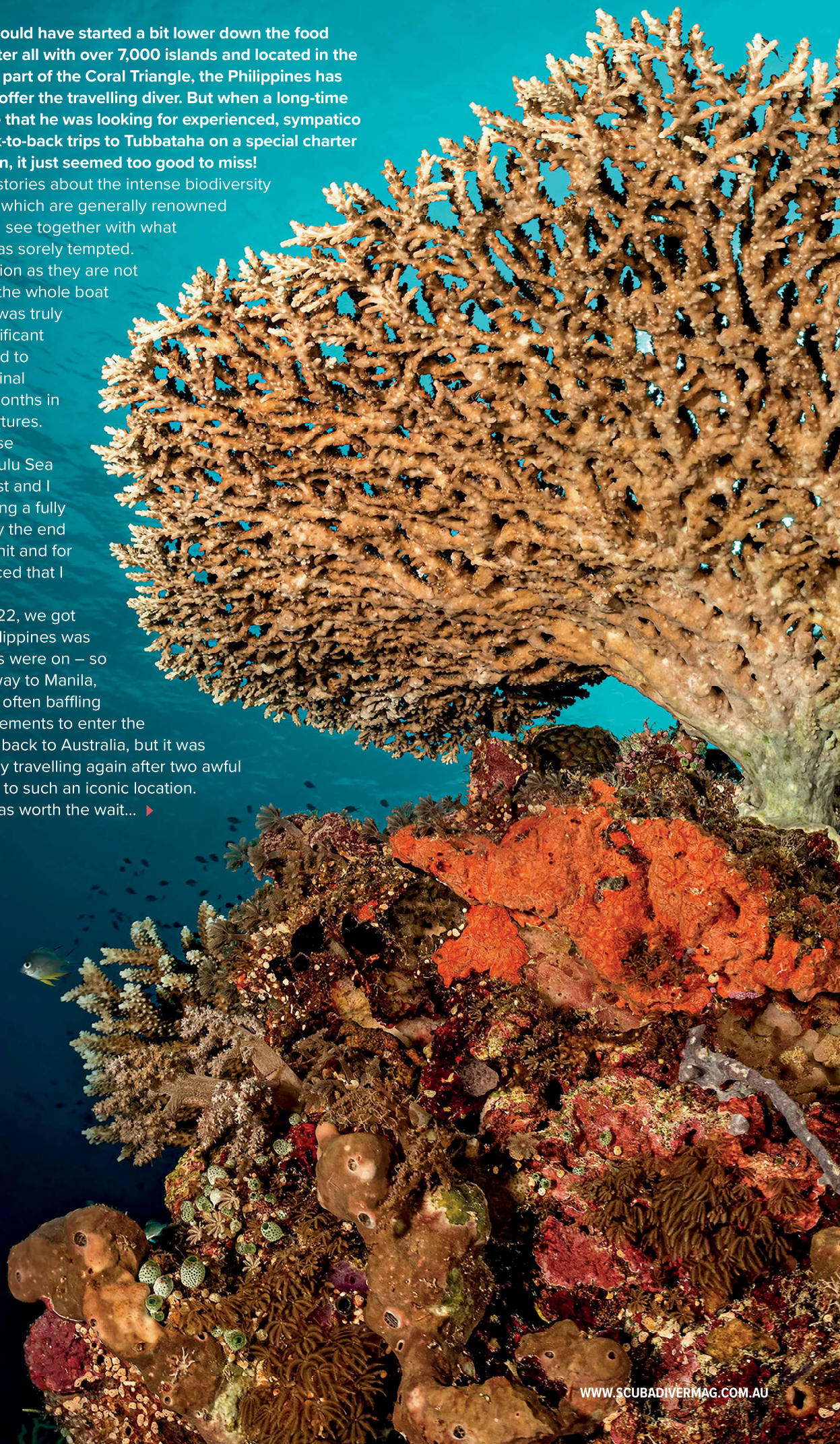


Maybe I should have started a bit lower down the food chain, after all with over 7,000 islands and located in the northern part of the Coral Triangle, the Philippines has much to offer the travelling diver. But when a long-time diving buddy told me that he was looking for experienced, sympatico divers to fill two back-to-back trips to Tubbataha on a special charter of the Philippine Siren, it just seemed too good to miss!

I had heard many stories about the intense biodiversity of Tubbataha's reefs, which are generally renowned for both what you will see together with what you might see and was sorely tempted. But it was a big decision as they are not cheap trips and with the whole boat chartered, my friend was truly on the hook and significant deposits were needed to secure a place, with final payments required months in advance of the departures.

But the lure of those remote reefs in the Sulu Sea was too much to resist and I bit the bullet, becoming a fully paid-up participant by the end of 2019 - then Covid hit and for a while, I was convinced that I would lose the lot!

Finally, in early 2022, we got the news that the Philippines was opening, and the trips were on – so in April I was on my way to Manila, having navigated the often baffling and expensive requirements to enter the country and then get back to Australia, but it was all worth it to be finally travelling again after two awful years and on my way to such an iconic location. Read on to see if it was worth the wait... ▶





DIVING

Tubbataha

Scuba Diver Senior Travel Editor Don Silcock finally makes it to the Philippines after a Covid-induced delay, but his liveboard adventure to Tubbataha is worth the wait

Photographs by Don Silcock

Did you know?

Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park lies in a unique position in the centre of the Sulu Sea, and includes the Tubbataha and Jessie Beazley Reefs. It protects an area of almost 100,000 hectares of high quality marine habitats.

“ I had heard many stories about the intense biodiversity of Tubbataha’s reefs, which are generally renowned for both what you will see together with what you might see and was sorely tempted ”

Colourful reefs await
in Tubbataha

Did you know?

Tubbataha's dive season is schedule just three months long, running from mid-March until mid-June. At this time of year diving conditions is usually optimum, with clear skies, calm seas, and visibility between 30 and 45 metres.

Can you spell that again?

Pronounced 'Toobahtaaha'... the name means 'long reef exposed at low tide' in Sinama – the language of the nomadic Sama-Bajau sea gypsies of the southern Philippines, who are believed to have first discovered the area.

Physically the TRNP (Tubbataha Reefs National Park) consists of two atolls and one coral reef that are located in the middle of the Sulu Sea - effectively the core of the Philippine archipelago. And those 'exposed reefs' are the highest tips of the many extinct underwater volcanoes and mountains that form the Cagayan Ridge, which rises up from the 3,000m depths of the Sulu Basin.

The two atolls are (rather prosaically) named the north and south atolls, while the reef is named after a long-forgotten English mariner named Jessie Beazley. So, what is so special About Tubbataha? There are a few things that are really special about Tubbataha, which combined together create something that verges on the unique!

Let's start with the Sulu Sea, the 260,000 km² body of water that is bounded on three sides by the Philippine archipelago and, in the south by the province of Sabah in Malaysian Borneo, which marine biologists classify as a Large Marine Ecosystem (LME). Basically, the area is extremely rich in marine biodiversity with some 600 species of fish, 360 species of corals, 11 species of sharks and rays and 13 species of dolphins and whales found there.

All that concentrated biodiversity is nurtured and

“ There are a few things that are really special about Tubbataha, which combined together create something that verges on the unique! ”

sustained by the fertile currents of the Pacific Ocean from the east, together with the rich deep-water upwellings produced as those currents flow through the Sulu Sea.

Secondly, Tubbataha is some 150km from the nearest landfall on the large, narrow island of Palawan and, up to the 1980s, well beyond the range of traditional fishing boats, plus with no fresh-water available, habitation was impossible. So, the isolated atolls evolved into almost a marine version of the Garden of Eden with almost only natural predation occurring.

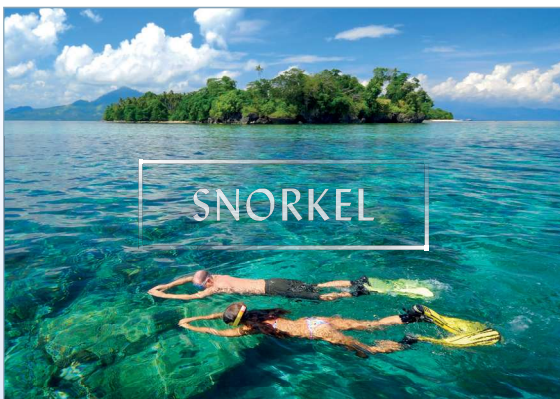
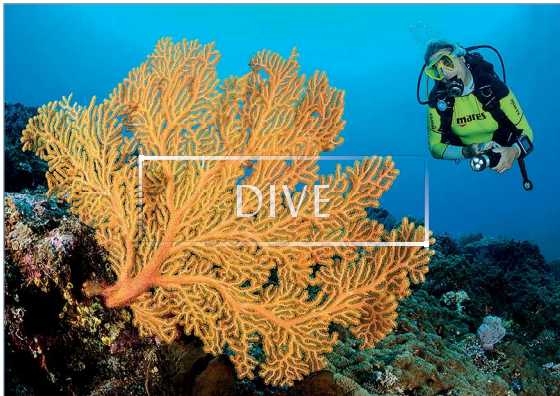
Then the early 1980s saw the first motorized fishing boats arrive... Driven from the more-accessible fishing grounds in the Sulu Sea by over-fishing and the dramatic depletion of fish stocks, the rich bounty of Tubbataha's atolls made the long and perilous journey worth the risk - but to maximise their returns those boats also introduced cyanide and ▶

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dynamite fishing and by the mid 1980s, that Garden of Eden was no longer what nature had made it.

Good governance was rarely associated with the Philippines in the 1980s, but through the efforts of a few key, highly motivated individuals, the government was stirred into action and in 1988, then President Corazon Aquino designated Tubbataha a national marine park - the first in the country and, five years later, UNESCO inscribed it as a World Heritage Site. Nature is an incredibly powerful thing when we humans let it do its job and by 2015, scientific studies of those badly decimated reefs on the north and south atolls, plus Jessie Beazley reef, had been restored to a near-pristine and truly natural state!

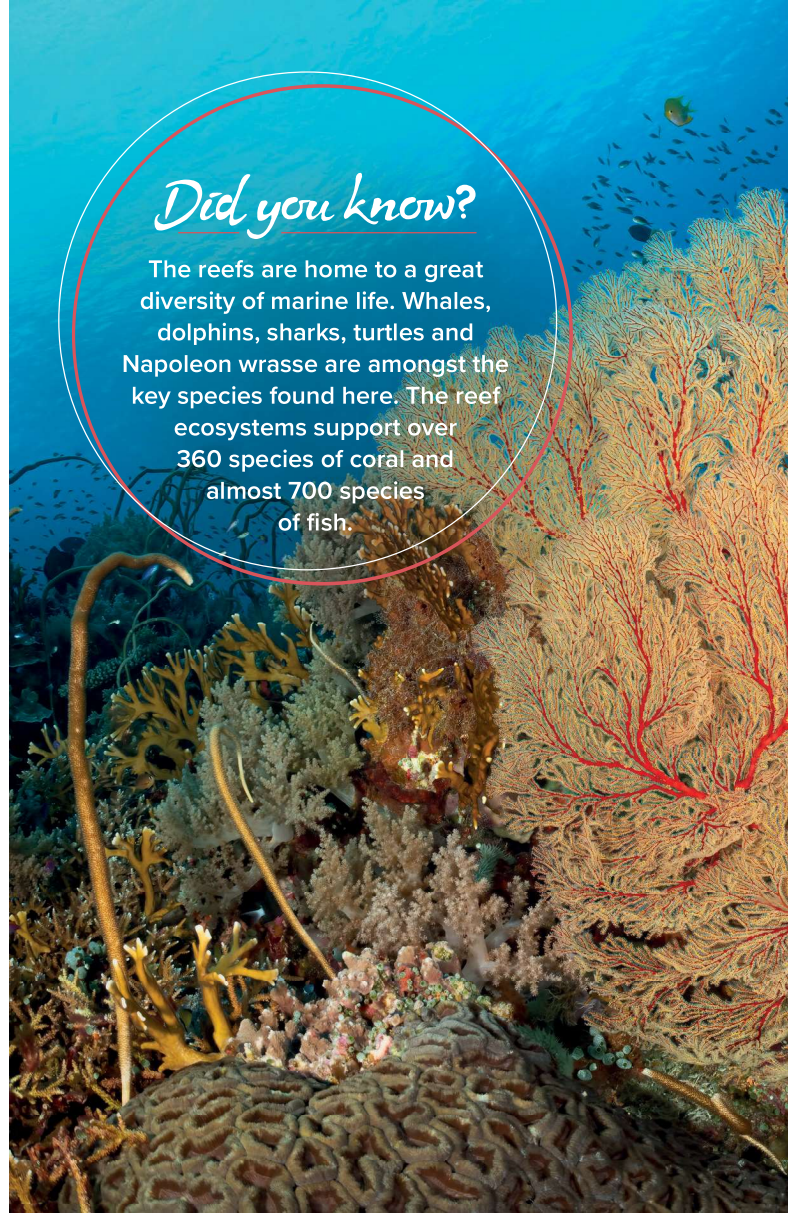
So effective has been the management of the TRNP it is often referred to as a role-model for similar initiatives elsewhere and will be the subject of the second of this two-part series on Tubbataha.

Diving Tubbataha

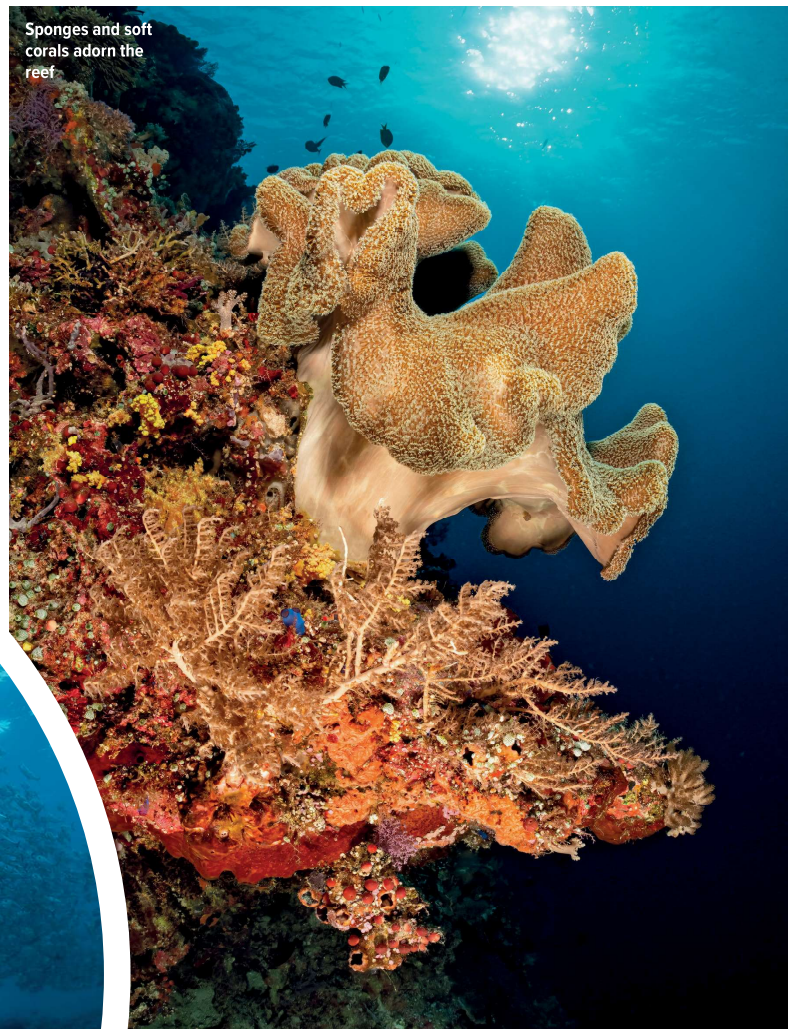
If you like tropical reef diving – and who doesn't - imagine if you will rolling backwards into blue water that is so clear, the visibility seems to stretch out to infinity. Then arrayed below you on the upper reef margin are vast rolling dunes of staghorn coral with schools of resident anthias swimming up into the light and then darting back down for protection as an endangered green turtle forages for food among the branches. Then head down to about 15m, where the margin ends and the reef slope begins its descent into the depths of the Sulu Sea. Arranged to perfection along the slope are rows of huge gorgonian fans that stretch out into the current and feed on the passing nutrients – each one a mini ecosystem of its own, with permanent residents like sea stars, brittle stars, ghost gobies, pygmy seahorses and the pygmy's nemesis, the long-nosed hawkfish.

Did you know?

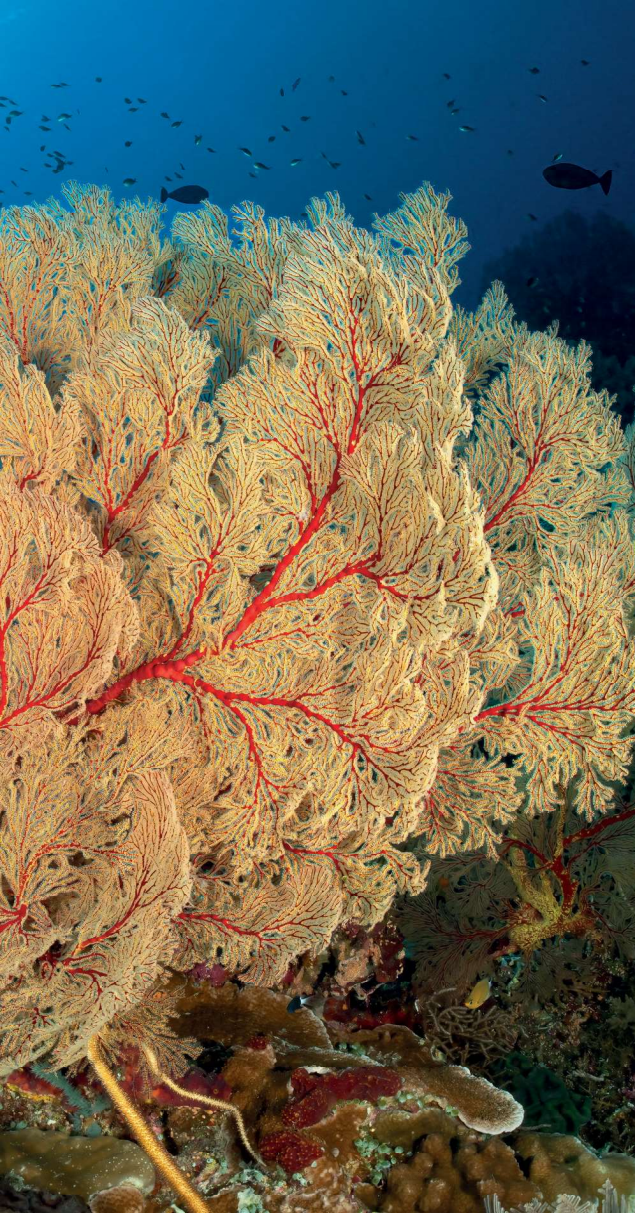
The reefs are home to a great diversity of marine life. Whales, dolphins, sharks, turtles and Napoleon wrasse are amongst the key species found here. The reef ecosystems support over 360 species of coral and almost 700 species of fish.



Divers beneath the boat



Sponges and soft corals adorn the reef



Shoal of sweetlips



Pufferfish getting a clean

Vast gorgonian seafan

“ If you like tropical reef diving – and who doesn’t - imagine if you will rolling backwards into blue water that is so clear, the visibility seems to stretch out to infinity ”



Happy diver on Tubbataha's reefs

Look up and there is a good chance of seeing the massive schools of jacks that patrol the upper parts of the reef and then out into the blue where schools of barracuda move up and down the reef wall. Concentrate on the blue and you will see large groups of blacktip reef sharks hunting in the current – often with individual sharks working tag-team with a giant trevally.

At this point you tend to have to make a decision... stay focused on the blue on the chance of a pelagic encounter with one of the regular open-water animals that visit Tubbataha such as whalesharks, giant oceanic mantas and tiger sharks. Or you stay focused on the beautiful and wonderfully biodiverse reef slope because, believe me, it's hard to do both!

And, that's just my description of one of my personal favourite sites - Staghorn Point on the southern tip of the South Atoll. There are another 16 other sites to choose from at Tubbataha and of them at least seven are absolutely world-class in terms of their biodiversity. ▶

How to dive Tubbataha

Stating the obvious... from a liveaboard, as there is simply no other way to do it, and there are currently around 18 registered vessels all operating from Puerto Princesa mid-way down the island of Palawan.

But the season is limited to about three months from mid-March to mid-June because of the tropical storms from the November to March northeast monsoon and the July and October southwest monsoon. During those three months, the diving conditions are usually excellent with clear skies, calm seas and visibility up to 50 metres! To get to Puerto Princesa (PPS) I flew Qantas from Sydney to Manila, overnights near the airport and caught a Philippine Airways Express flight the next day – with another overnight stay required before getting on the Philippine Siren.

In summary

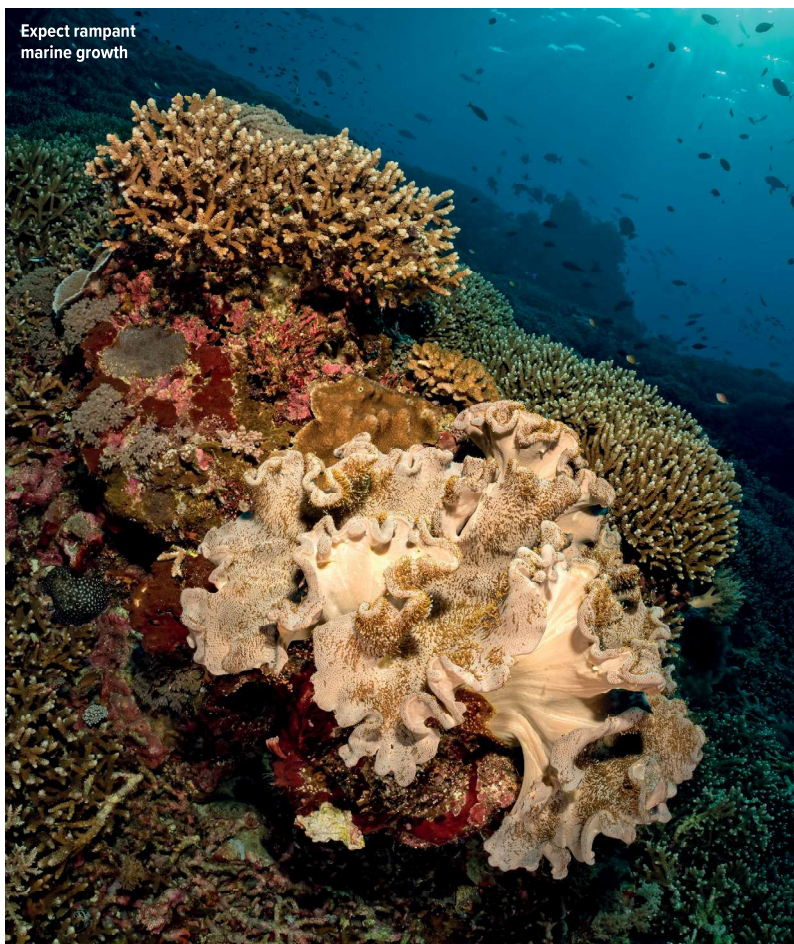
There are certain iconic locations around the world where, when I have been fortunate to experience them, a constant thought runs through my mind – there must have been so many places like this once! Tubbataha is a stunning example of just how powerful nature is in creating such Gardens of Eden and what can happen if we humans get out of the way and let it restore that beauty!

What you will see at Tubbataha are superb reefs in pristine condition that are bursting at their seams with a veritable smorgasbord of marine life. What you might see are those passing pelagics that are roaming the Sulu Sea, which pass like ships in the night! Was it worth the wait and the expense – well, for me, it certainly was and was the perfect remedy for two years of Covid induced half-life! ■

“ Tubbataha is a stunning example of just how powerful nature is in creating such Gardens of Eden and what can happen if we humans get out of the way and let it restore that beauty! ”



Turtle flypast



Expect rampant marine growth



Iridescent parrotfish

Don Silcock

Don is Scuba Diver's Senior Travel Editor and is based from Bali in Indonesia. His website has extensive location guides, articles and images on some of the best diving locations in the Indo-Pacific region and 'big animal' experiences globally.

www.indopacificimages.com