



BETH M. HOWARD

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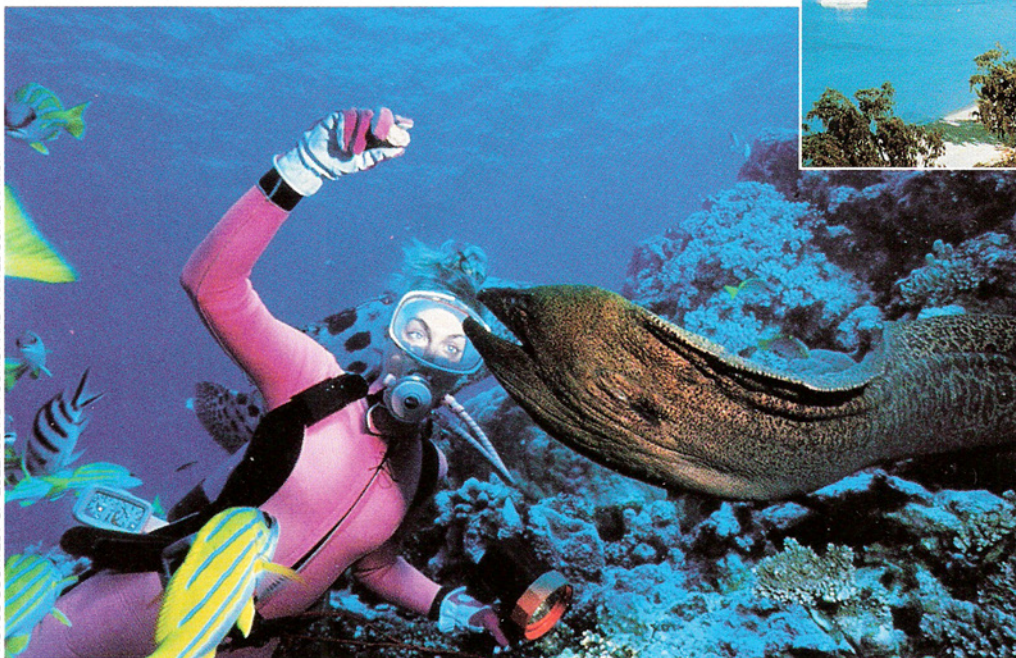
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— Scuba diving on the Great Barrier Reef in Australia is one of the world's great adventures. Colorful sea creatures, including a fish called Chuck, make the sport a captivating one. Above-water accommodations are plush, including Lizard Island (above), a five-star 80-room resort on the northernmost of the reef islands. The elegant, remote hideaway is one of the best dive spots on the reef.

## Diving Down Under

*Australia's Great Barrier Reef is a scuba diver's underwater dream come true.*

BY BETH M. HOWARD

I've never been crazy about scuba diving. I find that it's cold, it's dark, and it's unnatural to breathe oxygen from a tube while underneath the water's surface. I'm also afraid of fish. But—and this is a big but—you cannot go to Australia's Great Barrier Reef without scuba diving.

So there I was, in the quaint coastal town of Port Douglas in Queensland, 15 years since having been certified in scuba diving, seven years since my last dive, and six months since Bill and Hillary Clinton had visited this tropical paradise. Quicksilver Connections Ltd. tours leave daily from port for Agincourt Reef, a smooth one-hour cruise on a 130-foot Wavepiercer catamaran. En route to the reef, they offer an introductory diving course designed as a refresher for

rusty divers and as a way for noncertified divers to fully experience the reef scuba-style.

### WELCOME TO THE REEF

The Great Barrier Reef is one of the largest living organisms on the planet. Over 1,200 miles long, made up of 500 islands, 2,500 coral reefs, and 500 fringing reefs, it is so big that it is visible from outer space. Considered by some to be a natural wonder of the world for its richness and diversity of life, it is home to more than 1,500 species of fish and some 400 species of coral. For divers, it rivals sites found in the Cayman Islands, Cancún, and Indonesia. Diving the Great Barrier Reef is one of the classic adventures, on a par with an African safari or a Mount Everest climb.

## RECREATION

Quicksilver docks at a semipermanent anchorage, a floating covered platform large enough for all 400 passengers to spread out comfortably, eat a buffet lunch, and enjoy the view of, well, the ocean. Here, we suit up with our gear: short wet suit, mask, fins, snorkel, weight belt, tank, and breathing apparatus. Our guide instructs our group of five to dive in, and as we slowly submerge, bubbles from our regulators initially mask the foreign surroundings. At first I focus only on my breathing because the thought of what I am doing and where I am is so exciting, I'm afraid I'll hyperventilate. *I am scuba diving on the Great Barrier Reef*, I think. It sounds corny, but that first dip into the revered Pacific Ocean waters triggers a rare adrenaline rush.

It's an even bigger rush when we meet our first fish. The thing about fish on the reef, I learn immediately, is that they can be very large and friendly (for the most part), and they have names. This one is Chuck, a Maori wrasse of turquoise and blue and pink and gray

stripes with large lips and a Cro-Magnon forehead. He weighs about 100 pounds. Chuck knows this dive spot well and is coming around for his daily feeding of a few fish, which the instructor is carrying. (The reef is a marine park, and feeding is strictly regulated.)

After getting his treat, he follows us for the entire 30 minutes of our dive, watching us discover big things (giant clams); tiny things (Christmas tree worms); interactive things (anemones and the charming orange clown fish that live among them); old things (bits of wrecked boats); colorful things (rainbow-colored parrot fish); and an abundance of things such as the various species, colors, and shapes of coral.

The intense Australian sun filters down, adding a vibrance and light to an already spectacular aquatic world. I am a mermaid swimming amid the marine life. I have become one with the sea. But then I look at my pressure gauge and see that the needle is almost in the red zone. No more air.

No more mermaid. Our guide signals us to ascend. Chuck watches us swim to the surface and carries on with his daily

routine. We stampede to the buffet for a huge lunch of shrimp, rice, and salad, and review the underwater video of our own dive in which Chuck plays a starring role.

## HEADING FOR THE BEST

Next stop on the Great Barrier Reef is Lizard Island. The northernmost of the reef islands, Lizard Island houses a five-star 80-room resort and nothing more. The elegant, remote hideaway is famous for both its marlin fishing in the fall and its scuba diving. It is the closest island to Cod Hole, one of the best dive spots on the reef.

I am joined on Lizard Island by my friend Wende. She is a certified dive instructor, and though the dive staff at Lizard are extremely competent, I am glad to have the extra security, because at Cod Hole you don't see just the brown and white spotted giant potato cod that weigh an average of 150 pounds (even bigger than Chuck the wrasse!), you see sharks. Granted, they are small, shy, relatively harmless white tip reef sharks, but they are still sharks.

The boat ride from Lizard to Cod Hole (on the Outer Reef) takes about an

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## RECREATION

hour and calls for Dramamine. There is one other boat anchored at our destination, but its divers are finished and we have the site to ourselves. Our group is instructed to kneel on the ocean bottom (so as not to kick up sand and diminish visibility) and keep our hand gestures slow and smooth (so as not to scare the fish). We are briefed on what to expect at the ritual fish feeding, that the cod will surround us, and though their mouths are huge, they won't bite—us, anyway. It is at Cod Hole where we meet Cuddles the Cod. Dive master Patrick Ward tells us, "The fish don't come around for food, they come to be petted. They like affection." Thus the name. This old guy really likes to be stroked on his sides and under the chin. The feeding (fish from a bucket brought along by our guide) lasts about 15 minutes. It's a slow-motion movie before our eyes with the sound of our own breathing as background music. It is meditative and surreal.

When the fish food is gone, we regroup and swim along the reef's edge, in and out of naturally formed tunnels, to an area adjoining Cod Hole known as Shark Alley. By this time, I trust the notion that if we don't provoke them, they won't attack us. We see six reef sharks, and continue to swim, unharmed, back to the dive boat.

### NEXT ADVENTURE: NIGHT DIVING

If it weren't for my dive buddy, Wende, I would never have agreed to scuba diving in the dark. This concept simply doesn't register as wise or rational.

When night falls, I find myself armed with a powerful waterproof flashlight, a glow stick, and a full tank of air. I descend with Wende into the blackness of the water. We stay close together and encounter a pair of giant sea turtles nestled in a kelp bed. Their mottled brown and black shells and unwieldy fins startle me, but they serenely swim away. I learn from the turtles to stay calm, and again I focus on my breathing. We see things at night that are not visible by day: coral feeding with its soft tentacles extended, lionfish with tigerlike stripes and feathery whiskers, and a moray eel baring its teeth at us from behind a rock. There is an otherworldly quality in

the darkness of the night sea, exaggerated by our beams of light and our glow sticks. This is a true adventure, I realize, and I am glad I said yes, especially when we emerge from the deep water. I float on my back and look at the sky. It is jet-black and filled with zillions of twinkling stars. Lizard Island's remoteness and the clear Australian air provide unparalleled stargazing conditions.

### HAYMAN ISLAND

Our last stop. Situated near Whitsunday Island at the halfway point of the long reef, Hayman Island offers a glitzy 203-room five-star megaresort with six restaurants and every activity and water sport you can dream of. It has a loud glamour, with shopping, underground tunnels, and baroque furnishings; Lizard Island's sophistication is quieter.

From Hayman Island, I am whisked out to the reef—Bait Reef in this case—by seaplane, which is a good thing. It's quick transportation without the seasickness, and it flies low enough for us to examine the geology of the reef as well as spot marine life. I look out the window and see manta rays and sea turtles. Just when I thought I'd seen as much as I could see, I am once again filled with awe. The colors alone are inspiring—blues, greens, turquoise, brown, yellow—all intensified by the bright sun of the tropics. The only catch with the seaplane is a new regulation that prohibits the transport of oxygen tanks: thus it takes some special arrangements to have dive gear delivered by boat.

I take back everything I said. I do like scuba diving. It's light, it's warm, and it's easy to breathe from a tube. And after diving on the Great Barrier Reef, I am no longer afraid of fish. In fact, between Chuck and Cuddles, I consider some of them to be my friends. ♦

### TOP DIVES

The best dive sites on the Great Barrier Reef:

1. Cod Hole off Lizard Island
2. Bait, Hook, Line & Sinker Reefs off Hayman Island
3. Agincourt Reef off Port Douglas
4. Yongala Shipwreck (where you can still see the skeletons of the passengers on board)
5. Heron Island
6. Lady Elliot Island
7. Mike Ball Expeditions, (61) 77 72-3022

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