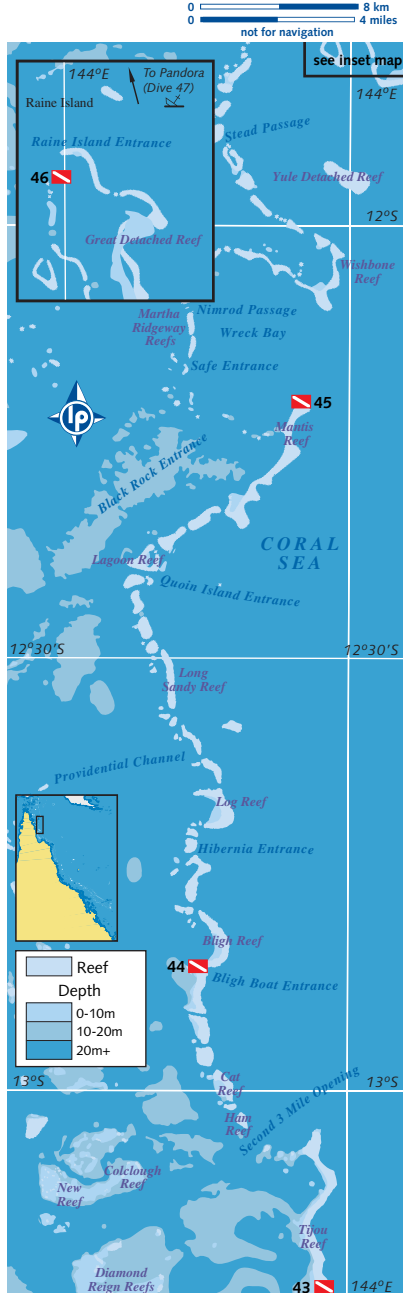


Far Northern Reefs



The tentacles of an anemone

Far Northern Reef Dive Sites



A series of sand cays, some vegetated, runs along the outer Far Northern Reefs

As this area extends 300km to 1000km (200 to 600 nautical miles) north of Cairns and Port Douglas, there are no set itinerary diving services to these remote reefs. The area includes all the reefs and islands from Lizard Island to the tip of Cape York, with Torres Strait sites further north. Several boats make annual expeditions and others run charter trips. These reefs are accessible via Cairns, Port Douglas and Cooktown, or you can fly into Lizard Island, Iron Range or Thursday Island to join one of the fly-in, sail-out trips to save the travel time from Cairns or Port Douglas – whatever way you can do it, it is worth it!

About 600 reefs, ranging in size from a few metres across to 35km (22 miles) long and 15km (9 miles) wide, provide thousands of kilometres of diveable reef edges, and that's not including the floors and shoals in between the reefs, or lagoons on their surfaces!

More than one hundred cays and many mainland islands also provide stunning terrestrial experiences. Many

are closed or permit-only, due to their status as Aboriginal sites or bird and turtle rookeries. Raine Island once had over 16,000 green turtles nesting there at night and is now an important rookery for turtles, frigate birds, Nankeen night herons, gannets and terns. It is closed at all times.

The reefs best for diving are on the outer edges of the continental shelf, from Lizard Island to adjacent to the tip of Cape York. This gives you a continuous line of ribbon, deltaic and dissected linear (east-west across the shelf) reefs. Visibility is usually 20m (66ft) and up to 50m (165ft). As this shelf edge is from 60km to 160km (35 miles to 100 miles) from the coast, the inshore waters can still be a little dirty from coastal run-off, although there are none of the chemicals and silt from coastal human activities offshore. In the Cape York area, outflows from the Fly River in Papua New Guinea wash down in big floods.

As you get closer to the coast there are more islands, less visibility, more dugong, saltwater crocodiles, tiger sharks and generally less desirable diving conditions. Yet these are fantastic underwater places, if you are at all biologically or muck-diving inclined.

Moving farther north, toward the centre of greatest Indo-Pacific species diversity, it is possible to see as yet undescribed species of corals, fish and

Far Northern Reef Dive Sites

	GOOD SNORKELING	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
43 TIJOU REEF – MR WALKER'S CAVES	•	•	•	•
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45 MANTIS REEF	•	•	•	•
46 GREAT DETACHED REEF	•	•	•	•
47 WRECK OF THE PANDORA	•	•	•	•



One of the caves in the Mr Walker's Caves complex

other life – these reefs are the richest of the GBR. Generally remote but significantly fished for a long time, these reefs have been subjected to harvesting for beche-de-mer, pearl, trochus, and fishing for coral trout and other reef fish, mud crab and barramundi. However they have been only minimally visited by divers. There are now large 'no trawling or fishing' areas that will hopefully help conserve this area.

All the outer reef edges (channel sides, backs and fronts) are the best known recreational diving areas. Rich corals, pelagic action and great visibility make them memorable.

As boats only usually visit in the late spring and summer months during the monsoonal calms, it is calm enough to dive any part of the reefs, including walls and terraces off reef fronts and sides, which are usually smashed by heavy waves. Your boat operator will take you to the easiest and best-suited sites for your ability and the weather.

Drift dives are often the best way to experience these areas.

Wreck Bay, Great Detached Reef, Raine Island and Pandora Entrance are well known for their manta rays, green turtles, whale shark, sperm whales, Bryde's whales and general pelagic action. There are incredible arrays of coral heads, staghorn thickets, large numbers of fish of all sorts, crayfish, sharks, cascading algal beds, sand falls and giant clams. You can experience almost every conceivable reef feature, along with historical shipwrecks.



Red-throat sweetlip are common throughout the GBR

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TIJOU REEF – MR WALKER'S CAVES

Location: *Western wall of southern lagoon*

Depth Range: *1-40m (3-130ft)*

Access: *Boat*

Expertise Rating: *Advanced*



These caves extend along the entire western side of a 55m-deep lagoon on the southern end of Tijou Reef, a ribbon reef 24km-long. Discovered in 1995, they are in a mile-long vertical wall from 20 to 35m. The caves were named in memory of Terry Walker, a great reefie and dive buddy, who lost his life in a boating accident in the Gulf of Carpentaria. The whole reef is a superb site for snorkeling and diving, especially the northern tip at Shark Point.

The only access to the lagoons and caves is over the reeftop. If the boat anchors on the western side, numerous small coral heads and patches on sand provide excellent snorkeling in 1m to 5m, and become an exciting drift in tide runs. If the boat anchors on the outside, there is a shelf of reef that is also excellent for snorkeling and scuba.

The lagoon is unusual because of both its depth and the caves. Entry into most of the caves is okay, but some are quite complex and need ropes, so be very careful or trained and follow procedures. Funds are being raised to undertake research into the cave sediment, to determine if there is a break in layers between the terrestrial sediment of the last ice age and an overlay of marine sediment since resubmergence. To date, researchers have cored to 3m and found sediment more than 3000 years old.

The wall is vertical with numerous gullies and overhangs. A sand-and-rubble slope at its base leads onto the gently sloping sandy lagoon floor. On

the eastern side of the lagoon, a larger sand slope extends from 1m to 5m to the floor. Two large bommies rich in coral and fish provide good diving and snorkeling.

In late November sharks in large numbers have been observed, possibly breeding, as their behaviour was highly aggressive. Usually a few grey reef sharks appear on each dive. Trevally, barracuda and numerous reef species are seen along the wall. Triggerfish are common, especially on sandy floor areas.

44

BLIGH BOAT ENTRANCE

Location: *Wall along southern side of channel*

Depth Range: *1-35m (3-115ft)*

Access: *Boat*

Expertise Rating: *Intermediate*



On the northern tip of reef no#12-127 and south of Bligh Reef is the entrance that Captain Bligh and 18 shipmates, sailing in the *Bounty* long boat, used in their 3618 nautical mile epic journey from Tonga to Timor. Little did they know that only 200 years later this would become one of the premier dive sites in the region!

This site is best dived as a drift on the incoming tide. You enter at the notch about a third of the way in and drop to your planned depth. Sometimes eddies can swing you out into the chan-



Bligh's Boat Passage is historic and a great dive site

nel or apparently the wrong way. In this case, go with the flow but be careful as it is very easy to go below depth here. You end the dive at the reef point by popping around the corner and doing a safety stop in the shallows, where the coral is excellent.

Along the wall, photographers can shoot wide-angle and enjoy the enormous plate and staghorn corals, gorgonian fans, silvertip and grey reef sharks and barracuda that occasionally cruise here. Alternately, go macro for the great diversity of small life to be seen. Feather stars hang out in the current for food, while huge swirling schools of basslets, parrotfish, wrasse, surgeonfish and damsels provide a disorienting effect – especially towards the end of the dive. Large soft corals, whips and black tree coral colonies are common.

As the wall is so sharp it has small gutters nearer the surface, sand falls and algal cascades occur in-between the corals and small gully floors. Look for resting whitetip or tawny sharks.

45 MANTIS REEF

Location: Northwest end of Mantis Reef

Depth Range: 1-40m+ (3-130ft+)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



This end of Mantis Reef is spectacular from outside the northern tip to inside along the back edge. Vertical walls, terraces, caves, overhangs, sandy gullies, sand ledges with garden eels and triggerfish nests and shallow bommies add up to excellent diving at many sites.

Outside, on the front, a vertical face stretches almost all along the 19km of the reef. This is where more of the great pelagic action is seen, with barracuda schools, trevally and fusiliers. Sperm

whales and whale sharks have also been spotted. Potato cod and groper are resident and, deeper down, enormous gorgonian fans and spiky soft corals reach out into the waters. Keep an eye out for manta and mobula rays.

If you are snorkeling, the sandy flat area around shallow bommies at the reef back is superb as a coral garden site. Butterflyfish, damsels, angelfish, triggerfish and flutemouths will be often seen. Cod, trout and surgeonfish are common, especially in among the staghorn and plate corals.

It is important here that you plan your dive and your plan well, due to the remoteness of the site, depths and currents. It is worth it!

46 GREAT DETACHED REEF

Location: Northwest GDR reef, western edge

Depth Range: 2-40m+ (7-130ft)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate or Advanced



Great Detached Reef is a large complex of several reefs on an older fossil surface. There are numerous reported shipwrecks on the reeftop – many known and many still unknown. This reef has about 46km (27 miles) of edge – dive sites are innumerable. The northwest site is representative of all sites and convenient for anchorage.



Pink sponges compete with soft coral for food from the currents



Flatworms display an amazing array of colours and behaviours

Diving from the boat, you can go to either side of a small coral promontory that extends westward from the reef. The surface of this reef is at 2m and two swim-throughs allow you to cross from side-to-side. One is closed over the top but easily traversed. Closer to the back edge of the main reef are giant clams and coral gardens of staghorn and plate corals, in about 8m.

On either side of the ridge an almost vertical wall drops away 200m. Superb pelagics, including barracuda, trevally and sharks, cruise by constantly. Schools of basslets, fusiliers and sometimes blue-lined snapper are also to be found.

Soft spiky coral and gorgonians add to the colour, as do feather stars. Stinging

coral is common, so be careful. Watch your depths and stick close to the walls for orientation.

47 PANDORA WRECK

Location: Sea floor to north of Pandora Entrance
Depth Range: 33-36m (100-110ft)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate or Advanced

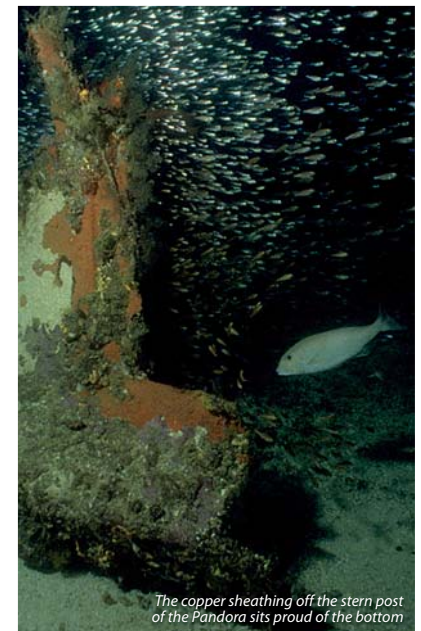


Internationally significant, the HMS Pandora is the oldest known wreck off Australia's east coast. She is best known

as the Royal Navy frigate sent by the British Admiralty to pursue *Bounty* mutineers. After nearly five months searching the South Pacific, the *Pandora* was on her way home from Tahiti with 14 prisoners – mutineers along with several *Bounty* crew who couldn't fit on Bligh's longboat.

They were locked in a makeshift cell, 'Pandora's Box', on the ship's quarterdeck. While exploring a passage through the GBR, the *Pandora* struck a reef on 28 August 1791. She sank the next morning in 33m (108ft). Of the 35 people who died, four were *Bounty* mutineers.

The ship remains have been extensively investigated on expeditions by Queensland Museum staff, other professionals and volunteers. The results of the project are on display in a spectacular Maritime Archaeology gallery at the Museum of Tropical Queensland in Townsville.



The copper sheathing off the stern post of the Pandora sits proud of the bottom

Pandora Wreck

The Queensland Museum chose to dedicate so much effort to the *Pandora* due to its historical importance and archaeological potential. About a quarter of the wreck is exceptionally well preserved, although it is buried under sand, so very little can be seen. The fascinating array of recovered artefacts enables the museum to reconstruct a rare view of what life was like onboard an 18th-century European ship. This ambitious effort – the *Pandora* Project – was funded by government departments and the *Pandora* Foundation, established to ensure the success of this exciting maritime archaeological project.

To dive the site you must go with a permitted operator who meets strict requirements. Permit applications can be directed to the Museum of Tropical Queensland in Townsville (☎ 07 4726 0625). Alternately, an application form can be downloaded from www.mtq.qld.gov.au.

Once at the wreck site, you drop straight down to 33m (108ft). Visibility allowing, you can see the stern anchor and sheathing, the bow anchor and the nearby oven, which are the most obvious features. In-between is a hard-to-discern coral-covered cannon, swivel guns, a chain pump and many unidentified concretions. A consecrated obelisk on the southeast corner is where one of the skeletons excavated so far was found.

The dive enlists your sense of history and imagination of the *Pandora's* voyage more than 200 years ago. The top three-quarters of the wooden hull have been eaten away by Teredo worms, leaving the ship filled with Halimeda algae sands, which buried artefacts that slid down into the hull. Poles and frames allow archaeologists to accurately determine where each excavated artefact came from. Shoals of fish mix with the algae and coral that shroud most of the wreck's remains.

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