



Australia's Premier Natural Wonder

The Great Barrier Reef delivers as one of the world's top live-aboard destinations ■ BY BROOKE MORTON

The world's largest and best-known dive destination, the Great Barrier Reef is freighted with divers' expectations. This series of fringing, platform and barrier reefs spanning 1,400 miles promises 400 species of corals and 2,000 species of fish. It's also the cruising grounds of charismatic megafauna like minke whales (in June and July); while year-round, impressive pelagics such as silvertip and whitetip reef sharks make appearances on most dives. If the

stars align and you're especially lucky, you might even catch a rare glimpse of a tiger shark. The dive sites just outside Cairns offer a reasonable sample of what lies beyond, but **Live-Aboards** to truly tap into the awe factor of this massive and diverse ecosystem you have to commit to a live-aboard getaway. Good news for us divers then that there is no shortage of high-end live-aboard options to choose from.

Huge potato cod are the main attraction at aptly named Cod Hole, one of the Ribbon Reefs most popular sites.

With regular departures from Cairns, Mike Ball's *Spoilsport* threads along the Great Barrier Reef to reach sites so remote that it's considered "crowded" if, on a weeklong trip, you see one or two boats dotting the uninterrupted panorama of turquoise and cobalt. It's here in the Coral Sea that the reefs and their inhabitants, untouched by water runoff or development, can swell to epic proportions.

Tucked within lagoons of the various Ribbon Reefs, many dive sites shelter fat swaths of branching and plate corals in neon blues, pinks, yellows and other vibrant hues. These

Need to Know

» **Travel Tip** An hour's drive from Cairns, the Rainforest Habitat in Port Douglas showcases much of the country's wildlife and ecosystems, ranging from dry savannah to rainforests, coastal areas and tablelands. Arrive in time for breakfast with the parrots, parakeets and other birds that help eat your corn flakes. Don't forget a camera, as you'll also get the chance to feed kangaroos.

» **When to Go** Minke whales migrate off the coast in June and July, making sightings almost inevitable at sites such as Lighthouse Bommie.

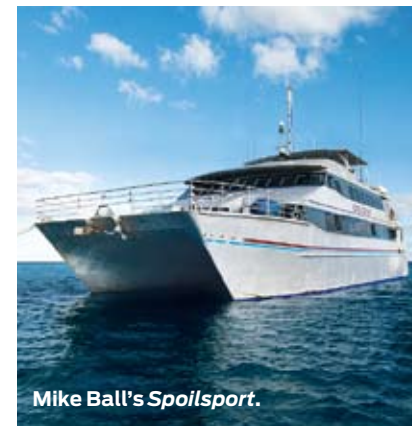
» **Dive Conditions** Water temperatures can climb to 85°F in January and February and dip to 73°F in August.

» **Getting There** Qantas flies to Cairns (CNS) from Los Angeles, with most flights routed through Brisbane.

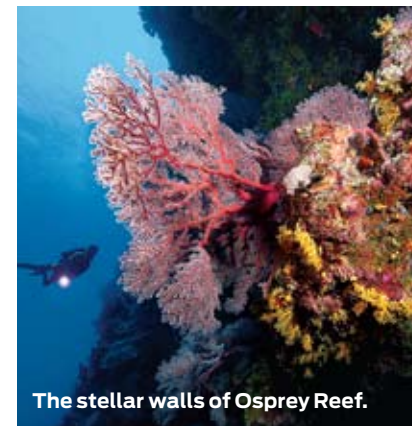
» **Price Tag** A seven-night Coral Sea Safari starts at \$2,750 per person and depends on cabin selection. The package includes up to five dives per day, meals, nonalcoholic drinks and one glass of wine per night. Nitrox is \$150 per week.

» **More Info** mikeball.com

FROM TOP: JURGEN FREUND; RODGER KLEIN (2); OPPOSITE: RODGER KLEIN



Mike Ball's *Spoilsport*.



The stellar walls of Osprey Reef.



Dwarf minke whales cruise the Barrier Reef.

Itinerary

Day 1 Arrive at Trinity Wharf at 6 p.m. for boarding. Overnight to 1 Ribbon Reef 10.

Day 2 Start with two dives at 2 Challenger Bay, home to cuttlefish and spotted lionfish. Dives three and four are at 3 Cod Hole, where the resident giant cod make ideal photography subjects. Overnight to 4 Osprey Reef, weather permitting.

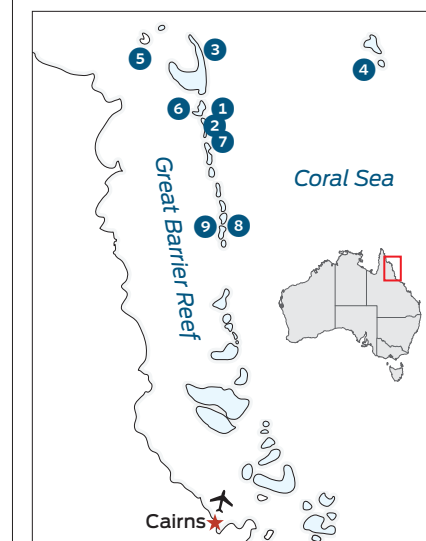
Day 3 & 4 Osprey Reef. On wall dives watch for hammerheads, chevron barracuda and sharks. At the shark feed at North Hole, watch the competition for tethered tuna between the potato cod, whitetip reef sharks and silvertip sharks. Overnight to 5 Lizard Island.

Day 5 Half-week guests depart while week-long guests hike among the pandanus trees. After new guests board, it's back to Cod Hole and Challenger Bay.

Day 6 At 6 Lighthouse Bommie, swim among schools of trevally while Olive Ridley turtles, stonefish and sea snakes claim resident status on the pinnacle. At 7 Pixie Garden scout for nudibranchs and leaf scorpionfish. Overnight to 8 Ribbon Reef 3.

Day 7 9 Steve's Bommie, just a half-mile from Ribbon Reef 3, offers a wealth of color. Finish the day diving at Ribbon Reef 3. Overnight back to Trinity Wharf.

Day 8 Depart.



TRAIN

the **Great Escape** 8003210298 HOUSTON, TX



corals are swarmed by the smaller fish, like colorful anthias that make underwater images burst to life. Other reef fish — in the form of regal angelfish, pink anemonefish, clown triggerfish, blue-green damselfish and other eye-catching species — clutter the reef, while unicornfish and bumphead parrotfish cruise nearby. Of course you get the big fellas too, like enormous groupers that smile big for the camera.

One of the more memorable dives is Osprey Reef's Round the Bend (aka Fast Eddie's), which requires the use of dinghies to deliver divers to the heart of the action. Drop into the swift current where the reef wall juts at almost a right angle to a sandy cove. Stay low to the wall and wait for the curtains of snapper and goatfish to part, revealing tuna, giant trevally and silvertip sharks. Then fin over to the shallows to catch your breath and marvel as nearly a dozen whitetip reef sharks sleep on the sand, looking like a squadron of planes grounded on the tarmac.

To ensure a breezy week of maximum diving and ample downtime for as many as 29 guests, *Spoilsport's* nine crew and

three volunteers vibrate behind the scenes on a timely, seamless schedule. They ensure tanks are always full and a meal or snack is just minutes away. Serving up variety, the chef prepares a mix of Australian, Thai, Mexican and continental fare (not to mention a mouth-watering international barbecue on the final night) to keep palates satisfied and energy levels high. Not enough pampering for you? One of the nicer touches is that after every dive you emerge to a warm towel and a hot beverage. (Wake-up calls in the morning are more pleasant too, with hot coffee or hot chocolate delivered to your doorstep.) In between dining and diving, visitors can spread out in the sun or shade on the two lounging decks or on the sofas in the air-conditioned cabin with its library, entertainment system and computer. The cabin also houses the onboard photographer and nature expert, who hosts fish and invertebrate talks every night, catering to guests' desire to develop a stronger understanding of the marine life that makes the Great Barrier Reef the world's most expansive underwater wonder.

If the Boat Fits ...

Two other live-aboards travel similar itineraries departing from Cairns. Along with the Mike Ball, these two also offer three- and four-day journeys, giving the option of diving either half of the safari.

Spirit of Freedom Built in 1992, this 120-foot-long vessel serves a maximum of 26 passengers in 13 cabins. The boat also carries paddle skis, wave skis and a wind surfer. Your cruise on the *Spirit of Freedom* ends (or begins) with a low-level flight over the reefs between Cairns and Lizard Island for a bird's-eye view of some of the world's best dive spots. Prices start at \$2,675 per person for the quad-share cabin. spiritoffreedom.com.au



Spirit of Freedom



TAKA

TAKA A smaller boat at 100 feet long, the *TAKA* can offer slightly more affordable rates — \$2,460 for those who wish to share a cabin with three other passengers. The boat carries a maximum of 30 passengers in 13 cabins, served by a crew of 11. If you're really looking for a deal and will be in Australia anyway, standby spots are occasionally offered on the boat at significant discounts. takadive.com

FROM TOP: COURTESY SPIRIT OF FREEDOM; COURTESY TAKA DIVE