

DIVELOG AUSTRALASIA

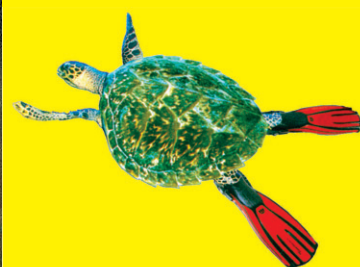
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INCORPORATING

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ING MAGAZINE

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DIVELOG AUSTRALASIA

INCORPORATING SPORTDIVING MAGAZINE

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REACHING ASIA/PACIFIC'S BIGGEST SINGLE DIVER READERSHIP!

OUR COVER PHOTO

THIS months cover photo was supplied our resident Photo Journalist Mike Scotland of a Three Spot Angelfish with its beautiful blue lips, another stunning Angel that is very nervous and difficult to approach taken at Manta Alley in South Komodo.

EDITORS DESK

Welcome to the February issue of Dive Log inc Sportdiving magazine, firstly as we go to press Australian's are enduring some very tough times with the ongoing bushfires, lives have been lost, homes and properties destroyed and millions of wildlife lost. As with any disaster it brings out the best in people with overwhelming help coming from home and abroad. We know homes can be rebuilt and the bush will regenerate and with ongoing support from amazing people, wildlife will continue to be rescued and cared for by professionals and volunteers. In all the devastation we read about in the news, Australia is very much open for business, tourism is what we need and our diving has not been affected and is just as amazing as ever.

In this issue we have a fabulous article showcasing the Great Southern Reef, this most pristine and unique reef was recently named Mission Blue's Hope Spot, watch the video of the renowned Dr Sylvia Earle embedded in the article, another wonderful article is on the Sea Lions in South Australian waters by Malcolm Nobbs and Jamie Watts. Heading overseas we have the wonderful Witu Islands article by Don Silcock, to dive these Islands book a trip on either the fabulous new Liveaboard MV Oceania or MV Febrina both based in Walindi PNG. This month we also travel to the Solomon Islands for a grand adventure by Mike Scotland and then Mike Salvarezza's article on the Tubbataha reefs national park in the Philippines, accessible by Liveaboard Discovery Fleet - contact details in article.

Congratulations to the lucky winner Lena Sesin from Wheelers Hill in Vic on winning a Mares Puck Pro Dive Computer valued at \$359.00, sponsored by Mares.

We have all our regular contributors sharing their stories and expertise amongst the pages of February Dive Log... PT Hirschfield shares her adventures in Munda, Simon Pridmore "Rethinking Narcosis", Mike Scotland's column "Marine Scene" on Cod, Trout & Gropers plus many more.

Dive Log is FREE to read on all devices via our website www.diveblog.net.au, Facebook, Instagram or sign up to our monthly newsletter to receive the magazine link directly to your email.

We thank you for your continued support and feedback, every letter is appreciated please continue to email us your comments and underwater images, Dive Log is YOUR magazine!

Until next month we wish all our readers plenty of amazing underwater adventures.

Leanne & Vikki



An update from our retiree ...

AFTER 64 Years of working and over 50 of those years self-employed in the diving industry, I'm slowly settling into retirement, but I must admit it is harder than I thought it would be! With long time dive travel friends John DeFrancesco and Alan Buck we have a return trip to PNG coming up early in the year and in August the three of us are planning a return trip to Tonga to dive with the humpback whales. As diving with the whales is all breathhold freediving it is important that I stay fit. I am currently finishing my 10th Albumworks book with several more in the pipeline. Belinda & I have a trip to Canada for a visit with our granddaughters who are growing up fast, plus a Baltic Cruise later in the year. With Leanne and Vikki still operating from the existing MOT office and my MAC in my long time position, sometimes I feel nothing has changed. Today I looked over the page proofs from February Dive Log ...
What a Great Issue!

TUBBATAHA

Coral Kingdom of the Sulu Sea

: Michael Salvarezza

: Christopher P. Weaver

The reef was healthy. In fact, exquisitely healthy. Hard and soft corals crowded each other for space while clouds of Anthias in rainbow colours of orange, red, purple and lime-green fluttered a few feet above.

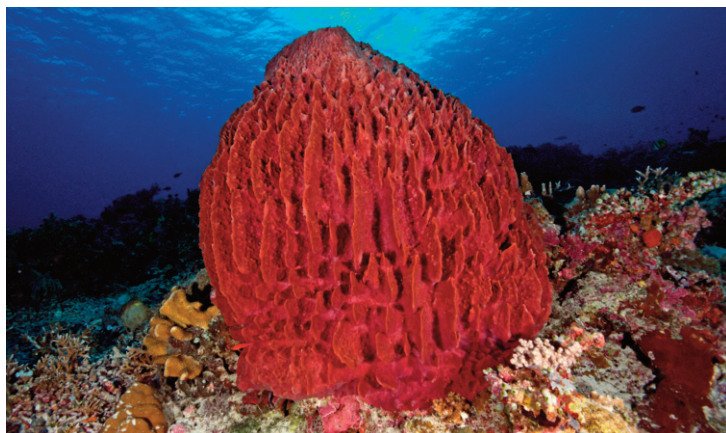
Near the top of the dropoff, we had just encountered a dense school of Trevally, swirling in a veritable tornado of fish, and now we were once again drifting at the precipice of the wall below. Our eyes turned to the deep and we began to descend. Whip corals, Gorgonia and massive barrel sponges festooned the wall and at depth the Anthias were replaced with swarms of Pyramid Butterflyfish and Redtooth Triggerfish, all fluttering peacefully in the open water until something big swam by, causing a mass rush to the safe confines of the reef wall.

This was Tubbataha...and something big was often swimming by!

As we drifted deeper our attention was suddenly fixed on a set of white dots just barely visible in the gloom of the deep. We squinted and strained until, gradually, a massive form emerged from the edge of visibility and appeared in all its glory: a whale shark! No, two! No, hang on...is that a third?

Introducing Tubbataha

Tubbataha is a collection of three coral atolls that barely reach the surface in a stretch of water in the Sulu Sea, the geographic center of world marine biodiversity. Lying some 93 miles (150km) southeast of Puerto Princesa, in the province of Palawan in the Philippines, Tubbataha Reefs National Park is a 375 square mile (97,030 hectare) Marine Protected Area reachable only by liveaboard dive vessel and only for certain times of the year. Together, the North Atoll, South Atoll and



Barrel sponges dominate the reefs *Photographing the Trevally*



Jessie Beazley Reef that make up Tubbataha are a World Heritage Site and a mecca for SCUBA Divers.

Our journey to Tubbataha was aboard the comfortable Discovery Adventure liveaboard, and we were joined by a number of guests of Marco Vincent Dive Resort which had chartered the vessel for this end of season transition expedition. The itinerary would first take us to Tubbataha before a visit to a little-known dive site in Cayuan, a stop at Apo Reef and a return to port in Puerto Galera.

Diving Tubbataha

The sighting of three Whale Sharks cruising the wall at a dive site known as Staghorn Point on the South Atoll occurred on our first day of diving in Tubbataha. Subsequent dives were equally electric, so much so that we almost became inured to the beautiful reefs and dynamic marine ecosystems that lay before our eyes on each dive. But not quite...

Our expedition began in the South Atoll, with dive sites like Staghorn Point where we saw the Whale Sharks and schools of Trevally and Striped Barracuda. We also did several dives at a site known as Delsan Wreck. The wreck itself is not part of the dive as it sits in water too shallow for a safe approach. Rather, this site is a sheer wall that drops off from a lush reef teeming with colourful indo-pacific reef fish. On one dive, a group of rather indifferent Bumphead Parrotfish cruised by, pre-occupied with their search for food and unconcerned about the group of divers in their midst.

Schools of Moorish Idols flitted over the reef at Black Rock in the northern part of the South Atoll. We also found a variety of Anemones with resident Anemonefish nervously cavorting in the anemone tentacles.

Strong currents are always a possibility at Tubbataha. Most of our dives were drifts with varying degrees of speed. The dive guides are well schooled in the vagaries of the water movement here and we almost never faced a dive into the current nor were we ever confronted with a current too strong for our safety. Still, currents can change in moments, they can be confusingly inconsistent from one depth to another, and down currents are an ever-present danger especially when diving near to the wall. Proper experience will provide greater comfort and proficiency with an SMB is a must.

On the North Atoll, we dove sites like South Park, Shark Airport, Seafan Alley and the ominously named Washing Machine. We frequently came across Whitetip Reef Sharks resting in the coral plains, but in the blue water off the walls, we encountered Silvertip Sharks and Silky Sharks on several of the dives.

One of our objectives was to dive with Manta Rays here. We didn't see any but another group on the boat did when they hit the water at the Malayan Wreck. We were skeptical at first, but their video evidence proved us wrong!

Tubbataha is known for its very healthy reefs and big animal action. It is best photographed using wide angle equipment, but divers who thirst for macro experiences can delight in the intricate reef systems which hold so much small life to be photographed. Just be aware that as you focus on the small stuff, big animals will undoubtedly be swimming by!

*Top to bottom: Bubble anemone are favourite macro subjects
An oyster snaps its shell closed when divers approach
The eggs of a Spanish Dancer nudibranch
A Funeral Jorunna Nudibranch accompanies a small goby*





It's easy to overlook the macro life when swimming with giants, but don't!

Protecting Tubbataha

The name "Tubbataha" comes from the Samal language meaning "long reef exposed at low tide". Positioned in the middle of the Sulu Sea and very far from inhabitable land, the isolation of this reef system was, for many years, its best protection. There are only a few very tiny islets poking ever so slightly above the waves, and there is no protection from typhoons associated with the northeast monsoon between November and March and the southwest monsoon between July and October. Still, increasing numbers of Filipino fisherman using motorized boats in the 1980s began to threaten the health of the reefs. Dynamite and cyanide fishing began in earnest as the abundance of fish here became well known.



Whale Sharks are the giants of the sea



Barrel sponges grow to very impressive sizes



A school of Yellowfin Surgeonfish gathers at dusk

Thankfully, in 1988 President Corazon Aquino declared Tubbataha a National Marine Park, the first of its kind in the Philippines. A model for conservation and protection was implemented and has gradually been improved over the years. This model, which includes restricted access, ample time for no visitation, aggressive enforcement of regulations and very strict requirements of all visitors, including divers, is one that has shown success and should be emulated the world over.

Divers are among the most frequent visitors and their actions are very carefully monitored. Indeed, dive guides can be heavily fined or even prohibited from working in the park if the divers they escort do as much as touch the coral or harass any of the marine life. For divers, this is a very strict "no touch" environment and good buoyancy skills are essential.

Our journey included a visit to the ranger station on the North Atoll, where we briefly glimpsed what life is like for the dedicated individuals working here to protect Tubbataha. Here, a team of between 10-12 men from the Philippine Navy, Philippine Coast Guard, Municipality of Cagayancillo and the Tubbataha Management Office are stationed here in a shelter for 2 months at a time with the task of protecting the park from illegal activities. Equipped with radar, motor boats and other equipment, they regularly patrol the park and confront unauthorized visitors.

It is a vitally important role.

While we were there, we met with Angelique Songco, referred to affectionately by those she works with as "Mama Ranger". She has been Tubbataha's Park Manager since



The authors with "Mama Ranger"

2001 and she works tirelessly to protect this very special place. We thanked her, and the rangers, for the work they are doing and for the hardships they endure on behalf of the reef. The work has paid off...Tubbataha has some of the healthiest reefs in the world.

Leaving Tubbataha

The Discovery Adventure left Tubbataha in the early evening as the sun set behind a flat horizon on a sultry afternoon. We were bound for a rare dive at Cayuan, 15 hours away, where we would be among the first 200 people to ever dive this pinnacle in the Sulu Sea, and for a visit to Apo Reef before ending our journey with some fascinating muck dives in Puerto Galera.

But the sensational reefs of Tubbataha had gotten into our blood.

As seabirds called, we bid adieu to the reefs and all the myriad creatures making this their home. This expedition was the final one of the season. In the coming weeks, the waters will turn rough and storms may rake over Tubbataha with unrelenting fury. But for us, the knowledge that this area of ocean will now remain undisturbed for 9 months makes us smile. It is a chance for Tubbataha to breathe, to regenerate, to exist as the reefs of the world once did: healthy, in balance and teeming with life.

Getting There

The only way to dive Tubbataha is via liveaboard, and most depart from the port city of Puerto Princesa on the island of Palawan. Philippines Air Express flies domestic routes from Manila Airport.

Diving and Accommodation

Mike and Chris dove with the Discovery Adventure Liveaboard, on a chartered expedition by Marco Vincent Dive Resort. This was a 14-day custom itinerary that cost \$4800 per person and was all inclusive, including domestic airfare from Manila. Contact Marco Vincent Dive Resort for more information: <http://www.marcovincent.com>

When to go

The dive season at Tubbataha runs from March through June only.



The Discovery Adventure liveaboard



The reefs drop off into the depths and are adorned with marine life



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