Dive Into the Exotic World of Nudibranchs, the Spectacular Slugs of the Sea

When he picks me up at the airport, Gary Cobb is wearing a nudibranch baseball cap, a gray T-shirt covered in illustrations of nudibranchs of various kinds, and wraparound sunglasses known colloquially in Australia as “speed dealers.” It is a bright, clear winter’s day in Mooloolaba, on Australia’s Sunshine Coast. “I own 15 of these shirts,” Cobb, 73, says later, as we walk to a restaurant in a small shopping center. “That’s all I wear. And I do that because it’s a talking point.” He stops in at a dive shop. A young woman behind the counter greets Cobb warmly: “He’s just a bloody legend,” she tells me. “You can quote me on that.” She draws tiny hearts on his tank and flippers. Cobb points out a hand-painted mural depicting an undersea scene. “Now look closer—I got them to put the nudibranchs on there,” he says. And among the octopus and schools of fish, there they are: tiny, powerfully cute, neon-colored sea slugs. Nudibranchs (pronounced various ways, including NEW-duh-branks) are a family of sea slugs. They typically lack shells and are distinguished by their exposed gills, which is what gives them their name—naked gills. They can be as small as the half-moon of your pinky fingernail or as long as 20 inches. And they come in a gleeful variety of colors and shapes, though there are two main types. Dorids often resemble tiny rabbits, with their rhinophores, or two antenna-like protrusions on their heads, like bunny ears, and a ring of feathery gills on their backs. There is also the Spanish dancer, a slug in the form of a bright red wavy flamenco shawl. Aeolids are covered in cerata—fleshy growths that resemble anemone tendrils, only shorter. There is one aeolid that looks like a psychedelic hedgehog, and several that wouldn’t be out of place at the tip of an orchid stem. The blue dragon has long talon-like cerata on the end of perpetually outstretched arms, as though it were flying. It is really, really difficult not to compare them to Pokémon characters. There are around 3,000 nudibranch species all over the world, from the Arctic to the tropics, but roughly a third of them are found in the waters off Australia. And Gary Cobb, a retired American expat, might just be their biggest fan and advocate. Cobb answers the phone, “Nudibranch Central, how may I direct your call?” He sells merchandise that says “Fear no nudibranch.” He runs a Facebook group called Nudibranch Central, with more than 33,000 members. Scroll down its page and you’ll find post after post of nudibranchs photographed by divers around the world—and identified by Cobb. It is a hobby that takes hours a day. He dives a few times a week at La Balsa Park, which he refers to as his “backyard,” moving slowly along the floor of the Mooloolah River just before it opens out to the sea. His average dive time is four hours, a marathon in scuba terms, though he has been underwater for as long as six. Cobb dives for nudibranchs, he says, because it’s the “greatest value for money”—a way to spend as long as possible in the water, rather than seeing a couple of things and rushing back to the boat.