

# Cairns & Nearby Reefs Dive Sites



leave home as it can sometimes be difficult to get the trip you want. With more time to spare, you'll have the opportunity to shop around for the trip – and weather – that suits your needs.

Reefs and islands just offshore are excellent. Green Island is a developed tourist spot on a coral cay, with good snorkeling and diving, serviced by several operators. Fitzroy Island is a mainland island with good fringing reefs. Other islands here are for day visits only, with Michaelmas Cay being an internationally significant bird rookery.

Reefs off Innisfail, to the south, are quite different to those off Cairns and Port Douglas, to the north (the start of the Ribbon Reefs). Innisfail reefs tend to be broken into isolated coral patches, while the reefs off Cairns become more solid and the Ribbons are elongated shelf-edge shapes. Diving or snorkeling on all of them is fantastic.

Trips from Cairns access the Coral Sea, far northern reefs and from Port Douglas to Lizard Island. Some operators allow you to go out on their day boat and then stay overnight on the reef on a 'mother ship,' which may move daily from reef-to-reef. Amphibious aircraft and helicopter options are also available.

A true tourism centre with many nearby reef, rainforest and outback facilities, Cairns allows those with a shorter timeframe to 'do it all' from one convenient location. Truly a tropical city, it has everything a visitor could ask for: warm climate, amazing rainforest-clad mountain ranges, an excellent range of accommodation, dining establishments, shopping, a casino, and many tour operations.

The nearby rainforest-clad Great Dividing Range makes an excellent backdrop to this harbour city and region with a population of more than 120,000. Whitewater rafting, fishing, calm-water mangrove cruises, bungee jumping, parachuting, rainforest tours, helicopter flights, diving day-trips, extended trips or charters are all there for the asking.

The diving and snorkeling options from Cairns is impressive. If you have limited time, it's best to book before you

Cairns & Nearby Reefs Dive Sites	GOOD SNORKELING			
	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED	
25 MOORE REEF	•	•		
26 THETFORD REEF	•	•	•	
27 MILLN REEF – THREE SISTERS	•	•		
28 FLYNN REEF – CORAL GARDENS	•	•		
29 MICHAELMAS REEF	•	•		
30 HOLMES REEF – AMAZING	•	•	•	
31 HASTINGS REEF – THE FISH BOWL	•	•		
32 SAXON REEF	•	•		
33 NORMAN REEF – TROPPO LOUNGE	•	•		

Rich back reef communities grade onto white sand slopes on many northern reefs



## 25 MOORE REEF

**Location:** Sunlover Cruises mooring  
**Depth Range:** 1-25m (3-82ft)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Novice or Advanced



Several operators run trips out to Moore Reef, a site rich with marine life. Operators work the back reef areas, all of which have similar dives.

Each dive takes you over staghorn thickets on sand that slopes out and drops to 22m. You can go out right or left to the bommies, or closer in to the reef edge. Some bommies have great swim-throughs and the smaller ones in-between are also well worth exploring. As you swim out, watch for rays buried in the sand.

Bommies and gullies in the reef side make excellent sites for fish observation. The larger bommies usually come to within a few metres of the surface, so you can dive at whatever depth you feel most comfortable. At night you'll see nudibranchs, crabs, worms and out-stretched coral polyps. Also look for occasional crayfish.

The abundant hard coral is in good condition, interspersed with soft coral hiding grounds for damselfish, which dash out to catch planktonic food. Wrasse are common, along with parrotfish, emperors, butterflyfish and surgeonfish.

A school of grey reef sharks has been spotted here, but you're more likely to see a whitetip reef shark resting on the sand. This site probably suits macro-photography best – especially at night – but you can also get the odd wide-angle shot.

## 26 THETFORD REEF

**Location:** Bommie fields, northwest side of reef  
**Depth Range:** 1-25m (3-82ft)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate



Almost 2km-long with scattered coral heads along its back (leeward) edge, Thetford provides numerous dive sites to choose from. Be careful of your navigation and take along a safety sausage, as it is easy to find yourself disoriented well away from the boat with no dive time left.

Sandy floors between the numerous coral bommies are covered with smaller coral patches and blue staghorn thickets. Look among these for giant clams,

butterflyfish, rabbitfish, damsels, angelfish and the occasional pipefish. Moving over to the bommies, you'll be confronted with many swim-throughs. Most are partially closed on top, sending magical shafts of light down into these mysterious passageways.

The large gorgonian fans and soft corals that occur in these tunnels need special care, so watch your fins. Anemones are common, with several species of commensal fish and beautiful transparent shrimps cavorting within their tentacles. As always, it is the slow and observant diver who will get to see them.

Some of the boulder coral heads have dozens of multi-colored Christmas tree worms. The bright whorls of their brachial plumes make them look like little pairs of their namesake. These whorls are used for feeding and breathing. If you get too close, the polychaete worm will retract back into its tube in the coral, pulling a cap over the end for protection.

A fish-feeding permit allows the Coral Princess to attract trevally, wrasse, spangled emperor, red bass, blue-and-gold fusiliers and sergeant majors for the benefit of guests.



Blue-lined angelfish are shy and hard to photograph

## 27 MILLN REEF – THREE SISTERS

**Location:** NW Milln Reef – moorings**Depth Range:** 1-33m (3-108ft)**Access:** Boat**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate

The Three Sisters are a series of three large bommies lined up at the back of the reef, with the sites of Whale Bommie, the Desert, Petaj Mooring and Swimming Pools nearby. The deepest sister rises from about 33m off sand on the northwestern side, coming to within 1m of the surface. Closer to the reef on an easterly bearing, the other two sisters are shallower, with the innermost bommie in about 14m off a sand-and-rubble bottom.

If there is little current, ideally start your first dive on the deepest bommie, which has steep sides and may have schools of fusiliers, various snappers and chub. As you head down the walls, you'll see barracuda hanging silently in the blue. At the bottom, coral trout and cod move in and out of overhangs and crevices. A superb stand of black coral on the bommies' deepest side is home to commensal gobies.

In good visibility, you may be able to see the second sister, about 40m to the east. After spiraling up the first large bommie, head to the east. You will likely see several whitetip sharks resting on the sand. They will lazily swim away if you approach, only to return to the same place a few minutes later.

A green turtle has made Three Sisters its favourite haunt, and is often seen lying motionless near the surface around the second sister, where it feeds on sponges and algae. The depth at the second sister is about 19m, making it ideal for exploring around the base, where you are likely to see more sharks, blue-spotted rays and other sand dwellers.



Outer reefs are hammered by regular rough seas

After circling the bommie and upon approaching the third sister, you'll be confronted by a memorable sight. The walls between sister two and three are straight-sided and only about 3m apart, and are often crammed with schools of fusiliers and snapper. If this weren't enough, brilliant gold or yellow gorgonians jut out from the walls like impenetrable curtains – a spectacular photographic opportunity for a wide-angle lens.

On your way back, a swim-through on the north side of the first sister is safe and exits to more shallow bommies where abundant fish and coral can make your safety stop interesting. Alternatively, keep swimming to the wall on the edge of the back reef to finish off in the shallows.



Green turtles will be seen by lucky divers



Clam species come in three sizes: small, medium and giant

## 28 FLYNN REEF – CORAL GARDENS

**Location:** NW Flynn Reef – moorings  
**Depth Range:** 1-27m (3-89ft)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Novice



Flynn Reef has several well known dive sites, including Gordon's Mooring, Tennis Court and Tracy's Bommie, which supply good bommie swim-throughs, walls, overhangs, crevices and night diving. The Coral Gardens mooring sits in 8m on a sandy bottom. In front is a wall from 5m to the surface, along the reef edge.

Extending back from the wall are superb coral gardens, complete with stands of staghorn coral among terraces of table corals, boulder coral heads and

plates, with swaying soft corals in between. You need to practice your no-touch diving here, as the many small critters will test your identification skills to the limit. Dropping away from this plateau of coral is a terracing slope down 10m to 20m.

This slope is richly covered in coral stands and giant clams. Down deeper there are fan corals and even more staghorn thickets on the sand, with occasional good trevally and mackerel pelagic action. Clownfish, batfish, trout, cod, fusiliers, butterflyfish and angelfish, basslets and whitetip reef sharks are some of the frequent visitors. Lucky divers may see grey reef sharks and octopus, along with more common moray eels, barracuda, lionfish and nudibranchs.

There are numerous opportunities for a safety stop on your way out of this site as well.

## 29 MICHAELMAS REEF

**Location:** Northwest reef back  
**Depth Range:** 1-20m (3-66ft)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Novice



Michaelmas Reef is 10km (6 miles) long with a sand cay – an important rookery for sooty and crested terns. It has enormous potential for diving. This site description is an amalgamation of many sites here, but is demonstrative of most dives available.

Giant clams are the most common and delightful feature of this reef. You will see them whether snorkeling the shallows or diving to 20m, although they are more prolific in shallower areas. Also look for soft corals with hard bases that contribute to reef growth throughout this area.

Walls, swim-throughs, gullies, small caves and overhangs are found in most areas and are often homes to whitetip reef sharks. Snorkeling takes you over shallow reeftops riddled with holes, crevices and many giant clams. Smaller burrowing clams are common and tend to be more iridescent and varied in colour. Blue-spotted rays and sea cucumbers are common on the sandy floors, with schools of damselfish and fusiliers all over the corals.

If you dive or snorkel near the beach of the cay, you'll have the disconcerting



Minifin parrotfish often have food algae growing on their fused teeth

experience of fish, and sometimes even small sharks, dashing in and 'biting' at your heels as you walk on the sand. Fear not! They are merely trying to catch the shrimp and other animals lifted from out of the sand as you walk, having learned that humans are useful for something. The faster or more vigorously you move the more excited they will become, as you stir up more food for them!

As you explore the bommies, you'll encounter batfish, cleaner stations, nudibranchs, crayfish, turtle weed clumps and a constantly changing parade of life.

On lucky days you may see the cow-tail ray, eagle ray, or schools of pelagics cruising by in deeper water. Anemones are scattered all over, thickets of blue and brown staghorn corals adding colour to all activities.

## 30 HOLMES REEF – AMAZING

**Location:** Holmes Reef  
**Depth Range:** 5-40m+ (16-130ft+)  
**Access:** Moored boat only  
**Expertise Rating:** Intermediate



From the sheer walls and pinnacles, swim-throughs and sandy floors to the abundant life throughout the whole area, this site is truly amazing in its appearance from the surface and as you dive it. There are many dive sites on each of these Coral Sea reefs with elements of Amazing, often with great pelagic action in clear waters.

If the whitetip reef sharks haven't overly distracted you as you descend, you may see thousands of tiny 'umbrella handles' sticking out of the sand, seemingly dancing and disappearing as you approach. Take your time and approach slowly; you'll seldom get closer than about 4m before they vanish into their burrows.



Down the slope at 35m are two large coral outcrops called The Matterhorn, resembling mountains protruding from snow. These have glorious sea fans, soft corals, fairy basslets and cruising grey reef sharks. Be careful of your depth here as it drops away to 60m and into the abyss.

Back up the slope, the reef starts at 25m and rises quickly to 10m. This wall is where awesome swim-throughs can be found. On a sunny day they have a laser show of sunbeams streaking through the holes above, so you don't need a torch for daytime entries. Watch for several resident potato cod and spotted sweetlip schools. Banded coral shrimp also give themselves away with their long white antennae poking out of crevices.

As you finish your dive with a safety stop at the top of the mooring pinnacle, entertainment is often provided by clownfish, passing bluespot trevally and occasionally giant trevally.

Night diving here is easy due to the shallows and complex of gullies and swim-throughs. If you face your torch toward yourself (so the beam is hidden), you'll see a spectacular display of flash-light fish.

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### HASTINGS REEF – THE FISH BOWL

**Location:** Mooring

**Depth Range:** 0-16m (0-53ft)

**Access:** Boat

**Expertise Rating:** Novice



Hastings is a large, popular diving and snorkeling reef, with over 13km of reef edge and back reef sand floors to explore. Upon entering the water at The Fish Bowl, head to the wall that runs along the reef's back edge and drops to a sandy floor at 8m to 12m (as you move

along the wall it is possible to go left out to a series of bommies).

Anemones and clumps of staghorn coral are regular features, with giant clams perched in the shallows on the reeftop and bommies. Sweetlip, cod and trout are regulars and schools of damselfish and angelfish feeding among the coral add more splashes of colour. The wall winds around and along, bringing you to more clams and a good swim-through up into the reef. After exploring here, go left around the group of bommies. Note also the giant clam on the outer edge's base in 12m.

By making your way back along the wall, you can return the way you came or take a different depth or route out over the floor. Whitetip reef sharks and lagoon rays are often seen, along with less common turtles.

On some of the coral patches you will see long white tentacles extending out over the sand. These are the feeding threads of a Terrellid worm and if you get close enough to the ribbon-like tentacles, you will see lumps of food being carried along inside them. Also notice the daytime coral, with polyps out about 6cm to 10cm. You will often find broken off satellite pieces establishing new colonies.

*Maori wrasse are becoming more regularly seen in protected areas*



## 32 SAXON REEF

**Location:** Moorings  
**Depth Range:** 1-20m (3-66ft)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Novice



Another popular location used by several operators, this is an excellent back reef offering several night or day dive sites combined here into one 'mega site.' Snorkeling anywhere on the shallow bommie tops, reef edge and reeftop here is excellent.

The reeftop is exposed on low tides, with a wall dropping down 8m onto a white sand floor. Moving out from the wall, large patches of staghorn coral thickets and small bommies are interspersed with large single-species and mixed-species bommies. Swim-throughs and gullies are scattered throughout the area. Your guide can help you find the best sites to explore.

There is no need to go below 18m, as the rubble sand and few coral patches beyond pale into insignificance compared with the life further up the slope. Each bommie has its own special feature and life associated with it – giant clams, anemones, corallimorpharians, pipefish, lionfish and moray eels. Occasionally a turtle may cruise by, as can large cod and ever-present schools of damselfish and fusiliers. Passing pelagics are common and include tuna, mackerel, trevally and barracuda.

The white sandy floor always lifts the light and on a sunny day transforms the whole area into a classic, magical reef scene. Wide-angle photography and macro work well here, but watch the sand glare effect. Giant clams make great subjects but watch nesting titan triggerfish in summer, as they protect their 'bomb crater' nests with crash-tackling effectiveness.



*A pair of anemone fish hover over their eggs exposed by a careless diver*

## 33 NORMAN REEF – TROPPO LOUNGE

**Location:** Moorings  
**Depth Range:** 0-27m (0-89ft)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Expertise Rating:** Novice



This superb little reef has moorings belonging to several dive operations, with each using different areas of the reef's back.

Maori wrasse, moray eels, giant clams, anemones and their commensals are all permanent features. Along the reef back are a series of large bommies, staghorn

thickets and hillocks of rich coral cover. Sandy areas deeper down often have garden eels but you may need to wait for them to emerge, as they are very timid.

Almost all dives start with a giant stride entry from the boat. Depending on your experience, you either swim up to the shallows or out deeper and then back in. Amphitheatre-like sandy floors are surrounded by coral hillocks, reef edge and bommies. Take your time around the bommies and at the reef edge, as there are some excellent swim-throughs and a few caves, some of which are not safe for divers – you will need a guide to show and lead the way. Walls of all sizes and shapes with gullies, crevices and overhangs are common.

In mid-to-late winter, minke whales can be present in this whole area of reefs. Batfish, drummers, spangled emperors, fusiliers and red bass are common. Several large resident Maori wrasse will join you on your dive, especially if you ignore them. When you pay them any specific attention, they tend to shy away.

Turtles are regulars, but tend to leave as soon as you see them. Moray eels can also be found throughout the area, with blue-spotted rays and giant clams common on the sandy floor.

Wide-angle and macrophotography are both rewarding here, with the occasional whitetip shark adding a thrill if you get the shot.

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