

Port Douglas



Port Douglas Dive Sites



A famed 'hideaway' for movie stars and presidents, Port Douglas is Australia's premier tropical destination. No longer a sleepy village, it is decidedly friendly, casual and energetic, with the highest number of restaurants per capita in the country.

Port (as it is locally known) is the coastal centre located closest to the Australian Wet Tropics (which includes 19 National Parks, 31 State Forests, timber reserves and an Aboriginal Reserve) and the Great Barrier Reef (GBR). Both of these enormous areas were designated UNESCO World Heritage Areas, in 1988 and 1981 respectively.

Port's Four Mile beach is delightful, with a central marina harbouring many dive boats, yachts and private vessels. Adventure trips in addition to diving and snorkeling include rafting, kayaking, horse riding, ballooning, 4WD, motorcycling and mountain biking. A wide range of accommodations – from camping grounds to 5-star hotels – are available.

Day trips to the reefs (starting around 90 minutes) can be made on large wave-piercing catamarans, smaller 10-30 person vessels and helicopters. Several

extended stay and charter boats operate to the Ribbon Reefs, Coral Sea and Far Northern Reefs from here as well. Low Isles, just 15km offshore, is a popular nearby destination, with a sand cay and mangrove cay on a typical mid-shelf reef. The mangrove cay is closed during the nesting season of thousands of Torresian Imperial Pigeons, from August to February. Agincourt and Opal Reefs extend southwards from the Ribbons and are also popular outer edge reefs on this narrow part of the continental shelf, generally giving better visibility.

Port Douglas Dive Sites	Dive Site Suitability				
	GOOD	SNORKELING	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
34 TONGUE REEF – TURTLE BAY	•	•			
35 OPAL REEF – BARRACUDA PASS	•	•	•		
36 AGINCOURT REEF – CASTLE ROCK	•	•			
37 THE ZOO – BOUGAINVILLE REEF	•	•			
38 MACKAY REEF	•	•			
39 PIXIE'S PINNACLE	•	•			
40 RIBBON REEF NO 10 – THE COD HOLE	•	•			
41 LIZARD ISLAND – COBIA HOLE				•	
42 OSPREY REEF – NORTH HORN	•	•			

34 TONGUE REEF – TURTLE BAY

Location: North end Third Sister Reef in Tongue Complex

Depth Range: 1-15m (3-49ft)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Novice



A giant stride entry will often put you face-to-face with 'Killer', a 35kg Maori wrasse. You'll find the reef edge in about 3m – watch for one of several resident turtles often seen here. If you are lucky, 'Dopey', identified by his quiet nature and a nick in his back right flipper, will swim right into your view finder.

Working around the circle of reef will take you over one enormous giant clam and several species of sea cucumbers, on the sandy floor of this back reef cove. A staghorn thicket and patches provide hiding places for many smaller reef fish, which are also tucked along the small walls and bommies you pass.

A good mixture of soft and hard corals cover the reef edges and small bommies. Check under the plate corals for hovering trout, sweetlip and the occasional barramundi cod.

Finish the dive in the shallows adjacent to the reef edge. It is an easy swim back to the boat – the bottom can be interesting for those willing to look hard for smaller, more cryptic life.



Black-spotted toadfish could bite the end off a teasing finger



Flame angelfish are surprisingly bright when seen underwater
Photo: Phil Woodhead

35 OPAL REEF – BARRACUDA PASS

Location: Between south and main Opal Reefs, Poseidon & Haba moorings

Depth Range: 1-15m (3-49ft)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Port Douglas dive boat operators love North and South Opal Reefs for the numerous great dive sites, including Bashful Bommie, Ayer's Rock, SNO, Cathedrals, Split Bommie, Blue Buoy, and One Fin Bommie. At Barracuda Point your entry drops you into a sandbox in 6m, which leads the way

to a line of small bommies connected by beautiful coral gardens and sandy floors.

You can also start outside the pass for a drift dive. Either way, use the reef edge for navigation and watch your buddy and guide for a safe return. The tides bring lots of plankton through this opening, attracting smaller fish, which in turn attract bigger fish, thereby attracting bigger fish, and so on.

Note the bottom here, as the size of the sand grains gives an idea of how rugged it can get around reefs. Sea cucumbers abound on the sand – look at them carefully for commensals, if you can tear your eyes away from the superb soft and hard corals and grazing fish. You may see the occasional lagoon ray in the sand as well. The water deep-

ens to your left as the fish life increases on your right. Schools of paddletail, trevally, mackerel, red bass and three species of barracuda move around slowly. A resident blacktip reef shark may also show itself.

This underwater 'rolling hills and valleys' area of coral is interspersed with sand. The nursery plate, three plate corals about 40cm off the sand, has provided shelter for a succession of juvenile whitetip reef sharks, which can usually be found at this site. The occasional giant clam can also be seen here, as well as titan triggerfish – which can get very aggressive in summer – digging their crater-shaped nests.

This is a superb site in most conditions and always great for photography, both wide-angle and macro.



36

AGINCOURT REEF – CASTLE ROCK

Location: Southern end Agincourt Reef

Depth Range: 0-25m (0-77ft)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Novice – Intermediate



Agincourt Reef is a complex of many smaller reefs, with snorkel sites at the pontoons and more than 20 excellent dive sites including Point Break, Phil's, Barracuda Bommie, Three Sisters, Horse-shoe Reef and the Fish Bowl.

The northern Agincourts are also used by day operators from Port Douglas. Pieces of a Taiwanese wreck feature at The Wreck, giant clams are found at all sites, as are resident Maori wrasse. Drifts, walls, swim-throughs, pinnacles, big fish and turtles, coral gardens and garden eels are also found in the area.

Castle Rock is a large rich coral pinnacle rising from a steep sand slope located at the southern end of Agincourt Reef. Just around the corner is the continental shelf drop-off into the 2000m Queensland Trench, with oceanic waters usually giving great visibility. This Castle Rock is a classic back-reef pinnacle providing superb deep and shallow dives. By circumnavigating the pinnacle you will see a great diversity of life in the water and on the sandy floor and pinnacle. Many other species of coral have settled onto the boulder coral, which provides the basis of this pinnacle, making numerous habitats for thousands of animals and plants. This is a great macro or wide-angle site.

'Axle' is a friendly 1.2m malabar groper who will interact with divers by swimming up and looking to be patted. Please don't however, as chemicals from sunscreen and your skin may be harmful. Curious triggerfish are com-

mon and an abundance of blue-lined yellow snappers and sergeant-major damselfish will be seen. Graceful blue-spotted lagoon rays can also be seen swimming or buried in the sand with only their eyes and tails showing, with the occasional white-tip reef shark resting nearby.

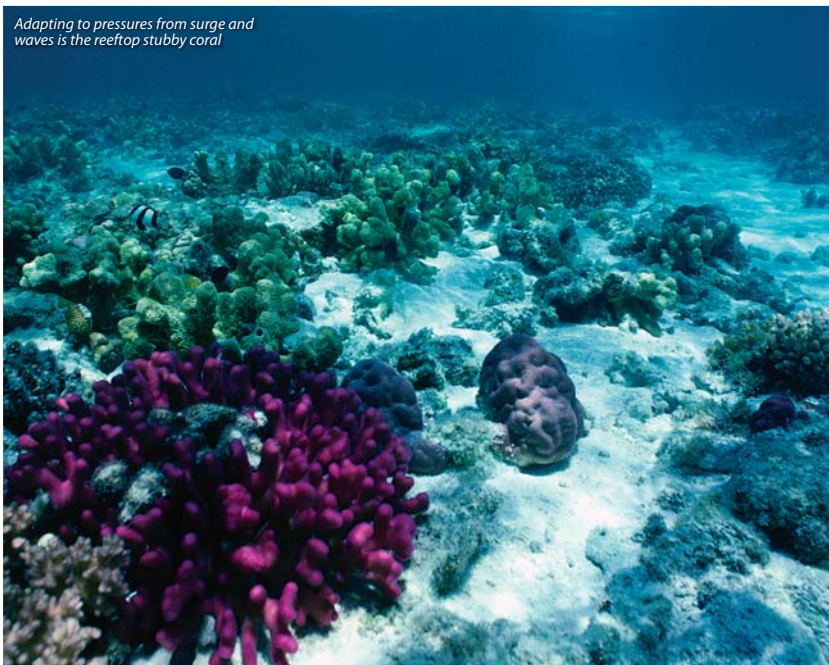
Christmas tree worms are to be found extended from the tubes they create within the boulder coral. Lionfish often lurk in branching corals or small overhangs, waiting to rush out and suck up passing prey. 'Daisy' the flowery cod may also make an appearance if she's in the area.

The reef shallows near the pinnacle are perfect for snorkelers and as a safety stop. Giant clams can be seen, along with lizardfish, parrotfish, wrasse, damselfish and rays. As the small plankton feeding blue-green chromis are approached, they will dart back into the staghorn corals for protection.



Soldierfish are night-time feeders seen hiding under overhangs by day
Photo: John Barnett

Adapting to pressures from surge and waves is the reeftop stubby coral



37 THE ZOO – BOUGANVILLE REEF

Location: Anchored boat
Depth Range: 5-40m+ (16-130ft)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice – Advanced



One of the smaller Coral Sea Reefs, Bouganville has a delightful array of dive sites, ranging from moorings to drifts. The Sticks and Between Wrecks are great drifts, while Deep Six, Dungeons & Dragons, West Point, The Junkyard and Corner Shop are all accessed from moorings or hot boats. These sites present a challenge for photographers, due to the diversity of life that can be seen here – your biggest dilemma will be whether to take your wide-angle or macro lens. Good luck with your decision! (Hint: on a clear day, go wide.)

At The Zoo, follow the mooring line down onto the large coral bommie then go to either the coral sand gully or onto the outside wall. Either direction makes for a rewarding dive.

The sand gully slopes down from 14 to 30m and is usually a resting place for whitetip reef sharks and sometimes a black cowtail ray. The edges of the gully supply rich surfaces of coral, algae and coralline algae, all great spots to find nudibranchs, flatworms and leopard blennies.

Leading away from the edges of the gully and the shallows of the wall, numerous channels form a labyrinth. Each channel has swim-throughs and provides all sorts of shady and protected spots, with an array of fish life that will keep you busy identifying for a while. Surgeonfish, snappers, sweetlips, drummers and grazers are some of the larger species, while numerous smaller species reward the careful observer.

On the outside wall at 30m, blooming displays of small sea fans and soft corals are swarming with basslets and chromis, like bees around flowers. Grey reef sharks patrol the whole area – a great thrill if you meet one coming the other way up a channel.

As you ascend for your safety stop, you will move into the richer coral and fish life of the shallows, on the outer edge of the wall. A lucky observer may witness the rare flame angel – once seen, you'll never forget it.

With cruising green and hawksbill turtles, sharks and other life, The Zoo is appropriately named. Each dive yields new species, all within a confined area.

38 MACKAY REEF

Location: Northwest corner
Depth Range: 1-5m (3-16ft)
Access: Boat to island, entry from beach
Expertise Rating: Novice



Primarily used as a snorkel site, this spot is excellent for keen macrophotographers and snorkelers. The boat drops you on the sandy beach of this cay – submerged on big tides – from which you can adventure out into the shallows between the coral heads and clams, or continue over the edge with scuba.

The bommies come in all sizes, each rich with a different suite of animals and plants. Large colonies of soft corals are seen nearer the island – look at their bases carefully and you will see that some of them are hard. These are made up of the calcium carbonate spines secreted by the soft corals, which are major contributors to back reef growth in the northern GBR.

Giant clams provide a superb range of colours and sizes, with their inhalant and exhalant siphons allowing you to

look inside to see their inner workings. Due to small, light-sensitive cells in their mantles, they may sense your shadow as you swim over them, causing them to jerk closed. Other animals here that react by closing up are the many little Christmas tree worms, especially in the boulder coral colonies – their colours are superb.

Turtles are more common than at sites farther offshore, as grazing conditions are generally better. In summer, you may see mating pairs or females waiting around to nest on nearby cays. Anemones and their commensal shrimps and fish are common as well, it is worth examining each anemone carefully for clownfish eggs under its edges. Butterflyfish and surgeons are common and sometimes a large Maori wrasse will cruise in to check you out.

The sand slopes down quickly over the edge, where coral heads provide a continuing range of good animal and plant life. This is a great spot for patient observers.



Small sand cays can be swept away by storms



By searching around, the photographer can gain a great foreground subject

39 PIXIE'S PINNACLE

Location: Northwest corner, small plug reef between Ribbons No 9 & 10
Depth Range: 1-30m (3-98ft)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice



Pixie's Pinnacle has the best of everything the GBR has to offer. This site can be done in five minutes or, by slowing down, you can see examples of almost every group of organisms found on the GBR.

This coral pinnacle rises from 40m to the surface, where it is about 15m across. By following a slowly descending spiral you will see plenty, finishing with an ascending spiral and a safety stop.

Hard coral diversity is high, with many small colonies striving to fight their way out from under the larger, faster-growing, shading species, especially down to about 20m. Here a talus (rubble) slope starts on all sides, with more soft corals and an occasional large, black (actually dark green) tree coral colony. The slope then drops off slowly at varying angles to a 30m bottom. This is often a resting spot for large cod, feeding sea cucumbers, rays and whitetip reef sharks.

Above the talus slope is a series of vertical walls, overhangs and multitudes of small caves. All provide great hangouts for lionfish, moray eels, shrimp, anemones and their clownfish, cleaner wrasse, hanging spiky soft corals, gorgonians, yellow turret corals, lace corals, sponges, hydroids and molluscs.

On some occasions fairy basslets provide an amazing pink cloud while they feed in the current that bathes the pin-

nacle. Many animals are well-camouflaged, such as the resident stonefish, so the patient and observant diver will be rewarded. Be prepared to shoot all your film or fill your memory card, with medium to close-up being your best lens choice.

For those who can tear their eyes away from the life on the pinnacle, there is the reward of shoals of fish regularly



Potato cod are the gentle giants at several popular sites

cruising by or hovering. Fusiliers are regulars, with trevally, barracuda, mackerel, sharks, batfish and the occasional ray providing a charismatic megafaunal experience.

40

RIBBON REEF No 10 – THE COD HOLE

Location: North end of Ribbon No 10
Depth Range: 10-22m (33-72ft)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice/Intermediate



Internationally recognised underwater photographers, Ron and Valerie Taylor, were the first to publicise this fantastic fish site, and were instrumental in its declaration as a protected Marine Park Area in the 1970s. Large potato cod (numbers now reported from two to 15 – many less than in the '70s) are friendly, especially since they have been regularly fed for 20 years. Over time, the health of these cod has decreased, with cankers and skin disease becoming evident, possibly due to inappropriate feeding and handling by divers. Today only those with a Marine Parks permit can feed them, and then with special food, so the cod appear to be improving.

Let the divemaster handle any feeding and follow instructions carefully. You dive right off the boat into a cloud of waiting cod, large Maori wrasse, red bass, emperor and many other species, unless they have all been fed by the previous boat, in which case you may only get the stragglers.

You drop to the sandy floor areas between the bommies, which provide amphitheatre-like viewing areas among great coral outcrops, to watch the fish feeding. They generally come close and are superb wide-angle subjects, even if they haven't been fed.

As with all fed animals, things seem fine at first, but as they grow to expect food, they often lose their ability to forage on their own. If you take food away, they can become aggressive. Cod will mouth and sometimes bite, especially if they haven't been fed for a while, but their thousands of small fine teeth cause only minor lacerations a few millimetres deep.

Tidal currents keep this area interesting and on a rising tide you get much better visibility, making the sandy floors among rich coral heads stand out. If the cod don't show, this is still a great dive, demonstrating a typical back reef channel area.

Other marine life includes excellent coral cover, occasional moray eels, anemones, whitetip reef sharks, giant clams, schools of pyramid butterflyfish, Solomon's sweetlip, cleaning stations and feather stars. At the start of the dive, ensure you know what the bottom of your boat looks like and return to it. If you hear boat engines, watch out for propellers above.

41 LIZARD ISLAND – COBIA HOLE

Location: Off point, northeast Watson's Bay
Depth Range: 14-18m (46-59ft)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Home to an exclusive resort with an airstrip and a research station, camping is allowed on Lizard Island with a permit from National Parks.

Your descent at the Cobia Hole takes you onto a submerged mooring float that usually has circling pelagic barracuda or trevally. The cobia have not been seen regularly for years, but watch for them off the rocks or on the sandy bottom at 14m, where you come across

a pinnacle of rocks covered with every conceivable group of marine organism.

Macrophotographers will delight in this area, where sponges, soft corals, coralliamorpharians, feather stars, sea stars, sea squirts and their commensal shrimps, crabs and gobies will occupy even the least interested diver. This is best described as another veneer community, where reef life covers the island rock and fish life comes in and occupies the site. Sea whips, gorgonian fans and stinging hydroids with hovering slaty bream can often be seen. The numerous nooks and crannies guarantee a constant supply of more interesting sponges, lace corals and sea squirts.

Often large turtles, toadfish and estuary cod will appear as well. If by some remote chance you run out of subjects on the rocky areas, try looking out on the sea grasses and algae on the nearby sand – make sure your buddy comes and the guide knows where you have gone. There are several other good dives around the island, including the inner lagoon. Snorkeling is popular wherever you can get into the water, as giant clams and corals are common.



42 OSPREY REEF – NORTH HORN

Location: Mooring at northwest tip of reef
Depth Range: 2-20m+ (6-66ft+)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Osprey has many sites, with the entrances providing several spots for overnight anchorages and moorings. The North Horn site is best known. Sharks have always been here and a resident population of whitetip reef sharks is currently under study, whereby each one is identified and recorded individually, through the assistance of Undersea Explorer. This site has been used as a shark feeding site for more than 15 years, so the silvertip and grey reef sharks, potato cod, morays and many smaller species are familiar with humans as an irregular food source.

Moorings allow the boat to hang in the safest spot so you dive into water that drops to almost 1000m, with 40m visibility common. The reef edge is an easy 20m swim. Divers gather together at 16 to 20m and when all is set, food is brought down and the action begins. The bolder whitetips come in first, fol-

lowed by potato cod. Gradually grey reef sharks build up the courage to start feeding and they are closely followed by silvertips. A 45kg dogtooth tuna was once eaten in under 90 seconds, so if you want a photograph – you'll have to be quick!

It is important to follow the dive-master's instructions as they know the usual behavior of these species. Schooling scalloped hammerheads and great hammerheads, possibly seen here seasonally when the waters cool, always bring a feeling of quiet awe.

If you have the time, experience and air, there are some large soft coral trees deep down on the western wall. At this site, you will always see great pelagic action including three-spot dart, dogtooth tuna, rainbow runners and mackerel, with stunning planktonic animals floating by. Snorkeling over the whole wall and nearby reeftop, with its gullies, stinging coral and great fish life, is also a buzz.

Diving nearby sites at night will let you see flashlightfish, pelagic octopus, pleurobranchs, crabs, shrimps and sleeping fish.

As part of its many diving/research expeditions, the Undersea Explorer sometimes trap a nautilus, take its details and then release it, allowing you to observe and swim with it.

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