

Whitsunday Islands & Nearby Reefs Dive Sites

Aerial view of the magnificent Whitehaven Beach in the Whitsunday Islands
Photo: Manfred Gottschalk



More than 100 continental islands make up the Whitsundays, including the Cumberland Group and the coast from Mackay to Bowen. The Whitsundays appeared as islands when the seas rose after the last ice age, drowning the valleys between the islands. This area is now a tourism hot spot for sailing, island hopping, holidaying and scuba diving.

Island dive sites are generally at the northern end of the Whitsunday Group and can be quite spectacular when the tides and weather are favourable; however, it is the nearby areas of the mid-shelf and outer Great Barrier Reef (GBR) that offer the best local sites.

Accommodations and primary exit points to the Coral Sea and Whitsunday Islands are at Airlie Beach and Shute Harbour. Abel Point Marina at Airlie Beach is

the principle departure point for dive cruises to the Whitsunday Islands and nearby mid-shelf to outer Great Barrier Reef. On the resort islands, which range from backpacker-style hostels to five-star hotels, there are ample resort-style activities including golf, hiking, tennis, windsurfing and dining.

Resort and mainland dive centres provide diver training facilities and trips. Specialised dive boats offer live-aboard dive cruises to many of the mid-shelf and some outer-reef dive sites, while day dives to the islands and reef are also available. You may wish to charter an aircraft and fly between sites!

You can dive the local island fringing reefs or the GBR proper – between 65km (40 miles) and 140km (85 miles) east of Airlie Beach – which has a superb range of dive sites. Humpback whales pass through in winter and other reef life is rich and diverse. Reef structures are excellent with great walls, caverns, overhangs, coral gardens and lagoons. Strong currents from the big tides are not a problem, as dive operators know where to go, regardless of the conditions.

Whitsunday Islands & Nearby Reefs Dive Sites		DIVE SKILL LEVEL			
Dive Site	Description	DIVE SKILL LEVEL			
		GOOD SNORKELING	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
9	BORDER ISLAND – CATARAN BAY	•	•		
10	HOOK ISLAND MANTA RAY BAY	•	•		
11	HAYMAN ISLAND – BLUE PEARL BAY	•	•		
12	BAIT REEF – STEPPING STONES		•		
13	SVANE'S REEF – HELL DRIFT	•			•
14	LITTLE BLACK REEF – LAGOON	•	•		
15	HARDY REEF – FANTASEA DRIFT	•	•		
16	KNUCKLE REEF – WALKING STICK	•			•
17	JUST MAGIC ON REEF 19-119				•



Clams offer great close-up experiences for divers and photographers

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BORDER ISLAND – CATARAN BAY

Location: North side Border Island

Access: Boat

Depth Range: 0-15m (0-49ft)

Expertise Rating: Novice



Border Island is the furthest Whitsunday island from the coast, giving it generally better visibility than the inshore islands. The winds can be strong, but the water stays calm and enjoyable for snorkeling or diving.

Turtles are regulars and during whale season you may hear the 'squeaky door' songs of passing humpbacks, but you need to listen carefully. Reef sharks are common but are easily spooked and will quickly disappear.

Large schools of baitfish sometimes appear and attract predatory trevally, queenfish and mackerel swooping in

for a meal. Fusiliers are common, as are the many smaller reef fish that abound near the coral.

You can find excellent walls and overhangs and the areas around and under large bommies provide great hiding spots for coral trout and sweetlip. The shallow areas are dotted with numerous clams in various shades of blue, brown, aqua and purple. Christmas tree worms are also common, as are many other small organisms if you take the time to see them. This is an ideal site for macro-photography.

On the shallow areas of the bommie tops there is more soft and hard coral, along with large colonies of stinging coral, so beware of their fiery sting. Parrotfish graze on the exposed reef surface and pairs of butterflyfish dart around between the staghorn coral colonies. As you finish your dive, take a drift snorkel or swim over the shallows to see how different these sites are to other reef types. Snorkeling is best in this area at mid-to-low tide.

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HOOK ISLAND – MANTA RAY BAY

Location: Northeast end of Hook Island

Depth Range: 0-15m (0-49ft)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Novice



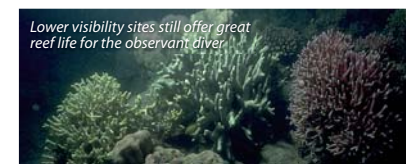
As one of the more popular bays for snorkeling and diving in the Whitsundays, Manta Ray Bay has mooring limitations. The fish are numerous and familiar with humans – look for Fat Albert, the resident Maori wrasse, for proof. He weighs about 100kg and has bright aqua markings around his face. Smaller females accompany him wherever he goes. Interestingly, when Fat Albert dies, the largest female will frantically change sex and take his place as the dominant male.

Underwater terrain consists of large bommies extending from 15m to the surface with overhangs, small caves

and clumps of corals on a muddy sandy floor. Stinging coral and staghorns give primary cover. Friendly batfish abound with fusiliers, sergeant majors and masses of planktivorous (plankton-eating) fish more common near shore.

The blue staghorn thickets here are probably the best to be seen in the Whitsunday Islands area. Soft corals, occasional black coral trees and gorgonians can also be seen. If you venture to the rocky end of the bay, look for some of the big splits occurring in the rocks.

Cleaner stations are common and if you are lucky you may see a cleaner swim into Fat Albert's mouth to clean his teeth and gills. On good days this is a great area for macro or super wide-angle, close-up photography. Upon finishing the dive, beware of the boat traffic on the surface.



Lower visibility sites still offer great reef life for the observant diver

Sex lives of fish

If you ever asked a fish what sex it was, it would be important to add, 'I mean, right now.' Many fish start life as one sex then change irreversibly during their growth – some from male to female and others female to male. The cleaner wrasse is a good example. A male has a harem of females; once you remove the male, the largest female (which the male dominated until now) turns into a male. She/he now dominates all the females and if 'he' is removed, the next largest female changes to male, and on it goes.

The anemonefish has a different system: one large female lives in a 'family' made up of a male and several juveniles. If she is removed, the male becomes female and the juveniles step up the sex ladder as well.

Obviously, fishing can negatively affect breeding populations. If, for example, a large male coral trout is removed, following the rules of nature, a female then must change sex younger and smaller than it normally would, making reproduction less effective.

When it comes to parenting: fish employ every conceivable method. Some spawn in the surface waters (pelagic spawning), while others spawn on the bottom by attaching their eggs to the substrate and caring for them until they hatch (demersal spawning). Seahorse females lay their eggs in the male's front pouch, where they stay until they hatch. Some sharks give birth to live young, others lay eggs. If you are a tiger shark, your siblings may even eat you before you are born!

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**HAYMAN ISLAND –
BLUE PEARL BAY****Location:** *West side of Hayman Island***Depth Range:** *1-15m (3-49ft)***Access:** *By boat or from beach after boat delivery***Expertise Rating:** *Novice*

The Whitsunday Islands are surrounded by an abundance of rich fringing reefs, sandy and rocky shores and mangroves. The northern islands tend to have clearer waters, except for those outside to the east, although the reefs are generally the same species composition. Other popular nearby sites include **Maureen's Cove**, **Manta Ray Bay** and **Butterfly Bay**. Snorkeling at any of these island beaches, coves and reefs is a delight.

Blue Pearl Bay offers fringing reef diving at its best. At low tide, visibility is often reduced but the diversity of sea life remains outstanding. Large coral heads rise from the muddy sand floor from 7m to 15m and are topped with delightful aggregations of sergeant majors, blue pullers and other damselfish which dash about the stinging and plate coral colonies.

A resident tasselled wobbegong shark is hard to find because of its camouflaged skin and habit of lying under small overhangs. Batfish, harlequin tuskfish and parrotfish are abundant

*The Bait Reef Stepping Stones are a stunning array of coral heads
Photo: Craig Lamotte*



with the territorial damsel likely to rush out and peck your hair as you approach its territory.

Small caves, overhangs and crevices through the bommies occur but few are safe to swim through. The sizes are restrictive and the silt stirs up easily. Keep your buoyancy right and off the bottom.

During the day, some of the coral here have incredibly long polyps, especially the long-tentacled mushroom corals – look for commensal shrimp among their tentacles. Anemones are common, hosting several species of clownfish. Observant divers will be rewarded with nudibranchs, carnation corals and other unusual sightings.

As you finish your dive in the shallows watch out for the many stinging coral colonies. Boat traffic can be a worry so always be aware of where and how you ascend.

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BAIT REEF – STEPPING STONES**Location:** *Southwest back of Bait Reef***Depth Range:** *2-30m+ (7-100ft+)***Access:** *Boat***Expertise Rating:** *Novice to advanced*

Bait Reef is the first reef you'll encounter as you head out from the Whitsunday Islands and has several diving areas including The Maze, Cluster of Four, Coral Gardens, Hawaii and The Looking Glass. All are within the Stepping Stones, a series of 17 flat-topped bommies rising from 50m to sometimes be exposed at low tide. There are seven more round-topped bommies submerged. There are canyons, caves, swim-throughs, walls and a vast array of corals and sea life and it is a favourite of underwater photographers. It's so large, you could dive here for a week and still not see it all.





Drift diving at dusk is a buzz that's hard to beat – and sometimes scary!

Drop in near one of the bommies to 20m, only a few metres up-current from the shallow coral edge. Great swim-throughs, splits, gullies, overhangs and crevices are all around. Below them a sand slope starts at 15m to 23m and slopes away past 30m. Lower down, the rubble slope has less hard coral cover, rather you'll find colonies of spiky soft coral and sea fans.

As you are almost always surrounded by bommies, you can get caught in lots of amazing eddy effects. It is great fun to use the eddies to swoosh around to the other side of a bommie, then wait for them to change direction and take you back, or just hover in the lee.

A great scattering of staghorn clumps leads to thickets on the shallower la-

goon side, and soft corals decorate the ridges below the bommies. Look in the thickets for foxface, anemones, butterflyfish and angelfish. Mushroom corals lie under the coral trout, sweetlip and whip corals. Occasionally you will see a turtle asleep under an overhang or perhaps feeding on the edges of the bommies.

Swim-throughs, gullies, overhangs and a rich set of reeftops provide good diving and ideal fish habitats. Feather stars give a splash of colour and schools of fusiliers hover in the current, feeding and waiting for night when they become more active.

This is a great macro site and, on clear days, wide-angle opportunities are fantastic.



Overhangs and crevices allow creatures and divers to escape the currents

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SVANE'S REEF (REEF 19-138) – HELL DRIFT

Location: Entire northeast side of Reef 19-138

Depth Range: 0-20m+ (0-66ft+)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Advanced



This site has an exciting parachute entry to test your buoyancy and general diving skills. Get yourself organised, collect your buddy and swim over to the vertical reef edge before you begin the drift along it.

In parts of the reef this top is heavily reticulated with gullies and grooves, giving superb coral coverage for hovering fish taking refuge from predators and the current.

At the reef edge drop down the wall to your planned depth and be very careful you don't go past it – it is very easy to do so. The life drops off quickly after 20m. Gorgonian fans, whips and sponges with clinging feather stars are colourful features.

Large fish species like trout, sweetlip and cod are common, and keep an eye out for pelagic mackerel and trevally zooming past as well.

Up the wall and in the shallows, masses of smaller planktivores flit about and, if you're lucky, you'll spot turtles cruising by.

A great way to dive this site is to get to a comfortable depth, stay close to the wall, relax and let it all go by while keeping your buddy in view. There is ample life of all kinds and interesting structural features to give you a great dive for minimal effort.

As you finish your dive in the shallows at Turtle Point, watch the fish behaviour during your safety stop, then surface and swim out to the boat.



Feeding damsels create a cloud above a staghorn clump

14 LITTLE BLACK REEF – LAGOON

Location: West side of reef
Lagoon Depth: 20m (66ft); Outside: 40m+ (130ft+)
Access: Boat
Lagoon Expertise Rating: Novice; advanced outside



Little Black Reef's sandy lagoon floor – at 10m to 20m – has patches of staghorn coral and sea cucumbers, and is a great easy dive or training area. The Elephant Rock wall dive, on the outside of the lagoon, is definitely for advanced divers, much like **Svane's Hell Drift** dive.

Parrotfish abound and the reeftops offer great snorkeling. Inside the lagoon, stingrays are often seen in the sand, and a large bommie provides some good all-round diving.

The lagoon walls are mainly vertical with interesting life and some undercuts and overhangs. Advanced divers can drift the walls and slopes outside the entrance as part of their lagoon dive. To the south of the mooring is a great night dive along the wall, into the notch and swim-through.

Watch for the solitary daytime mushroom coral that looks like an anemone sitting on the bottom. They often have transparent shrimps living among the tentacles.

Outside the lagoon, diving is current driven and tidally dependent. There is the potential to go deep quickly if you don't watch your depth – keep your eye on the wall and reef edge. Good corals and fish, overhangs, walls and sand flowing down the rubble slope make this a great dive.

Visibility varies from 10m to 25m; currents can be quick so trust your dive operator to pick the safest and best times.

15 HARDY REEF – FANTASEA DRIFT

Location: Northwest corner inside channel
Depth Range: 0-20m+ (0-66ft+)
Access: Fantasea Pontoon
Expertise Rating: Novice or intermediate



Hardy Reef is a spectacular 13km-long reef with a suspended lagoon and three 'waterfalls' that drain it. There is an 80m-deep channel, with a few hundred metres between Hardy and its nearby reefs. Other sites provide enormous overhangs, rich fronts and tops, fascinating lagoons and edges of all sorts.

Diving from Reefworld, the Fantasea pontoon, is most comfortable. A flat decked tender (boat) from the pontoon

drops you up-current to the north or south, depending on the tide, at a buoy with a descent line. You drift with the tide back to the pontoon until you hit the mooring and diver ascent line. All dives are escorted and a lifeguard sits high on the end of the pontoon keeping a lookout for snorkelers and divers.

Small bommies provide great surfaces for anemones and their fish. The scenery consists of both soft and hard corals, massive boulder coral heads up to 5m across, and black coral trees. These are interspersed with encrusting and staghorn corals, gorgonian fans and a host of colourful soft corals. Observant divers can find queen murex, baler and spider shells, plus pincushion seastars, flatworms and an incredible variety of nudibranchs.

Tame fish-life abounds along the wall. Mackerel and trevally compete for your attention, along with more colourful reef fish such as butterflyfish, angelfish and clown triggerfish. Turtles are also seen on most dives.



Snorkelers, semi-sub riders and divers all experience the great reef edges off the Whitsundays

The reeftop is flat with heavily grooved edges that give way to walls and overhangs falling down 10m to 30m, followed by a sand and rubble slope that drops away to 65m. The sealife is best above 20m and the underside of the pontoon is fantastic for macro and wide-angle close-up photography.

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KNUCKLE REEF – WALKING STICK

Location: Southwest corner of reef
Depth Range: 0-40m+ (0-130ft)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice (inside); advanced (outside)



At this superb anchorage, the reef is shaped like, you guessed it, a walking stick. It's an easy site for snorkelers and divers as long as you watch your depth. Entry and exit locations will be determined by the ebbing or flooding of the tide.

Cruise Whitsunday has a Reef pontoon here. An easy drift dive takes you down a wall to 20m, where a slope quickly drops below 40m. At the base of the wall (at the stick 'handle'), there is an enormous overhang about 10m high and wide.

Shoaling fish hover along the wall, where fan corals reach out into the strong currents for plankton. Look for the resident hump-headed wrasse in the channel on the northern part of the site, along with passing mackerel and trout. These fish can be seen whether you're snorkeling or diving. Visibility ranges from 10m to 25m, averaging about 15m. Take your time, as the many smaller overhangs, nooks and crannies provide hideaways for cuttlefish and other cryptic critters.

Once inside the lagoon area there is a great snorkeling, night dive site and

safety stop area. At night, look for sea cucumbers and their commensal animals, and shells on the sandy floor.

17

REEF 19-119 – JUST MAGIC

Location: Both sides of elongate reef
Depth Range: 1-20m+ (3-66ft+)
Access: Boat only and usually parachute entries from a hot boat
Expertise Rating: Advanced



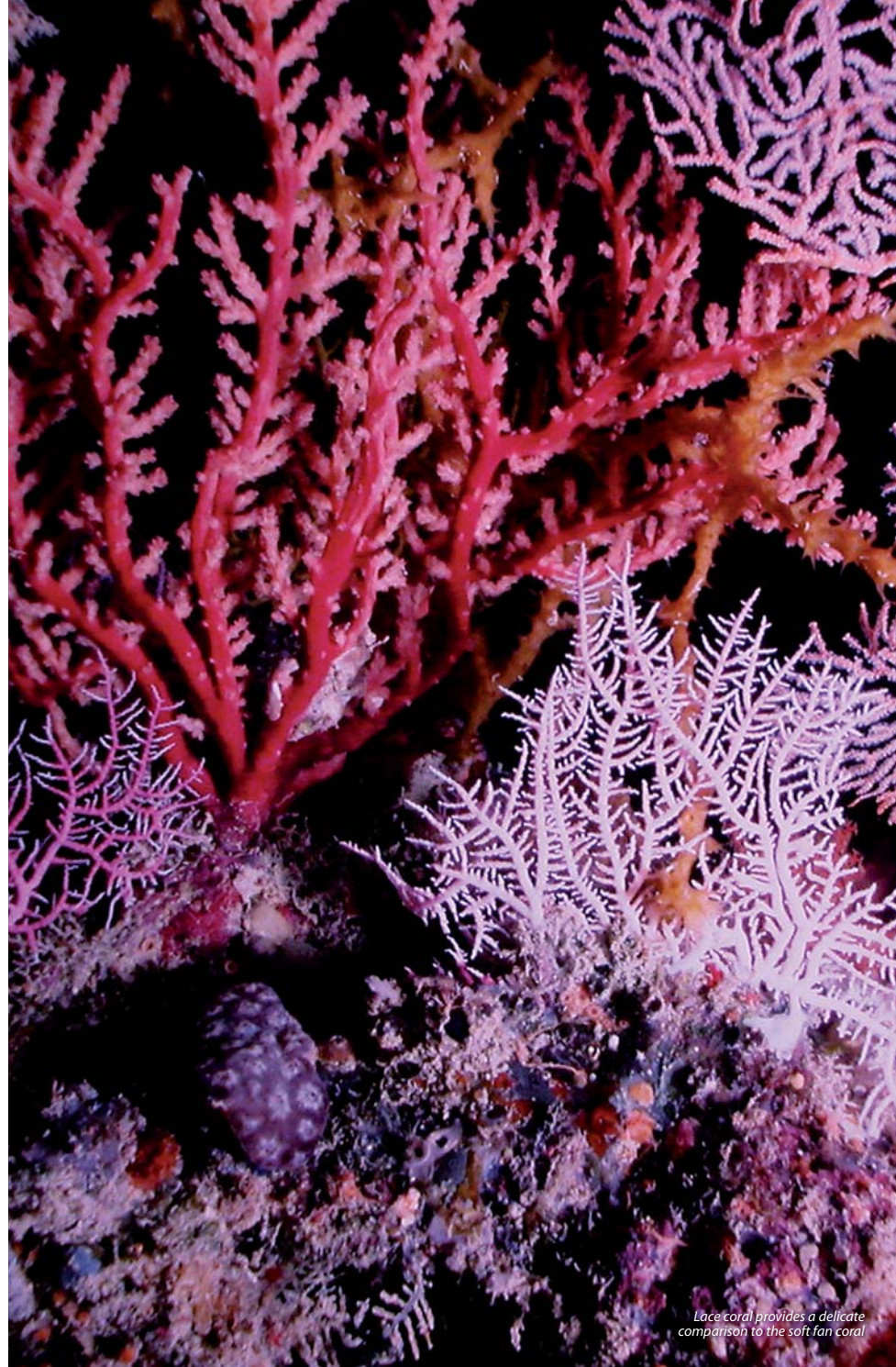
An exciting drift dive when you can get to it, Just Magic lives up to its name. A parachute hot boat entry drops you in about 20m from the reef and you must swim straight in to the edge or risk being carried away when the tides are running.

Carry a safety sausage on this dive and listen to the divemaster's brief, as it is quite possible to wash off the end of the reef when you're finishing the dive. You may need to do a mid-water safety stop.

This is an almost linear, but small reef loaded with spectacular coral and fish life. You have the option to swim deep to 40m+, or stay shallower above 20m where the life is more interesting. Watch your depth constantly along this vertical wall, which juts to and fro on a 60-degree slope. The bottom is well beyond 40m. Nearer the surface, the wall has a right-angle shoulder to the reeftop, which exposes on very low tides.

This colourful site has almost 100% coral cover with spectacular formations, especially branching and table forms of the staghorn group.

The larger fish include passing mackerel, tuna, trevally and barracuda. Large numbers of blue pullers and other planktivores are all over and close to the coral – great for wide-angle photography.



Lace coral provides a delicate comparison to the soft fan coral.

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