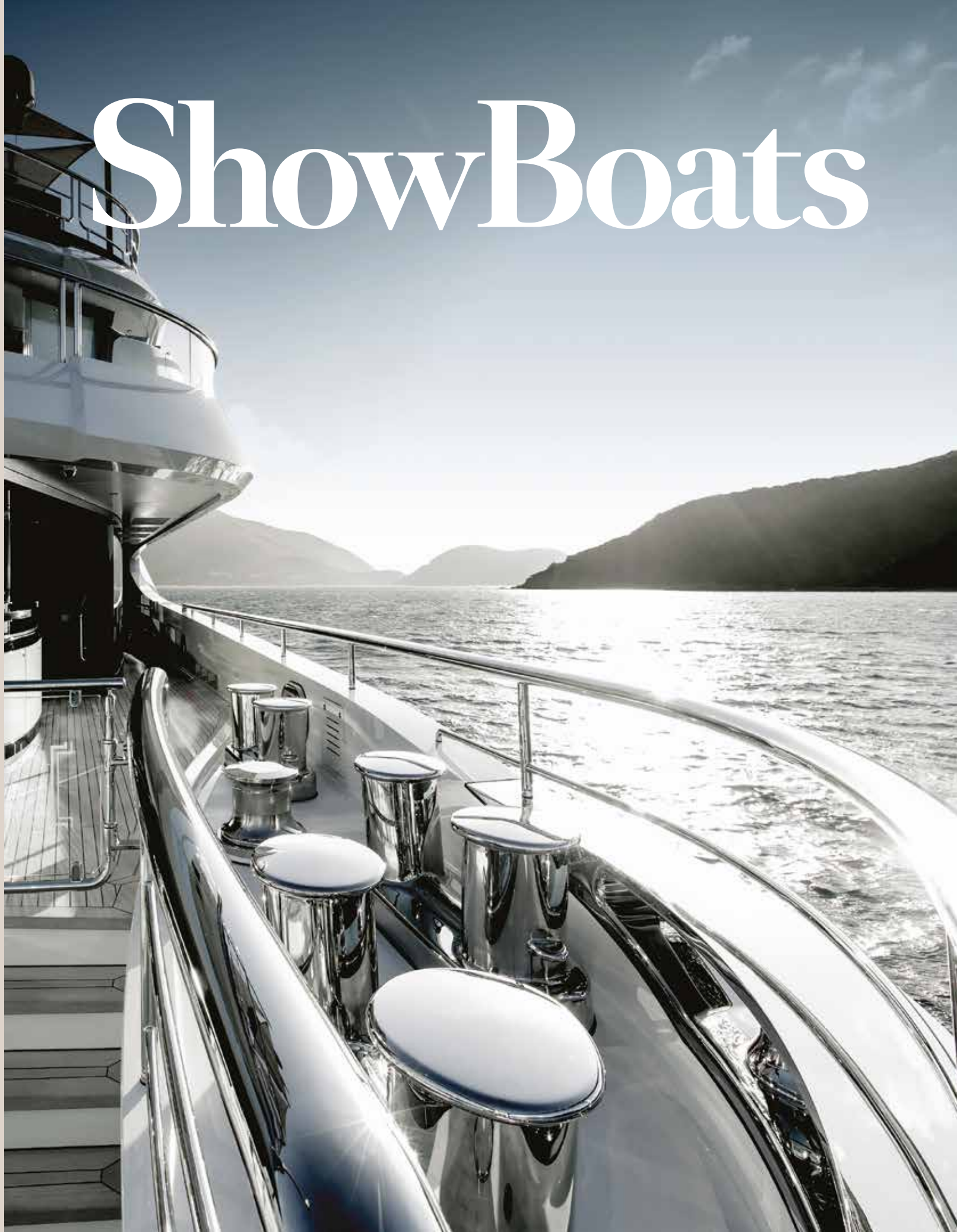


# ShowBoats



# THE WORLD BELOW

*Nature at its most extreme*

*We've ventured far, through jellyfish-infested lakes, over millions of land crabs and even down to a watery grave, to bring you these first-hand accounts of some of planet Earth's marvelous wonders. Here are three of the best experiences you'll have underwater in the Southern Hemisphere, must-do's for any adventurous yachtsman and diver.*

### PLEASING THE KINGS

“So where exactly is this jellyfish lake?” I ask, referring to an attraction that Courtney Robba, marketing manager of the 167-foot yacht *Dunia Baru*, has been getting me excited about since we boarded our flight from Bali nearly two weeks ago, bound for Indonesia’s easternmost reaches.

Robba just smiles, “I can’t tell you; it’s a secret.”

While she refuses to divulge the exact location of this mysterious marine lake – one of but a few known lakes in the world with jellyfish that harbor a sting so mild it’s undetectable – I’m able, by way of the charts and nearby dive sites, to work out its general location. But telling would sour the sweetness that such mysteries possess, so let’s just say it’s somewhere in the southern half of Raja Ampat, one of Indonesia’s – and, indeed, the world’s – finest scuba diving destinations.

Even without the celebrated jellyfish, the 15,000-square-mile Raja Ampat archipelago, which encompasses about 1,500 mostly uninhabited islands, has staggering marine diversity: 1,500-plus fish species, 700-plus species of mollusk, more than 75 percent of the world’s hard coral species (550-plus) and half of the world’s known soft corals.

In 2010, the entire area was declared a shark sanctuary, the first in Indonesia, thus prohibiting the capture and killing of sharks, turtles, rays and dugongs. Within this sanctuary is a 4,500-square-mile network of seven marine protected areas, established in 2007 to safeguard these reefs from detrimental fishing practices.

Judging from the small number of sharks we’ve encountered so far, they may need a little more time to increase their populations. However, numbers



of other fish on just about every dive site have been phenomenal. To my eyes, the most fetching gilled inhabitants have been the seven-plus species of anemonefish, a Papuan scorpionfish, a porcupinefish and thousands of fusileers and dainty blue chromis, which flitted above the shallow, teal-tipped hard coral gardens at Melissa’s Garden off Penemu Island in the Fam Islands. This last site was so magnificent that we visited it twice in one day; however, afternoon currents transformed its calm morning environment into a chaotic frenzy of worried-looking fish hovering just above the reef, easily swept up and down and side to side according to the sea’s whim. Not my cup of salty tea really, although the currents did deliver a beautiful wobbegong, stealthily navigating the fickle waters like they were no hassle at all.

The changing current conditions and site variety is one reason why Raja Ampat manages to satisfy just about every type of diver. My preferred diving style is akin to an underwater stroll; current dives feel too much like a sprint. Yet *Dunia Baru*’s owner and some of the other guests are adrenaline-seeking divers. Fortunately, the yacht carries boat manager and dive instructor partners, Leah Sindel and Chris Hamilton, who are able to choose sites and depths each day that cater to both tastes.

At picturesque Wayag Island, for example, where we spend three glorious days and nights, Sindel takes me to Ridge Rock, a site next to one of the many karst limestone islands that embrace its massive, calm lagoons. The current here can be quite strong, but we

go on a slack tide, and I enjoy the bizarre holothurian-covered corals along the island’s vibrant submerged wall. Later, Hamilton takes Robba and some of the other guests to the “sweet spot” of another site, where the current breaks across the coral head and where fish like to congregate. Here, the divers pause, watching as fast-moving schools of trevally, barracuda, jacks, sweetlips and fusileers pass by.

Wayag quickly becomes my favorite area – not due to the diving (other sites farther south are even more spectacular), but because of the ease of other activities within its massive, calm lagoons, which are spiced by dozens of exquisite, orchid-covered, karst limestone outcrops. The lagoons, I find, are perfect for paddleboarding, and *Dunia Baru* is equipped with

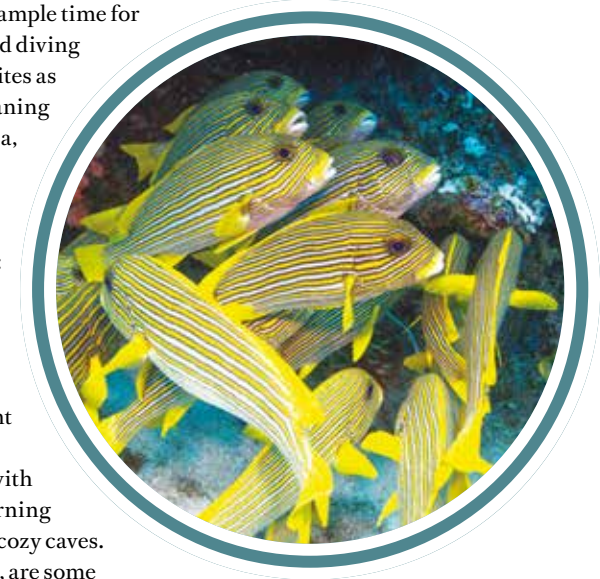


a couple of boards, as well as kayaks and personal watercraft, all of which are well used. The reefs along the lagoon edges are also lovely, perfect for cooling off with a snorkel mid-paddle. Mount Pindito, the island’s highest point, offers a sublime view over a couple of the island’s lagoons after a challenging 20-minute climb. A tucked-away inlet, dubbed “Secret Beach” by our party, becomes an exhilarating drift snorkel at high tide, as the surf and currents rush in from the sea, washing over a river of coral and weary fish. Best of all, we have Wayag’s lagoons all to ourselves for the first two nights. As we sip sangria, the yacht’s signature drink, under a full moon the final evening, another vessel discreetly slips in another lagoon out of sight.

Our two-week charter allows ample time for visiting quite a few of this revered diving archipelago’s other islands and sites as well. The name Raja Ampat, meaning

“Four Kings” in Bahasa Indonesia, references a local myth, where a woman finds seven eggs; four of the eggs hatch into kings who rule over the four largest islands: Waigeo in the north, Batanta and Salawati in central Raja Ampat and Misool in the south. While we don’t spend much time at Waigeo, one itinerary highlight is a dive in the narrow passage separating it from Gam Island, with brilliant coral and tunicates adorning submerged limestone walls and cozy caves. Just south, in the Dampier Strait, are some renowned dives boasting strong currents – Blue Magic, Chicken Reef and Sardine Reef, to name a few – as well as Manta Sandy, which, along with Manta Ridge, is one of the most reliable places in Raja Ampat to spot manta rays. Kneeling on sand, at a depth of about 65 feet, we watch a couple of reef mantas (*Manta alfredi*) circle over a giant coral head, allowing small fish to clean them of parasites. Toward the dive’s end, one manta swoop just above three of the least experienced divers in our group, inches above their stunned faces.

On Batanta’s northern side, we wait quietly in the jungle, attempting to glimpse the Wilson’s bird of paradise, then pass the remains of the day diving the aptly named Fish Heaven site and paddleboarding around tiny Hornbill island, where Blyth’s hornbills, their wings as noisy as mosquitoes, return each evening while dugongs feed in the shallows. And,



The Fam Islands of central Raja Ampat (above) offer yachts blissful seclusion, but it’s what goes on below the surface that’s the really cool part of cruising here. Marine life encompasses more than 1,500 fish species, including batfish (below), sweetlips (opposite circle) and pink anemonefish (opposite bottom).





Divers in Misool will encounter enchanting visions of vibrant corals, anemones (bottom right) and ocellaris clownfish (center), which is one of at least seven anemonefish species found in Raja Ampat. Misool is also home to one of the few known lakes in the world with stingless golden jellyfish (right).

following an overnight cruise south, we reach Misool, home to mighty Tomolol Cave, a natural cathedral, where limestone ceilings tower over the 650-foot snorkel between its entrances, as well as some of Raja Ampat's most stunning dive sites, including Dunia Kecil, Whale Rock, Nudi Rock and many more.

And somewhere in this southern section of Raja Ampat is that lake of jellyfish. Getting there involves a scenic tender ride, sweaty jungle hike and careful negotiation over a submerged log just past the small lake's entrance. But several swim strokes into the water the golden jellyfish begin to appear; first one, pulsating slightly toward me, and then another and another until I'm surrounded, mesmerized by the ethereal visual feast at hand. Although estimating numbers is difficult, hundreds of the fully grown species are present, gravitating toward the nourishing energy of the moving sun as

#### WHEN TO GO

While the diving is excellent year-round, October to April is the best time for yachts as seas are generally calmer.

#### CHARTER

*Dunia Baru* sleeps 14 in one master and six guest cabins. To charter her, email [lies.sol@northropandjohnson.com](mailto:lies.sol@northropandjohnson.com). For more information, visit [www.duniabaru.com](http://www.duniabaru.com).



well as, it seems, toward the masked intruders. The experience is so enchanting that those of us with underwater cameras visit again the following day when the sun is higher, and the light rays filtering through the water make the spectacle all the more magical.

Hours later, the day's underwater desires fully satisfied, we sip sangria under the stars, enjoy a sumptuous seafood dinner on the aft deck, then succumb to a well-deserved sleep, where pulsating jellies, walls of soft coral and miles of underwater possibilities permeate dreams.

#### THE CRABS THAT STOLE CHRISTMAS

I gingerly make my way over the rocky doorstep of the Grotto, a small brackish water cave that is at the moment acutely spooky. Hundreds of red land crabs, each somewhat smaller than my bare feet, are quietly crawling over the rocks and path I've just traveled. Gathering storm clouds have stolen much of the sun. And the water rushing through a 50-foot submerged tunnel, with the regularity of an ominous heartbeat, causes the cave's interior to growl and rumble. It's easy to imagine a sea monster lurking in its inky belly, waiting patiently to grab my foot and pull me under the shallow waters, back through the tunnel and into the Indian Ocean, claiming both me and my camera for the pounding sea.

Reminding myself that Teruki Hamanaka (known as Hama), owner of Wet'n'Dry Adventures ([divingchristmas.com](http://divingchristmas.com)), Christmas Island's only scuba

diving operator, said he'd dived the tunnel before, I gently steer some of the crabs out of the way and slide into the waist-deep pool.

I've come to remote Christmas Island, an Australian territory that's much closer to Indonesia than the Australian mainland, to dive some of its 60-plus scuba diving sites. However, thanks to the trip's fortuitous timing, another natural wonder has captured my attention. This 52-square-mile island is home to around 20 species of land crabs, but its most famous and abundant species is the endemic red crab. Although all of the land crabs migrate to the coastline to breed, the red crabs are easiest to observe thanks to their mind-boggling numbers (approximately 50 million) and predictable spawning behavior.

Every year, at the beginning of the wet season (around November), sexually mature crabs patter down from their shady forest burrows toward the sea. This initial migration lasts about a week, prompting road closures, "crab crossing" constructions and the common practice of carrying a rake in one's vehicle to help usher them out of the way. After mating, the females relax in moist



Christmas Island red crabs cling to the sheer cliffs that surround much of the island.



burrows for a couple of weeks, waiting for the pre-dawn receding high tide during the last quarter of the moon, at which time they'll gather at the shoreline and release their bounty – up to 100,000 eggs each – into the sea. A month later, the larvae will return to shore, transform into young crabs and march inland. Some never become part of this spectacular migration, though – millions of larvae are eaten by fish and plankton feeders, such as manta rays or the island's most celebrated seasonal visitor and the planet's largest fish, the whale shark.

I flew into the island's tiny airport about nine days after the migration began. While most crabs had already descended to the coastal terraces, the numbers still venturing across the roads and along the shoreline were impressive. As for whale sharks, divers had seen them recently, so my fingers and fins are crossed that I'll have similar luck. Sightings vary during whale shark season (which lasts until April), says Hama. Sometimes he sees more than 20 per week, but other weeks none. He's been constantly scanning for signs of them as we've motored between some of the dive sites scattered within 10 minutes or so of Flying Fish Cove, the island's harbor, but, thus far, the gentle giants have been elusive.

Our surface intervals between dives have yielded sightings of other species, though. Yesterday, a silky shark and several giant trevallies swam beneath us as we snorkeled near the boat. As we peered down, thousands of land crabs clung to the base of the lofty cliffs above us, seeking a necessary dousing. Occasionally one or two



Red crabs welcome guests to the Grotto's entrance during the annual migration.

lost their grip and fell into the sea – a tragic mistake. If they're unable to scale the cliff again quickly, they die.

The drama of the island's mostly sheer perimeter continues underwater. The tip of a volcanic mountain, Christmas Island lies about 25 miles south of the Indian Ocean's deepest section, the 24,400-foot Java Trench.

And while depths near the island aren't quite that extreme, they plummet to more than a quarter mile within 650 feet of shore. Starting just a few yards from the shoreline is a narrow fringing reef, which supports 88 coral species and 600-plus species of fish, including Indian and Pacific Ocean species, as well as hybrids of the two.

The dive sites we've explored here have delivered more than 65 feet visibility and have been richly varied – steep Rhoda Wall, which begins at 60 feet and descends to more than 10 times that; the Old Tip site (offshore



Christmas Island's sheer perimeter continues undersea; steep drop offs and good visibility provide excellent diving at Million Dollar Bommie (here) and Old Tip, where a whitemouth moray eel greets us (opposite, far right circle).



from a former dump), with its sloping coral garden and wall; the lively coral outcrops of Million Dollar Bommie and Daniel Roux, where we spot a rare dragon moray eel; and, lastly, the submerged Thunderdome and Thundercliff caves. When dive master Lynette Jenynes says we'll be exploring both these caves on a single dive, I begin to sweat beneath my 3mm wetsuit. My dives so far here have averaged around 55 minutes, but, in other locations, I've depleted my air and surfaced in 35 minutes. What if I run out of air while we're still in the second cave?

The first cave, Thunderdome, is the deepest; we explore its first, partially illuminated chamber and second darker one in about 20 minutes before exiting and making the brief swim to Thundercliff's wide mouth, only about 20 feet deep. After entering its cathedral-like throat, we bid farewell to light, pressing on toward its inner reaches, where a stale, air-filled chamber dripping with stalactite formations inspires us to surface. A chair-shaped natural formation, appropriately named "Neptune's Seat," is perched above the water to our left. I can imagine the revered sea goddess one local has told me about sprawled upon it, her pearl and sea-glass eyes beholding us as she taps her coral-encrusted fingernails, deciding what to do with us. Descending and

disappearing from her gaze, we retreat back to the cave's entrance and the gloriously illuminated reef beyond.

And although the sea goddess pardons our entry into her realm, she does not deliver a passing whale shark.

Back on land, my cavernous pursuits aren't finished. In the Grotto's cool, waist-deep waters, I photograph the courageous, scarlet crabs that, while hanging precariously close to the deathly waters, remain secured to the rocks. The cave groans, and although no sea monster appears, I don't linger. On a sunny day, in the company of friends filling the cave with chatter and laughter, this would be a pleasant spot. Alone, though, save for the company of crabs and the thunder of the sea, it's no place for me.



#### WHEN TO GO

The red crab migration usually starts in October/November, with spawning happening about a month afterward. For yachts, May to October is the best time to visit; SE trade winds form the dominant weather pattern, creating the calmest conditions in Flying Fish Cove. For information on yachting events and more, visit [www.christmas.net.au](http://www.christmas.net.au).



With no natural coral reefs for miles around, the Yongala wreck attracts an astonishing variety of marine life.

### LUXURY & LIVES LOST, PARADISE FOUND

When, over dinner, I tell a fellow Brisbane, Australia-based friend about my plans to dive the 52- to 92-foot-deep *Yongala* wreck the following week, his eyes widen. “Whoa,” he says, “be ready for some serious current!”

“It’s not too bad once you reach the wreck,” he continues, “but on the descent and ascent, it’s crazy. You’ll definitely need both hands on the line. Otherwise, you’ll be swept away!”

I’d already heard this 104-year-old shipwreck, located 12 nautical miles off Cape Bowling Green, within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, is a challenging dive, subject to strong currents and temperamental seas. But no one mentioned I might have to cling for dear life to the descent line.

On the two-hour flight north to Townsville and 90-minute drive south to sleepy Alva Beach, my mind spins like the Cat 5 cyclone that recently threatened

parts of this coast. Traveling toward what should be an amazing underwater adventure, I probably look like I’m headed for a surgical appointment.

In 1911, the 351-foot luxury, iron-hulled passenger vessel *S.S. Yongala*, built in England for the Adelaide Steamship Company and launched in 1903, was making a routine journey between Melbourne and Cairns, on Australia’s east coast. On March 23, she steamed into Mackay, dropping off some passengers and receiving others, then left the same afternoon, with 29 first-class passengers, 20 second-class passengers and 73 crew aboard. Sometime thereafter, the signal station at Mackay received a telegram warning of a cyclone between there and Townsville, but, alas, *Yongala* didn’t have a radio. (Plans were in place to fit her with one soon after.) Around 6 p.m., the keeper at Dent Island lighthouse in the Whitsunday Passage observed her steaming northward; in

the following hours, she disappeared, presumably a cyclone casualty. Her location remained a mystery until the 1940s, when a couple of Royal Australian Navy vessels detected and later examined an obstruction on the sea floor; still, no one actually saw her until 1958, when divers collected evidence that positively identified her.

Today, the *Yongala* is protected by the Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976; divers aren’t allowed to touch, enter, or remove anything. Access is by permit only, and visiting yachts often obtain guides from local operators, such as Alva Beach-based *Yongala Dive* ([yongaladive.com.au](http://yongaladive.com.au)).



When I stop by their shop the afternoon prior to my first dive, an enthusiastic instructor-in-training greets my queries about conditions with welcome news. “The best I’ve seen! The sea was like glass. And no currents!”

And so, the next morning, our 12-strong group makes the 30-minute journey to the site. Like yesterday, the sea is smooth, with currents so slight that upon entry I descend to the wreck’s stern with one hand. She lies with her bow pointing northward and listing to her starboard side; however, today’s 30- to 50-foot visibility makes getting a good perspective of her overall position difficult. If visibility was better, we’d also be able to appreciate what an oasis she is in an otherwise sandy underwater desert. The nearest natural hard coral reefs are another 12 miles out to sea. Thanks to strong currents transporting plankton past the wreck, sponges and hard and soft corals have settled on the ship’s metal structure, helping protect it and attracting an astonishing variety of marine life, including resident giant groupers lurking under the hull, sea turtles, bull sharks, Maori wrasse, stingrays, sea snakes, plus the occasional whale shark and manta ray.

Reaching *Yongala*’s stern, the view of her structure diminishes further, compromised by a thick cloud of fusiliers and damselfish and trevally darting past. An olive sea snake abruptly appears before

me, too close, then disappears from view. Above, schools of barracuda float, seemingly stationary, while several eagle rays and a marbled ray, larger than the ship’s still-housed anchors, sail toward the bow.

Continuing in their direction along the listing side, I pass spaces where second-class passengers, officers and first-class passengers slept soundly, dreaming, perhaps, of their families and upcoming adventures. And here, I’m reminded that the *Yongala* is a tomb. She sank late at night; divers later found the bones of passengers in their cabins, and nearly all crew in the forward hold.

But, in spite of her tragic end, this isn’t a place that feels haunted by ghosts or drowned in sorrow. Perhaps the souls trapped on that fateful night have moved on.

What’s certain is that the many life forms now embracing the *Yongala* are wild and free, chaotic and intense, and utterly captivating. 🐠



#### WHEN TO GO

You can dive the *Yongala* wreck year-round. The austral winter offers better visibility, though, and the months between May and October are drier and outside of the Queensland cyclone season.

