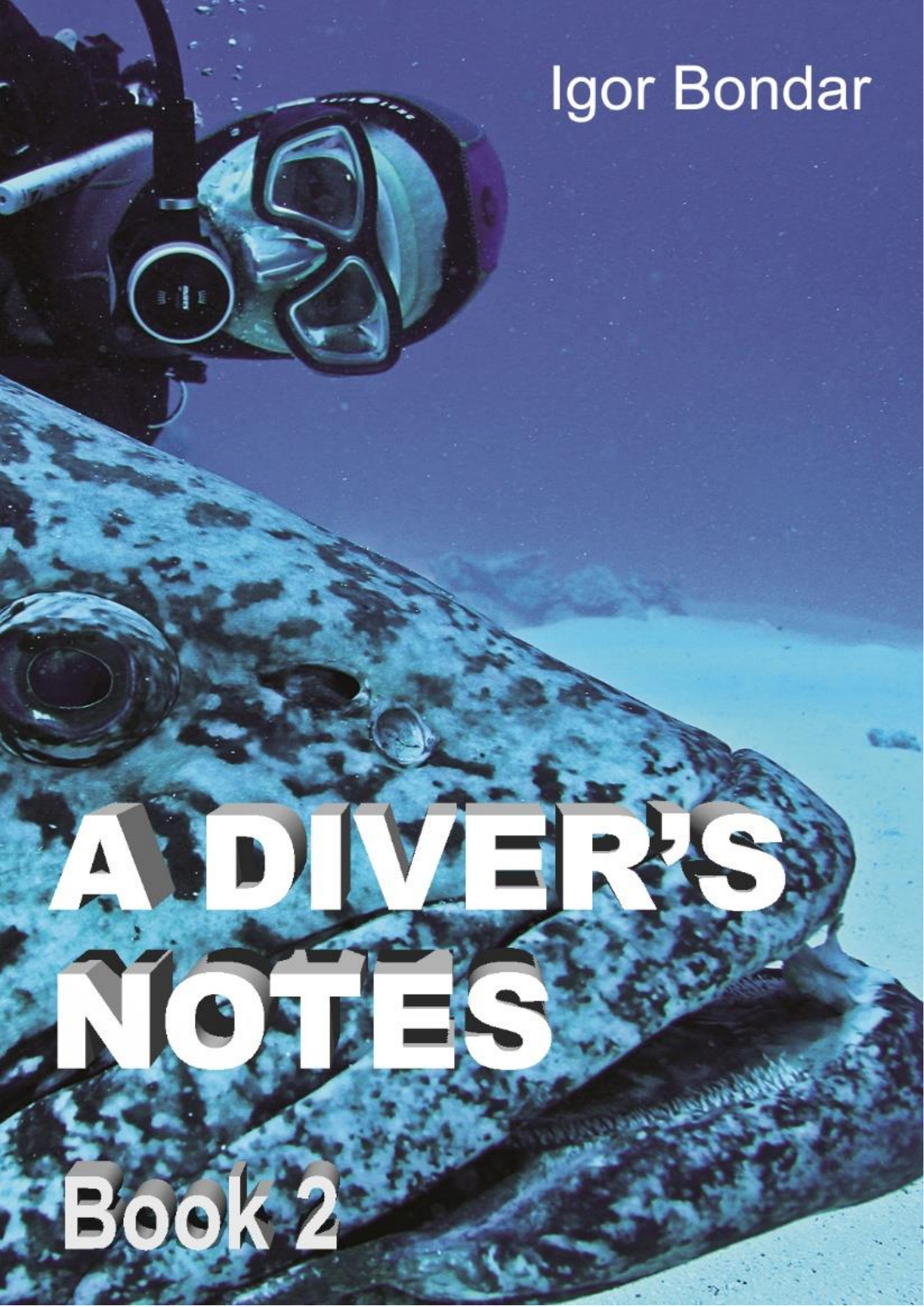

Igor Bondar
A DIVER'S NOTES
Book 2

Cut the fin

How long and beautiful they are! On the eve of the upcoming dive I was enjoying the look of my new meter sports fins with pleasure. Swimming with them was comparable to driving a Ferrari. Barely moving my legs, I was overtaking all the divers around as if they were "standing still". Now I brought those fins here, to Fish Rock Cave in New South Wales.

Beautiful predators - sharks - live near this cave all year round. Their population here varies from about twenty to sixty individuals. I have been here during their peak season with perfect visibility to see them on occasion. Incredible eye-catching sight. Large individuals from two to three and a half meters long gracefully soar in the water around as far as the eyes can see. They almost don’t react to divers. Being absolutely confident in themselves only on occasion showing a slight curiosity . This is a unique place for diving, one of the few in the world where diving of this kind is still possible.

* * *

John, the owner of the dive center, broke into a smile when he saw me. Perhaps he was overwhelmed with pleasant memories about our last trip to the pub when I definitely proved to him the superiority of the Eurasian liver over the Australian one.

“Hi, Igor!” He said and then looked at the fins in my hand. “What beautiful new fins you have! But they seem way too long to me, they should be shortened by twenty centimeters, mate.”

“Envious, probably,” I thought, demonstrating indulgence and benevolence towards the representative of the short-fin class with all my appearance.

My next interlocutor was dive guide Larry. His welcome speech was also half dedicated to the excessive length of my fins. The suggestion to cut them a little was no longer news to me. Moreover, his finger while demonstrating this thought also crossed my flipper twenty centimeters from its end. “There are so many diving conservatives here!” I thought cheerfully, “any innovation immediately causes criticism from them.”

The last one to criticize was captain Simon. He was trying to fit my long fins into the usual place on board of the boat for a very long time. After several unsuccessful attempts, of course, he suggested cutting them down a little. Well, it seems I will unlikely hear a different opinion about my fins in this nice town.

Diving that day started out great - small waves on the surface, bright sun and pleasant company. The only upsetting thing was the visibility underwater, only ten meters today. However, inside the cave visibility has improved. Although huge flocks of fish filled this space so densely, that visibility was no longer important here - even divers from the group sometimes had difficulty seeing each other.

One look towards the exit of the cave was enough to realize that sharks are staying on the usual side today and there were a lot of them. In general, the exit from that cave is, undoubtedly, the most exciting and beautiful moment while diving here. First, the pitch darkness is replaced by shallow light, then a gap, then the pure blue. And like chic planes with ideal shapes, huge,

graceful predators are circling in it. It is impossible to get used to this beautiful sight, no matter how long you dive here.

After leaving the cave, we were swimming along the reef wall and suddenly became part of this wonderful and very unusual underwater company. The sharks were slowly circling here and their route passed very close to us. Sometimes they swam so close to us I could have probably touched a dozen sharks if I wanted to, in those twenty minutes.

* * *

This happened at the very end of the dive. I was the first in the group and sat very close to the sharks. Trying to exchange a couple of signs with Larry, I turned sideways to the predators for a minute. At the same time, one of my long fins moved to the side and came across the route of the sharks. Probably for predators it looked like a barrier placed on the way to their native cave. Then I felt a short tug on the fin.

When I looked back no one was around. Later, from Larry and other divers I learned that the two-meter toothy beauty first stopped in front of my flipper that blocked her path, politely stood there for a couple of seconds, and then quickly bit my fin with her teeth and disappeared into the blue. As a memory, I was left with ... a straight scratch across the fin about twenty centimeters from its edge!

It seems to me that the local underwater inhabitants do not differ much in their tastes from the land ones. Well, why didn’t they all like my long fins? However, personally, I regarded

everything that happened as an underwater kiss of my flipper by a predator, as a sign of respect for my diving merits. After all, sharks do not have tender lips - so they kiss with anything.



In the evening at the pub, after a couple of beers, John, Larry and Simon finally agreed with my version provided that I pay the bill. Well, it's always a pleasure for me to treat these simple, wonderful Australian guys. However, I shall add that from this day forward diving in this place, I take my old normal-length fins. It is necessary, it is always necessary to respect local traditions.

Bula!

“Igor, what do you think, why on this island I only see women, how to say it more mildly with a slightly above average weight?” - George once asked me while on the open terrace of a cozy cafe located on one of the islands of Fiji.

The day before we flew here to take part in the feeding of bull sharks, which is quite famous in the diving world. This event was scheduled for the day after so my friend and I had the time to slowly get to know the local way of life, already receiving first insights.

“Winds, George. I think the reason for this is the winds,” - I answered.

“Winds?” - George raised an eyebrow curiously.

“Yes, very strong winds that often blow over these islands”, - I followed my thought. “After all, the wind, as you know, carries away everything light and slender, but it cannot move something heavy.”

Friend laughed out loud at my joke.

"It makes sense", - he said at last - "and I even dare to suggest that the local winds probably blow mainly towards Australia. Have you noticed how many slim women appeared in the Gold Coast in recent years?”

It was my turn to laugh. The sun was beautiful in the sunset sky during our conversation, and soon disappeared behind the sea

horizon. My friend and I got up and went to our rooms to get a good night's sleep before an active day tomorrow.

* * *

“Bula!” The crew members of the diving boat were saying the traditional Fijian greeting to the divers with a big smile as they boarded.

“Bula!” The arriving guests cheerfully answered and sat down in empty seats along the side of the ship.

That morning about two dozen people gathered for shark feeding. After everyone arrived, the boat left the marina at high speed, moved towards the reef where feeding is carried out. The distance to the place was not very long, and after some time we put on the equipment for the first dive.

As George and I heard from fellow divers who had previously been here, several bull sharks usually come up for the feeding. Quite large in size - up to four meters in length. Sometimes a tiger shark appears here but I’ll make a reservation right away that this time we didn’t manage to see it. However, and bull sharks turned out to be more than enough to get the necessary emotions.

After a short briefing, the divers jumped into the water and began to occupy their spots at the bottom, in accordance with the instructions of the dive guides. Several large bull sharks were already circling nearby, waiting for food. Two people from the staff positioned themselves at the edges of our group to control the distance from the predators. For this purpose, they hold long

aluminum sticks in their hands sharpened on one end and bent on the other in the form of a handle. As friends told us: with a sharp end the guides repelled bull sharks and with a blunt end they pushed tiger sharks away - they did not want to disturb them without necessity.

Soon, two people from the staff lowered a green plastic tank about a meter size with a lid under the water. They began to empty pieces of fish from it with their hands. The activity of the sharks instantly and significantly increased and they began to swim in front and above us. Sometimes being pushed away by dive guides. That spectacle was very impressive, since some individuals weighed about half a ton. We filmed everything that happened on a video and took some photos and we did not experience any boredom until the end of the dive.



When the food in the tank had ended, the sharks immediately calmed down and moved a little to the side. The divers were moving towards the boat and soon began to ascend. Then there was an hour for rest and a light lunch on a boat. During lunch the guests shared their impressions with enthusiasm. Meanwhile, George and I got to know the local dive guides. Once they realized we were in the same sphere coming from Australia, they told us about some interesting stories that once happened here during shark feeding.

After lunch and rest we began the preparation for the second dive. It is supposed to be nearby but with a different landscape of the seafloor. As the local instructor explained to us at the briefing, this dive site had a stone plate about two meters high where we all had to sit down. Having plunged to the bottom, we immediately moved to this place.

George and I were placed in the center by the local dive guides apparently out of a sense of professional sympathy. Moreover, they put me at the bottom with my large camera right in front of the ledge with my back to the stone wall. Having spread the flashes and uncovered the front lens, I quickly got ready to shoot. Then I raised my head, I saw George's familiar fins above my head. Good sign.

In a moment, the feeding of sharks began. In order to give us the best possible experience, the local dive guides started dumping fish from a plastic tank just a couple of meters away, right in front of George and me. In the first three minutes of this feeding, I was taking good pictures. However, after the huge

predators muddied all the water in front of me, the visibility dropped to one meter. I realized that my shooting was over.

However, soon I had completely different thoughts appeared. Huge tails, fins and even jaws began to flash from this cloud of dust right in front of my nose. Moreover, all of this was happening so fast. For the first time in my life, I thought they might hit me accidentally. There was a wall behind me, and there was nowhere to retreat.

If the local dive guides had wanted to give us the most unforgettable experience and emotions, they succeeded. For about five minutes I was holding my huge “lucky” camera in front of me like a shield. It looks like I tried to blend in with my surroundings like a local coral. Apparently the power of thought worked as none of the big underwater predators hit me by mistake.

When it was all over, I looked up. George was the only one left sitting on the ledge above me. All the other divers left earlier apparently having had their fill of the action much sooner. My friend later told me that during this stormy feeding he himself had to lean back a couple of times just in case.

After this dive, local dive-guides patted me and George on the shoulder with a laughter of approval, saying that my friend and I got the maximum experience possible. Of course, we thanked them genuinely for the honor.

However, that evening while dining with George in the hotel, on our beautiful terrace, we over the pint of beer suddenly made another thought. What if… it was not a sign of respect for

colleagues who arrived from the Gold Coast, but a very insidious and original way with which local dive guides wanted to get even a little for all the light women blown away by the wind to Australia?

Frosty

It was a quiet evening and almost all the divers were on the upper deck of the catamaran which was anchored in the cozy lagoon on one of the islands. Some of them just admired the sunset, some did it a little more difficult - with a can of beer in hand, and some had a casual conversation with other divers. Not much time left before the sunset of the solar disk below the sea horizon.

Suddenly, loud splashes were heard overboard. Divers immediately got up from their seats and approached the side of the boat. What they saw next is very rare at sea. Large shark was hunting a sea turtle in shallow waters. Smooth water surface of the sea was distorted by the movement of large bodies under the water. From time to time, the long fin of a shark flashed and a couple of times the tail of a predator surfaced. Tail was over a meter long.

* * *

Everyone on the ship called that diver “Frosty” - I have never learned his full name during that safari. The man looked about

sixty or sixty-five years old with gray hair and a neat beard. Frosty was a good-natured and positive person with a great sense of humor - I never saw him in a bad mood. However, there also seemed to be something deep about him. If I was asked: “Which person is the most suitable for the title "man of the sea" from the people you know?” likely he would be the first person I recall. I don’t know why - perhaps it’s just some kind of intuition, based on all the information known about him and of my own feelings.

Frosty and I met on a boat called Big Cat Reality during one of its infrequent dive safari trips to the southern part of the Great Barrier Reef. Bunker Group islands and reefs - definitely not a place for mass diving in Australia. Only a small boat and our elderly catamaran bring divers here only a few weeks a year.

To be honest, I never understood Frosty's status on this ship - he was somewhere in between staff and regular divers. Perhaps he was helping the team somehow and for this reason he got an opportunity to dive in these waters on his own. In any case, no doubt diving was very important to him. Or maybe Frosty was a kind of lucky charm - everyone loved and respected him so much.

According to divers who knew Frosty, he was diving all his life - the number of dives he had, has reached several thousand. He was a diving instructor, a solo diver and many other things in this field. It didn't take any complex thought to realize that this guy is madly in love with the underwater world. In the daily life of the ship, Frosty was eager to help everyone without excuse. However, he often went under water alone in his free time – a solo diver is allowed – to enjoy a beautiful silent world.

* * *

My friend George and I booked this trip well in advance as this tour was very popular. Almost all the guests on the catamaran were locals that once again confirmed the interest for this diving safari. In fact, the local reefs were so little explored that almost every diver here could reasonably feel like a pioneer. George and I, for example, discovered during this trip two beautiful and quite large underwater caves that were not previously mapped by dive guides.

It is also worth mentioning that at that time there was sea turtle season to lay their eggs in the sand on local islands. However, as is often the case in nature, it is also a high season for some predators, given large gatherings of turtles around these reefs. We are talking about tiger sharks. An adult tiger shark has powerful jaws that can break the strong shell of a sea turtle. So at this time of the year in the waters around the Bunker Group divers have a real chance of spotting a tiger shark underwater.

* * *

One day during our diving safari, Frosty returned from a solo dive a little different from usual. At that time he clearly looked a little excited in contrast to his eternally calm state.

“Did you see anything unusual underwater?” The captain, who knew the diver very well, asked.

“I did, Steve,” Frosty nodded his head. “I just ran into a big tiger shark face to face on the reef.”

Everyone gasped in surprise. All the divers of the catamaran gathered around the man in a dense circle to find out the details.

“How did it happen, Frosty?” Questions came from all sides.

“Well, I'm swimming along the reef as usual, and suddenly I see a big tiger shark moving towards me. It was about four meters, or maybe even closer to five in length”, the diver answered. “I immediately stopped, and it stood right in front of me. We stand like this for a few seconds, looking at each other.”

Everyone froze in excitement.

“And what did you do, Frosty, how did you get rid of it?” The captain asked again.

The experienced diver was silent for a second, and then suddenly threw up his hands and yelled really load. All the divers jumped back in surprise, and some even fell on the deck.

“So, I did the same thing underwater, and after that the shark first backed out as well and then swam away.” Frosty explained with a smile, and went to take off his wetsuit.

However, everyone on the ship noticed that after that incident an experienced diver took a two-meter stick with him on single dives. Perhaps, in the next probable encounter with a tiger shark, Frosty found a loud word and a stick to be still a more convincing argument than just a loud word.

Amazing whales

No matter what anyone says about whales, I know for sure that these sea giants have a good sense of humor. I have witnessed this three times in my life.

I once observed the first story on this topic through binoculars, from the balcony of my room on the top floor of a high-rise hotel. It happened early in the morning on one of the islands inside the Great Barrier Reef. That day by chance, I witnessed the way a group of three whales periodically threw out fountains of water in the path of one windsurfer guy. They did it fun, no doubt. The guy wasn't intimidated and gladly took part in this unusual ‘whale water park’. The whole action lasted no longer than five minutes but the obvious whales’ intentions left me without the slightest doubt that they had a sense of humor.

The second case occurred a few years later on the same coast but much further south. My friends and I dived at a dive site quite remote from the coast then. I remember that day there was a complete calm, which happens here only a few times a year. Taking advantage of the good weather, we made a deep dive and upon completion we were relaxing on the boat, which was at an anchor. There was a complete silence which was not broken even by birds, given the great distance from the coast.

Suddenly, in the middle of that silence, there was an incredibly loud sound. After a couple of seconds, we were doused with the splashes of water. Everyone was in shock, and one girl even fell off the side onto the deck taken by surprise. As it turned out later,

this big hooligan whale quietly surfaced four or five meters from our boat and loudly did its wet fountain work. We decided unanimously that a whale’s face must have had a wide (about three meters) smile at the moment of his prank. As for us, my friends and I regained the ability to smile only five minutes after that unusual shower.

For the third time, I witnessed not just the humor of the whales but also their curiosity and even some kind of sociality. It happened in approximately the same waters a year later. That day it was calm as well and my friends and I decided to look for whales in the ocean on my friend's boat. It was a winter month and sea giants were often swimming along the coast. Our boat left the coast for ten miles, so the depth of the ocean was about fifty meters - whales are more common at greater depths.

The captain had turned off the engines and we all began to look around through binoculars in the search for fountains. However, our program that day went differently than was originally planned. As it turned out a little later, a couple of whales (probably a family) at exactly the same time were looking for a group of sailors on a boat, for some reason. And they found us. I'm not kidding - it looked exactly like this: two humpback whales suddenly swam up to us and for the next half hour they literally circled around our boat.

We were all shocked by such a pleasant surprise. About ten times huge whales dived under our boat and swam very close to its keel. Considering that the sea giants were several times heavier than the boat it is easy to imagine our emotions in those moments as well as the wide smiles of the whales. Having played enough

with the poor whale seekers, the huge guests went even further in their contact. They suddenly began to stick their heads out of the water just opposite the rear deck where my friends and I were standing at that moment.

You should have seen the way they gazed at us! They looked at us the same way tourists gaze at unusual little animals in the zoo. I'm willing to bet that at that moment I even understood what one whale was talking about to another. Approximately it sounded like this: “Look, dear, these are the very people you asked me to show you. I agree, they don’t look very good, but that admiration they look at you with!”

I don’t even know how long this contact would have continued if my friend George had not suddenly come up with the idea of swimming with our guests. By the way, it was quite easy to understand him - half an hour of such close communication with these giants made them almost tame in our eyes. As a result, when the whales stuck their heads out near the rear deck of the boat one more time, my friend jumped into the water to them. However, the huge animals suddenly immediately swam away after that, never to return.

When George got out of the water and back on the deck, he looked at me with confusion.

“Igor, what do you think, why did they leave me so suddenly?” - He asked.

“Well, it's obvious, my friend!” - I answered him. “Tell me, did our sociable whales come to you in clothes?”

"No," - George shrugged.

“Then why did you jump into the ocean without the slightest respect for the guests in shorts and in such bright ones as well? They punished you for violating the whale's dress code, mate”. - I had answered him and went to make coffee.



Remora

Sometimes, underwater you can find a fish called remora also known as suckerfish. Moreover, it does not swim alone but mostly next to a larger sea creature. This less than a meter long fish is unusual as its sucker located on the top of its head. With its help, the fish sticks to various large underwater inhabitants, for example, manta rays, sharks and large sea turtles.

The advantages of such a neighborhood for remoras are obvious - they do not particularly spend much energy on movement and are always under the protection of their big "boss". Well, besides this sometimes, remora also has the opportunity to pick up pieces from boss' dinner.

* * *

On one of my usual diving days, I was slowly swimming underwater along a pretty long reef. My partner on that dive, swimming a few meters behind me, was my wife. With a specific purpose in mind, I will make a note in advance that my wife is inferior to me in size. I will not say that on that day I was swimming especially majestically or gracefully somehow - I just swam, as I always swim in general. Nevertheless, it was specifically on this dive when a medium-sized remora suddenly came up to me from some depths of the sea.

Having examined me appraisingly, this fish slowly began to swim up towards me from below. At first, I did not understand anything at all and was only surprised. Then, it finally dawned on

me that this remora saw me as her new "boss", next to whom it wanted to spend some part of her life.

I don’t even know if that remora was too young or, on the contrary, old, sick in the head or blind but for some reason it firmly decided that it would be safe, fed and comfortable in my shadow. And in confirmation of this thought, she was honestly swimming under me throughout the dive, indescribably amusing me and my wife. At times, it was clearly looking for a spot to cling to me. However, my complex underwater equipment, with different “pendants”, hoses and other things apparently led the remora into some kind of confusion.

So in the end she just floated under me just a dozen or two centimeters away. It was very funny and unusual. Of course, I tried my best to live up to my new status - a sea "boss" with a personal remora - and moved under water as gracefully and majestically as possible. Well, so that the suckerfish that trusted me was not ashamed of the boss.

Few minutes later, new, unusual thoughts suddenly began to visit me. Obviously, my new companion clearly expected that I would soon get hungry and pounce on some oncoming fish and start eating it. Well, as usual, it will get delicious pieces from me scattering to the sides. I was a little embarrassed in front of my new gullible travel companion but I had completely different plans for lunch. My lunch was waiting for me on the ship, in white plates, without extra eaters around.

When our dive was beginning to come to an end and my wife and I were approaching the surface of the sea to make a decompression stop, the remora suddenly darted around in

bewilderment. It clearly did not understand why its “boss” had moved close to a surface and even assumed a vertical body position - it was inconvenient for it to swim under him. After three minutes, when my wife and I finally were heading to the surface of the water, poor remora finally realized that it was all over.

Having already resigned to the fact that her choice was a mistake, she spun under me for the last time and slowly went back to the deep reef. With all my heart, I mentally wished that it would find out there a real, huge and most voracious boss. Next to whom it will always be full and comfortable.



Nicole

Hygiene bags were in incredible demand that morning. As if competing, half a dozen of unaccustomed to pitching tourists filled them competing with each other. I even tried to offer George to play a simple game called "Who's next?" but my compassionate friend gave me such a look that I immediately switched to studying the habits of seagulls outside the window.

Our twenty-meter catamaran cut through the steep oncoming waves at a good speed. An open ocean around the Great Barrier Reef is almost never completely calm but that day it clearly did its best.

After our vessel anchored in a quiet place, my friend and I went out to the back deck and joined the diving part of the passengers. In addition to diving enthusiasts, there were also people on the ship who wanted to swim with a mask and tourists who came to see at the legendary reef from the upper deck of the catamaran.

Probably the longest on the planet - the Australian diving briefing - was over in twenty minutes, and after that it was possible to ask the guides a few more specific questions. George and I quickly learned all the details we needed from colleagues and were soon fully prepared to dive.

In general, the southern tip of the Great Barrier Reef consists of nineteen scattered atolls. All of them are located at a considerable distance from each other and therefore they are natural places of concentration of various underwater animals. The advantage of these places from a diving point of view is that very few companies organize their dives in this part of the famous

reef. Therefore, the probability of meeting other divers under water here is almost zero.

That day’s reef was called Fitzroy. It was a large coral formation, with a convenient lagoon for anchoring ships in the middle. The perfect transparency of the water allowed the passengers to see the colorful coral garden below us even from the deck of the ship. All the tourists who had masks and fins with them immediately jumped into the water, and the diving contingent began to assemble equipment and was loading it into a large inflatable boat. Another half an hour later, eight divers including George and me, as well as the girl guide Nicole and the young skipper Tom, headed out of the cozy lagoon.

Jumping on the waves cheerfully, our boat confidently crawled to the outer part of the reef. It is a well known fact that you have the greatest chance of encountering sharks there and other large predators. Following the current, we should be carried to the interior of the atoll where the dive was planned to be completed at a shallow depth. Soon we reached the starting point and cheerfully, in two stages, plopped overboard. Watching the air bubbles from me race up to the surface of the water, I sighed blissfully - well, finally diving!

However, our ideal plan was broken in a couple of minutes after the start of the dive. Our guide Nicole released a red buoy to the surface from a depth of five meters so that the captain could always see where we were. However, the girl's hands did something wrong there which is hardly a surprise in this world. So, Nicole had a coil stuck and she tried to repair it in vain.

Realizing (just from my own family experience) then, that she was unlikely to fix anything quickly, I attracted her attention with the sound of my quack. I pointed to the girl with my finger at the rest of the divers - our entire group was quickly descending to the

depths. On top of that, we found ourselves in a fast current which only exacerbated the situation. Of course, theoretically it was possible to leave a buoy with a coil. But when have you seen a girl who could calmly part with two hundred dollars?

Beautiful eyes looked at me through the glass of the mask with despair. By the way, have I mentioned that Nicole was so damn beautiful? The girl knew that I had the right to organize diving and had a good experience of diving on this coast. Without thinking twice, I signaled to her that I myself would lead our group and that she should not worry. It has been my habit since childhood - to help beauties in trouble. Perhaps, because I reread too many romantic fairy tales then.

Nicole waved back so gratefully that I almost swam back to her. But then, George's quack sounded. Malicious! After all, he would not call me, if I were chatting with old men. Yes, if I had met George earlier, I probably would not have gotten married by that day. Having caught up with the divers quickly, I explained to them about the change in the leadership in our group. George was an instructor as well. Therefore, despite all his maliciousness, I appointed him as a deputy and asked him to swim at the end of our group. Well, then everything was simple: I had to show the site where I had not been yet, as if I had already been here a thousand times.

In fact, a child's task. The whole secret here was to keep the divers confident that we were seeing the very best. Well, poking your fingers more in the direction of different living creatures. Although in this case, I did not have to get out of the situation too much, since this site was actually very good. The entire wall at a depth of thirty meters was covered with beautiful fan corals. Huge fish, moray eels, stingrays and other large inhabitants of the reef often swam nearby to pay their respects to us.

Gray reef sharks swam past us several times. However, the inexperienced part of our group released so many air bubbles that the predators did not linger near us. What surprised me the most on this dive was the abundance of sea turtles. Which, in principle, was understandable: not far from us was the famous Mon Repos beach - one of the largest places in the southern hemisphere where turtles lay their eggs. In general, the divers did not get bored and I waved my fins in a relaxed way, sweetly dreaming about the options of gratitude from Nicole (well, within the framework of my family principles, of course) ...

Soon the bottom appeared below us and it became clear that the dive was approaching a decompression stop. In addition, some of my wards had very little air left in the cylinders. Throwing a buoy to the surface, I hung on the cord, while continuing to dream. George hung in the water not far away. He had no access code to my thoughts and at least here, he could not harm me in any way. However, my dreamy mood did not last long.

Suddenly, I saw that a winding ribbon was approaching us from the side of the reef. A snake - I immediately realized and prepared for a meeting with an olive *sea snake* - well known and in principle, it is not an aggressive underwater reptile at all. But it was a different guest. I well remembered that I had seen it before at the top of a poster depicting the most venomous sea snakes. I knew nothing about its character and would have preferred not to know in the further.

The snake approached George and me with suspicious confidence. Not having swum to us just a couple of meters, it stopped for a second, as if thinking about from whom to start. Apparently, feeling that the most malicious of the two of us is not me, the reptile moved towards my partner. What a wonderful intuition! At that moment, when it was only a meter away from

my friend, he suddenly showed unprecedented agility. While spinning around on a spot almost instantly, he somehow hit it with a flipper so that the snake flew off for a couple of meters to the side.

Not bad! Of course, I understand that if she had crawled up to him in the familiar Australian forest, he would have most likely bitten off her head habitually. But at that moment, he had a regulator in his mouth so the snake was very lucky that day. It seemed that having understood the whole alignment, the reptile moved back to the reef in sadness. All right, that was enough impressions for that day. I gave the group a command to ascend.

Nicole on the ship was scattered in gratitude. All the way back to the mainland, she literally did not leave me alone - she treated me to an excellent coffee, various sweets and did not stop for a second to smile sweetly and chat merrily. All this was quite enough for George to fidget pleasantly next to me and envy me quietly. Always help the beauties, gentlemen! Someday it will definitely end beautiful. So I have read as a child …

Sea lions

As you know, life is full of surprises and these surprises are often very pleasant. Sometimes in life they come to us by themselves and at other times you need to show intuition and move your legs a little in order not to miss them.

Once, my wife and I were travelling across the West Coast of Australia during our vacation. We did not plan to go diving then,

but simply drove along the ocean and visited various reserves, as well as other interesting places in this part of the country. The trip was a success, but the water world still did not leave us to the end on that journey, and made a pleasant surprise.

Back then, we stopped in the small town of Jurien Bay for a couple of days which was located just two hundred kilometers north from the city of Perth. I have long made a habit of visiting local ports and discovering if there was anything interesting there. In fact, many small Australian companies sometimes make great tours without much advertising. Or, often they are just starting to work, and little is known about them yet. However, having stopped at the port, you could immediately find out all this information, and often even someone's plans for the future.

That morning, my wife and I also went to have breakfast at the local port. where there was a good cafe, and to find out all the local news at the same time. The waitress - a young and sociable girl - was well suited for the role of a source of local news. She told us that they had just received a fresh catch of a small but very tasty fish “whiting”. We ordered two large portions and a couple more to take away.

“Oh, do you like this fish so much?” the girl asked us.

“No,” I decided to joke, “simply my wife eats this "whiting” fish in order to brighten her hair with it. It’s the latest discovery of local scientists.”

The waitress looked at my blonde wife with attention and seriously and became thoughtful. I decided not to give away the joke, as a good fish is always a great and healthy meal. And

certainly more healthy than various buns that young people like to eat. There were no other customers in the cafe that morning, so we continued to chat with the girl as we ate our breakfast. It soon became clear that we did not look into this port in vain.

As it turned out, it was from that port a small family company - father and son - arranged excursions to the sea lions, that very successfully lived just a fifteen-minute drive away from this place. This excursion was carried out on two beautiful, stylish catamarans with all the amenities and equipment for snorkeling. Without thinking twice, after breakfast we went to book a day tour.

* * *

The air temperature that day was over thirty and the water temperature was twenty-one degrees. It can be said that these were simply the most comfortable conditions under which these animals could possibly be found, since sea lions usually like to live in colder waters. A small catamaran team welcomed us warmly and immediately gave us fins with masks and light wetsuits. In addition to us, seven young tourists from South Korea and a couple of Australians from Melbourne also went on this excursion. After everyone gathered, the captain held a briefing and we set off.

After leaving the port at low speed, our catamaran picked up good speed and sailed through calm water along the picturesque coast. The entire route to the place where the sea lions

lived took us no more than fifteen minutes indeed. A ridge of small islands in that place formed a kind of internal lagoon with a depth of about two meters. As the skipper explained to us, the main enemy of sea lions in the local waters was the great white shark and sometimes other species of large sharks. However, big sharks cannot hunt sea lions in shallow waters. Therefore, the population of sea lions felt quite safe there. As well as the tourists.



As soon as we anchored near the islands, small sea lions immediately appeared around us. They showed a funny curiosity and were very playful. We quickly put on wetsuits, fins and masks, and then jumped into the water. Small sea lions

immediately began to swim around us while showing funny faces and sometimes jumping out of the water. Some individuals, having nothing else to do, tried to climb along the anchor chain to the catamaran. In general, we did not get bored, and did not let go of our cameras.



The local sea lions were so positive that we all had a smile on our faces. The young Korean tourists who seemed not to snorkel much (judging by the number of life jackets they had on), were happy to periodically check great photos on their phones. They were close-ups of sea lions' funny faces in the company of their

friends. It is worth mentioning that such photos are rare even among experienced divers.

So our trip was a success and, in addition to a great mood, all the tourists received excellent photo trophies. After a light snack and a cup of coffee, we set off back to the port happy and satisfied. Yes, this wonderful Australian family actually established a wonderful company that brought good mood to all the lovers of the sea and its inhabitants. Needless to say, if one day our road passes through this port again, we will definitely look at them one more time.

On the bottom

I don’t know if anybody faces this, but I have situations when my head and intuition advise me different things. For example, my head tells me that I it’s better for me not do something, but my intuition whispers that everything will be fine. Or vice versa. My life experience eventually led me to the conclusion that listening to your intuition is sometimes very worth it.

That day my friend George and I were diving at one of our favorite dive sites, a place called Fish Rock Cave, which is located about four hundred kilometers south of Brisbane. A large population of Gray Nurse sharks lives at this place. Up to sixty individuals can be met in this place on lucky days and with good visibility. At that time, there were about thirty sharks, which was also very good. Moreover, the visibility underwater was excellent

and it was the maximum ocean temperature for these places: 23°C.

Fish Rock Cave is such an underwater rock that comes to the surface. There is a beautiful cave inside of it. This cave has a rather high archway on one side and the sharks mostly stick around this part of the island. However, that day because of the current or something else, the sharks were on the opposite side of the cliff.

In that place, the island plunged rather steeply into the sea to a depth of almost twenty meters, and then passed into a plateau with a slight slope. That day my friend and I swam along the wall of the island and watched how a group of sharks slowly led its circle dance over this plateau. An incredible sight, especially when you consider that Gray Nurse sharks are not small at all - in these places their size ranges from two to three and a half meters.



While watching this show, I suddenly got an idea to lay down on the bottom of that plateau about ten or fifteen meters from the wall. Well, to look at the shark circle dance from below. At that moment, my head immediately began to tell me in a clever way the reasons why such stupidity should definitely not be done. However, my intuition told me that the idea was safe and that I would not regret doing so. Behind intuition, by the way, there was also some logic, since this type of shark was distinguished by a stable psyche, and there seemed to be no sad events while diving here before. It seemed to be...

I explained to George with gestures what I was going to do and saw his surprised eyes. I think he was definitely on the side of my head. Having informed him with a sign that he should not worry, I did not discuss this topic and swam with my other friend - a large underwater camera - along the bottom to a small section of a plateau covered with even sand. Having reached it, I laid down on the bottom.

At first it seemed to me that the sharks did not react to my arrival on their plateau at all - they still swam slowly in a circle. But looking closer, I realized that my presence still made some adjustments to their route. However, it was much more interesting to me what I felt, being surrounded by these graceful inhabitants of the ocean.

I have long been accustomed to trust my feelings - whatever one may say it is often the shortest path to the right conclusions. So, there at the bottom I did not feel any strong anxiety. It was rather a feeling of some unusual coming to visit. Moreover, I clearly felt the emotions of curiosity or interest in my person from

the owners of the reef. But this curiosity definitely was with an admixture of tact and respect.

After some time, the sharks changed their route a little more. This time, they began to swim a couple of meters from me in twos and threes. As before, I did not feel any discontentment in their behavior or even much surprise. What emanated from them was more like the usual emotions of curious but tactful people. At times I was almost certain that I could even hear some of their thoughts. They were something like this: “You are laying here, right? Will you always stay here now? We swim here too. It's a good place, yes".

I was laying at the bottom, heartily enjoying an unusual and very interesting company. Such contact with sharks is rare for me, so I literally absorbed some new shades of information about these graceful masters of the depths. Information that is perhaps difficult to obtain in any other way.

It must have been about fifteen minutes before my dive computer started kicking me out of that depth into a shallower place. I sighed with regret, and mentally said goodbye to my new hospitable acquaintances. Then I moved back to the rock where my friend was patiently waiting for me. Apparently, he was eager to ask me a few questions on land. Well, in exchange for a good dinner, I would tell him everything and maybe even fantasize a little.

Yellow submarine

I threaded the rope through the holes in the large stone on the bottom of the sea, and after that, I tied the simplest knot with a bow on it. Finally, our old dream has come true! I turned my head and looked at George. It is very difficult to understand underwater whether a diver is smiling or not, since the regulator in the mouth hides the facial expressions of the mouth of a smiling person and the mask hides the facial expressions of the eyes. However, I was sure that George was also smiling broadly at that moment. Today, he and I finally put into practice a very important part of our plan, which we conceived a long time ago.

* * *

“And what do you need this old scrap metal for?” George sighed, looking at the hopeless me. – “Dive, swim and enjoy the sea. Here is the work for a whole month, and it is still unknown what the result will be.”

“Well, perhaps you are right, my friend”, I nodded. “However, to fly to the stars, you always need a rocket. And in order to explore the reefs fairly well in flippers and to search properly for sunken ships in the Swain reefs region alone, for example, it will take a lifetime of three hundred years. Even five hundred, if you account for the additional time needed for our families, household chores and business. Do you have that much time?”

I watched with pleasure as George's head was slowly bowing under the weight of facts.

“But if we succeed, it will be possible to swim comfortably underwater at five times the speed of a normal diver. In this case, it will be much more convenient to look in different directions from a sitting position. And if we meet something interesting underwater, then we will stop our submarine, tie it to the coral like a horse, and swim around. As a result, in one such dive, we could easily explore three to four kilometers of reefs.”

“Submarine… oh, come on!” George laughed out loud. “It's just some kind of underwater tug for divers, and it looks like a hundred years. It is not a fact that it will ever swim again.”

“No, friend, for me everything that has a motor and a hull, floats and carries people under water - is a submarine”, I answered categorically. “And the air inside it or water, champagne or fish - this is the second question. Cars can also be very different, but they are all called cars.”

“Then, we’ll have to paint it yellow to make this more convincing,” George smiled since he loved the Beatles songs.

I nodded in agreement.

“Okay, friend, then we'll have to lose a couple of days on a trip to Sydney and spend some money on this scrap metal”, George sighed, and then smiled slyly. “Oh, and if this thing suddenly does not move, then I will look at you with terrible reproach for another twenty years.”

“You can do it even all five hundred years, my friend”, I laughed. “But if it works, then your eyes will radiate what they were actually created for: one hundred percent thirst for adventure and discovery.”

George waved me off as if I was hopelessly sick, and slowly went into the house to call the owner of that advertisement.

“Just imagine, mate”, I shouted after him, “it's so convenient - under the feet on the right side we will stack large diamonds from the Spanish galleon, and under the feet on the left side – smaller ones. Then we won’t have to shove them into our pockets.”

The friend went a little faster.

* * *

A company located near Sydney bought a used commercial ship overseas a few years ago. On board, the new owners found a broken wet-type transporter for two divers, externally in terrible condition. The new owners of this boat had nothing to do with diving and therefore they put up this, in their opinion, obvious scrap metal, for sale for little money.

George and I were looking through different ads for diving equipment in Australia from time to time, and one day we came across this offer. We asked the owners for some photos of this contraption from all angles, and soon had a more detailed idea about it.

It is worth saying that my friend and I had a good command of some working skills, and made a lot of repairs on the ship and

diving equipment by ourselves. Besides, George even owned a small workshop with some useful tools and small machines. Therefore, the process of restoring this device was technically more or less clear to us, although such work required a significant amount of time. A huge plus was that the design of this device was not very complicated. Only a metal battery compartment, one marching and two rotary electric motors, and a simple control panel were hermetically sealed equipment. Everything else was open to the water.

Men sometimes like to tinker with mechanisms. Moreover, the opportunity to get personal underwater transport for George and me was a great incentive to take on this job. Therefore, we drove a small truck to Sydney. No special difficulties awaited us there - the device fully corresponded to all the photos that were sent to us. Well, everything else, as doctors sometimes like to say, could only be identified by further “autopsy”. We paid for the goods, loaded them into the car and drove back.

On the way, my friend and I reflected a little about its name. After all, it is well known that as you call a ship, so, in general, it will sail. As a result of the discussion, we decided to name our new underwater friend a little in the Italian manner - "Dolce Dive".

* * *

The process of repairing the device took a couple of months. We had to buy only one new electric motor - the other two were functioning properly, and we just serviced them. We restored the tightness of the power compartment by changing the rubber seal, and replaced three helium batteries.



It took the most time for us to restore the frame and the hull. Rust damaged the frame in some places so we had to weld strengthening somewhere. The cladding and plastic windows were not in very good condition either and we had to tinker with them and even make something anew. However, day after day we did our work and one day all the work was done.

It remains only to paint our underwater friend yellow. We did not do it ourselves, but took the device to a paint auto center. The local paint master was scratching his head for a long time, studying the unusual device but nevertheless, he got down to work and did it well. After that, we brought the submarine back to the workshop and wrote a name on it. With respect to all traditions, of course...

* * *



George and I swam away a little from our yellow friend tied to a stone, and once again looked at it with pride. Handsome!

Of course, we could not know how the fate of our project would turn out, and to be honest, we didn’t really want to know. It is more important not to look ahead in life, but to live, enjoying every moment. However, rockets certainly bring the stars closer. And our submarine will also bring many beautiful and interesting things in the ocean closer to us. My friend and I had no doubts about it.

Whale shark

I am well aware that the expression "diving fortune" is far from an empty phrase. When, for example, certain divers begin to tell me that for some reason they cannot meet some fish or animal underwater, I am beginning to smile involuntarily. The reason for this lies in the fact that at that moment I always remember my story of meetings with one cute underwater creature.

Sometime in the early 2000s, I could not meet a whale shark underwater for several years. By that time, I had already been diving for quite a long time, visited many interesting diving places in the world and saw almost everything that I wanted to see underwater. However, I never came across a whale shark - it was always seen either before me, or after me, or instead of me.

At that time, I did almost everything possible to find it. I made several trips to places where whale sharks are frequent and only went there during the peak season. Nevertheless, as the result of all my attempts, our paths with this shark have never crossed. My bad luck was often laughable. Once, for example, my partner and I sat underwater longer than others hoping to see the desired shark. As a result, my friend and I were the last to surface. And ... we saw that our ship was not nearby, but it was visible somewhere in the distance.

We patiently began to wait for it on the surface and the ship actually come back for us twenty minutes later. As it turned out later, it was all about the whale shark. They radioed from another ship that there was a large whale shark near the surface of the sea

about a kilometer away from us. The captain and the instructor decided to come back for us a little later and they took other divers who had already returned to the ship by that time to see this shark. There, everyone quickly put on fins and masks, jumped into the water and had seen enough of the whale shark and took pictures of it. Well, after that they came back for us. I will not describe to you the full depth of my mental trauma that evening.

Trying to break my terrible bad luck with whale sharks I sometimes even began to follow some omens. So, for example, I knew the sign that beginners are always lucky and I specially stayed closer to them underwater a couple of times. Moreover, it is not so difficult to recognize beginners by their brand new underwater equipment. However, I had no luck with this tactic either.

So, one day I specifically swam in the Maldives not far from one young, optimistic guy in new fins and a bright mask. As I learned from him before the dive, it was his first serious diving tour. Like an old experienced fisherman, I immediately decided to put the “newbie” on the hook of my bad luck in order to pull a whale shark for him. However, that plan of mine also failed.

In some incredible way, I lost sight of that guy underwater, somewhere in the middle of the dive. When I saw him on the ship after the dive, he immediately ran up to me with his small underwater camera. “Igor, Igor!” - He mumbled excitedly. “What did I just see underwater?” After that, he showed me his little screen with the image. I sat down on the bench in surprise - on the screen in full size the muzzle of a large whale shark flaunted.

Yes, it is unlikely that you will ever be able to imagine my emotions at that moment.

I do not know how long it would have continued if Neptune had not taken pity on me one day. I finally met my first whale shark underwater during one of my safari in the Maldives. Then very quickly the second, third, fifth and twentieth. After that, whale sharks began to come to me quite often, as if they were trying so hard to compensate for the damage done to my nerves in the previous years. And, of course I forgave them.



Therefore, to all divers who have not yet been able to see something underwater I highly recommend to be patient, have a good mood and wait. Well, do not forget to knock from time to time (preferably not too softly) on Neptune's door. Someday he will either take pity or get tired, but he will definitely open it.

Trips across Australia 1

Meat grinder

The coffee machine stubbornly refused to get into the trunk of the jeep. I had tried in vain to put it inside for about ten minutes until I realized that it was completely impossible. Well, it seemed, something needed to be taken out first.

I looked through the entire contents of the packed-to-the-top car once again while looking for a potential victim: our baggage bags, diving equipment, a couple of air tanks, a bag of groceries. Basic diving kit for two gentlemen on a week trip. Taking a deep breath, I pulled my grocery bag out of the car. After all, we will always find something to eat in Australia, however, being left without a cup of fresh coffee before diving - was already a real torture.

The idea of such trips came to my friend and me spontaneously. Of course, it was not without some delicious Australian beer here, which sometimes helps George and me come up with great ideas. I remember that evening we sat with him in the same bar and took turns complaining to each other about the long-suffering lot of fathers in our large families. No, this does not mean that my friend and I had bad families - on the contrary, our families were wonderful. However, even honey in large quantities causes nausea, and in critical quantities - thoughts of suicide.

So, when our emotional steam gradually came out, and the beer vapors reached the right place, we immediately realized that it was useless to simply cry over our problems. We urgently needed a plan that would save us from this sticky family routine from time to time. And it came soon - simple, like a meat grinder, and brilliant, also like a meat grinder.

So today my friend and I started an *expedition trip to the far north of the east coast of Australia in search of potential diving sites for our business program*. Of course, this was the official version of our trip. The essence of the informal version let continue to be stored at the bottom of a beer mug from that bar.

In total, George and I planned to cover a distance of about five thousand kilometers, often through sparsely populated and sometimes completely deserted places. We intended to dive with him in the dive centers that we would meet in those parts. Our previous experience has shown that in such distant corners of Australia you could find real underwater pearls. And sometimes they are known only among experienced Australian divers - the owners of local dive clubs often do not advertise them too much.

From somewhere far away came the sounds of classical Italian music. Everything is clear: my friend George is already close. The only thing where we one hundred percent disagreed with him was our musical preference. After many unsuccessful attempts to find something in between that could please both of us, we gave up this hopeless experiment. Now we just turn on the radio in car and what started playing, then started playing. However, I always win in this seemingly fair game. Well, tell me, where can you hear Italian classics on the radio besides Italy itself?

Ayr

My soul sang in a many-voiced choir. Glancing sideways at George, I realized that I was not alone in my emotions. The picturesque highway, like a wide conveyor belt, quickly ran under our car. The bright sun played beautifully in the foliage of roadside eucalyptus trees. It had been several hours since we had passed Brisbane and we were now driving on a road with very little traffic. About once every half an hour we passed a village or town.

Surprisingly, each of these settlements had its own face and even some peculiarity. First, we came across a pond with a thousand white parrots sitting on the branches of trees that grew around it; then an alley with sculptures, from which you could die of laughter, if you try to find meaning in them.



Once, a composition of a dozen old tractors, painted in different colors flashed by. And many similar sites. In general, local enthusiasts did everything possible to ensure that tourists stop here to take some photos. Well, and to buy something, of course.

Our final destination was the Ayr town. We planned to stay there three or four days. The reason for this was simple - just fifteen miles from the local coast, a delightful sunken ship lay at the bottom. For a hundred years, it has become so overgrown with corals that in fact, it has already turned into a real living reef with huge spaces inside. I've been there a couple and I was always surprised at the incredible amount of living creatures around it. In addition, George and I planned to thoroughly explore these places and find the most convenient slopes into the water here. Someday we planned to come here on our own with a boat on a trailer and dive.

Cow pastures in the Rockhampton area gradually gave way to endless sugar cane fields in the Proserpine area. George gave me two long lectures along the way: "Rockhampton - the meat capital of Australia" and, "Proserpine - the sugar capital of Australia." As a result, a huge piece of information appeared in my head with which I have to live now. Fortunately, all roads end, and finally we reached the place we needed.

Ayr pleasantly surprised us. Despite the fact that the town was small, the taste and civilization was clearly felt there. Nice streets, large shops and cozy cafes promised us an interesting pastime. Our hotel with a beautiful floral name was located just a couple of minutes walk from the center, so we spent the rest of the day

exploring the city. Preliminarily, of course, having cleared the windshield of our car from hundreds of flies, whose day was not so lucky.

The next day was completely devoted to exploring the surroundings. As it turned out, there were as many as sixteen boat ramps in this area. Methodically, like watchmakers, we examined them one by one, noting the most convenient for us. True, this time we had to remember about safety - the local rivers and canals were full of crocodiles. The night before, in a bar, we heard a lot of different stories about this from a random acquaintance. I will omit the details, but even if half of those stories were true, then it really was worth being extremely careful here.

Yongala

The cozy dive center that organized dives to our sunken ship was located not very far from the shore. Among other things, it had a cafe and several hotel rooms where divers could live quite comfortably for several days. The latter was very relevant, considering that the nearest comforts of civilization were not very close from here. As is generally the case in Australia, all the staff at the dive center were friendly, cheerful and professional.

After completing all the documents, my friend and I, as well as other divers, were put into a large off-road vehicle. A big old tractor with a huge five-ton Zodiac on a trailer followed us. I have never seen inflatable boats this size before. Later I understood why this was necessary. The fact is that in this part of Australia

the Great Barrier Reef is located a hundred kilometers from the coast. The huge ocean waves that break against it, after another hundred kilometers, manage to gain strength again. As a result, the sea in the area of the sunken ship is often rough. Therefore, any smaller boat will feel uncomfortable there.

The girl in the office who registered us for diving promised a fun descent into the water. We all soon understood what she meant. There was no specially equipped descent in these places, so we had to somehow start straight from the beach into the oncoming surf. Our main assistant in this matter, obviously, was supposed to be the same old tractor.

This was the first time George and I had encountered such an unusual technique of shore descent. All the twelve divers climbed into the boat on the shore, and the tractor began to move it in reverse towards the water. The sea here was shallow, and our boat left the trailer only about a hundred meters from land. The large rear wheels of the iron horse almost disappeared underwater, but the engine remained above the surface. When the tractor and trailer moved back to the shore, it was rocking so much that all the divers got up from their seats and groaned emotionally in different languages of the world, watching this scene.

For the next twenty minutes, we zigzagged through the waves on the boat, approaching the famous shipwreck. As expected, the ocean was not very calm at the dive site again. By the way, the local dive center sends divers to Yongala only about a hundred days a year. The rest of the time this is prevented by bad weather conditions.

Having secured the boat to the buoys quickly and smoothly, the crew began helping the divers put on their equipment. The boat was rocking heavily but the divers gradually managed to cope with it. George and I finished everything quickly and were the first to plop into the water.

How stable and calm the underwater world is! On earth, something is always happening somewhere - emotions and experiences, vanity and haste. However, underwater immediately there is a feeling that time has stopped. Just like a thousand years ago, fish swim around, just like a million years ago, corals grow and sand lies. And for some reason, only restless people needed to drag their scrap metal here and sink it. After that, the poor sea had to work for a hundred years, bringing it into harmony with the rest of the underwater kingdom.



My friend and I were slowly descending near the bow of the ship slowly. Visibility that day was not the best but still quite decent. I concentrated on preparing my camera for the upcoming shoot, and barely looked around during the descent. The sound of George's quacking signal distracted me from the matter. My friend frantically pointed his finger at the space below me. I looked down and winced.

A large shark called *Tawny nurse* was swimming just a couple of meters below me at that moment. If George had not given me a signal, I would have sat on her back in a few seconds. Rodeo on a shark! For the life of me, I don't want to be the first to do it. And even if the whole world then showed me on all TV channels for a week, I would still refuse...

I mentally forgave George for all his past sins and even one of his future ones. Having immediately froze in place, I patiently let the graceful predator pass beneath me. For myself, as an experienced driver, I at once established a new rule for moving in the underwater world - "interference from below." The minimum fine for which... Here I had several answer options, and there were definitely no good ones.

In the end, I finally sank to the bottom and finished preparing the camera. After that, I looked around - Yongala was, as always, beautiful. Clouds of large and small fish surrounded the ship overgrown with corals in a dense ring. I even had the thought that it would be difficult to squeeze my bulky camera through these dense schools. However, fish always give way under water. Well, unless they are very, very big...

I like to measure the quality of a dive by the number of photos I take during it. If I manage to get past twenty, then that is a very good dive for me. On Yongala, I usually take from one hundred to one hundred and twenty frames per dive! Can you imagine how rich the surrounding underwater world must be so that you practically do not remove your finger from the shutter button? Therefore, today I also almost did not look up from the viewfinder of my camera, trying to capture everything around me.

It is worth saying that some of the sea inhabitants were for some reason of unusually large in size in this place. However, the size of the two local giant groupers always surprised us the most. By the way, familiar divers who were here many years before us, also told us about them. So, when I approached them from behind, they always seemed to me that two large underwater elephants were swimming in front of me. I am willing to bet that each of them weighed at least a ton.

I took several shots of these giants from different angles and then swam on. Soon my attention was attracted by a school of twenty fish lying nearby on the seabed. All of them were quite large in size - a little more than a meter - and the structure of their fins resembled sharks. I had never met these fish before, and decided to find out - are they sharks or not? To do this I needed to take a photo of them. However, those fish turned out to be extremely shy, so I had to resort to many tricks in order to somehow capture them in focus. The most interesting thing was that I later showed these photographs to many divers and none of them could recognize these fish.

I often captured underwater snakes in my frame. These curious creatures, mostly *Olive sea snakes*, were also common here. There were other divers swimming around George and me at times today, so we weren't taking any liberties with these reptiles. However, I remember well the day when we were here only with known to me instructor Brighton. And that time everything was different. However, this is a topic for a separate story.



Everything, even the most beautiful fairy tales, ends someday. At the end of the dive, George and I took another look at our wonderful Yongala and then swam to the decompression stop. When we boarded the boat, it turned out that almost all the divers had already returned. We quickly dropped our gear and sat on the soft side with our thermos of hot and delicious coffee. What could

be better than a nice cup of drink after such an interesting dive? This is exactly the time when everything you saw is digested somewhere in your head, and then returns to you in the form of a wonderful and serene mood.

Trips across Australia 2. Bargara

Frankenstein

Once, while diving in northern Australia, George and I had the good fortune to meet an experienced diver who was from Bundaberg. We were greatly impressed with what he told us about the underwater world in the area. The amazing thing was that after spending an hour on the Internet in search of some supporting information, we found almost nothing there. This fact once again only proved our theory that there were many good diving places in Australia, which still little known.

After finding a few days off in our schedule, my friend and I soon went there by car. We managed to get to the city about an hour before the closing time of the diving center. His owner Jack was already waiting for us. Having quickly prepared our equipment for tomorrow's dives, George and I decided to take a little tour of the city afterward. Our enthusiasm was rewarded - it turned out that the largest rum factory in the entire southern hemisphere was located very close by. My friend and I thought about it for a bit, but then we decided to go on a tour there after the completion of the diving program.

The next morning started out fun. We immediately fell into a light trance when first saw the boat from which we were to dive for several days. The boat was officially called "Fishing Stories", but I immediately gave it another, in my opinion a more appropriate name: "Frankenstein". Jack, looking at our large and very rounded eyes, immediately began to explain.

“This is our instructor Dave's bot and he made it himself”. The owner of the dive center was clearly trying to bring at least some romance to what was in front of us. “Once upon a time Dave was a welder, and then he bought cheap pieces of aluminum somewhere else. So he decided to try.”

The test was clearly a success - "Frankenstein" was incomparable! This miracle of shipbuilding could easily claim the cover of the Guinness Book of Records. There was not a single straight or even line in it. It consisted exclusively of curved, oblique and convex parts. For some reason, I immediately remembered the children’s poem about crooked mice in a crooked house. And, it seemed, my friend and I were in the role of mice today. George and I walked around this miracle five times in silence, but for some reason we did not want to talk. Our feelings were too strong.

“Eh... Has he already sailed on it?” George was the first to come out of his daze.

“Oh yeah! Already three times last week”. Proudly answered Jack. “Great bot! And most importantly, there will be no other divers on it except you.”

The last phrase alarmed rather than pleased us. At that moment, the author of the bot, who we already wanted to meet, approached us. After saying hello, Dave looked at his creation

with such warmth that George and I even felt a little ashamed of our tactless thoughts.

“Don't worry, it won't sink!” Dave began to speak, most likely already answering the most popular question in advance. “I personally welded twelve unsinkable compartments in it!”

To be honest, he would have made us more happy if he had said that he bought them from a reliable store. However, as it soon turned out, it was only one part of the features in "Frankenstein". Very soon, we witnessed its unique seaworthiness. Firstly, while meeting each wave, it did not bounce on it with its nose, as it is usual with bots, but tried to dive under it. I don’t know what Dave welded to the bottom but it was clearly more needed for the submarine.

Secondly, all the water that got inside did not flow out backwards, as was the case with normal boats but collected into a puddle right under the captain's feet. Only then I understood why Dave came in boots. Thirdly, despite the sides covered with an awning, the spray somehow miraculously flew into the boat from behind, and then flew forward along the cabin to the captain himself! Even the laws of physics did not work here. There was a feeling that the "Frankenstein" wanted to take revenge on its creator at any cost, well and at the same time on all the passengers.

Thank God our first dive site was only three miles away from the coast. Otherwise, we would possibly have checked "unsinkable" compartments of the Frankenstein for airtightness as well. When Dave finally tied his stubborn child to the buoy, George and I breathed out a sigh of relief. Our return journey already had to be with a passing wave, so our chances for a safe return to the solid shore have increased dramatically.

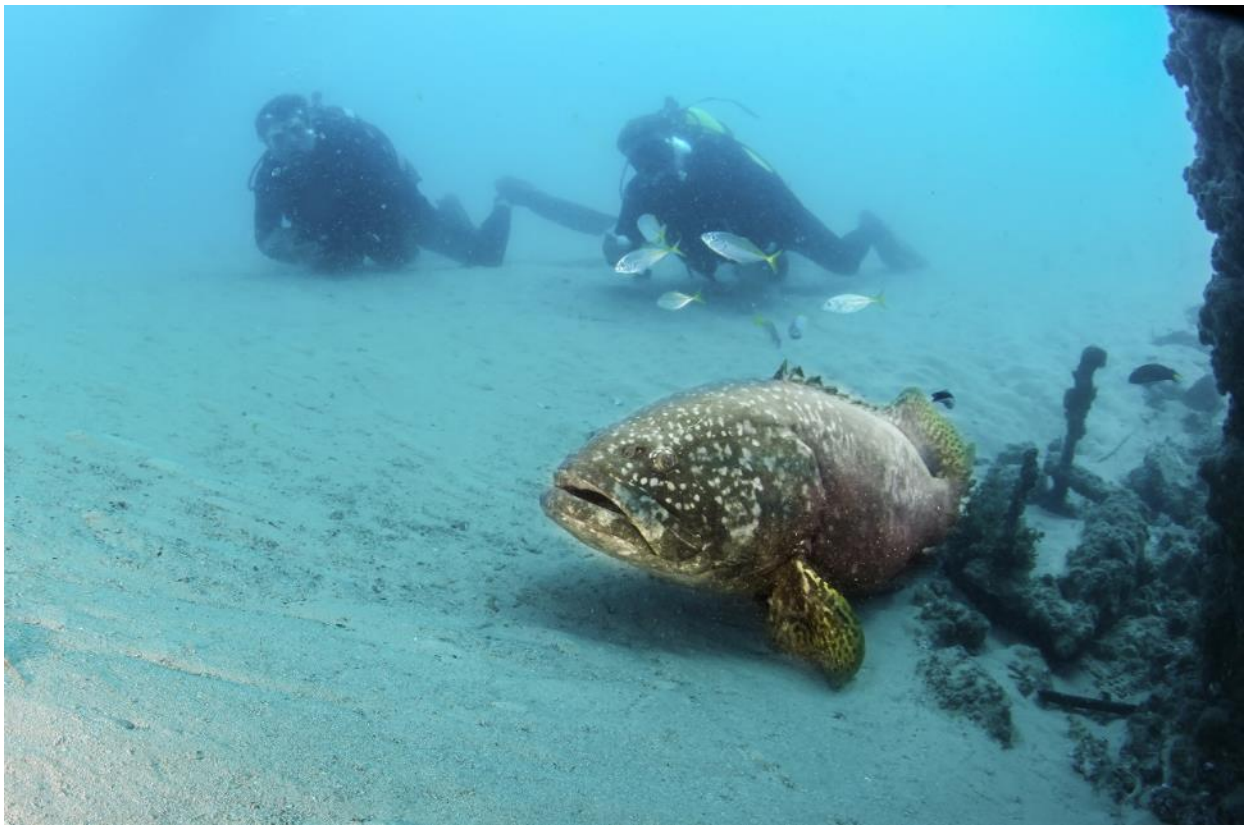
Artificial reef

Dave started his briefing and from the first minute it became clear that we had an excellent instructor in front of us. As we found out a little later, his status in professional diving was maximal - the course director. And why did he start building ships? Indeed, you can not command the heart.

The place where we were to dive was simply called "artificial reef". As it turned out from Dave's story, about twenty years ago several old ships were specially flooded here, as well as the wreckage of three aircrafts from the Second World War. All objects were located at depths of up to twenty meter, which made diving at this dive site very comfortable. Having carefully studied the layout of the objects under water, we began to slowly put on our equipment.



The reef greeted us very warmly. A huge grouper which must be responsible for welcoming guests that day swam just a couple of meters away from us and disappeared into the hold of a large boat. I looked around. For twenty years, the sea had done a good job on these ships. They were completely covered with hard and soft corals and also surrounded by dense schools of fish. Yes, of course it was not “Yongala” but everything here looked very good as well.



In the fifty minutes of diving, we encountered a dozen turtles, a couple of leopard sharks, half a dozen catsharks, many olive sea snakes and several large groupers underwater. Plus, we often swam through the clouds of fish, a variety of species. All that happened with a fairly good visibility and at optimal depth. To sum up, we had a wonderful and intense dive. George and I were

extremely grateful to the Australian guy who recommended that place to us.

Between dives, while George and I were drinking our coffee, Dave did not stop talking for a minute. By the way, he could have been a great guide or even an announcer. Oh God, why would he start building ships? In general, he turned out to be a very nice conversationalist and soon we learned a lot of new and interesting things about these places. It turns out that whales sometimes visited that site in the winter. Dolphins and sharks "toninus" were also frequent guests here. And once Dave happened to meet a big tiger shark here. It must have come to see Frankenstein on purpose. But what else surprised and pleased us was that on this site it was possible to make three different dives without repeating - there were so many underwater objects here.

All our second dive, in the truest sense of the word, we crawled through the holds of the next three ships. Some of them were literally packed with huge flocks of glassfish. They look very beautiful in photographs and I spent quite a few minutes capturing them properly. For a "dessert" we climbed into the cabin of the plane where we were met by a giant grouper. He slowly made way for us and I managed to get a few more good shots.

We returned to the beach tired and happy. Even the poor "Frankenstein" could not spoil our mood on the way back, although it tried its best. Our cozy hotel was located twenty steps from the diving center. And another twenty paces in the other direction, there was a stylish Australian pub with great food and drinks. Without thinking twice, we named this place, by some analogy with the Bermuda Triangle - the Bundaberg Triangle of Happiness. Well, we immediately tried to get lost in it.

Trips across Australia 3. Daintree

Cod Hall

I was sweetly napping on the passenger seat. It was George's turn to drive, so it was unreasonable not to take advantage of the situation. We departed at three o'clock in the morning with the intention of reaching the town of Proserpine before dark. Such an early waking up clearly did not conducive any to activity or conversation. I looked at my friend: George, who also had not much sleep, was emotionality like a Sphinx. It’s okay, he’ll sleep for a couple of hours when I get behind the wheel.

But in fact, all this did not matter much. The most important thing was that my friend and I again managed to go on another trip to search for the same - *potentially interesting places for a joint diving business*. All members of our families were completely satisfied with that motivation for the absence of husbands and fathers, George and I on the other hand were simply happy. A couple of weeks of travelling with new impressions, laughter and various adventures - what could be better?

Actually, this time we had a plan to get to Cooktown. This is the name of the northernmost city on the east coast of Australia. The thing is that we could launch our diving boat here and sail to Lizard Island. The distance from Cooktown to the island was about fifty nautical miles, which was within our capabilities. Moreover, the sailing there would be done in calmer waters inside the Great Barrier Reef.

There were many excellent dive sites around Lizard Island. However, the real gem, of course, was the place called Cod Hall, located half an hour's sail from the island, on the outer side of the reef ridge. This place has long been known in the diving world. At a depth of ten to fifteen meters, you can see there a large number of giant groupers and potato codes (which, by the way, are also often classified as groupers).



In Cod Hall, many of these specimens reach the size of a human and even surpass it. Furthermore, they are not shy at all and are often not averse to taking pictures with divers. George and I had been to this place a couple of times already during the diving safari in that part of the Great Barrier Reef. So, after visiting it, our impressions were always as vivid as possible.

That’s why we wanted to visit this place on our own, on our diving boat. Moreover, it would be great to spend the night at a hotel on Lizard Island.

To North

Around noon, we were approaching Rockhampton - the meat capital of Australia. As it turned out, at all the entrances to this city there were giant stone bulls with horns facing out. They symbolized the main specialty of the local industry. My friend who had already been here many times, told me that some city residents sometimes joked about living in the place between asses.

The pastures on the approach to Rockhampton were truly enormous. For about two hours we drove along endless meadows where elite bulls grazed. Different breeds had different colors. For example, whites were called "Brahman" and blacks were called "Black Angus". The steak from the latter is one of my favorite dishes. I am not going to describe its taste to avoid any play on the feelings of readers, I will only limit myself to the fact that it is very tasty.

George and I understood that skipping this dish for breakfast in its homeland would be terribly disrespectful to everything reasonable and proper. Besides, few cups of good coffee that day were essential to fight our sleepiness. That was why we stopped by a nice cafe on the road to enjoy the taste of local livestock products.

After a short rest we continued our journey. That day we drove almost without stopping to our final destination. As a result, we arrived in the town of Proserpine even a little earlier than it was planned. We got two rooms at a cozy roadside motel, brought our things inside and set ourselves straight. After that, we went to a random cafe in the city center for a snack.

After dinner, George and I did not explore the city, but went to our motel rooms to get some sleep. We had another long trip planned the next day, so it was necessary to rest before that.

Over the next day, we also covered a considerable distance, passing the cities of Ayr, Townsville and Cairns. We stopped for the night in the town of Port Douglas. This was a small resort town, an hour's drive away from Cairns. There was a large port where tourists and divers were transported to the Great Barrier Reef.

Some local ships used for these trips were so large that they resembled starships from Star Wars movies. One of these catamarans, as we found out, could simultaneously accommodate up to four hundred tourists. My friend and I had dinner on the embankment, looking at one such monster. Then returned to our rooms to get some sleep again.

In the morning, we continued our trip and soon reached the town of Daintree, located on the banks of the river with the same name. On the way there, we had a great pleasure looking around at the beautiful landscapes. In these places, the tropical forest became increasingly dense and humid. It often rained here which was why the road was often flooded. Fortunately, the heavy rain season had not yet begun, so we were able to reach the place

without much trouble. Then, we had to take a ferry to the other side.

Basically, there were two routes to Cooktown. The first route was a road that was eighty kilometers from the coast and was quite reliable even during the rainy season. The second route was the ferry crossing and then through the tropical forest. You need a good SUV to travel on that road, but even with it would be difficult to get to Cooktown during the rainy season.

George and I rented a small boat with a guide and went on a tour of the river, before getting to the other side. We really wanted to see the tropical forest from the water before continuing our trip. That tour could easily be called the *crocodile tour*. The Daintree River is the largest river in the tropical north of Australia's east coast. It was not surprising that there were a lot of formidable predators in its warm, muddy waters.

In general, divers always avoid crocodiles. One can even say that diving and crocodiles are incompatible in their essence. So, do not be fooled by some of the underwater photos that show divers with crocodiles. Some of my Australian friends, very experienced divers and underwater photographers, once told me some of the secrets of such underwater photos.

For these purposes, small crocodiles are usually picked. Moreover, crocodiles are well fed in advance. And then it’s a matter of technique - to make the crocodile appear large in the frame, and the diver - small. Cameraman needs to swim closer to the crocodile and move the diver further away into the background - the shot is ready. The main thing is to have a good visibility underwater.

Sometimes photos with larger crocodiles are taken, but in this case a different technique is used. At first, such a crocodile is either fed, as they say, “to its fullest”, or special medication is used. When it desires nothing more but sleep, it is pushed into the water. However! Even in this case, the specialists first wrap a strong fishing line around its jaws, which becomes almost invisible underwater.

So try to notice that the crocodiles' jaws are always closed in these photographs. It is well known that these formidable predators have rather weak muscles for opening their jaws. Therefore, a few turns of strong, thick fishing line are enough to make crocodiles harmless.

However, in real life, even small crocodiles are extremely dangerous underwater. We have heard a lot of tragic stories about this. Therefore, you should always avoid diving in areas where these predators can be found.

It is much more interesting to watch them from the shore or a boat. That is why George, our guide Peter and I sailed by boat on a friendly visit to their territory that day. It is estimated that there are thousands of green, toothy predators live in the floodplain of the Daintree River.

We came across crocodiles immediately. Peter was mostly the first to notice them. The reptiles disguised themselves very well in the surroundings but the experienced eyes of the guide quickly noticed them. Mostly, we came across small specimens up to two meters long. As we found out from Peter's story, crocodiles always protect their territory. Therefore, fights over it are pretty common among them.

As it turned out, crocodiles could sometimes leave their native waters during drought. When some rivers dried up, these predators could cover a significant distance overland. In addition, from time to time they made their way to cow pastures which were sometimes located in the floodplains. To prevent this, local farmers often install barbed wire along the water slopes. In a word, the entire local way of life took the presence of these dangerous neighbors into account one way or another.

That day, apart from several dozen crocodiles we were able to see a great variety of different birds, snakes and even spiders that lived in the coastal thickets. Wild jungle was undoubtedly dangerous for inexperienced travelers. So, only the aborigines, who lived on this land for many thousands of years, felt comfortable there.



At the end of our tour, George and I thanked Peter warmly and headed back to the car. It was time for us to cross the river by ferry and continue our journey.

Cunning Napoleons

Sometimes the events happen underwater that help us discover something new and interesting about the inhabitants of the underwater world. It is especially fascinating when it concerns the manifestation of intelligence in some sea creatures. One such case happened to us during the two-week diving safari in the warm waters of the southern hemisphere. Back then, we were diving on the distant and magnificent reefs of one of the largest atolls.

The professional and cheerful crew of our ship had few good surprises in mind for its guests underwater, as is usually the case on such dive cruises. In particular, at one of the dive sites, guides gave divers the opportunity to feed giant Napoleons (Humphead wrasse) with peeled chicken eggs. For the green giants, this product was an excellent delicacy. In my opinion, there was nothing bad for the fish in such feeding - a chicken egg is pure natural protein, almost the same as the food that these fish ate every day.

So, all those willing to feed were given some peeled eggs. The guides recommended holding the eggs with two fingers underwater in order not to create difficulties for the Napoleons when feeding. As we placed the eggs in the pockets of our diving vests, we geared up and jumped into the water. The Napoleons appeared almost immediately, as if someone had told them about our plans. There were three and one of them was enormous, the size of a large TV screen. The other two were smaller in size, yet still quite big. I do not know whether they were related but they did keep together.

I pulled the first egg out of my vest, and held it out in front of me, holding it with two fingers. I can bet that all Napoleons wrasse had a sly shine in their eyes. The large Napoleon moved closer to me without taking its gaze off the delicacy. I decided that one should make an effort for such a delicacy so I quickly pulled my hand behind my back. The big Napoleon stopped and looked at me, as if amused. A second later I realized why.



Suddenly, someone behind me quickly snatched the egg from my hand. Immediately turning around, I saw a happy smaller Napoleon swimming off. Laughing myself to the full, I switched my attention to my friends, where the group of Napoleons were headed. In the next few minutes I witnessed three occasions of how these sneaky underwater guys snatched the eggs from the naive divers. Furthermore, they used a very similar scheme - my

friends also tried to hide the eggs behind themselves with as much success as myself.

I don’t know how this group of underwater tricksters later shared the catch among themselves, but they definitely worked as a team, and clearly for the common result. After some time, I pulled out another egg from the pocket of my vest and stretched my hand forward again. Everything begin to repeat itself down to the details - the large Napoleon swam closer to me from the front. I hid my hand behind my back, yet this time I was already glancing behind. When the smaller Napoleon began to approach the treat from behind, I quickly moved my hand with the egg to the side. However, after a few seconds something snatched the egg from my fingers again. Glancing in that direction I saw a third Napoleon which I briefly lost sight of, swimming away from me pleased.

This time, I was laughing much longer - such an open group robbery of divers underwater can be seen very rarely. I looked at my neighbors. Some of my friends also tried to complicate the process of feeding Napoleons. Nevertheless, their results were the same as mine - the ‘green underwater team’ worked with amazing cohesion and precision.

After we came back to the ship and had lunch, we then begged the cook for some more eggs. After a while, we went diving again to take part in this unforgettable show. The group of underwater tricksters were waiting for us below, and they again happily began to demonstrate their ‘talents’. Very soon, we were left without eggs for the second time. You cannot imagine the ways in which

we were trying to hide the eggs from Napoleons! Nevertheless, none could fool the underwater trio for longer than a few seconds.



In the evening on the ship, we recalled the entertaining underwater show for a long time. It is not very often to see the intelligence of animals underwater so clearly as well as their ability for cohesive and precise actions. More so, in the situations where they had to collectively overcome the cunning of humans. Well, I have to admit they outsmarted us on that day.

Diver and boy

Experienced diver Yegor was sitting on a rock next to the sea, drinking his coffee from a thermos and looking at the blue surface under which he had recently dived. The underwater world that day pleased him greatly: a couple of leopard sharks danced their signature “graceful tail” dance in front of him, a huge grouper allowed him to swim very close and take a couple of photos, and a large school of travelly fish surrounded him in a cloud at the end of the dive.

Yegor’s equipment was lying nearby on the sand. He threw the top of his wetsuit to his waist backwards and enjoyed his favorite drink, the sun and the sound of the surf.

“Excuse me, mister, can I ask what you are doing here?” The diver suddenly heard a very young voice next to him.

Yegor turned his head and saw a neatly dressed boy of about eight years old a couple of meters away. He wore large glasses and held a large smartphone in his hands.

“Hello, buddy!” The diver greeted him good-naturedly. “I was just diving here. And now I’m sitting and relaxing, enjoying the beautiful weather and remembering what I saw”.

“Did you just dive into this water?” The boy asked with interest and fixed his glasses. “Is it deep here? And why did you do this?”

“I dived for about twenty meters today. Well, I looked at various beautiful fish there, at the amazing underwater world”,

Yegor smiled.

“Did you look at various beautiful fish and at the amazing underwater world?” The boy asked again and scratched the back of his head. “Is that why you bought equipment to dive deep underwater?”

“Exactly”, the diver nodded.

The boy thought for a second, and then shrugged his shoulders.

“I also like to look at fish and the underwater world, but only in my aquarium. It’s much more convenient: I’m sitting in a warm and dry room, in a soft chair”, he said.

“No, my friend, this is completely different”, Yegor smiled in response. “Being in the real world of fish is so interesting and romantic!”

But it was clear that the boy was listening to his arguments with an obvious doubt. The diver also scratched his head.

“How can I explain this to you better... Well, for example, my friends and I recently sailed for two weeks on a ship to a bay where 900 whales spend the winter. Can you imagine how beautiful it is there? There’s only the sea, islands, sunrises and sunsets and many, many huge whales around”, Yegor tried to explain, and his eyes even lit up from his own memories.

“You sailed for two weeks to see whales?” The boy’s lively mind quickly extracted the essence from the emotional speech of the obscure man.

After that, the boy raised his phone to his mouth and said:

“whales”. A second later, images of whales of various breeds and sizes flashed on the screen. The boy turned the screen towards Yegor.

“Look - whales. This way you can see them faster”.

Yegor was silent, not even knowing what to answer. Yes, it seems like the world around him has changed. He and his friends at that age were ready to run to the ends of the earth for any captain or diver in order to hear some kind of maritime story from them. The same thing happened with previous generations of boys - this is obvious from many books of those years. But now, it seems, the situation has changed.

Having clearly lost all interest in the unusual man’s activity, the boy politely said goodbye to him and moved on. On his way, he turned back a couple of times and looked a little with pity at his recent interlocutor. The diver looked at him with the same feeling.

The Untouched Red Sea

The frequency with which one recalls the memory of a past diving trips - is a sort of criteria by which their quality can be judged. Some trips are forgotten quite fast, others linger in the memory. The diving trip to this country for me and my wife was

a lifetime memory. Even though more than 20 years have passed since, we still remember with unchanging warmth the vivid and even magical impressions we experienced in the depths of the Sudan's Red Sea.

It is not a secret that Sudan is far from being the most quiet place in the world. For many decades, internal conflicts spark there from time to time, of course, this has a strong consequence on the local way of life and well-being. That is why we would hardly ever agree to dive in a place like this, if it was not for the trip there of our good old acquaintance, who is also a diver. The pictures he made in Sudan underwater, the impressions he shared with us afterwards left me and my wife with no other choice, but to go there by any means necessary.

Despite the complicated situation in Sudan during those years, tourists were allowed to enter the country for the purpose of diving in the Red Sea from the ships. Although, to be honest, the number of those ships then could have been counted with the fingers of a single hand. My wife and I chose the small Italian sailing yacht which was used by our friend, then we prepared for the journey.

* * *

The flight to the area where our yacht would set sail, departed from Cairo, Egypt. The recipient side booked us the tickets and provided a set of precise instructions to be followed upon landing in the airport and then on our way to the port. So, during the security checks, any item the security did not recognize we had to call diving equipment. The thing is, Sudan is not a very wealthy

country, so many day to day items are simply unknown to some people there.

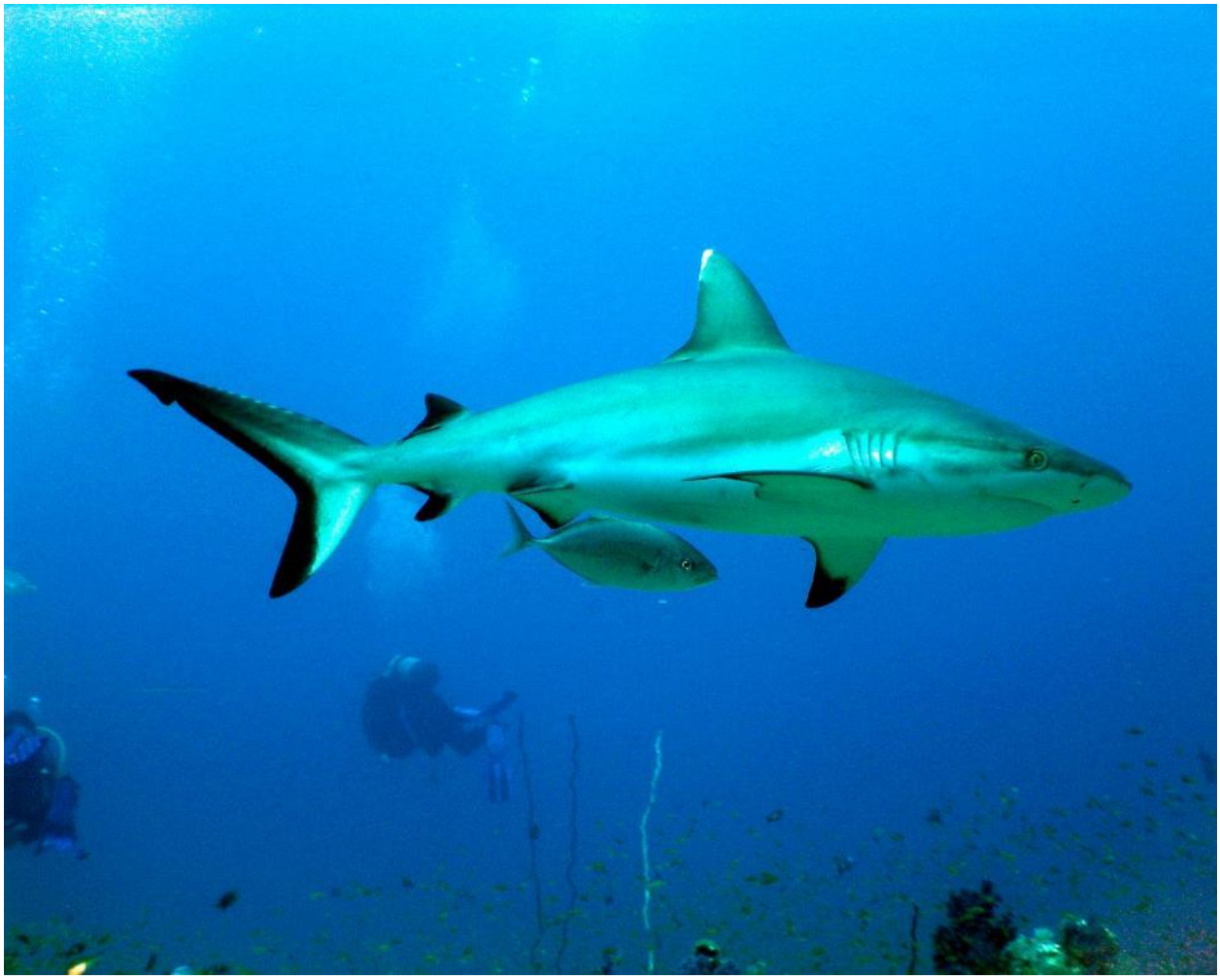
The flight itself was normal and after some time we disembarked the plane into a small airport. The security check of our luggage was done by hand. The most difficult thing for me was not to smile while telling them it was diving equipment. Especially so when the security guard was pointing to some personal items belonging to my wife. Nevertheless, we passed the security with no problem and soon we were on our way to the yacht.

The distance from the airport to the yacht was about 15 kilometres. Even so, we were stopped for checks by patrol several times during that journey - the situation in the country was not very calm indeed, it seemed. On the yacht, we were met with a warm Italian welcome and were immediately given food. Then, we talked a little with the yacht crew and went to our cabins to accommodate.

The next morning, we were sailing off to the sea. Our first dive was made at the Shaab Rumi plateau which is located approximately 40 kilometres from the port. I will never forget the impressions from what I have seen. I have almost never seen such vivid and alive reefs in my life. Considering the best underwater visibility of the Red Sea in the world, that reef truly deserves the best rating. It is no coincidence that the “grandfather” of diving, Jacques-Yves Cousteau chose that place for the construction of his underwater station Precontinent II in 1963.

Dense variety of underwater flora and fauna was stunning to our sight. For the first hour of our dive at the reef, grey reef sharks

calmly swam next to us, several hammerhead sharks suddenly appeared at the plateau a few times, once a magnificent manta ray swam by, after that several large green humphead parrotfish came and many, many more others. So, everything our friend talked about came true 200%.



On the same day, we also dived to the Jacques-Yves Cousteau's underwater station. It is not a secret that this man sparked an interest for diving in many people (us included, by the way) with his movies about the underwater world. That is why, it was very interesting to see with our own eyes one of the products of his enthusiasm - his research station for human capabilities underwater. Without any exaggeration, this place also made a very positive and strong impression on us.



For almost 10 days we were now diving in Sudan waters and completed dives on several reefs. The only thing remained unchanged everywhere - the pristineness of the underwater world around us. The unbelievably vivid reefs, the immense variety of small and large fauna. Manta rays, reef sharks, large groups of hammerhead sharks at dawn and many, many more - all of this accompanied us from the first and to the last day of our trip.

I remember before the trip to Sudan, I was envious of the divers diving in Egypt 20-30 years before me. Their stories of the condition of the underwater world during those years seemed like a fairy tale to me. It was unbelievable that something like this could actually exist underwater. During our trip to Sudan, I think my wife and I saw the same thing underwater, as those divers once saw. Namely, the untouched Red Sea.



Of course, any diving is interesting, especially if you go in the company of your friends or like minded people. The discovery of the underwater world would leave almost no one indifferent. However, all areas of interest would have their own heights and reference points one would desire to reach. The underwater world of Sudan gave us a very bright reference point. Perhaps that is why, my friends and I like to be interested in various poorly investigated places of the underwater world. That is, however, a completely different story. The stories, to be more precise, about the magnificent underwater world of Australia.

Diver's ‘omelet’

People love eating tasty food. If they have the opportunity and time, they like going to different cafes or restaurants, often with national cuisines, and try different dishes there. Sometimes they can also tinker in the kitchen and cook something tasty. However, they often do not have such an opportunity. Nevertheless, people are designed in such a way that they need to eat three times a day. Therefore, for such cases, people have quick-to-cook omelet, oatmeal, or sausage from the refrigerator.

In some ways, similar logic can be observed in diving. Of course, real divers always like going somewhere far away, diving deeper and seeing something more interesting there. However, they do not always succeed. But a real diver always wants to dive! Therefore, many divers often have some “home places” for diving that are not very far away from them. They may not boast the highest level of the underwater world, but they are quite suitable for not forgetting that you are a diver.

My friend George and I have such a place when we are in the Gold Coast area. It does not require going out into the ocean on a boat, serious preparation for diving, taking into account all the weather conditions. Here you can just come to the shore almost any day and immediately go underwater. This place is called Seaway, and in fact, it is a wide channel through which boats and yachts enter from the ocean into the inner waters of local rivers and canals.



There is only one indispensable condition for this area - you need to come here in the moment of maximum tide. At this time, clear water from the ocean makes underwater visibility very good, and the current becomes minimal. At any other time, divers will inevitably encounter a very strong incoming or outgoing current and terrible visibility.

Of course, this dive site is not the famous Yongala or some distant wild reef in the Coral Sea. However, this place definitely helps us remember that we are divers. Moreover, the range of all kinds of observations and activities in this place is not so meager.

Here you can see many representatives of the underwater world. A large pipe crosses the entire channel, not far from the place of descent into the water. Over the years, it has become heavily overgrown with corals and therefore serves as a refuge for a considerable number of fish. For example, here you can see quite numerous schools of travelly fish. Queensland groupers are

also often found here. Sometimes they reach two meters in length. Different types of rays, sea turtles, leopard sharks and guitar sharks are also not the rarest guests here. Among other things, in the supports of the pipe you can sometimes see whiskered lobsters and something else.

If you like looking for something on the bottom, then here you will also find a real embodiment of many of your desires. From natural “trophies”, a few meters from the pipe you can find quite a large number of different underwater shells, sometimes of very good quality and size. However, the search here will definitely not be limited to only natural finds.



The thing is that due to high tides here, a very strong current twice a day carries out from the internal channels everything that people accidentally dropped there. Well, since this place is also very popular with fishermen on boats, the things they dropped are also present on the local bottom in a good assortment. For example, here you can find a decent number of sunglasses, masks and snorkels. Sometimes you can find boat propellers, knives, anchors and even underwater guns in the sand. There is a lot of everything here, right down to golf balls, which also sometimes obviously fly into the water from the golf courses adjacent to the channels.

Therefore, any diver will find quite an interesting pastime on the bottom in this place, taking into account their tastes. Therefore, returning again to analogies with food, we can confidently state the following: yes, diving in the Seaway place (as, most likely, with many other similar places) is certainly not black caviar or Dom Perignon champagne. Nevertheless, it can be compared to a good diving "omelet" with a good filling. Moreover, these fillings can be very different on different days.

Underwater "Starry Sky"

The underwater world is a huge, largely unexplored world, teeming with its own secrets, mysteries, and surprises. Surprises, as they should, almost always appear unexpectedly and then often linger in memory for many years.

One of these cases happened to me during a diving safari in equatorial waters. On that trip, the guides on the boat offered experienced divers to take part in a diving, where it was possible to see hammerhead sharks. But this dive had a number of peculiarities.

Firstly, this dive had to be done very early, just before sunrise. In the equatorial region, dawn breaks very quickly, so we needed to enter the water at the very end of the night, greet the sunrise underwater, and see the hammerhead sharks that pass by only at that time. The second peculiarity was descending to a serious depth in complete darkness, with no external reference points. Therefore, only very experienced divers were invited.

Several such divers on our boat were willing to attempt the dive. The evening before, we prepared our gear to minimize the time needed for assembly during the night. Well before sunrise, we were awakened, had some coffee, got our equipment together, and boarded a diving boat.

In almost total darkness, guided only by a compass, our guide took us to the dive site. Above us was a dark sky, strewn with a million twinkling stars. When we reached the spot, the first signs of dawn were already appearing on the horizon. The guide turned off the engine and reminded us once more of the depth we should reach and approximately how far apart we should stay from each other underwater. We all turned on our flashlights and, with a backward roll, entered the water.

After descending to the required, quite considerable depth, the divers hovered in the dark water column, waiting for the hammerhead sharks. I thought our wait for dawn would be

tedious, but it turned out to be far more interesting. Bored for a moment, I switched off my flashlight and suddenly gasped in astonishment – down below, in the water column beneath me, a starry sky was shining brightly.

Of course, it wasn't the real sky, which remained above the surface. It was some kind of tiny, luminous organisms, floating in great numbers at various depths all around us. Nevertheless, the imitation of a bright, starry sky underwater was almost perfect. Gradually, the other divers also turned off their lights, and we all began to admire at this unearthly beauty.

Only the dim glow of our dive computer screens reminded us of reality. This lasted for several minutes. Then, dawn broke above the water's surface, and visibility underwater began to improve rapidly. After a while, our underwater "starry sky" vanished completely. A few minutes later, hammerhead sharks began to swim beneath us.

We were lucky that morning and saw, to the fullest extent, everything there was to see in that place. But as it turned out later, the most powerful impression for all the divers from that dive was not the sharks, but the underwater starry sky.

The First Dive

On today’s world map, there are not many "white spots" left — unexplored or poorly explored areas of land on the planet. The development of various technologies now allows people to reach the most hard-to-access places.

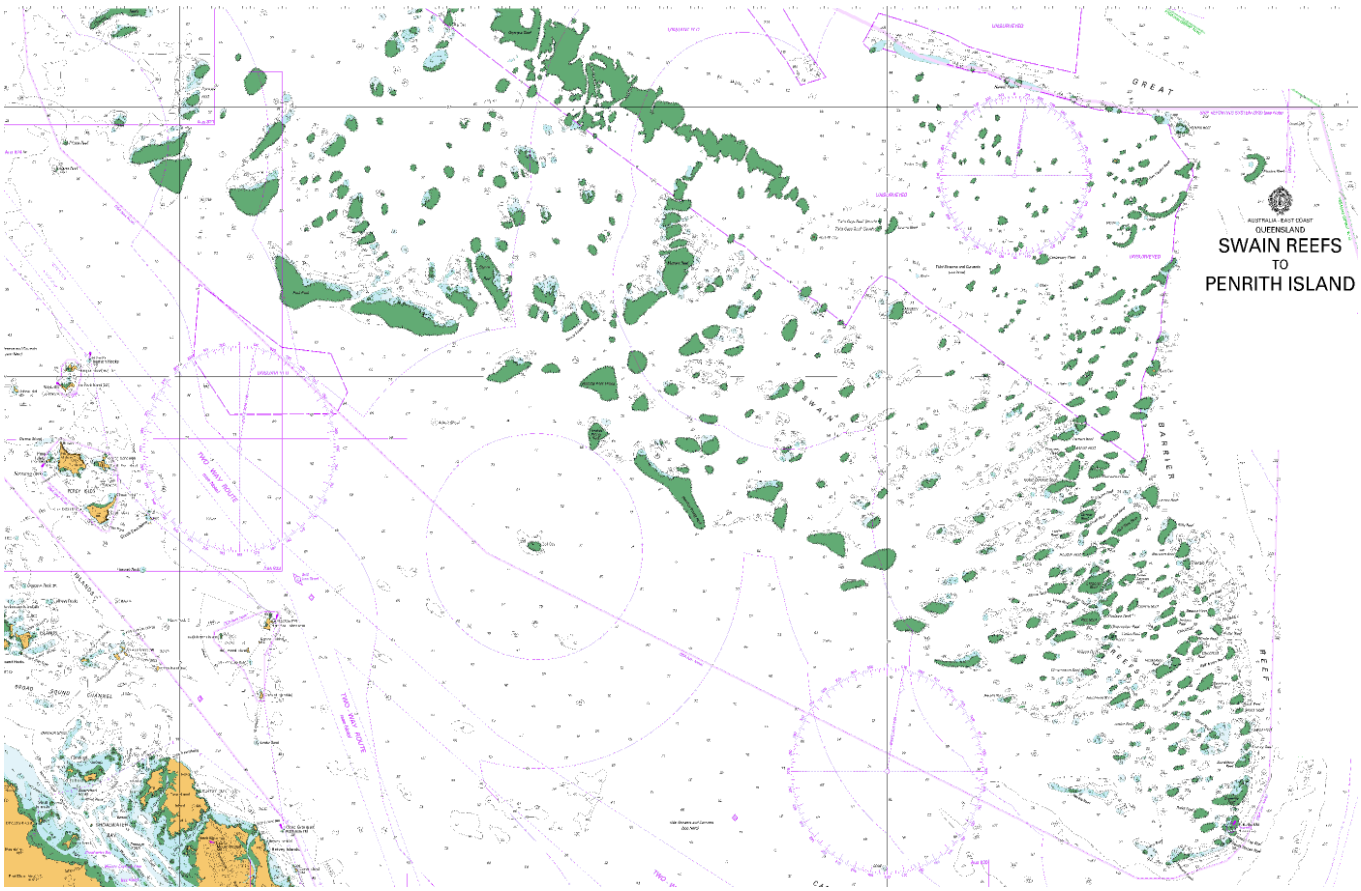
However, on the diver’s world map, such "white spots" are plentiful. And this is easily explained — divers, that is, enthusiasts who explore the underwater world with scuba gear, are relatively few in percentage terms. Moreover, most divers tend to dive in already well-known locations. To make a dive in a new place usually requires specific opportunities and conditions, a good level of diving skill, and, of course, a strong desire.

Nevertheless, diving in a place where no one has ever dived before is certainly a significant event for any diver. The spirit of exploration lives on in people and continues to excite them. To be the first human to see a piece of the pristine underwater kingdom is undeniably impressive.

In Australia, there are many underwater reefs that divers rarely visit or have never visited at all. The reasons are clear: the country’s small population, and consequently, a small number of divers; its remoteness from the rest of the world; the vast number of reefs along the coastline; the considerable distance of some of these reefs from the shore; and so on. Most likely, all these reefs will eventually be explored by curious divers. But for now…

We have had the opportunity to dive in such places and would like to share some of our experience. North of Fraser Island, there begins a group of islands and reefs known as the Bunker Group and the Capricorn Group. While diving tours are occasionally organized to certain spots within the Bunker Group, the Capricorn Group is visited much less frequently by divers. Therefore, on the remote reefs there, one can still find unexplored "white" areas of the underwater world. Since the distance from the shore to these reefs is 50–60 kilometers, a high-speed boat can easily make a day trip here with a couple of dives.

However, the true paradise for lovers of the "first dive" lies in the Swain Reefs — the southernmost tip of the Great Barrier Reef.



The distance of these locations from the shore exceeds one hundred kilometers, and the reef area spans several thousand (!) square kilometers. Fishermen sometimes sail here, but divers are practically never seen. And even when divers will appear on these reefs, it will take many years to explore such a vast territory. So, for many decades to come, this place will continue to offer the joy of the "first dive" to many underwater enthusiasts.

Furthermore, on the Swain Reefs, there is also a real chance of finding an unknown shipwreck. After all, during the period of Australia’s colonization, about a thousand ships went missing in its waters and have never been found. The Swain Reefs have a configuration that is particularly hazardous for sailing vessels navigating here in poor weather conditions. Thus, the pleasure of enjoying the pristine underwater world in this place may well be complemented by some underwater discoveries.

(To be continued)

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Several stories about underwater world of Australia and some other countries.

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