

Townsville & Magnetic Island Dive Sites



The Museum of Tropical Queensland houses the Pandora relics and nearby is Reef HQ and Omnimax Theatre at Townsville

The third largest city in Queensland, Townsville averages 300 days of sunshine a year, is home to the Museum of Tropical Queensland, Reef HQ Aquar-

ium and Omnimax Theatre, Australian Institute of Marine Science, Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA), regional centre for the EPA, Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) and James Cook University. It is a fascinating city, widely recognised as the capital of North Queensland. It has a range of accommodation, dining and entertainment options, which you'll also find on Magnetic Island, a fun destination just a short ferry ride from town. With the island and rainforest-clad ranges surrounding Townsville, this truly tropical city has great options for all activities.

A variety of dive operators run from Townsville, servicing the *Yongala*, Coral Sea and nearby reefs. Three day cruises to Cairns are also available.

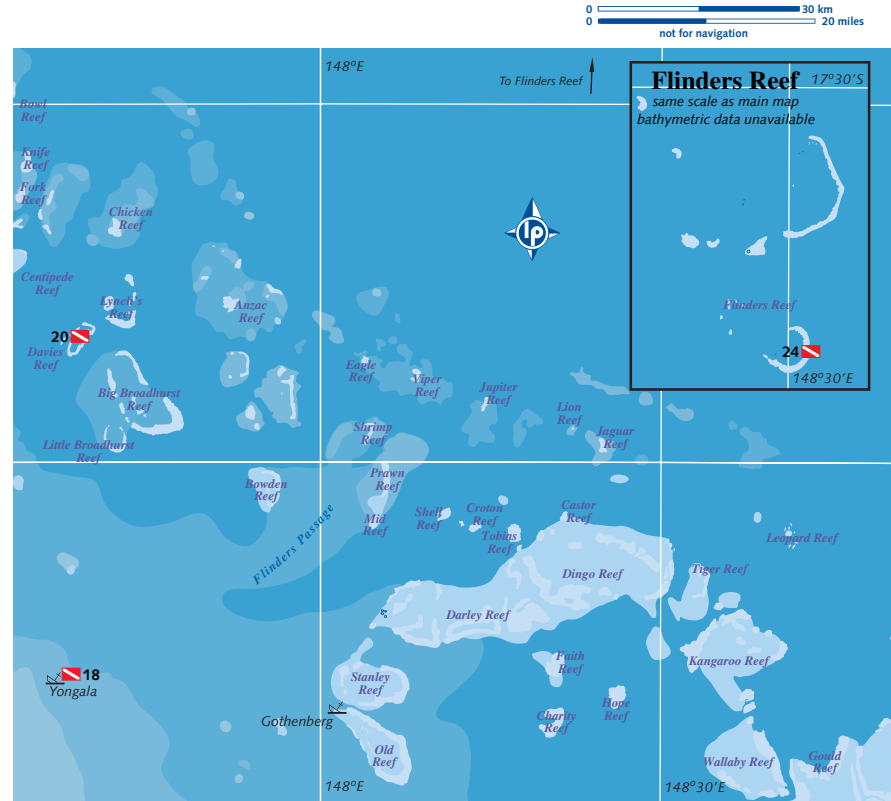
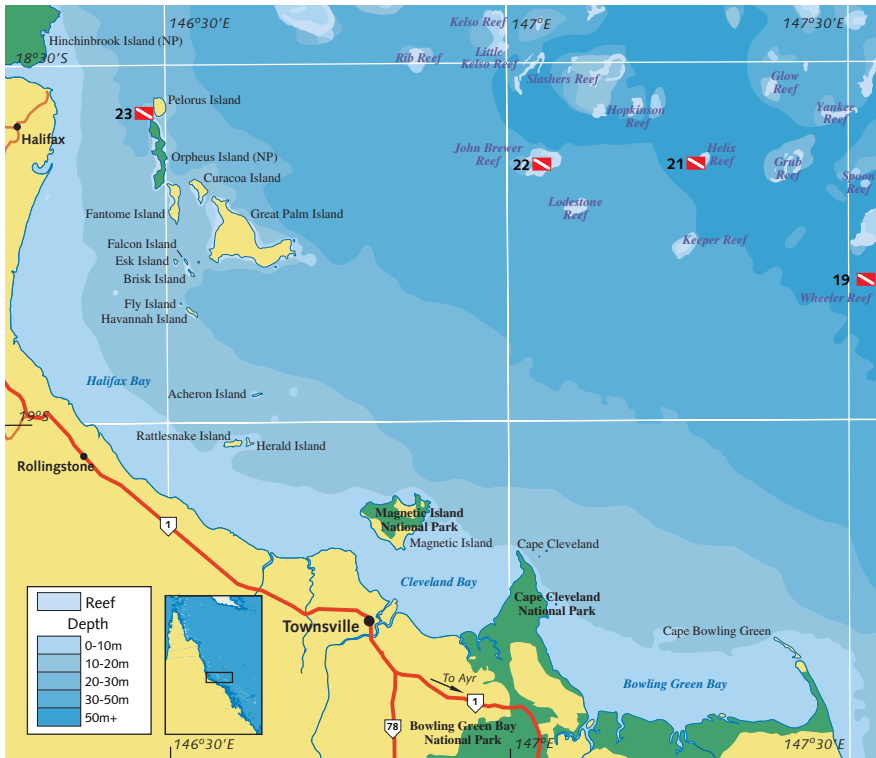
The Palm Islands to the north are mainland-type islands with good fringing reefs, much like Magnetic Island's, but better due to their greater length. Orpheus Island has a resort and James Cook University's Research Station. Still further north, Dunk, Hinchinbrook and Bedarra Islands have resorts serviced from Townsville, Cardwell and Mission Beach.

Reefs off Townsville are diverse and offer a great variety of diving. From here you can reach the *Yongala* and *Gothenberg* shipwrecks, plus others that remain unidentified. Some, like the Foam,

are protected and no entry is permitted. Townsville has a hyperbaric medicine unit and the only recompression chamber in Queensland, so if you're going to get bent, it's best to do it near here!

Townsville & Magnetic Island Dive Sites		GOOD SNORKELING	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
18	YONGALA				•
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Townsville Reefs & Magnetic Island



THIS IMAGE
NOT AVAILABLE
IN PICK & MIX

18 YONGALA

Location: 25 km (14 miles) east of Cape Bowling Green

Depth Range: 15-33m (49-108ft)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Advanced



The *Yongala* is undoubtedly Queensland's best wreck dive. This passenger and general cargo steamer was lost in a cyclone in 1911 when she was headed to Cairns on her 99th run along the Queensland coast. The ship departed Mackay Harbour without telegraph equipment and was too far out before it could be warned of the oncoming cyclone. Details of the ship's sinking are unknown, but it was likely swamped by massive waves that left its 121 crew and passengers no way to escape.

The *Yongala* is a significant cultural site and is protected under both the

GBR Marine Park regulations and the Commonwealth Government's Historic Shipwrecks Act (1976). Regulations prohibit any activity that is likely to damage the fabric of the wreck or unduly disturb the prolific (and spectacular) flora and fauna that has colonised the sunken hull. This includes prohibited activities such as fishing, removing artefacts and spearing fish.

Several dive shops offer tours to the wreck. Visitors on charter vessels will be briefed by the operator about the do's and don'ts of diving the site, while those on private vessels will need a permit to enter the protected zone around the wreck. The permit will list the conditions and code of conduct for diving on this and all historic wrecks off Queensland.

Access to this site is weather and permission dependent – tide runs and sea state can make this a hazardous dive. A giant stride from a moored boat down a buoyed descent line makes an exciting beginning to an incredibly interesting dive.

The port side of the vessel comes into view first and if the tidal current is running you can 'hide' in the lee of the hull and work your dive from there. As the entire hull is richly encrusted with soft and hard corals, hydroids, oysters, fan and whip gorgonians, it is a superb macro site. The cruising schools of kingfish, trevally, turrum and barracuda provide good wide-angle shots. Sea snakes are common, as are bull rays, eagle rays, turtles and enormous groper. One groper, usually found under the bow or stern, is called V-Dub, because it's as big as a Volkswagon!

Thousands of oysters line the interior and under the bow and stern of the wreck, leaving piles of dead shells on the bottom. The wreck features coral trout, stripeys, surgeonfish, fusiliers, lionfish, damselfish and often clouds of baitfish.

This 110m-long marine grave is truly an oasis in a 'desert' of sand – it deserves its total protection. Some say this is the best wreck dive in the world.

19

WHEELER REEF

Location: Southwest corner near anchorage & sandy area off cay

Depth Range: 3-40m (10-130ft)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Novice



This small cay is the only one in the whole area. The sand slope falling away from the cay provides delightful sandy floor diving between rich coral heads and patches. There is excellent fish diversity, especially in the mid-depth areas, with schools of pelagics occasionally zooming by.

Drop into the shallows and follow your dive plan as it is easy to go deep into the coral ridges. Lucky divers will get to see whitetip reef sharks resting on the bottom and the rare appearance of a leopard shark, but only in the deeper places. It's protected as a national park, so we are seeing more and more of the larger reef species that are targeted by fishers. The trout and sweetlip are becoming bigger and more common with the occasional sighting of a beautiful barramundi cod.

Large bommies provide settling places for plate and staghorn coral colonies with great diversity of damselfish, cardinal and parrotfish. Take your time here and enjoy the end of the dive in the white sandy floors of the shallows.



Rich coral slopes abound on reefs off Townsville

20 MAGNETIC ISLAND

Location: Any one of the many sites around the island

Depth Range: 0-25m (0-75ft)

Access: Boat or beach

Expertise Rating: Novice to advanced



Magnetic Island has a diverse range of great sites, many of which you can access straight from the beach. Several old wreck remains can be seen and coral life has gradually got better as the silt from dredging has been reduced during the past few years. Many of the communities are veneer reefs where the corals live on a granite substrate. This means cyclones can wipe out large areas, as they can on any reef. When conditions are ideal at the island, it is a great place for fish, corals and macro dives.

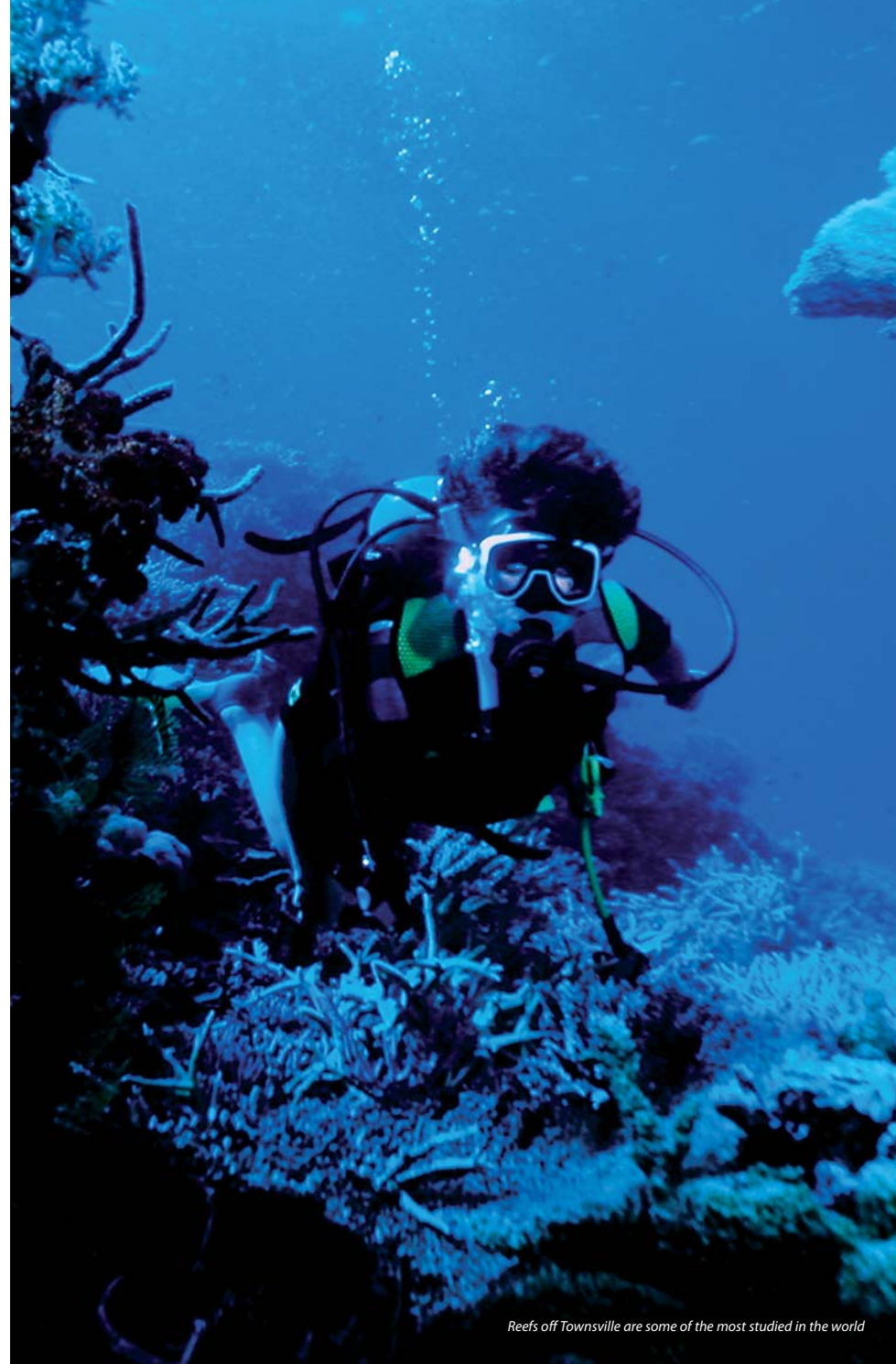
Primary sites are Alma, Arthur, Florence, Geoffrey and Nelly Bays, with Orchard Rocks and Bremer Point offering those with access to a boat an exciting deep dive.

There are great spots for muck diving, and corals and fish abound with sandy-floor bays also providing night diving opportunities. Wherever you dive here, take your time and look out for the oc-

casional large bommie, swim-through canyons, rich plate coral and stag thickets, which provide great habitats for the smaller fish. Large schools of pelagics will be seen in the deeper waters. Trout, batfish, parrotfish, angelfish and boxfish will be seen. Nudibranchs and other cryptic creatures are commonly seen by the careful observer.



*Fringing reef communities are recovering well after dredge spoils were dumped further away from Magnetic Island
Photo: Andy Lewis*



Exploring Shipwrecks

Penetration by divers can accelerate a wreck's deterioration. Even minor and inadvertent diver contact can cause structural damage. Divers' bubbles can cause active corrosion of fragile iron structures and bulkheads, especially where protective sediments and marine growths are damaged or disturbed.

Remember too that shipwreck penetration is a skilled specialty that should only be attempted with proper training. Wrecks are often unstable; they can be silty, deep and disorienting. Use an experienced guide to view wreck artefacts and the amazing coral communities that grow on them.

Many ships in the GBR Province are protected historic sites where, among other things, penetration is illegal. Several of the most important wrecks have additional special regulations. Make inquiries at the Museum of Tropical Queensland (☎ (07) 47 260 600; www.mtq.qld.gov.au; 84 Flinders St, Townsville)



Aggregations of fish are becoming more common in protected areas

21 HELIX REEF – HIGH VOLTAGE

Location: Southwest corner near anchorage & lagoon area
Depth Range: 5-36m (16-118ft)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice



Helix has numerous good sites. The North Wall is an excellent drift dive for advanced divers. It is chock-full of great life, gullies and overhangs. High Voltage is excellent for all levels, as it has a sandy floor, plenty of depth ranges and an incredible array of swim-throughs and caves that form mazes of coral passageways.

Entry takes you down to about 20m, but you can easily swim to one of the nearby bommies. On your left, about five bommies have a network of swim-

throughs between them. Most are open to the top, so light is good and they are generally safe. As you proceed, try to avoid fin, hose and gauge damage to the corals. One swim-through cave tracks from 16m in a spiral and exits at 6m. As you exit each swim-through you come into a vista of beautiful staghorn thickets and many types of fish.

Large giant clams are well spaced around the site and are as varied in colour as the fish. Damsels, butterflyfish, fusiliers, soldierfish, trout and cod are common with parrotfish and wrasse adding a rainbow of colour.

If you tire of the beauty of the bommies and mazes, then cross the staghorn thickets toward the reef. On your right, you'll come across Broken Bommie. This leads you to the reef edge and another swim-through between the reef and bommie. From here you can continue along the edge of the reef that surrounds a sandy lagoon area, and then back to the boat.

Feathery stinging hydroids should always be avoided



22 JOHN BREWER REEF

Location: Southwest corner near anchorages
Depth Range: 5-38m (16-125ft)
Access: Boat
Expertise Rating: Novice



John Brewer is a rich reef today, but was devastated by crown-of-thorns seastars in the late 1960s and again in the 1980s, showing how a reef can recover quite well. Occasional crown-of-thorns can still be seen, leaving their white feeding scars where they have eaten the living coral off its limestone skeleton. There are numerous dive sites to be found suiting the novice through to advanced diver with shallow lagoon-like dives and then deeper dives off the walls and back reef bommies. Colourful

soft corals provide rich splashes of colour among the pastels of the hard plate and boulder corals.

Photo opportunities abound with the conditions of the day determining whether you go wide or close-up as the rougher conditions can lower the visibility. Look for clams, soft corals and clouds of blue pullers and passing trout or trevally to photograph. Bump-headed parrotfish are often seen, as well as species of algae-eating parrotfish and wrasse.

Passing pelagics out near the edge areas will include mackerel, barracuda and tuna if you are lucky.

23 PELORUS ISLAND

Location: Southwest side of northernmost Palm Island
Depth Range: 1-15m (3-49ft)
Access: Boat/Beach
Expertise Rating: Novice



Pelorus Island is the northern-most of the Palm Islands, a group of mainland islands boasting a mixture of habitats. They combine sandy and muddy beaches and bottoms, rich fringing reefs, mangroves and rocky shores. Many of the fringing reefs have excellent diving.

Accessing the Pelorus site is easy – fall off the Coral Princess pontoon into about 3m and then dive to your plan, either up-current, drifting back to the pontoon, or setting up a drift-and-dinghy pickup.

Snorkelers can enjoy the excellent fringing reef, nearby white sandy beach and, visibility willing, great viewing all round.

An established feeding station has been set up here at 5m, so the fish are tame and usually impatiently waiting for divers. Sergeant majors, monocle bream, moon wrasse, rabbitfish, red em-

peror, harlequin tuskfish and the occasional moray eel all gather for the feed.

After the feeding frenzy, follow the slope along the reef edge. This fringing reef is rich due to the mud, sand, current and depths. You can travel anywhere from 5m to 15m and have a great dive. A diversity of corals – soft, gorgonian, fan, whip, hard, mushroom and stinging – are present here.

Bull, eagle and Kuhl's rays can often be seen cruising around or resting on the bottom.

Pelagics are here but usually hard to see in the lower visibility. Beware the stinging hydroids, which look deceptively tame with their beautiful white feathers or delicate brown/white hard colonies – they deliver a painful sting when touched.



*Pelorus Island has a superb beach and dive site
Photo: www.coralprincess.com.au*



Fragile white lace coral is always a macro-photographer's delight

24 FLINDERS REEF – CHINA WALL

Location: Eastern wall of reef

Depth Range: 1-40m+ (10-130ft+)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



Flinders Reef is an atoll about 37km-long and 28km-wide. It has a cay and weather tower and represents Coral Sea diving at its best. China Wall is one of the best dives on Flinders, Dart, Abington and Shark reefs, although each has its own unique features. On most of these reefs, the walls drop away to over 305m (1000ft)

Good fish diversity occurs in the shallows with emperor angelfish, clown triggerfish and schools of goatfish feeding on the sand. Bump-headed parrotfish are regularly seen with pelagic surgeons, dogtooth tuna, trevally and barracuda. The prowlers include silvertip, grey whaler and whitetip reef sharks. On

a good day you will also see lionfish and Pavo razorfish, which hover vertically by the staghorn coral.

Hard corals are small, slow-growing and found in more protected grooves or on the reeftop. You will see staghorns and tabulates in addition to golf ball and brain type corals. Stinging corals are common, with their light brownish-to-white colonies growing in bizarre shapes. Softs and gorgonians are also present.

Many critters can be found in the wall's crevices and overhangs, especially lace corals, sponges, small clams, nudibranchs, morays, anemones and feather stars. Night diving brings out more crabs, shrimps and enormous basket stars.

Caves, caverns and swim-throughs are all along these walls, just waiting to be explored. Sometimes manta rays and hammerhead sharks appear, along with schooling hammerheads deep in the colder water during winter. You may be lucky enough to see billfish here as well.

Shoaling pelagics are common Coral Sea sights



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