

# heading south

> IMAGINE BEING SURROUNDED BY 40 GREY NURSE SHARKS OR SEEING FOR THE FIRST TIME A RARE BLUE-LINED OCTOPUS FLASH ITS IRIDESCENT WARNING. THOSE WERE JUST SOME OF THE HIGHLIGHTS OF OUR ROAD TRIP BETWEEN BRISBANE AND SYDNEY. LUCKILY, THE NEXT LEG FROM SYDNEY TO TASMANIA HAD PLENTY MORE IN STORE, INCLUDING SEAHORSES GALORE, PLAYFUL SEALS AND STUNNING KELP FORESTS.

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Heading south over the Sydney Harbour Bridge I reflected on some of the amazing dives we'd done between Brisbane and Sydney. The grey nurse sharks schooling in the entrance of Fish Rock cave, the fascinating critters in Port Stephens and hairy frogfish, more normally seen in Indonesia's muck dives than within sight of the Sydney Opera House. It struck me that few international or domestic dive tourists experience the true scope of Australia's underwater riches. Their experience in the tropical waters of the Great Barrier Reef are full of colour, energy and tranquillity with southern Australia rarely given a second thought. Temperate waters can be more hit or miss, but on a good day they're hard to beat.

#### Pushy Pinnipeds

Our journey from Sydney to Melbourne was broken up by a day in the small coastal town of Narooma, about 350km

south of Sydney. Just off the coast is Montague Island, where thousands of years of Aboriginal heritage and abundant wildlife create a fascinating mix. Dive groups don't go out to the island often and we ended up being a last minute addition to an island tour group with Narooma Charters. Whilst the rest of the guests were touring the island with a guide from NSW National Parks my buddy Laura and I were taken to a rocky outcrop where dozens of seals frolicked. This is one of the most northerly spots to reliably encounter the Australian fur seal on the east coast (with a few of the New Zealand species also thrown in).

Since Laura and I were the only divers in the water we became the star attraction amongst the seals. With help from the friendly and attentive crew we left the boat with a giant stride and descended to eight metres depth, just above the rocky bottom. Quickly the seals got over their initial

shyness and were swimming to within inches of us, in a game of high-speed chicken. Laura put on an interpretive underwater ballet that captivated the seals and soon they surrounded her. Meanwhile, I became the object of affection to a young pup that was fascinated by the strobes of my camera and enjoyed gnawing on my fins. Mum seal tried to calm the youngster, but the excitement all became too much and the baby vomited its breakfast!

Montague Island is also known as a grey nurse aggregation site but we stayed shallow to play with the seals having seen plenty of the sharks at Fish Rock. There was still plenty to see and I saw my first Port Jackson sharks patrolling back and forth along the shoreline. I'm not sure what it was that day but the sharks too were enchanted by me and would approach within inches if I kept still. I was able to inspect their strange comb-like teeth, the



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1 An orange colour form of the pot bellied seahorse *Hippocampus abdominalis* at Blairgowrie pier, Melbourne; 2 A spotted handfish *Brachionichthys hirsutus* in the Derwent Estuary; 3 A male weedy seadragon carrying a clutch of eggs, Tasman Peninsula; 4 An inquisitive Australian fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus doriferus*

1 The Eastern fidler ray *Trygonorrhina fasciata* is a stunning little guitar shark; 2 Southern dumpling squid *Euprymna tasmanica* on a night dive at Blairgowrie Pier, Melbourne; 3 Giant cuttlefish *Sepia apama*; 4 Australian fur seals romping in the kelp beds; 5 A diver inspects the lush invertebrate growth of the Cathedral Cave, Tasmania; 6 Biscuit seastar *Rye pier*, Melbourne; 7 This juvenile crested weedfish (*Cristiceps australis*) was a surprise encounter under Blairgowrie pier, Melbourne



primitive horns in front of the dorsal fins and peer straight in the eye of these docile sharks.

**A Dash South**

Driving the Sydney to Melbourne coastal road took much longer than the inland highway but the vast forest wildernesses were spectacular. Once in the Melbourne vicinity we had a couple days of diving planned along the Mornington Peninsula east of the city. We hired tanks from Bay Play, a watersports centre based in Portsea near the mouth of Port Phillip Bay. As with many dive centres Bay Play offer cheap accommodation to their divers, handy for keeping costs down. As we were there in the off peak season and diving mid week we scored a three bedroom flat above the shop for just the two of us. The Bay Play staff were really helpful in explaining local dive sites and which piers were worth checking out – there’s several piers, so it was useful whittling them down.

Our dives around the tip of Mornington Peninsula acted as an extended safety stop

for all the diving we’d been doing on our trip. Over our five dives we were never deeper than 5m and clocked up a couple of dives lasting over 90 minutes. Of the four piers we dived (Portsea, Rye, Blairgowrie and Flinders), Blairgowrie was most rewarding. We dived it during the day and at night, seeing different creatures at different times. I’ve never seen so many seahorses on one dive – 13 pot-bellied seahorses *Hippocampus abdominalis* and three much smaller dwarf short-head seahorses *H. breviceps*. During night dives I was careful not to shine my torch on the sleeping seahorses as this is highly disturbing. Another highlight of Blairgowrie pier was a juvenile crested weedfish *Cristiceps australis*. This is one preposterous fish; I could have watched it for hours. It was amazingly well camouflaged and its tiny frame was constantly swayed and pushed about with the ocean swell trying to imitate the surrounding weed.

Flinders was another interesting pier dive on the other side of the peninsula so we

experienced quite different conditions. The visibility wasn’t great but this may have been due to the tidal conditions rather than being the norm here. The gloom was slightly unnerving since massive stingrays repeatedly approached us and as the offshore area is known for the odd great white shark sighting it’s easy for the mind to wander! It may have been our heightened alertness that helped us locate 10 weedy seadragons lurking in the dense seaweed patches. They were very easy to find, I found three right after entering the water waiting for Laura to descend! They’re one of the largest syngnathids, the group containing all pipefish and seahorses, but their colouration and adornments help disguise them in the algae.

Our final dive on Mornington Peninsula was at night at Blairgowrie Pier. We hadn’t allowed for the changing tide, which resulted in a rather difficult dive among the pier pylons. There were several fishermen above so we were restricted to the area directly underneath the pier. There were many interesting nocturnal creatures we

hadn’t seen during the day including southern dumpling squid, Miller’s velvetfish, octopuses and nudibranchs.

**Van Diemens Adventure**

From Melbourne we caught the redeye ferry to Devonport in northern Tasmania. We had two dive destinations planned for Australia’s southernmost state: one near Hobart and the other in the southeastern Tasman Peninsula. I’d been worrying a little about diving in such cold waters as I’d avoided the cold since my Open Water course in a UK quarry 15 years earlier. Luckily we’d timed our visit well as the ocean in early March retains much of its warmth from the Austral summer and the East Australia Current remains strong bringing warm water from the tropics. Covered with 13mm of neoprene I was ready for the 16°C water!

Whilst planning our trip I’d become very excited about a strange little fish known as *Brachionichthys hirsutus*, or the spotted handfish to its friends. Its extremely limited range in the Derwent Estuary around Hobart, specific habitat requirements and

poor ability to colonise new areas have meant that it is now at a very high risk of becoming extinct. I was fortunate enough to contact Sue Wragge, of Underwater Adventures, whilst working out the logistics of observing this fascinating fish in the wild. She turned out to have a soft spot for this little fish and is actively involved in conservation efforts to protect it.

Handfishes are like a prototype anglerfish, having split from that lineage many millions of years ago and diversified around Australia’s southern coast. Their small vestigial lure is evidence of this. At least 14 species are now known, but many from only a single or small number of specimens. The spotted handfish has undergone a massive range reduction since its discovery explaining its listing as Critically Endangered. Sue took us to three sites around the Derwent Estuary and I found six animals. This may sound like a lot but when you consider that between the three sites we searched for the species, which were clearly visible from one another, we covered almost its entire geographic range, the precarious nature of the fish’s survival





*A large spider crab in the Derwent Estuary*

interactions have taken their toll. Bays once rendered unnavigable by dense kelp growth are now almost devoid of the giant algae. The diving, however, was very rewarding and we were even escorted to one dive site by dolphins, seals and a lone albatross.

Below water we were in search of the famously colourful Tasmanian weedy seadragons. Despite being the

same species as those in Melbourne their southern counterparts are larger and much more vibrantly coloured. Unusually for so late in the summer we found a pregnant male with his clutch of bright pink eggs

adhered to his underside. It was good to see that some elements of the ecosystem were exceeding expectations.

**Rumination**

Driving the 2,000km between Brisbane and southern Tasmania allowed us to experience some of the underwater wealth that Australia has to offer beyond the Great Barrier Reef. As a marine biologist, the transition from coral reefs to giant kelp forests was fascinating. Driving such huge distances and diving on the way wasn't particularly relaxing, but the amazing dive sites we experienced day after day certainly made up for it. After the success of our inaugural 'drive & dive', we're already planning a similar journey north from Brisbane to Cairns.

**Resources**

- Montague Island – Narooma Charters [www.naroomacharters.com.au](http://www.naroomacharters.com.au)
- Mornington Peninsula – Bayplay [www.bayplay.com.au](http://www.bayplay.com.au)
- Hobart, Derwent Estuary – Underwater Adventures [www.underwateradventures.com.au](http://www.underwateradventures.com.au)
- Tasman Peninsula – Eaglehawk Dive Centre [www.eaglehawkdive.com.au](http://www.eaglehawkdive.com.au)

becomes more apparent.

**Convicts and Kelp**

After our successful first Tasmanian dives in Hobart we made the relatively short journey down to the Tasman Peninsula. The region is most well known for the derelict jail at Port Arthur, which has great ghost tours for the historic thrill seekers, but we were after some of Australia's last remaining kelp forests. Sadly these forests of the sea have been declining in size over the last few decades as a complex barrage of climatic and inter-species

