

Nautilus SCUBA Club Newsletter

Trip Reports

Tawali

Wakatobi

Coral Sea and
Ribbon Reefs



September/October 2020

Editor: Phil Woodhead



Tawali Trip

By: Eden Gray-Spence

In March 2020 I had the opportunity to travel to the Milne Bay Province in PNG staying at the Tawali Dive and Leisure Resort, which had generously donated a 7-night dive and accommodation package as a prize in the club's 2019 photo Competition. Tracey Hale, a regular dive buddy of mine, also came along for the trip.

We had originally booked a Monday flight from Cairns to Alotau with Air Niugini that arrived in Port Moresby in the morning allowing us time to catch the early afternoon flight to Alotau. However, the Cairns flight was altered with a later departure time making this connection impossible. This necessitated a Sunday departure from Cairns and an overnight in Port Moresby. It is always worth checking if you're travelling for a holiday in PNG, outside of Port Moresby (which means most folk), that you can make your connecting flight without having to overnight in POM.

Having said that, the stay at the newish Hilton Hotel was quite comfortable, although it did add another night and a bit more expense to the trip. I had already elected to pay a bit more and extend my stay at Tawali to 10 nights.



Tracey at the Hilton looking at the rain

The flight to Alotau the next day was delayed for an hour or so due to "technical reasons" which also meant transferring to a pretty small turboprop which was subsequently full. I was worried that our luggage, which included scuba and camera gear may get offloaded, however on arrival at Alotau it was all there. You need to be patient travelling within PNG as delays, flight changes and luggage offloads are quite common. From Gurney Airport we travelled for a bit over an hour in the comfortable Tawali Resort bus, through the small town of Alotau and along the good road to the jetty to transfer to a boat for the 20 minute or so trip to Tawali Resort.



We were met upon arrival by the lovely Nozaki, whom I had known earlier when she worked on Lissenung Island.

Tawali Trip

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Tawali accommodation



The Tawali Explorer

We then went up the wooden ramps and flights of stairs, that we were to travel on many times over the next 10 days, to reception to check in and present our dive certs and insurance details.

The rooms are very comfortable in duplex bungalows with en-suites, air conditioning, TV (which we never turned on) and verandahs overlooking the little bay next to the resort.

The dive routine was either two morning dives at nearby (20 minutes or less cruising) sites then back for lunch and then out again for a third dive. If diving further afield the deal was that lunch would be had out on the boat after the first two dives and then a third dive in the afternoon on the way back to the resort.



All dives were from the Tawali Explorer, a very comfortable deep displacement vessel, with giant stride entry from either side and then back on board up the well-designed steps at the stern. Although the boat could take 20 or so divers there weren't more than half a dozen or so while we were there which was really nice. Captain Bill, engineer John and guides Jonah and ? were all great.

Milne Bay is renown for macro (muck) diving, but there are plenty of opportunities for wide angle as well. While we there we dived most of the nearby sites, Wahoo Point, Sponge Heaven, (No) Barracuda Point, Lawadi Beach, Deacon's, Coral Gardens, Towahi, Michelle's as well as the House Reef. The water temperature was around 29 degrees. Most of the nearby sites are for macro.

Lots to see, different pygmy sea horses, various ghost pipefish, shrimp, nudis of course and various slugs including the misnamed butterfly nudi.



Milne Bay macro

Tawali Trip

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Out East Cape way, where you eat lunch on board, we dived Cobb's Cliff, Tania's Reef and Cherie's Reef each a few times. Most times there was a strong surface current, so we needed to drop straight down to the reef where it was OK. On the way back you needed to keep an eye on the boat and your ascent rate to coincide with arrival at the boarding steps. If you missed there was a long mermaid catcher streaming out, but that meant a tiresome struggle back to the boat (particularly if you had a camera)

The food at the resort was varied and tasty with a range of different dishes at each buffet style meal. There is a great deck with beautiful views while enjoying a sundowner and reliving the day's diving. Wayne the barman was quick to keep us supplied with tonic and ice to go with our duty-free gin..



Milne Bay wide angle



View from the deck



It seemed like no time before our diving was over with one last House Reef morning dive and then the tedious exercise of rinsing and drying the gear before packing it all up again before heading off early the next day for the return trip back home.

Thanks to everyone at Tawali for making it a tremendous holiday. ■



Gurney Airport, Alotau

TOP SIDE @ Wakatobi Dive Resort

A Junior Master Diver adventure with Eliza Coralie Gow - age 13yrs.Nautulis Club Member



To my fellow club members, I've been involved with the club since I was 8 years old and some of you may have seen me sitting on the floor at club meetings or on board the clubs regular Minkie Whale trips or monthly club dives as a snorkeler a few years ago. Did you know the club has evolved and offers junior membership? Since becoming a Junior Master Scuba Diver at 12 I found myself as the messenger and promoter of junior scuba diving and more particularly family diving. After meeting Wakatobi representations at several dive events they extended an invitation to attend and write an article about my experience as a JMSD.

The article is as follows:

The first time I heard about Wakatobi Dive Resort was in Dive Log Magazine and then in August 2018 when attending the Sydney Boat and Dive Show 'Wakatobi stand' with mum. Earlier this year, Dad asked me where Mum would like to go for a 'surprise birthday holiday'. I said, "Wakatobi". Little did I know it would become the best week of my diving life with my family.



We departed Sydney in late July 2019. My last few dives were at Bass Point, south of Sydney at Shell Cove with water temperatures around 11-degrees. Vastly different to the July - August 26 degree temperatures at Wakatobi. I was so glad I had packed my 4-3mm wetsuit and left the 7mm on the hanger at home, the moment we landed after a 6hr + flight, and on exiting the plane, the heat and humidity blasted my body. I made a good choice!



Upon entering the International Terminal at Denpasar Bali Airport, and before passing through Customs or even collecting our bags, we were greeted by Ugus, a Wakatobi representative holding a sign with our names on it. From that moment, I felt like a 'rock star' as our bags were collected, and we passed through Customs like VIP's. Ugus and Wakatobi staff helped with every aspect of our Bali transfer and accommodation, even other passengers were asking us for help and questioning who we were due to our rock star treatment.

After settling into our overnight accommodation dad realised, he had forgot his speedo's/swimmers. I asked myself, how could he forget the most important thing to take on a tropical holiday like your swimmers. Dad must really need this holiday. Mum and I packed more than we needed of course! We then were forced into the bustling streets in search of a pair of swimmers and dinner. We were also careful in our meal choice as the last thing we wanted was Bali Belly heading to Wakatobi a five (5) star dive resort.

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Arriving back at the Airport the next morning we were again greeted by Ugus and Wakatobi staff, in true VIP style. Ugus said our luggage would be delivered to our Bungalow on Wakatobi. He guided us through the busy Airport and left us at a private lounge for breakfast, this is where I meet Ebram, Head of Food and Beverage at Wakatobi Dive Resort. Ebram was a great source of information and shared many stories of his 10 years working at the Resort.



Our private charter flight was just 2 ½ hours long, it was nice getting fresh hot towels, a pillow and blanket, delicious food and unlimited drinks, far better than Virgin Airlines flight to Bali. The onboard entertainment was supplied by Valentine, the youngest child of a Wakatobi Resort owner. His interaction on the flight gave a family feeling to the Resort. As we flew closer my eyes scrolled horizon to horizon to finally see the Sulawesi Islands and reefs appear like glossy pictures in a magazine. We landed at Wakatobi's private airstrip on a neighbouring Island and transferred to boats for the last leg of our journey. The wooden boats were nothing like I expected, they were big, long and very comfortable. Built on Wakatobi Island they are perfectly designed for diving and ferrying people. As soon as we boarded, chatter began amongst guests as refreshments were offered around, we all introduced ourselves and I met other dive families like us. It's not often I get to hang out with other Junior Scuba Divers. As we approached the Dive Resort my excitement was intense with the crystal blue waters sparkling afar, pure white sandy beaches and lush green tropical vegetation engulfing the timber bungalows along the foreshore and the sound of clicking, everyone taking photos.



We tied up alongside the jetty and were greeted by our assigned hosts, who are also Dive Instructors and speak at least two languages. Silvia introduced herself to us, she was tall and beautiful, a tanned blonde-



hair Italian who lives on Wakatobi with her partner, also from Italy. We hit it off immediately, you see I have Italian cousins and I would be visiting them back in Australia after our Wakatobi holiday. As we continued to chat, Silvia guided us through the Resort to our home for the next week, Bungalow #12, positioned between the longhouse building at the end of the jetty and the restaurant on the point. Silvia discussed our dive package and routine for the week. Dive packages are planned around diver's personal experience and the number of dives you'd like per day, Dad had pre-planned 2 and 3 dives on alternate days with a night dive. On top of that we could also dive the reef in front of the resort as much as we like, a shore dive or



jetty entry with a timber tender/boat for pick-ups if needed, usually requested if currents are strong.

TOP SIDE @ Wakatobi Dive Resort

A Junior Master Diver adventure with Eliza Coralie Gow - age 13yrs.Nautulis Club Member



From the moment we arrived we slipped straight into the Resort routine. Mornings began early, with a gourmet breakfast at our new favourite restaurant. Breakfast wasn't just cereal, bacon and eggs either. Ebram made sure no two smorgasbords were the same and cycled them every 28 days, meaning every breakfast lunch and dinner meal was different. On top of that, if you asked for something special and the ingredients were available at the Resort, the chef would make it for you. Since arriving, I continue to notice that all the staff knew my name and that of every guest as we came into contact. Again, it gave me the feeling of being a 'rock star'. It gave us a connection to the resort and its people.



After breakfast guests boarded boats at 07:30hrs sharp who intended to go diving. I counted five dive boats and at least 4 tender boats during our stay. After each dive, snacks and hot drinks are offered on deck before a boat ride to the second dive site (sometimes we'd stop via the Resort), then after the second dive site we'd return to the Resort for lunch at 12:30hrs. Dive sites were carefully selected for the best diving conditions as the August trade winds could reduce the visibility of some dive sites. The choices made during our stay were unbelievable and offered great visibility and fantastic diving conditions.



From our first lunch at the waterfront restaurant it became clear while looking across the pristine reef, we each knew, how we would spend that afternoon. I'd usually find mum and dad lounging at the front of our bungalow or at the longhouse chatting with other guests. I must admit, I enjoyed a couple of lazy afternoons too, but unlike Dad



particularly, I wanted to dive. This meant I was off with Silvia who was happy to buddy up. Silvia's dive briefings were amazing, sketching each dive site on a whiteboard and then clearing it for the next dive site brief. Everything Silvia 'briefed on' we found during our

dives. Lots of macro critters unique to each dive site. I thought my eyesight was good, but seriously, Silvia sees everything, pointing out the tiniest critters like the pigmy seahorse. I have Silvia to thank for the most amazing dive experiences at Wakatobi. The dive boat was never busy either, it

usually had just a few other guests, this meant we had lots of room for the crew to assist with every aspect of diving. Except for putting on our wetsuits. Honestly, diving Wakatobi was effortless, our dive gear floated between the resort and boats as if carried by butterfly's and was cleaned and dried daily by Wakatobi staff. Besides not handling my dive gear (apart from initial set up), I enjoyed hot face washers, fresh towels and hot chocolates after each dive in my Wakatobi gift, a personal mug/drink bottle, supplied to all diving guests. Snacks were also continually offered, but I can only eat so much food!



TOP SIDE @ Wakatobi Dive Resort

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Just like the boat, the longhouse was a good place to mingle, meet other guests and find a snack. It is where the front office is located, along with guest lounges, a coffee machine, resort shop, dive shop, library, amenities, theatre room and dedicated dive camera room to recharge and store dive cameras. The longhouse is where all activities are arranged, such as: The Resort Operation Tour, Local Village Tour, paddle board

- kayak and kite surf lessons, cooking lessons and the list goes on. Of the selection, we booked the Resort Operations Tour, Village Tour for our last day and the Wakatobi's Bali English speaking driver and car, for a Day Tour of Bali, on our return leg to Australia.

The longhouse was the first building/guest house built at the Wakatobi Dive Resort and is the hub for all activities catering for up to 68 guests' during peak season. I learnt the thatched roof on all guest buildings has a total of seven layers and are replaced every three years. All buildings are fitted modern appliances and air-conditioning and like the dive boats, all buildings and furniture were built on the Island to an amazingly high standard. We loved our bungalow and the huge comfortable beds, along with the private lounges and hammock outside the bungalow door. The beds had beautiful linen with amazing daily towel displays, divine toiletries amongst other things. Seriously, we all wanted to take the soaps and shampoo home, they smelt so good and made my long curly hair feel like silk. The lesson here is don't bring your own.

It was no surprise Mum's birthday fell at the mid-point of our Resort holiday, the real surprise was Dad visiting the Day Spa with Mum for a massage, then Ebram surprising Mum with a birthday cake after dinner and having the entire restaurant sing 'happy birthday Melissa' to her. Mum said besides sunset cocktails at the Jetty Bar her birthday cake was the best surprise of all. It was also no surprise that 'happy hour' was birthday drinks for Mum at the Jetty bar every day from 16:30hrs (4:30pm) in the afternoon. We would chat with other guests while looking out to sea for the next sign of sea-life. It was never long between turtles, schooling fish and even a marlin to show up. Besides that, we also had the largest living coral aquarium beside us when we looked over the jetties edge. Sunsets didn't disappoint either, it was always beautiful weather with an amazing display of colour as the sun disappeared past the horizon.



After sunset everyone disappeared and dinner that began at 1900hrs (7:00pm). The dress code was smart, resort wear except for shoes. The resort has a no shoes policy in all buildings, something we really embraced during our stay. Prior to entering any building, we would remove our shoes (thongs/sandals), wash our coral dusted feet under a little foot shower, prior to entering. It was an invigorating feeling, of being on a remote island in paradise. Every night was a new culinary experience for me, I'm a fussy eater and hard to please but every night there was something new and

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delicious to try. The presentation of food was like a piece of artwork. On one occasion bread was baked to look like tropical fish and coral reef. It was also appreciated when Ebram organised spaghetti bolognese especially for me. I think Silva triggered my subconscious with the talk of Italy. It turned out to be the best spaghetti bolognese I've ever had. The entire staff was so fantastic, and no staff was favoured over another as we built small friendships with everyone.



Food and Beverage Manager: Ebram and staff (Elina, Leo, Sari, & Arif), Chef: Iman with Eliza in the Kitchen, Internal Dining, Outside Dining,



These friendships were also made at the local village during our tour on our last day. We had anticipated this visit and pre-purchased gifts in Australia that we handed to Wakatobi Resort on arrival. This way items could be evenly

distributed amongst the Village Schools. On our approach to the village jetty by boat many locals stopped to watch our arrival. It was weird watching them, watching us, as we stepped off the boat. Smiling children seemed



unusually attracted to me as we all walked together. I couldn't understand any of them or the attention I was getting, the feeling of 'rock star' fell over me once again. I did my best to respect the culture wearing appropriate clothes as it was customary not to show shoulders or legs above the knee. I soon realised the attraction was to my long curly hair as each child reached for me to touch it, together with my white skin and 'rock star' sunglasses. I guess my overall appearance was very different to what they're used to. Even with our language barrier we managed to communicate to each other and confirm ages and where I was from. A couple of older girls; well, girls around my age carried mobile phones, I guessed they were from the wealthier village families. The girls mostly used the phones as a camera; meaning, I had lots of photos taken of me and we took lots of photos of them. As we



walked, the girls locked arms with me, and we walked together while the younger children trailed behind us with the adult group behind them. The girls I met were named Feny, Resty, Risma and Anis, Anis was the most photogenic and took the most selfies with me. We stopped in front of the local school for a group shot and then

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moved onto the local village market. We all purchased something from several stalls until our cash ran out. Later we learnt we could have just charged things to our room. Oh well, next time! With Wakatobi Resort being a family friendly resort, it surprised me to learn not all children visiting visit the village. For me, at first it was a difficult to accept the village lifestyle as it was something I had never seen before, they live very simply and nothing like our culture at all. I watched Villagers cooking meals outside their homes on campfires and others living in homes I thought needed serious repair. Fortunately, Wakatobi Resort contributes to all villages on the island and employs many of the island locals. Our visit made me grateful for the lifestyle I have. The most shocking aspect of my village tour was seeing the amount of plastic debris floating around the village harbour and amongst homes over the water. We were told villages have tried to remove the floating waste, but as soon as it's removed more returns with tides floating in from hundreds of miles away. For this reason, Wakatobi guests are encouraged to visit the Resort with a zero footprint: meaning, if you bring plastic, take it home with you. Wakatobi staff also search and remove debris when diving and assist in the management of the reef. For example: we watched Silvia lead a control 'Star of Thorns' dive by injecting creatures six times with a vinegar solution. Wakatobi Resort also educates locals to not over-fish or fish in protected areas. Since the early 1990's, Wakatobi Resort has offered locals a lifestyle solution to a better way of life. Simple things like fresh water and electricity were first supplied to the village we visited by Wakatobi Dive Resort. The Resort continues to grow with more bungalows and buildings planned. This means more employees above the 250 working there today; of which, many are local islanders. I discovered most staff are long term employees too, that says a lot about Wakatobi Dive Resort. According to me, the Dive Instructors are world class, each with over 2,000 dives, highly trained, with all instructors on the island speaking more than two languages and a gruelling selection process from the owners. Some Instructors wait years to get an opportunity to work at Wakatobi and I know why, but you'll have to see for yourself.



Silva our Guide/Dive Instructor and some of the other wonderful Dive Instructors at the Resort.

On the eve of our final day we were invited to spend 'happy hour' at another guest's waterfront villa whom we meet during our stay. I can only describe their two-bedroom Villa, with horizon pool, sun beds and private butler as exquisite - luxury - five-star and amazing. It ended our holiday with wonderful new friends in the best accommodation after a week of the best diving in my life. I thoroughly enjoyed my 'Top Side' and undersea adventure at Wakatobi Dive Resort and thank all those who made it possible.

Oceans of Love

Eliza Coralie Gow

Sharks, rays, wrecks and tender drops, the great Spoilsport Adventure

Libby Sterling



The great Spoilsport adventure occurred in January 2020 courtesy of Craig Stephens and Mike Ball Spoilsport. Thank you for sponsoring the Nautilus photo competition! Again still pinching myself that I was the lucky winner of the Wide Angle 'open' category. I upgraded the prize to the 4 night Coral Sea expedition and so glad I did! Epic trip, awesome viz, almost glass out conditions most days, spectacular sunrises and sunsets, fabulous marine encounters and exceptional crew, passengers and vessel, and then there was the food extravaganza (lucky I was wearing stretchy lycra!)

We departed from Cairns on Thursday night and with much excitement headed off to Bougainville Reef with calm seas all the way.



Waking up to a beautiful morning at Bougainville, two breakfasts and the day has barely started; we enjoy the last of the important dive procedure briefings, nautilus lifeline and EANx analysing and its finally "dive time" on the wreck of the Antonio Tarabocchia.



The Antonio Tarabocchia above and below the water

In 1961, the Italian motorship

Antonio Tarabocchia (5,851 tons) was travelling to load sugar in Townsville. She struck the reef in darkness with squally south-east winds and rain.

There was a 'bit of a current on this dive, so I burnt off my double breakfast (or so I tell myself), I followed Jules (award winning photographer / videographer) as she went to every highlight of the site to snap photos), so I saw it all! Viz was fabulous and water a balmy 29+ degrees.

Off to Anchors Away where we were treated to some AMAZING and very healthy hard coral reef with gorgonian fans, anemone fish, puffers, morays, colourful christmas tree work cities and fish everywhere!

Finishing the day at Crystal Plateau for an afternoon and night dive. Crystal Plateau had something for everyone including swim thru's, healthy coral, hawk fish, pufferfish, various anemone fish species, butterfly fish, moorish idols, damselfish, christmas tree worms everywhere yet again, coral cod, jacks, angel fish and on it goes.



Sharks, rays, wrecks and tender drops, the great Spoilsport Adventure

Libby Sterling



False Entrance

After an overnight steam we woke up to another spectacular morning at Osprey Reef. First dive of the day is at a personal favourite; False Entrance and it didn't disappoint, in fact this may well have been one of the best dives I've had at this site. Viz went on "forever" although there was so much going on within 100m of the boat that I never made it to the wall! There were schools of jacks that kept me enthralled for ages; a juvenile eagle ray (was so cute) that swam right over to me; sharks, hawk fish, anemone fish, puffer fish, marbled grouper, big eyes and coral grouper.

We move off to another personal favourite and as I write this I realise that all the sites at Osprey are personal favourites! Anyway North Horn is next and the world famous shark feed which of course never fails to disappoint. Who wouldn't love maybe 100 sharks and a couple of potato cod all coming together into a feeding frenzy less than 25 metres in front of you!



A tender drop to dive along the wall at North Horn is always a treat with spectacular and colourful gorgonian fans adorning the walls and under / overhangs. Hundreds of different fish species, sharks cruising by out in the blue and below, morays hiding in the cracks and a drop off that falls away to black water beneath you! One word AWESOME! Off to Admiralty for the afternoon and night dives. Again I love this dive!!!



and varied fish life but really the highlight here for me are the caves and swim throughs. Bit of a cracker current on the night dive. After a quiet night (not steaming) we wake up to glass-out conditions and hit the water at a new site; Goggle Gardens, yep you guessed it, loved

it too! I found Dory (always a treat), beautiful and very healthy coral, whip gobies, flat worms, nudibranchs, star fish, glass fish covering a few bommies, coral cod making it simply a beautiful and easy morning dive.

Sharks, rays, wrecks and tender drops, the great Spoilsport Adventure

Libby Sterling

Google Gardens



One of the things I love about Spoilsport is the 'open deck' policy on some dives. Two Towers was one of those dives so I managed to fit in two dives on this great site! I focussed on macro (in an effort to improve) with whip gobies, dwarf hawk fish and some anemone fish, finishing with a quick swim around planning my next dive. The other highlight on this one was hearing the dolphins communicating, whilst unbeknown to me at the time, some of the crew were snorkelling with them as they frolicked around Spoilsport (the dolphins, not the crew). By the time I went in for a quick snorkel they were long gone (doh). Dive two was equally fabulous with some sea slugs a couple of hermit crabs a green turtle and some very impressive coral cover.



Last dives of the day were at the Cod Hole where I briefly saw one elusive cod (no photos) and just had a very pleasant couple of dives with highlights including cuttlefish, moray eels, clown trigger fish, squirrel fish and some beautiful soft corals.

So that's the end of the diving for me on this trip. Last night on each part of the

expedition is BBQ and band night. I got to be tambourine girl again (which I love), trying to stay in time with Kristy on the beat box and Pete on the guitar.



We wake up at the tranquil Lizard Island for the last morning and those of us departing running around and triple checking we haven't left anything behind, then its jump in the tender and over the



Lizard Island for a walk around and wait for our ride home. Always a spectacular flight low over the water where you can clearly see the reefs. After a relatively short scenic flight (60 mins) we land back in Cairns and it's all over.

Again I would like to thank Mike Ball for sponsoring the competition and providing me with the opportunity for another wonderful dive trip! The crew; Pete the pirate (skipper and guitar ballad maestro), Kristy (trip director extraordinaire), Ricardo (first mate), Marcus (engineer), Rens, Justin, Anna and Vinnie (instructors), Katie (chef), Kira (host), Jules

Sharks, rays, wrecks and tender drops, the great Spoilsport Adventure

Libby Sterling



(photographer) and Mike and Mak trip volunteers were outstanding! Thank you all for making me feel so welcome and just like a real VIP. Plus of course the booking and management team who make sure everything goes to plan prior to you even making it onto Spoilsport (thanks to Bre and Bridgette). The food was outstanding (restaurant quality) and as I said at the start, luckily I had stretchy lycra pants. The day goes something like this; wake up to Kristy singing her way around all the cabins (yes she really does sing her way around), breakfast #1 (continental), diving, return to breakfast #2 (cooked), go diving, lunch, go diving, afternoon tea, more diving, dinner, diving, collapse in a heap and do it all again the next day.



If you haven't been on Spoilsport you really should! The vessel itself is very comfortable, there are a range of cabin styles and if, like me you travel with an uw camera, the facilities are fabulous. One of the real treats with this expedition is the photo competition at the end of each part of the voyage (it's great to see the top three images from each of the passengers) followed by the trip video (filmed and edited by Jules), such a fabulous memory to take away.



Last but not least we had a wonderful group of passengers from all over the world and a few intrepid Cairns locals as well. A truly outstanding few days in the Coral Sea and I can't wait to go again. ■



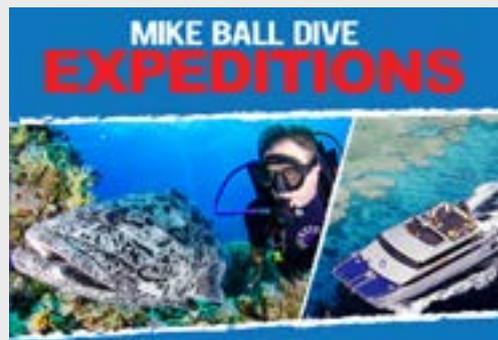
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LISSENING ISLAND RESORT
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PARTING SHOT



By Phil Woodhead