this area. Black sponges and fish, such as tusk fish, shelter in the caves and crevices along the front of the limestone platform. The boat channel often has schools of dart and yellowfin bream.

Many fish species also shelter in the lagoon, feeding opportunistically on organisms washed off or over the reef. Baldchin groper, distinguished by their white chin, often frequent the inside of the reef. Dolphins and dugongs are infrequent visitors. Dugongs are most likely to be seen in the scattered seagrass beds inside the lagoon, while dolphins prefer the deeper water outside the reef. Sea urchins often hide in the caves, while sea cucumbers and stingrays secrete themselves among the rubble in front of the reef.

BOTTLE BAY

Bottle Bay also lies offshore from Francois Peron National Park. There is beach access from the most northerly campsite at Bottle Bay (four-wheel-drive only). Although quite shallow (two to four metres), Bottle Bay has a small but lovely patch of corals and sponges, replete with tropical fish and crustaceans. Only 50 to 80 metres off the beach, it offers an easy dive or snorkel. Turtles and an occasional pod of dolphins may be seen in the area, if you are lucky enough to be there at the right time.

The largest patch of scattered coral lies about 80 metres offshore, and extends north-south for about 80 metres. It is made up of an array of fluorescent green and orange cabbage corals. There are also several pale pink



brain corals, small plate corals and the very occasional staghorn. There are also large, rubbery black sponges. The coral garden is populated by numerous species of bright parrotfish and wrasse, butterflyfish, angelfish and sergeant majors.

South of this patch, a large bank of seagrass harbours the odd small shark. Heading back inshore, about 30 metres from the beach, are two small rocky outcrops. Closer in, the rubble is covered by only a metre or two of water at high tide. This area is full of fish feeding, including many juvenile snapper, butterflyfish, mullet, garfish, parrotfish by the dozen, bullseyes, sweetlip and blue-lined emperor.

Top: The red and green wrasse inhabits rocky reefs and inshore coral reefs.

Males are very colourful.
Photo - John & Val Butler/Lochman
Transparencies

Above: Eagle Bluff is a good place to see the white-spotted shovelnose ray.
Photo - Clay Bryce/Lochman Transparencies

Snorkellers willing to spend time looking under, and lifting rocks, can find sleepy wobbegongs and timid crabs hiding in nooks and crannies.

The occasional anemone and its resident anemonefish can be seen among the coral, and stirred up silt can indicate a blue-spotted ray or a group of goatfish sifting diligently over the sandy bottom.



Above: The loggerhead, considered to be the most endangered turtle that nests in the Australian region, inhabits the waters of Shark Bay.

Below left: The olive sea snake is largely confined to Shark Bay. They are quite curious and sometimes approach divers.
Photos – Eva Boogaard/Lochman Transparencies

SAFETY

Tidal movements throughout Shark Bay Marine Park are very strong, particularly in South Passage and at the northern tip of Dirk Hartog Island. Thus, it is important to note that all sites within the marine park should be dived or snorkelled only on a slack tide.

Dive charters are available for groups by prior arrangement, and this is recommended as the safest way to dive most of the sites, as the charter operators are intimate with local tides, danger spots and conditions. If you intend to dive from your own boat, it is recommended that you first purchase two books produced by the Department of Conservation and Land Management. *Dive and Snorkel Sites in Western*

Australia and More Dive and Snorkel Sites in Western Australia contain useful information, descriptions and mud maps of all the dive sites described in this article. Compressed air is available in Denham, but no diving equipment is available for hire, so you will have to bring your own.

There are also a few dangerous animals to watch out for. Rules to obey for sea snakes are the same as for their land-based relatives: look but don't touch. Although sea snakes are highly venomous, they are placid and rarely attack people unless provoked and, even when they do, they do not always release venom. Watch out for stonefish in the shallows. They are highly venomous.

TAKING THE PLUNGE

It should now be clear that the unique Shark Bay Marine Park has much more to offer visitors than just the famed Monkey Mia dolphins. In future, it is hoped that more people will be tempted to take the plunge so they can appreciate the diversity and beauty of this amazing marine area where it counts the most—actually under the water!



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The authors wish to acknowledge the many contributors to the Shark Bay section of the abovementioned books.

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Within 40 years, the numbat has risen from near extinction to endangered with 10 populations in WA and interstate. See 'Numbats Forever' (page 17).



The forces that shaped the geology and landforms of the south-west began more than 3,500 million years ago. Read the fascinating story on page 10.



The Marine Community Monitoring Program is a new and ambitious program to involve the community in keeping our oceans clean. See page 35.



Shark Bay Marine Park provides spectacular opportunities for divers and snorkellers. No wonder it is called Bay of Delights. See page 23.



The history of Aboriginal occupation in the Leeuwin-Naturaliste region spans 50,000 years. Find out more in 'History from the Caves' (page 40).

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C O V E R

Leschenaultias are some of the most widely known and recognisable plants in Western Australia. They have fantastic horticultural value and provide glorious floral displays. The wreath leschenaultia is a favourite with visitors during our wildflower season. See page 23.



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