

BENEATH THE



A green sea turtle resting on the reef keeps a wary eye open for predators (above); a lionfish plays its venomous spines while a diver carrying an underwater video camera approaches from behind (opposite).

SOUTHERN CROSS

Most divers only dream about exploring Australia's Great Barrier Reef

Text and Photos by Glenn V. Ostle

“When you see the Southern Cross for the first time,
You understand now why you came this way.”

—From the song “Southern Cross”
by Rick Curtis, Michael Curtis, and Stephen Stills

Gazing up at the stars in the Australian sky, we realized that we weren't in Kansas anymore. Certainly there had been other clues: driving on the left side of the road, watching water swirl in the opposite direction down the drain, and the fact that we had to travel north to reach warmer weather.

But on that clear, dark evening on Queensland's Daintree River, as my dive partner, Pam Hadfield, and I surveyed constellations only visible in the southern hemisphere, our guide pointed out four stars forming a cross in the sky. We were seeing, for the first time, the famous Southern Cross—immortalized in songs, aboriginal stories, and on the Australian flag—that for centuries has shown sailors the way south. And now it had led us south as well, to dive the world famous Great Barrier Reef (GBR).

This twelve-hundred-mile crescent of reefs, cays, and islets rimming the jagged northeastern edge of Queensland—Australia's second-largest state—is the largest marine park in the world and the largest structure built by living organisms, with three thousand smaller reefs populated by more than 1,500 species of fish, four hundred species of coral, and five thousand species of





Unlike the large solitary barracuda so familiar in Florida, this smaller species in the Coral Sea prefers to travel lazily in large schools.

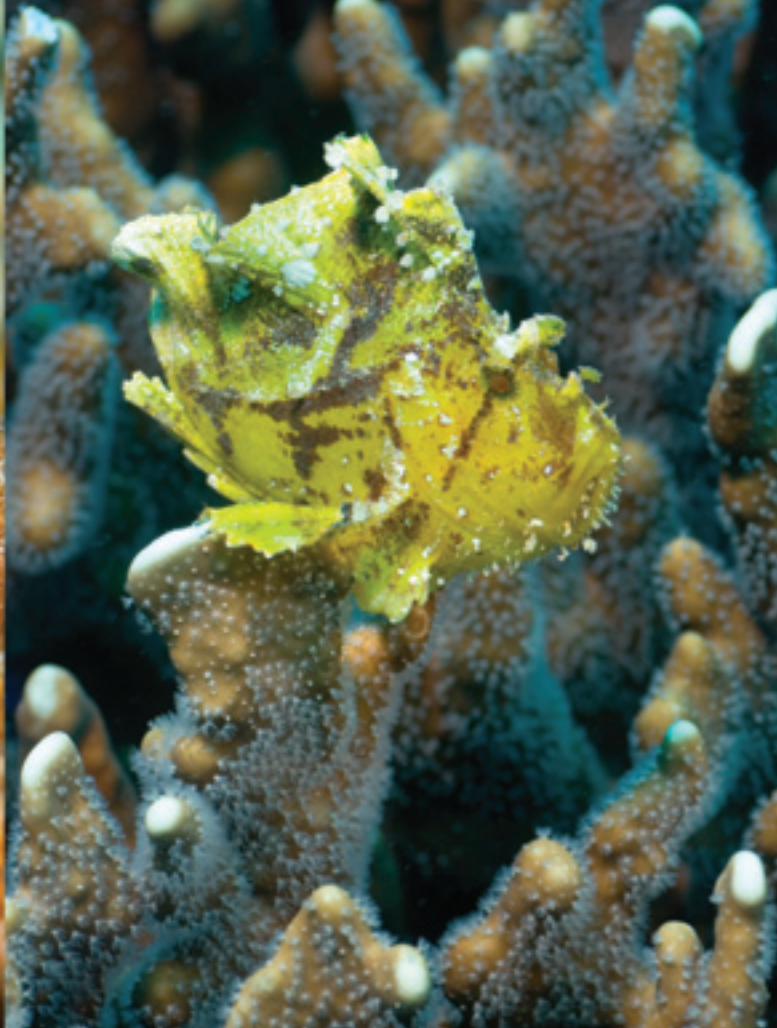
mollusks. It's a playground for divers and non-divers alike. But getting there is not half the fun.

The flight to Australia seems endless: five hours across the United States, a long layover in Los Angeles, and then fourteen hours to Sydney. Another layover there is followed by a three-hour flight to Cairns, self-proclaimed capital of the warm waters of Australia's "Tropical North" and gateway to the GBR and the Coral Sea, where some of the world's best diving awaits.


Granted, there are other great dive sites in Australia.

Southeast of Townsville there's the wreck of the 360-foot steamer *S.S. Yongala*, and even farther south the waters teem with great white sharks. Ningaloo Reef on the west coast is a seasonal home to huge yet shy whale sharks. But the GBR is where you'll find the greatest diversity of underwater life in this part of the world.

There are a number of ways to reach the reef. Day boats out of Cairns, Townsville, and Port Douglas can ensure a couple of dives and get you home in time for drinks and dinner.



Clockwise from upper left: A tiny cardinal fish hugs the coral for protection; an unusual yellow frog fish perches atop some hard coral, relying on natural camouflage to keep it safe from predators; a small hawkfish displays its two-tone paint job, which makes it difficult to see from below; a Clark's anemonefish swims safely among the stinging tentacles of its host.

A close-up photograph of two pink anemonefish (clownfish) swimming within the tentacles of a sea anemone. The fish are bright orange with white stripes and are surrounded by the thick, yellowish-brown tentacles of the anemone. The background is dark, making the fish and tentacles stand out.

A pair of pink anemonefish swims among its host's tentacles; a school of small fish seems to explode off an underwater "bommie," or sea mount (opposite).

For those more interested in diving than dining, there are three- and four-day live-aboard boats. And for the truly dive-smitten, full-blown weeklong live-aboard cruises carry divers to the outer edge of the reef and a few hundred miles farther out into the Coral Sea, where underwater visibility can reach up to two hundred feet.

The great dive sites of the GBR are on the "to do" list of just about any serious diver. Their names alone conjure up visions of memorable dives: Ribbon Reefs, Pixie Pinnacle,

Osprey Reef, Steve's Bommie, Challenger Bay, and the world-famous Cod Hole, where potato cod the size of small cars sidle up for an intense underwater encounter. We were fortunate in that for several days a pod of dwarf minke whales stayed around our boat and regularly cruised by to eyeball divers and snorkelers alike.

We were sorry to leave this land of friendly people, "Waltzing Matilda," and the plaintive didgeridoo. But I'm sure that one day, the Southern Cross will lead us back there again. 🐙





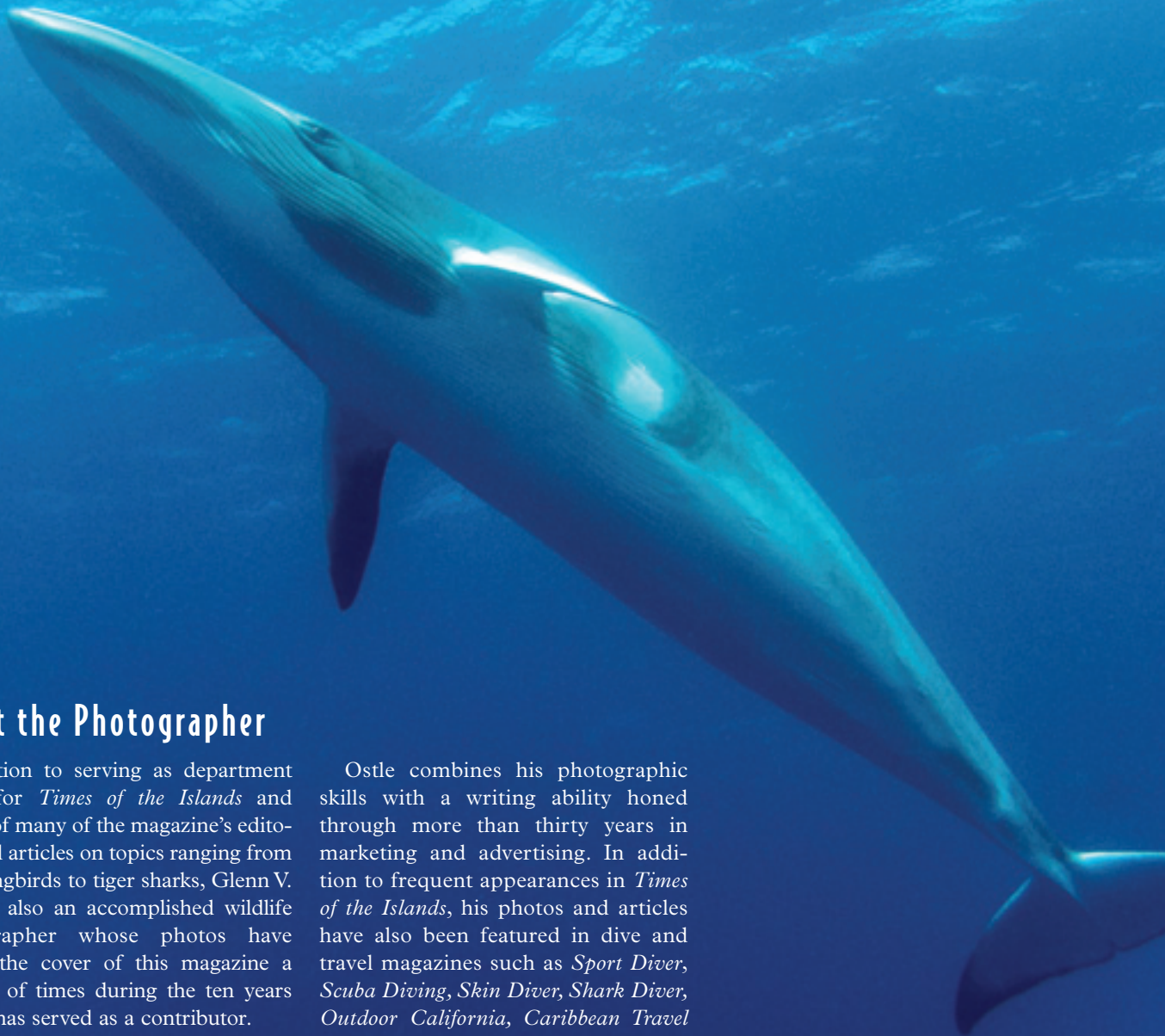
If You Go

Remember that the seasons in Australia are the opposite of those in the United States. So December through February is summertime down under, while June through August marks winter.

Water temperatures are in the mid-80s during the summer and cool to the mid-70s during the winter. Underwater visibility is forty to sixty feet inside the reef, where it is affected by tides and surge. Outside the reef it's about one hundred feet, and in the Coral Sea up to two hundred feet.

For more information, visit www.australia.com, www.destinationqueensland.com, or www.mikeball.com.

A dwarf minke whale, one of a pod that surrounded the author's boat for a few days, seemed curious about the divers who hung on the anchor line hoping for a close encounter; a pink anemonefish views the world from the safety of its ball anemone (opposite).



About the Photographer

In addition to serving as department editor for *Times of the Islands* and author of many of the magazine's editorials and articles on topics ranging from hummingbirds to tiger sharks, Glenn V. Ostle is also an accomplished wildlife photographer whose photos have graced the cover of this magazine a number of times during the ten years that he has served as a contributor.

Ostle's appreciation of photography began with his father, who taught him basic photographic principles as well as how to develop photos in a homemade darkroom. Twelve years ago, he became interested in underwater and wildlife photography, and today his photos of marine life, birds, and other animals—taken in many locations around the world and with the help of his partner, Pam Hadfield—have won numerous awards in photo competitions and have appeared in magazines, on calendars, and in marketing pieces.

Ostle combines his photographic skills with a writing ability honed through more than thirty years in marketing and advertising. In addition to frequent appearances in *Times of the Islands*, his photos and articles have also been featured in dive and travel magazines such as *Sport Diver*, *Scuba Diving*, *Skin Diver*, *Shark Diver*, *Outdoor California*, *Caribbean Travel & Life*, and *Islands*, as well as in a number of trade publications.

To view more of his photos and articles, visit his Web site, www.featherandfins.com.

