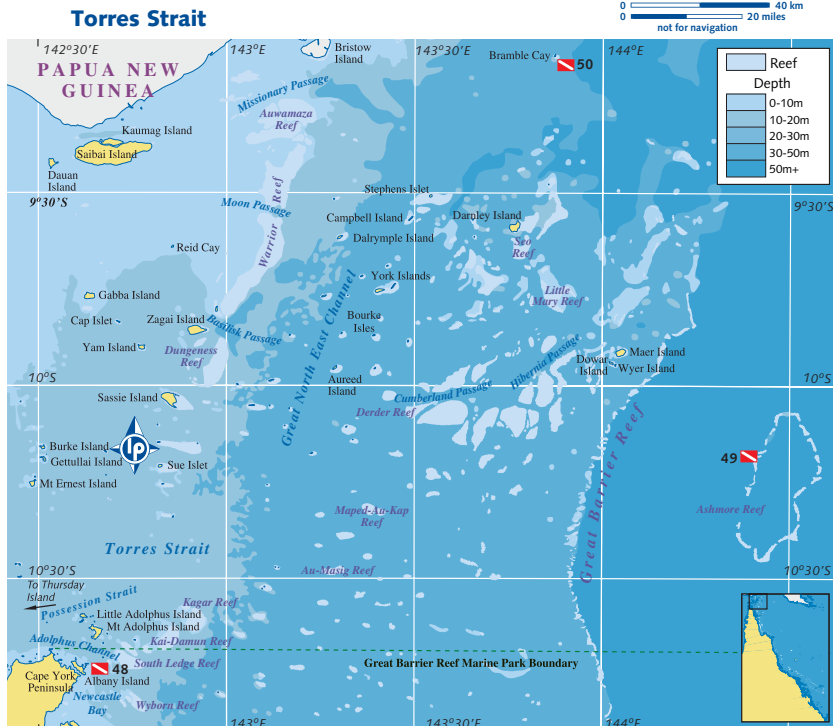




Tube worms have an enormous range of breathing and feeding appendages



Torres Strait Dive Sites

Torres Strait includes significant parts of the GBR, mainland islands, reefs and cays. The strait connects the Coral and Arafura Seas, which are part of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Anchor Cay, **Bramble Cay** and Black Rocks make up the northernmost point of the GBR.

The Torres Strait has a reasonably high tide range (4m) and receives the massive freshwater outflow of Papua New Guinea's Fly River. There are strong currents and sediment-rich waters, and the tides are complex and can be hazardous to shipping. Access is via the airport on Horn Island, which is adjacent to Thursday Island, the primary port and administration centre for the area.

Leading into the most diverse reef system in the world (the Sunda Sea in Indonesia), Torres Strait is the richest part of the GBR Province and is also the most diverse area in its island and reef morphology. To the east are the Ashmore and Boot Reef complexes, also part of the Coral Sea Reefs.

This region features large platform reefs (up to 28km (17 miles) long) over mud and sand bases, with islands of mud, sand and shingle. There are mainland islands with fringing reefs and many reefs with sand cays. Many islands are inhabited by Torres Strait Islanders, who are of Melanesian descent. Rich sea grass communities, mangroves, soft bottoms and reefs provide for the varied fish, dugong and turtle populations.

A long history of pearl, trochus and beche-de-mer industries provide insight into the area's colourful past, as evident in the cemetery on Thursday Island. Recreational diving opportunities are limited and only offered by a few boats due to the general misconception that diving is undesirable in this area. The western straits are in shal-



Butterfly fish with their bright colours distract all divers

lower muddy waters and are unlikely to ever become popular as dive destinations. The eastern straits provide excellent and unique diving opportunities, which will probably gain popularity as services develop.

Rare pulses of deep oceanic water slide in under Torres Strait waters decreasing visibility and temperature. Common features include walls, slopes, lagoons, caves and channels. Further west, a scattering of reefs have incredible potential as dive sites. Large sharks, whale sharks, turtles and pelagic fish are often seen.

| Torres Strait Dive Sites | | GOOD SNORKELING | NOVICE | INTERMEDIATE | ADVANCED |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|--------|--------------|----------|
| 48 | RMS QUETTA | | | | • |
| 49 | ASHMORE REEF – WESTERN EDGE | • | • | | |
| 50 | BRAMBLE CAY | • | • | | |

Christmas tree worms dart back into their tubes at the slightest disturbance



48 RMS QUETTA

Location: East of Cape York, eastern side of Adolphus Channel

Depth Range: 10-24m (33-79ft)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Advanced



Divers require a permit to dive this historic site. Strong tidal currents and generally low visibility present a difficult dive, making it necessary to have accurate tide information to plan the

20 minutes of slack water at high or low tide. It is common for divers to be swept away either entry or exit, so have your pick-up boats, safety sausages and systems well planned.

The wreck, or at least its ripple effect in the current, can sometimes be seen from the surface. Descent brings you into contact with a ship that is still in reasonably good condition and covered with prolific marine life. Thousands of fish move over, in and around the wreck.

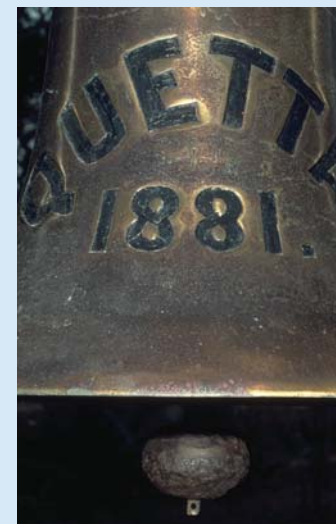
It would be possible to penetrate parts of the wreck, but is dangerous to do so and certainly no longer safe.

The stern lies well-exposed showing the propeller and rudder. Until you reach the enormous gash low on the bow, she seems almost intact.

Remnants of funnels, masts and other equipment lie scattered around the site. This is a significant wreck with many items, including the bell, on display at the Quetta Cathedral on Thursday Island.

Sadly, many artefacts had been removed from this important site prior to its protection as a historic site. Any seen during your dive should be left alone, photographed and reported to the Museum of Tropical Queensland.

The sinking of the Quetta



Like the *Yongala* and the *Gothenberg*, the RMS *Quetta* (1890) was a passenger ship that lost more than 100 lives. Unlike the others, however, the *Quetta* was not lost during a cyclone but rather sank after striking an uncharted rock off Mount Adolphus Island. It took just three minutes, taking 133 of her 290 passengers and crew with her.

Seasoned wreck divers argue that the *Quetta* is actually a more spectacular wreck dive than the *Yongala*. Access to the *Quetta* is difficult – and expensive, not only because of its remote location, but mainly because it is exposed to strong currents. All divers should be wary here and it is highly recommended that you dive at slack water.

As is the case with diving on the *Pandora*, unless you have a private vessel, access is easiest by charter dive boat from either Cairns or Port Douglas, where a variety of dive charter operators offer extended 'dive safari' tours to the far northern GBR.

49

**ASHMORE REEF –
WESTERN EDGE****Location:** *Western edge of complex***Depth Range:** 1-30m (3-98ft)**Access:** *Boat***Expertise Rating:** *Novice/Intermediate*

This outer slope is connected to the lagoon interior through channels. Rich staghorn corals group with the big branching blue and brown colonies and many table growth forms. This richness extends to 30m with the species changing away from the staghorn group to big fleshy polyp forms and hat corals up to 1m across. The walls have rubble slopes at the bases and rich growths of hard and soft corals, with whips, gorgonians and stinging coral.

Large silvertip, grey reef and whitetip reef sharks, along with other species of whaler sharks, are common and inquisitive but leave quickly if you rush them. Large pelagic species of mackerel, blue trevally, barracuda and tuna are regulars, along with fusiliers, damsels, wrasse and parrotfish. Basslets and other open ocean reef species are common with garden eels poking their heads out of the 15-30m sand ledges.

Outer and Coral Sea Reefs are enormously varied in their diversity of coral covers



This is a good site for wide-angle photography but sometimes pulses of dirty water will push you to macro systems. Several species of sea snakes are also seen here and as always are inquisitive but safer if left alone. There are ample shallow coral areas for safety stops and snorkeling.

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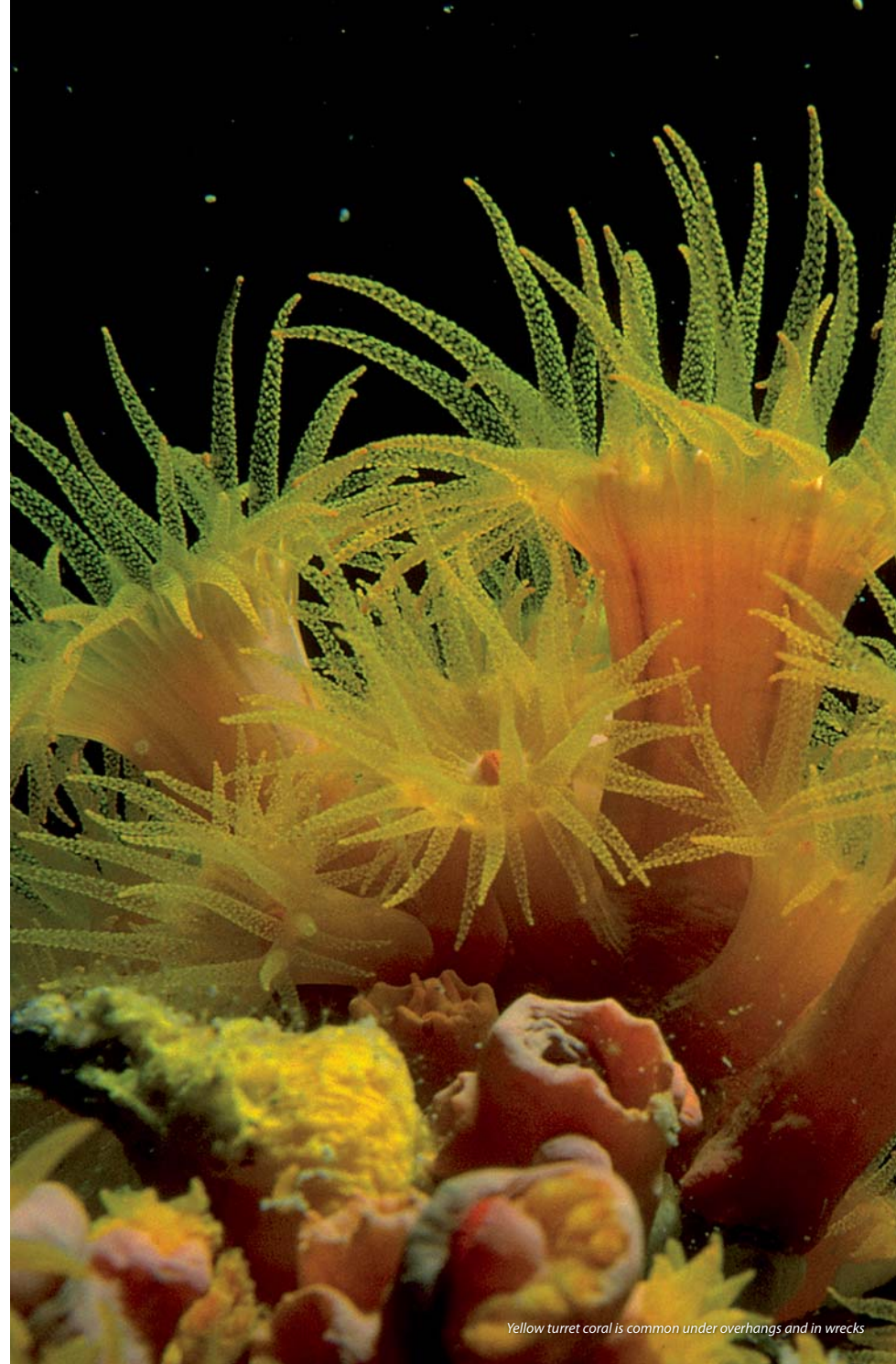
BRAMBLE CAY**Location:** *Northeast edge of reef***Depth Range:** 1-25m (3-82ft)**Access:** *Boat***Expertise Rating:** *Novice*

Bramble Cay is the northernmost reef of the GBR. It has a sand cay, with low plant growth and a light tower, and is an important turtle nesting rookery for green turtles.

Many dive site possibilities exist around the reef. The southeastern side drops down to sand flats at 12m to 30m with some walls, lots of rubble slopes and sediment-resistant coral species. The diversity of coral is high but the coverage is often low. Large beds of daytime coral cover areas up to 80m long and 5m wide. Low visibility can make it a macro-photography site.

Balls of boulder corals are alive on every surface, indicating they are rolled around by the strong wave and/or current action. The rubble slopes have many encrusting colonies of lettuce corals with free-living species of mushrooms and their cousins.

On the wall sections, which drop from 3m to 10m, there are many boulder, elephant skin and soft corals. Whip and gorgonian corals are common as well. As this area is rich in algae, there are also many grazing fish, especially rabbitfish and wrasse with trumpetfish, unicornfish and surgeons equally abundant.



Yellow turret coral is common under overhangs and in wrecks

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