

In Depth

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Consumer Reviews for Sport Divers

Spirit of Freedom

Down Under with an Organ in the Lounge

I'm settled in front of my word processor, the Coral Reef screen saver displaying pretty scenes, as I psych up to tell you about Australia. I stare at a shot of a lionfish peeking out from a ledge at a distant diver, way out in the clear, Ty-D-Bol-blue water.

Now, what's wrong with this picture? Why doesn't it put me in mind of the Great Barrier Reef, home to lions galore? Ah, so: the lionfish is definitely familiar — but the water is much too clear.

I flash back to October and my visit to the real-life Coral Sea. The Great Barrier Reef, the world's largest marine park, has long been one of my dream dive destinations. A new live-aboard, the *Spirit of Freedom*, now sails the reefs of the Great Barrier and the Coral Sea, and she's a damn fine craft. *Spirit* sails to the northern reef and nearby Coral Sea locales, from Cairns August through January, and from Gladstone the rest of the year.

Spirit of the *Spirit*

Owned and operated by Max and Carmel Allen, *Spirit* is among the most spacious and well-laid-out live-aboards of the dozen I've sailed on. The 120-foot length and 22-foot beam allow a sizeable dive staging area, a roomy dining area/salon, a spacious bar/lounge, plus two heads and a good galley on the main deck. Up top are crew quarters, a state-of-the-art bridge, a laundry, and a huge sun deck with a Jacuzzi.

As the brochure says, "You can have fun around the organ in the lounge" — but only if you've brought your own organist. The salon and bar are unlike any other live-aboard: lace curtains at the windows, banquettes done up in maroon faux velvet, and carpeting deep red with huge yellow flowers. Not exactly Newport Nautical, but somehow it works. It's as if Grandma redecorated.

Below deck are efficient carpeted cabins that sleep 24 — mostly doubles with blond-wood queen beds and upper bunks. All have their own heads, sinks, showers, reading lights, and closets. Except for the cabins abutting the engine room, they were very quiet. The craft is very stable. The air conditioning worked almost too well. Both hot and cold water were ample.

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Everything was spotless. Whenever Carmel was not cooking, she was running the vacuum, and when not sailing, Max was scrubbing the salt or barnacles off someplace. And they did it all with only a dive-master (on our trip, Scott Waring) and a “deckie” for help. Yet they created a warm, family atmosphere, and were never too busy to stop and chat. They and the rest of the crew dined with the guests.

Diving Accommodations

The dive platform was fairly spacious for our complement of 16, but some gear bins had to be shared by buddy pairs. Tanks were always at 3,000 psi. There were fresh towels and a shower. Two sets of steps led down to the dive platform, but the ladder — barely more than a swim ladder — was woefully inadequate. Not only was it very shallow, it offered no good handhold for fin doffing, especially if the water had a slight chop. (A new, state-of-the-art ladder is on order.) No light or flashing strobe was hung out for night dives, nor was there a safety-stop bar or a hanging line.

The crew didn’t dive with the guests, which was fine by me, but not good for neophytes lacking experienced buddies. We were briefed before each dive; Scott seemed to know all the sites well. Perhaps because we had a few brand-new divers, the dives all seemed planned to offer few challenges from strong currents or difficult depths. *Spirit* was usually tied up to moorings, to the coral’s relief, but sometimes it was a long swim to the reef. Once in a while, we were taken on the tender.

The boat ranks neutral on my “camera friendly” scale. There’s not much space for more than

a few photographers to park cameras safely on the dive deck, and the rinse tubs are minimal — but the crew handled gear with great care. Although one of the four dining salon tables was commandeered for laying out cameras, most folks did major work in their cabins. Charging facilities were adequate, and the video was rigged up to check out tapes. No light table, E-6 processing, or extra film was available — nor any rental gear.

The Fairly Good Barrier Reef

I’d heard that the visibility is less than wonderful and that the reefs are in poor shape — and there is some truth to all that. The reef itself is close enough to the mainland that erosion and chemical runoff make the water murky for quite a distance into the Coral Sea. Since 1990, several nasty storms have wiped out much of the soft

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coral in the northern reefs and nearby Coral Sea. And while I saw a few crown-of-thorns starfish here and there, I noticed only a little of the coral bleaching and algae growth others warned about, and the hard corals were spectacular.

The first and last dives, at Opal Reef and Undine near Cairns, were among the most boring dives I ever logged. Not only was the visibility poor, but

the sites had scant fish life. A few huge crown-of-thorns starfish scavenged amongst the broken-up coral. I would have been happy only if I were doing a thesis on sea cucumbers.

But things picked up on the second day when we steamed further into the Coral Sea. Although it suffered a cyclone a few years ago and lost much of its shallow soft coral, Osprey Reef’s steep wall was home to a variety of butterflies and a few assorted tridacnas. Macro shooters fired away at blue-tipped anemones with pale clownfish, tiny colonial yellow tunicates, blue-striped nudibranchs, and mini lionfish under ledges.

Osprey’s North Horn was where Ron and Valerie Taylor tested their chain-mail anti-shark suits, and shark action is still the main attraction. Scott set up a shark feed; once we were quietly arranged in a semicircle, he pulled down a line of fresh fish chunks on a pulley. Almost at once, a humongous potato cod and about 15 small whitetips cruised onto the scene. They were wary at first, but after a first bite by the cod, who was atop the pecking order, the scene burst into a frenzy. It was all over in 5 minutes.

We drifted away from the mess the sharks had left to explore the wall. The odd shark or two gave us a close glance, decided we had brought no more free lunches, and as quickly left. Drifting south on the wall, we found numerous unicorn fish and jacks and a few emperor angels.

After the first day we settled into the routine of three day dives and one at night. It used to be that four dives was a firm limit. Now the Queensland scuba police’s laws are a little

less strict, but many boats out of Cairns offer only three or four scheduled dives because of logistics and the strain on the crews. The regs require that each dive be recorded as shallower than the last, a hassle I could have done without. Yet there was little other regimentation, and they looked the other way when experienced loners practiced “same ocean, same day” buddy diving. Our group, mostly cautious over-40 souls, didn’t test the rules prohibiting any sort of decompression dives, so I couldn’t tell what the reaction might have been. I suspect Max and Scott might have handed down a scolding.

Gridlock at Cod Hole

Scott planned our diving to avoid Cod Hole over the weekend. “Boats pile up at the moorings all day long,” he told us, “and after a couple of feeding sessions, those poor cod are so stuffed they can hardly move.” As with the shark feed, we noticed another odd pecking order at Cod Hole. Here the king of the hill was a large Napoleon wrasse. Six or eight potato cod, some larger than the wrasse, hung back until the wrasse had eaten his fill of handouts from Scott’s plastic bucket. All through the show, a shy moray eel hovered close to Scott’s fins, refusing to dine until the cod were sated.

Near Lizard Island was my favorite site of the week, Snake Pit. Besides the sea snakes, dozens of them, there were various other slithery critters — bright blue ribbon eels with their yellow jaws open wide, midnight-mantled cowries, crinoids of many hues. Clusters of Moorish idols and friendly unicorn fish kept us company as we circled around the bommies.

I was pleased by the variety of sites offered us. Some were

fairly flat with patch reefs, others featured large bommies and pinnacles. There were a few walls and slopes. The scarcity of soft coral was almost made up for by the huge variety of stony corals. While I was impressed by the myriads of small Pacific tropicals, I was disappointed that the large-creature action was limited to the staged feedings.

We spent several days in the Ribbon Reefs, which extend

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through a vast area of the northern Great Barrier. At Ribbon Reefs site no. 9½, we were treated to an exhilarating drift dive, whizzing past fine soft coral, craggy hard corals, and blue-tipped anemones. My buddy saw a manta hanging out at the edge of visibility; it was the only manta sighting all week.

Several night forays rated yawns for my logbook, but one, at Pixie Pinnacles, was the site of a notable dive. We spiraled around the vertical column from bottom to top and found abundant activity everywhere: lionfish, blooming corals, crinoids, brittle stars, top shells, tiny pipefish, and nudibranchs.

On our last day, we began to move south, back toward Cairns, and the visibility wors-

ened steadily. At Ribbon Reefs site no. 3, Little Anderson, we found an assembly of over a dozen hefty tridacna clams, each 5 feet long and nearly a yard wide. Their 2-foot-long kids huddled at the edges. Gaping at the clams, we missed the flurry of activity down the reef as our friends found a cuttlefish in the midst of egg-laying, oblivious to flashes blinking around her.

Sum total: Not paradise, but rather better than the gloomsters related. For Pacific diving, a B minus.

Large Hungry Mammals

Our own feeding frenzies took place regularly. The breakfast buffet had splendid tropical fruit and a different hot dish each morning, sometimes eggs. For lunch one day there was cold roast chicken, other days hot dishes like prawns or British colonial versions of tacos or pizza. Dinners featured hefty portions of stolid pot roast, roast lamb, creamed scallops, baked chicken and Chinese-style shrimp. Vegetables were ample, but salads and fruit were scarce at dinner. For sale at \$10 a bottle were several undistinguished Australian wines, not their better labels. Desserts were mostly ice cream, but one night Carmel produced a Pavlova, a uniquely Australian mound of baked egg whites topped with whipped cream and kiwi fruit. Usually some sort of snack, like freshly baked cake, appeared after the morning dive. A large tray of nibbles such as cheeses, olives, and crudites circulated late afternoon. Pretty good fare for a live-aboard.

In the salon were a few videos, but after chilly night dives, a hot shower and a cozy bunk beckoned most. One night was mildly enlivened by a shore stop, at the exclusive

Lizard Island resort, for some elbow-bending with Aussie deep-sea fisherpersons at the Marlin Bar. So much for island contacts with colorful natives.

Before and after the trip we bunked at a hotel in Cairns to fight jet lag. I had last been in Cairns 6 years ago, when it was still a sleepy, tropical tourist town. It now bustles with malls, good for a half day (at most) of browsing, depending on your interest in stuffed koalas and tacky shark T-shirts; mine is limited, so I headed out of town, taking the Kuranda Railroad. We chugged up through steep valleys, passing glorious waterfalls, to lush highlands, where I took a short jungle tour in an army Duck. Others of my group went whitewater rafting. Six of us hired a van and meandered up the beautiful Rainforest Coast, stopping to visit koalas, emus, parrots, crocodiles, and kangaroos at a park called Habitat.

In Cairns I found a few really good restaurants, like Barnacle Bill's, Veranda, and those at the main hotels, where the seafood specialties — especially the mud crabs and the succulent Morton Bay Bugs — were delectable. The best thing about Cairns is the lovely, laid-back, friendly and helpful citizens. I hope they don't change once the huge casino, promised for later in '95, emerges from what is now a huge hole in the ground.

Admittedly, in 7 days I could sample only a small part of the Great Barrier Reef and a tiny area of the Coral Sea. Max Allen told me he prefers the diving farther south, from his Gladstone base. Though the water is much colder, the visibility is better than in the more tropical sections, and the most distant reefs, like Marion, Swain, Capricorn, and Heron

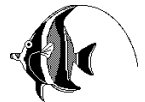
Island, offer more plentiful riches of pelagics.

Perhaps that is where I would find my dreamed-about Australian diving — the whale sharks, leafy sea dragons, crocodiles, mantas, sea lions, the awesome pelagics. It will have to await my second, third, and nth trips. Perhaps.

Details

My trip, which had been a group deal arranged through Art Travers's Poseidon Ventures Tours (800-854-9334), cost about \$3,250, which included airfare from Los Ange-

les, 8 nights aboard the boat (7 full days diving) with meals (but not beverages), plus 3 nights in good Cairns hotels. Cabs were extra. Travelling without a group and on full fare to Australia would run up the cost a bit. . . . The water temperatures were on the coolish side (76–79°F); I was glad to have full tropical suit and hood. . . . Best season for the northern Great Barrier and Coral Sea is October through December. . . . If you have both lights and strobes to charge, a converter and Aussie plug will come in handy.



The Miami Luggage Triangle

If you've dived the Caribbean, odds are that you've flown there through Miami. Hold onto your bag. In the first 6 months of 1994, more than 600 pieces of luggage disappeared in Miami's airport. That's about three a day.

What's the mystery of the missing bags? The Metro-Dade police suspected foul play. They set an elegant black camera case, with a Nikon inside, next to a pay phone inside the airport. During an average week they did this 25 times. Out of those 25 times, the camera was turned in to lost and found seven times; someone tried to call the "owner" three times.

But 15 times the camera case vanished — and not at all mysteriously. A psychiatrist spirited the booty into a bathroom stall and stuffed the Nikon into his own suitcase; he was carrying \$4,000 cash in his pockets. An IRS computer engineer also man-

aged to get the Nikon out of the case and into his bag. Later a preacher snagged it — and so on. They all ended up in handcuffs.

The fact that the camera was stolen 60% of the time doesn't do much to boost my faith in human nature, including that of preachers. But at least the *Miami Herald* reporter who covered the story quoted some stats on the 601 stolen bags that may be of some help to the traveler. Most thefts were in concourses D (American Airlines) and E (international flights). The worst day was Wednesday, the worst time 4 to 6 p.m. The safest days were Sunday and Monday.

So as you pass through the Miami Triangle, watch your bags closely. And if you're there Wednesday at 5 p.m., you might consider handcuffing your camera case to your wrist or hiring a bodyguard.