AUSTRALIA

Home

The Commonwealth of Australia is the largest island of Oceania. It consists of mainland Australia, Tasmania and some smaller islands. It is the sixth-largest country in the whole world and has the sixth-longest coastline of the world. Australia is surrounded by 35.877km/22.293mi of water, part of it the Indian and the Pacific Ocean, the Timor Sea, Arafura Sea, Coral Sea and Tasman Sea.

Australia is home to the most famous reef of the world: The Great Barrier Reef! Because of its fame, it attracts lots of tourists: snorkelers, divers, day boats and liveaboards… It is very busy. In the GBR, you can also find one of the most famous wrecks of the world: the SS Yongala, a passenger and freight steamer that sunk in 1911.  
If you want to have calmer dives with lesser people, you can go and visit Ningaloo Reef instead. It is on the opposite site, in Western Australia, while the GBR is in the East. So, choose a direction!

GBR

The Great Barrier Reef is located in the Coral Sea, Queensland, Eastern Australia. It is the largest coral reef system of the world. It consists of 2.900 separate reefs and 940 islands. The whole reef is around 2.300km/1.400mi long.

A big part of the reef is protected by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and was selected in 1981 as UNESCO World Heritage Site. Unfortunately, lately there are big environmental pressures on the reef. There is land-based runoff from farms, pollution from mines, Crown-Of-Thorns Starfish try to take over the reef and there is a massive coral bleaching going on due to climate change. It is said the reef lost half of its corals since 1985.  
The Queensland government tries to protect the reef and installed the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. They try to do as much as they can, but coral bleaching won’t be stopped in a day. Every diver and snorkeler will need to pay a $20 reef tax as support.

The Reef has a big marine biodiversity. There are whales and dolphins, different types of turtles, dugongs, crocodiles, heaps of sharks, rays, seahorses and over 1.500 types of reef fish…. Some species are endemic to the island the live near to. Sadly enough, these species became vulnerable and endangered.

Diving the Great Barrier Reef, you can do on day trips from Cairns where you will dive the Outer Barrier Reef, or, as the GBR is so big, go on a liveaboard and try to see as much as possible. You can dive the reef the whole year round, but most people prefer to go in between July and December. After this, there will be more rain. Remember Australia is on the southern hemisphere so the seasons switch. Water temperatures are between 23C/73F in winter and 30C/86F in summer. The Minke Whale season runs from June to August and the Humpback Whale season from August till November. Coral spawning occurs in October and November.  
Currents and visibility depend on where you are diving. The dive spots further away, so for liveaboards, have better vis but can also have stronger currents.

Let’s talk dive sites. One of the most famous one is Cod Hole on Ribbon Reef #10. It got his name after all the Potato Cod/Potato Grouper living there. Dive guides feed the fish so the cod got very friendly. They go cute on picture but it, of course, raises questions about feeding wild animals and reef management.  
Another good dive on Ribbon Reef is the Snake Pit where you will be surrounded by Olive Sea Snakes.

Diving Heron Island will bring you very close to turtles. There is a resident population of more than 4000. The Green Turtle and Loggerhead Turtle use the island for nesting. Around November they hatch and you can see all the little baby turtles crawling back to the see.

Osprey Reef is the northern-most reef of the GBR. You can only go there by liveaboard. The most famous dive on the reef is the North Horn Shark Feed. Divers will go down and sit on the sand at 12m/39ft while White Tips, Grey Reef Sharks and Silky sharks come for dinner. Maybe, if you’re lucky, a Silvertip or Hammerhead will show up.  
Around The Bend is an interesting dive too. Drifting through you can spot sometimes several Mantas as this is a cleaning station.

Novice divers are good off at the Whitsundays. Currents are gentle, conditions are easy, it’s great for doing courses. There are 74 islands to choose from but most dive centers are on Hamilton Island. Around Bait Reef, there is a good chance to see Mantas swirling.

SS YONGALA

The SS Yongala sank on March 23, 1911. It’s final resting place is now south of Townsville, Queensland, Australia. It is one of the must-do diving wreck of the world.

The Yongala was a passenger and freight steamer. On her final trip, she was sailing from Mackay to Townsville with 49 passengers, 73 crew and 617 tons of cargo. She was caught in a cyclone and sank with all and everything on board. Nobody knew she sank because the port authorities thought she was hiding for the storm. Only days later, when parts of the wreckage started showing up ashore, they knew something was wrong. But then it was too late. The ship itself was only found back in 1958. Since then, it has become a very popular dive site for the experienced diver.

The ship lies on a sandy bottom around 30m/100ft deep. The shallowest part is at 16m/52ft. The whole length is 109m/358ft. While being there for so long, the Yongala became an artificial reef with sea snakes, bat fish, lion fish, barracudas, rays and bull sharks cruising around. From June to November, you can spot Humpbacks and Minke Whales on the surface.  
The current around the wreck can be fierce so you should know what you are doing.

Diving the SS Yongala can be done on day trips from Townsville, QLD or Ayr, QLD. Entering in the wreck is not allowed.

NINGALOO

Ningaloo Reef is on the northwest of Australia, around 1200km/750mi north of Perth. The 260km/160mi long reef got the World Heritage Site status in 2011 and is protected in the Ningaloo Marine Park since 1987.   
Most of the dive centers are in Exmouth or the family-friendly tourist town Coral Bay, 100 km more south.

Whale Sharks feed on the plankton between March and June and made the reef famous. The most of them are juveniles but having an 8m/26ft shark next to you, is already rather overwhelming. Most trips to see them are (expensive) snorkel day trips, but you never know you will encounter them while diving!  
During the winter months, you can dive with Manta’s too. In Coral Bay, they even spot this big filter feeders the whole year through. From July till November, the Humpbacks are migrating towards Broome, give birth and turn back towards Antarctica. Next to Humpbacks, maybe you can spot Orca’s, Minke Whales, Sperm Whales or other different species. Ningaloo has 13 regular visiting types of whales and dolphins. Dugongs are also often seen, although the biggest population (+14.000) houses in the Shark Bay area, 600km/370mi down south.

The most famous dive site in Ningaloo, is the Exmouth Navy Pier. The pier is still used by the navy, so it is only restricted accessible by the public. This and the no-fishing rule makes it a great dive. It has a great variety of marine life and because of shallow depth, it is a photographers dream. Wobbegongs, nurse sharks and reef sharks, frog fish, morays, scorpion fish and lots of macro life like shrimps, flatworms and nudibranchs are commonly spotted around the pillars.  
At the moment, there is only Dive Ningaloo who is licenced to take you out diving the pier. This makes it expensive. Also, bring a photo ID. It is still a naval site.

You can dive Ningaloo the whole year round but bring the right wetsuit. The water temperatures are not that warm. In winter it’s a chilly 19C/66F, while in summer you get 27C/80F if you’re lucky. Most people will go in summer. Visibility depends on the rain. From November to January it will be lots less.