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A DIVER'S NOTES

Australia



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Several stories about underwater world of Australia will give you an insight into its unusual and interesting nature.

STORIES

Snaky games

I often recall Brighton. He had something inside him from the *Crocodile Dundee*, but with underwater snaky specificity...

I had come here three times before I could manage to see this beautiful sunken ship. I was hindered by either a storm, a lack of persons for a complete group, and God knows what else. One should have a general knowledge of Australia in order to understand how they run a business there, especially in such a far off corner as this one. Here, time stopped, having been flooded and choked by beauty, happiness and peacefulness. Here I am, an anxious diver accompanied by my wife, looking quite normal for me, who has been grasped by a deadly desire to see this underwater write-off. A finished idiot... It was the lack of people for a complete group today again!

Having finally been despaired to get to the ship site by normal, natural means, I declared that I was ready to pay for the whole day's charter. I had nothing to lose because my expenses for each trip and a stay in that kick-off corner cost much higher. It seems that I finally broke the local course of things with such proposition. A dozen calls to *the boss* and a hundred of sympathizing looks at me followed, as at a hopelessly ill.

At last, the issue was solved but instantly, there arose another one: 'who would go with us as a guide?'. It was Sunday that day, and working on such day in Australia would be equalled to high treason. There, it was the first time I heard the name 'Brighton'.

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A 14-metre alloy boat cut the waves with ease. The weather on that day was unbelievably good. As we found out later, such still weather occurs for only a couple of times per month. Our trip to the site almost took three hours so we had plenty of time to get acquainted with Brighton as well as with the captain. They were both typical Australians from a backwater place who do not give much respect to any sort of rules. We smoked under a sign with a crossed cigarette, drinking good coffee. Then, the guys made me a snack called *Vegemite*, an Australian delicacy, spread thinly on a slice of bread. I almost died from its taste while Brighton and the captain had a fit of helpless laughter. They both assured me simultaneously that after the tenth try, I would not live without this horridness.

Brighton asked me and my wife what in the upcoming dives was more fascinating to us: the sharks or the smalls. Hearing our answer, he nodded his head contentedly: he did not like the smalls too.

Underwater conditions for our dive on that day were the same as the weather on the surface: visibility under the water – endless, the ocean’s temperature – a warm milk, other divers – are impossible by all means. Although, we were not much lucky with big-sized inhabitants on that day. It was only one bull shark that came past us and then hurried off. My spouse and I became bored with the underwater. Although, it seemed that Brighton sympathized with us and we felt that he was much worried about our wasted expenses for travelling to this place. Then, the snakes came out.

I must say, the seabed there was like mushrooming with the sea snakes – which the divers call *flat tails*. There were two types of them: brown and brown-striped ones. The rest of them were absolutely identical in size and physical looks. Of the things I knew about flat tails, I recalled their poisonousness very well – twenty times more compared to a cobra! Therefore, when Brighton picked up the first plain-coloured, two-metre band from the seabed and started swinging it just above his head, I was mildly stunned. But, nothing bad happened. There was an impression that the snake liked this game even. Meanwhile, Brighton picked up the second, third and fourth snake. It seemed as if he was trying different neck ties underwater. With my camera firmly on hand, I kept shooting the action.

Soon, an excitement of an animal handler awakened in me too. I asked Briton with a gesture for permission to pick up a snake from the seabed. He agreed, warning me that if it begins

to jerk, I should set it free at once. What things two divers could speak about under the water! I stretched and picked up my first flat tail from the seabed. First, I held it cautiously by the tip of its tail with one hand, then, I became more and more confident. Soon, I could repeat some of Brighton's tricks.

After that, my wife showed some interest in it too and I began to watch her excruciations through my big camera. At first, she was careful, but then – more persistently – began to master the art of an underwater handler. I would purr near my camera's viewfinder, looking at my wife at times with the snake, and thinking whose bite is more poisonous?

Then, my eyes caught a striped sea snake. Men seek diversity at times. I gestured to Brighton asking for permission to pick it up. Brighton shuddered from such request. He crossed his arms on his chest so elaborately, rolling his eyes upwards that I guessed what the consequences would have been, had I picked it up. Apparently, these similar-looking sea snakes differed much in their character. For some reason, I was inclined to fully trust him in this issue.

This wonderful day of diving granted me a rare prize with dozens of beautiful and unusual photographs.

Never did I feel the desire to hold a flat-tail in my hands later. Perhaps, the hobby was for Brighton who was not near me there, or perhaps it was for the word *fool* I would hear every time I show these photographs with the sea snakes. All

in all, I am very grateful to that Australian guy who made sure we left safe and sound. And, if we happen to meet again one day, I will not worry about the safety of my underwater art.

Spin the bottle

Many of us have probably played this fine and simple game in our childhood. Then, everything was new and thrilling. The first kiss is never forgotten... However, this story is about a different game. Although who knows? May be it would have finished with a kiss too? I did not bring it to its end...

It happened on one of my diving safaris in Australia. An underwater reef lay in a remote place, some 200 kilometres off the shore: a huge and vibrant reef with splendid vertical walls that fell into the abyss of the blue.

Visibility there at times seemed like I was looking at an underwater silhouette of New Zealand. Also, it was wonderful seeing the sharks whenever they were out. There were many of the *finless* and quite often there were bigger *grey reef* ones. There were less there whereof the *hammerhead* and three-metre *silver* sharks.

In most of all the spots underwater, there were divers. As with many Australian safaris, there were nearly thirty of them including guides and instructors. Near the reef, there were all these mass who would bubble, make camera flashes, quack

and rush towards all the living things. Of course, the sharks radically did not want to participate in this *party*. How would I communicate with these gracious predators in such situation?

Certainly, I could have suspended somewhere in the dense blue of the sea, somewhere away from the group. But how would I make the sharks swim closer to me? I shared these sad thoughts of mine while having lunch with my old acquaintance Steve. On the boat, he was responsible for all the issues related to diving. He had been diving in those waters as an instructor for about five years which gave him enormous experience. 'Why don't you spin a bottle', he advised me.

First, I thought I had misinterpreted his words and that Steve was just hinting at drinking some alcohol together. I would not have objected to keeping the company of my friend, but *it's only the midday now, sir*. Then, I supposed it was one more Australian joke that I had not heard of. Also, only at the end of my thinking, I assumed it may be something interesting and asked him to explain it to me.

'It's simple', Steve explained. 'Take an empty plastic bottle underwater with you and crumple it so that it makes a typical sound. The sharks are attracted to this sound and will come very close to you.'

I quickly emptied the nearest water bottle, stuffed it into the compensator and began to prepare for the dive. I started to think along these lines: 'Well, Steve, if you have joked with

me this way, the coming evening will be very upsetting for you. For such a joke, I'll have to respond with some decent nasty thing. If the sharks will not come to this crumpling sound, I'll dedicate the remaining part of the dive to devise a revenge.'

Having dropped into the water, I immediately held back behind the group – suspending into the blue of the water – not far from the reef. I marveled at the kilometre-deep blue sea under me as I took out my new type of musical instrument from the compensator pocket. At 30 metres depth, it became as hard as a stone. I had to unscrew its cap and let some air out. After that, I easily made my first accord: *much crunch*. A thought was involuntary spinning in my head: 'it's good that no one sees what an idiot Steve is making out of me'. I was about to finish this strange concert and pass on to plan B – devising a revenge plan for this evening, when suddenly...

They literally materialized from the blue of the water. There were three sharks, two of which were grey reef ones and one big silver shark, slightly ahead of the others. There was no doubt where they were heading to: they were coming right towards me. I was crumpling the bottle as hard as I could, my heart nearly leapt: 'It's working!' Distance between me and the sharks was closing. Ten, five, three metres. It seemed they were ready to climb to the performer's scene. There was slightly more than a metre left and the sharks did not change neither their direction nor speed. I stopped crumpling the bottle and bowed. Ultimately, the sharks are not like rabbits.

Besides, the children expected some presents when I came home. Generally, there were many reasons for taking a break.

At the same moment, the sharks seemed 'unspelled'. They instantly turned ninety degrees and swam aside from me, showing no interest. *'There it goes!'* I took out my proven magical bottle and began to play with more sense even: *munch crunch, munch crunch*. Everything repeated itself like the first time. And again, I stopped playing when the sharks were just a couple of metres from me.

I was feeling like Mozart during his debut. The shark returned to me several times and I was just happy with such close communication with these gracious predators. Then, my instrument received a leak and the bottle was filled instantly with water.

The sound it made after that seemed to interest no one any longer. I did not regret much what happened. The impression I had already got were enough for ten dives. My thoughts regarding Steve became the opposite, and I started guessing what sort of beer this fine Australian guy likes the most.

Later in the evening, over a glass of a foamy beer, Steve looked at me passingly. 'Right, I forgot to warn you, Igor. You should stay very aware, when playing on the bottle and keep looking around. One of my fellow's arse was bitten by a bull shark, while he was crumpling the plastic.'

Then the diving instructor sipped his favourite beer. I'd pay a lot for it now to be fish oil instead of beer in his glass.

Circled by the sharks

Divers can talk for a long time about various sea creatures. Remembering dives is like an aftertaste which remains after a good wine or coffee. Although, there is a category of underwater creatures which evokes an increased interest. The sharks – this story is about them, of course – always attract and frighten people. A long list of terrible films in this regard have only made the situation worse. Sharks are simply an endless topic for the directors of many horror films.

I had the practice of communication with these beautiful and perfect predators as well. It was the time – when meeting them for the first time – I mechanically expected some unpleasant episodes of a popular Jaws film to continue. But, it seemed, the sharks simply did not see that film and behaved absolutely differently. And then I thought - who are these sharks really?

I don't know this still. It does not matter, how many of them you have met. In order to understand sharks entirely, you should be a shark too. It is like this with women. Thousands of years communicating with these creatures gives little information to men; only a woman can understand another woman well. The thing that remains for us is to marvel

at our differences. In this dissimilarity, very beautiful relations sometimes remain. That's almost what happens with sharks.

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It was a quiet, sunny morning. Scarce and sleepy clouds were crawling across the sky. The ocean at the reef shone with tints of blue: from turquoise one to the deepest blue. We stood on a distant reef in the Coral Sea which lay about two hundred kilometres from the nearest shore. Under our ship's keel, the sea bed was not quite close.

Deep water, current, perfect visibility and not a single ship on the horizon – what else do the sharks beneath need to be absolutely happy? Right, the food. And that was exactly what we came here for. It has long become tradition to feed the sharks on this reef's northern plateau. Although, this story is about to take a slightly different dive.

Aleksandr, my mate, was not an experienced diver at this time yet. After a couple of travels to the Red Sea, he had happily left the lines of outstanding novices. Although, having the perfect physical and morale abilities of a retired officer helped him to quickly gain the experience.

In the early morning, we dived in the site where the sharks were usually fed. In fact, this would normally be performed by the evening. The sharks somehow know the hour and the day

of feeding and try not be late to the table. Averagely, there are twenty to forty sharks of all paints and sizes: white-finned sharks, grey reef sharks, sometimes hammerhead sharks, and, of course, massive silver sharks. At times, they would come so close that they touch the flashes coming from the underwater camera.

Aleksandr and I went for this dive together. Our ship stayed right near the reef so we dropped to the sea from the rear deck. *Purr...* Why not purr from pleasure when the water temperature is twenty eight degrees high? Our further descend into the plateau took only a couple of minutes. Plenty of multi-coloured fishes were swimming around us in shoals; we did not see any sharks there.

Now I want to tell you my little secret. Having been to this site many times for the feeding, I paid attention to one thing there: Local guides will always rattle a chain attached to the reef in order to attract the sharks. Such sound travels a great distance underwater, communicating to the sharks that they are welcome to the feast. I beg your pardon, dear tour organizers, for abusing this chain for my personal needs at times.

And now, having swum up to it, I started shaking it energetically trying to produce the sound I needed. My mate stood ten metres away from me understanding nothing of that. The only thing he might have been thinking of then was the effect of a long diver's life on brain activity in humans.

Everything changed when the sharks arrived. Graciously and inevitably, they materialized slowly from a dark blue matter of the sea. Five, ten, twenty. The sharks began circling around me slowly, waiting for the food. My underwater *foolottery* had had its effect! I kept rattling with the chain, being pleased with the sight of these gracious predators.

Having played enough for my own pleasure, I drew the attention of my mate Aleksandr and asked him to change places. He looked around hoping that I was calling someone else there. But having realized that there was nobody else, he started coming towards me very slowly. I had seen such speed before at funerals only. Soon, Aleksanrd took over the chain and I swam aside. Why not make his first date perfect?

Twenty minutes passed. We had already exceeded the underwater staying limit but Aleksandr kept rattling and rattling as if he had gone insane, with the sharks making a dense circle around him. It was a pity to interrupt such beautiful underwater merry-go-round, but we were only guests there, unfortunately.

Hardly had he taken the regulator out of his mouth aboard the ship, Aleksandr burst into an endless monologue. He spoke about how comfortably and safe he felt there and about his attempts to establish a contact with the sharks. His efforts to growl underwater at them to show that he was the leader there made me shake with laughter. He could not help it; an

officer's position should mean a lot. Also, he expressed his gratefulness for the opportunity I had presented to him.

That was the point. Sometimes, our stereotypes are broken much quicker and easier than they are acquired.

An unfortunate day

It was too late when I realized what an unfortunate day it was. If only I could have known before, I would not have moved anywhere until late evening. But the sun that shone brightly, a light wind and a constant lust for adventures lured me. Besides, I received a skipper's license recently so I could theoretically cut all the waves around Australia. But that was theoretically.

The folks flooded the boat: my family of five persons, including my elderly son Denis and my friends George and Arseniy. All of us were eager to sail somewhere and dive in some place. At first, things went quite alright. We left the port without any incidents and sailed to the island where we had planned to dive without facing any adventures. Our good luck left us soon after we arrived at the destination.

There were giant waves at the site we planned to dive. Having thought for a while, we decided to anchor in a calm bay on another side of the island, then walk back across the island

with our equipment. To us, the walking distance from the boat seemed insignificant. We did what we planned; the anchor dropped quickly and four of the men wore their equipment without delay.

Problems arose as soon as I started climbing to the zodiac. A mount of the rubber boat opened for some reason and it moved away slightly from the board. When I stepped into it, the distance between the boats increased. As a result of these manoeuvres, I found my feet in the zodiac that set off while my hands held the boat's rail tightly, and the rest of my gear was swinging above the water. Laughing out loud, the crew dragged me to opposite side. The children were especially happy at this as they always missed the funny dad. After a few fails to get back to the deck, I sadly opened my hands and fell into the water.

The second time around, our group sat in the zodiac with more success. In a few minutes, the sand of a picturesque shore scratched the zodiac's bottom. Having taken flippers with our kit fully out, guided by looks of amazed people resting on the beach, we headed decisively not towards the water, but towards the forest.

It was frying hot as the air temperature had long passed the 30-degree mark. Having gained a good pace right from the flying start, we headed towards the opposite shore of the island. Although, the last distinguishable path proved to end twenty steps away. Further, there began impenetrable

thicket. Like *commandos*, we broke stoically through this unforeseen obstacle course. Every five metres, we had to wave away a huge web with a big spider sitting in its centre. Our flippers was ideally suited for this job. I even thought that I should have patented its secondary designation of use. But soon, from hot weather and fatigue, my thinking processes of a genius slowed and then, they all faded away.

Some thirty minutes later, being dead tired, we crawled to a sandy shore. Naïve me – I thought our trip would have taken less than five minutes. I looked at my companions and realized that my reputation was now stained badly. Well, that's nothing, now we are by the water and diving is not far away.

Having looked with more attention at the shore line, my optimism sank as one-metre-high waves broke against the sand shore. Besides, having been blown from somewhere, there was a pool of strange, bronze-coloured leaves floating by the shore. These bronze flakes ended only ten metres away from the shoreline, but it was too late to retreat. I was the first to have stepped courageously into the water.

Having prevailed the beat of waves, we dived in. The next bad news was that underwater visibility was only a couple of metres. Having taken my son by his hand, we swam together using a compass. Although, underwater swimming, as if we were in milk, bored us quickly and we decided to return to the shore. Having entered the wash, I let my son off and – trying

to stay on my foot – proceeded further to the beach. When I came to the shore, I looked back.

The scene that I witnessed was worth impressing in a painting. Right by me, my son was crawling out of the water with varied success. With the bronze leaves stuck to his back, he swayed to and fro in the waves continuously, resembling a bronze seal playing in the wash.

Five steps further from the water, there sat an impressive bronze statue of George, recovering his breath. All the grief of the universe could be seen on his face. Further on, there was Arseniy, standing in the water to his belt, searching for something desperately on the bottom. As we found out later, he was looking for his flipper. Probably, I also did not look better, as everyone who looked at me smiled in some odd manner.

Having recovered a little, our shabby and seasoned squad trudged sadly towards the boat. Our equipment seemed to weigh much heavier then. Big air tanks seemed to had been filled with lead. So when we, the bronze drivers, finally crawled to our home landing beach, the tourists resting there became completely puzzled. They were looking at us in surprise, as if we were lunatics, trying to understand what exactly we were doing there.

Who would prompt us...?

For whom the whale cry?

The whales always cry underwater. In fact, they certainly talk to each other like that. Perhaps, they even laugh at a new joke about the divers, but to us, their sound resembles a human cry. And, the force of the sound is so high that it could be heard several kilometres away. During the whale season in Australia, divers will often hear this magical cry of the giants.

* * *

It is hard but interesting to be an early bird. It is hard, because no matter what time you went to sleep yesterday, your inner alarm clock would always mercilessly throw you out of bed at 6 am. It is interesting because early morning is a special time: the sun which belongs only to dawn rises and nature wakes up in freshness. There is a deafening silence as well because the *night birds* appear only a few hours later. They have got an absolutely different alarm clock – their stomach, mainly.

It was nearly six o'clock in the morning as I sat on an open balcony of my hotel room enjoying an unrepeatably sunrise. In my hands was a camera with long-focus objective designed for taking photos of remote objects. The theme of my wildlife photography there was humpback whales on the water surface. I chose this island, the hotel and even the floor

especially for this occasion. From here, you could see a calm bay in plain sight; this was one the whales' favourite places.

Well-well, who is there? One more early bird is coming to the shore. *Hello, fellow!* He carried a bright-coloured board with a sail in his hands, obviously determined to catch the morning breeze. Well, I guess the more models in the water, the better for me. That surfer quickly sailed deeper into the bay as I finished preparing the camera.

It is a good time for the whales to appear. I took my marine binoculars and started searching the bay attentively. *Got it!* A group of five whale species were orderly entering the bay from the right. They moved slowly and ceremoniously to its centre, throwing high fountains periodically.

Turning my head slightly, I saw the surfer take the bearing, which would likely intercross with the whales. None of them saw each other yet. Well, the course of things seemed to be promising. That part of the bay had depth of no more than ten metres, that is why the whales did not disappear from the water surface for long. I hurried to take a couple of trial pictures to choose the best settings.

When there was some thirty metres distance to the whales left, the surfer finally spotted them, having heard the fountains' noise, probably. I could see his behavior changing instantly. Apparently, the guy was slightly embarrassed and took his decision in haste – although, he proved to be a brave

man. After a moment of hesitation, the board with the sail headed to the centre of the whales' group. That early bird was pretty cool!

The humpback whales usually are quite timid, despite their enormous size. They will always swim aside even from a small boat. But it seemed that this was a different case. The board was tiny and produced almost no noise, therefore, the whales kept on moving, as if nothing had happened.

Soon, the surfer found himself in the centre of the whales' group, and having made a manoeuvre, he sailed on together with them. It seemed, that nothing had changed in the whales' behaviour, but I swear that those are cunning beasts! Now, letting each breath out, the whales started blowing big fountains and as they did this, the surfer would disappear into a cloud of sprayed water. Observed from the side, it looked amazing. I could only imagine what the guy was experiencing, being taken for a ride by this whale-amusement park!

Soon, the whales moved to side. They will probably cry for their new friend for the whole day. I was sitting, being kindly jealous of that lucky guy. Encounters of such levels happen so rarely in our lives that they remain bright memories for many years. Right, it is not bad to be an early bird, finally!

A low noise, coming from my room, distracted me. Oh, the night birds are awakening! Certainly, they have the right to

their piece of happiness, in particular, if this piece has been cooked well. Well, I'd better go cook the breakfast.

The lucky unlucky

Many of the divers are interesting and impassioned people. The fact that a human being feels the desire to experience the beauty of underwater-viewing points to some its inner romanticism. Although, some of them start digging even deeper into it, thus there come to light *the underwater philosophers*.

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It happened a few years ago. Fate brought us together with this man so far from civilization that I didn't not want to travel there a second time. Strange as it may seem, namely in such a far-off corner, one may meet very interesting and unusual people.

My mate's name was Terry. I had long wanted to make acquaintance with him, that is why our encounter was not accidental. With some points, he was close and interesting to me. Terry is an incorrigible romantic who has fallen in love with the underwater world forever. He is a fan of the sharks and a brilliant photographer. One may marvel for hours at his underwater piece of art: a monster with horns with many lenses and flashes, called an underwater camera, had become

his integral part in the depth of the sea. If a flash is torn off from his camera, Terry will die from bleeding, it seems. Being a result of such underwater conjugation, some new species – a *phototerrisaur* – swam under the water with me, being complicated at sight, he was quite harmonizing in his nature.

The fact is, under water he feels at home. But in a dusty city, Terry seemed to me to be a mixture of boring earth contradictions, as old and eternal as the world itself. Namely, from such boredom, philosophers are sometimes born.

It was a calm, windless evening. I felt fresh and comfortable at the upper deck. The sunset impressed me with its beauty, while high-high plumeous clouds, painted in pink created a feeling of being in fairytale. A red wine on our table harmonized perfectly with the sunset, as well, as did its taste with our good mood. A diving day that had just finished brought us a lot of positive experiences. We have seen the best of the underwater from the best this place could offer. Our cameras still lay in a corner unpacked, but no one had the slightest doubt that they contained perfect shots.

‘You know, Igor,’ Terry sipped the wine, ‘haven’t you thought why we see the best things at every diving here? The group before us haven’t seen half of that even’.

To win myself some time, I sipped my wine too. Then, I sipped a little more. Having realized that it would run out

before I said something, I fired the version which lay on the surface.

‘Perhaps, the season’s higher, Terry.’

‘That’s a no.’ It seemed that Terry was even glad that I missed. ‘The season’s in its middle right now. Any other guessings?’

‘Well, I don’t know... maybe it’s current, moon phases, plankton’. I fired a burst, hoping that one bullet hit the target at least.

‘A miss again!’ Terry smiled. ‘It all’s quite simple here too.’

Now the wine seemed a little sour to me. I gave a questioning look to the smartie, trying to make him realize that it was a good time for him to speak too.

‘Fine. I’ll tell what the thing is.’ *He was a good guy, after all.* ‘The thing’s that we are the lucky guys. All the divers of the world are divided into two categories: the lucky and the unlucky. There’re some intermediary types too, but first, let’s consider the main variants. The first are awfully lucky. They are able to see everything, everywhere and anytime. Reason for this lies in themselves. Usually they are lighthearted and cheery, there aren’t any sharp contradictions and anxiety in them. They go underwater with pleasure and happiness. The same they receive there, what they plainly give. And often, even more than that. As for the unlucky, it’s the opposite. The

reason for that – is the anxiety inside them. They worry about everything and all the time. Even when going out for shark dives, indeed, they will often be much happier that they do not occur. Their fear for possible equipment breakages, strong currents, poor visibility, dangerous sea creatures and for other things, deprives them of the lightheartedness. As a result, they have much less of underwater luck.'

Terry kept silent for a moment.

'So, for many years I've been on the lookout so that I do not get into the company of the unlucky. They possess that unique quality to frighten everything interesting. So, if you happen to have such a mate, don't doubt: everything will roll out according to his version of script. Your optimism will not prevail over his pessimism, as a car is much easier to slow down than to accelerate'.

He finished his monologue and turned his face towards the sunset that was fading away. I pondered over everything he had said in relation to my previous experiences. One by one, previous trips' memories started rising in my head, for each of them, I could have easily distinguish the lucky and the unlucky. Well, there is something in this theory, perhaps...

Years have passed. Terry's theory proved to be a useful gift for me, as the life that followed, confirmed it worked a hundred percent. And, with the course of time, I even

improved its details. And, maybe, thanks to it, there occurred many interesting events in my life.

The kingdom of the leopards

It was a warm January day in Australia. The bird's cheery tweeter of various timbres sounded from the forest. Combined, it came out as a very beautiful and cheerful forest melody. I looked at the trees more attentively. The leaves of a near eucalypt were hardly moving. Afraid to miss my luck, I surfed the Internet for the current weather forecast. That was it! It said that the ocean was practically calm. Such an ideal weather rarely occurs in January there and so would be sinful to miss it. I rushed to the telephone to call George.

George is my old Australian friend with whom I go diving. A few years before, being slightly drunk, we both swore a terrible oath. Its gist is that if ever we swap diving for work, let all the troubles of the world fall upon us. When we sobered up it was too late - the magic already worked. That is why we are both just doomed to an eternal diving together. To tell the truth, George reassured me that he read somewhere that twin blondes could easily 'unspell' us. I don't believe it much, but...

It took us just an hour to drive to one of our favourite places – Byron Bay, located in the north of New South Wales.

Jack – the owner of a local diving centre – kept a couple of seats for us on the next boat. Having worn our suits quickly, we dived into our car and drove to the shore. In this dive center the boats are dropped in to the water right from a trailer. Commonly, it is quite a funny show. Then, divers turn the boats to point forwards, and with a running wave move it further from the shore. When it becomes deeper, they all jump aboard simultaneously and the captain turns engines on. It is worth mentioning that this is a popular place among those who love to ride waves standing on a board. That is why, having sailed away from the shore, a skipper has to ride slowly evading all the surfers.

The distance from the shore to the site is only three kilometres, so in five minutes the skipper tied our boat to a buoy. A glance over the board was enough to realize that underwater visibility was at its best. This was good news given that I had another friend with me – a big underwater camera. A backward dive immediately morphed me from a dry land creature to something flipped. I do love these transformations!

The underwater world shone with an array of colours. Rays of sunlight coming through small waves made everything around live, transforming the underwater world into a kingdom of fairytales. There, frisked hundreds of colourful fishes and corals played with bright tints. This is the kingdom you could never get accustomed to.

George and I swam slowly to a place where a plain seabed changed into a beautiful white sand between tiny stone piles. Namely, this site is most loved by local underwater dwellers whose quantity here is just enormous.

Five leopard sharks swam above the first sandy meadow. Their long beautiful tails merged into a uniform dance swaying in smooth rhythm. A spotty skin of the sharks played incredibly beautifully in the sun rays that penetrated here. Here they come – the hosts of the local reef!

Having adjusted my camera, I moved to the centre of this circle dance. I greatly desired to take pictures of it from inside. At the same instant, a big leopard shark broke from her shiver and moved slowly towards me. The distance between us closed quickly. *'It apparently wants to clash together,'* this thought came to my head when there was only one metre left between us. As I prepared my head for the crash, the shark suddenly made a sharp turn to the side, touching my shoulder lightly with its tail. *Whew!* I recovered my breath, wondering what would happen next.

Everything afterwards was simple. A leader-shark – I have no doubt about her status – swam past her pack and away from the meadow. The rest of its circle danced after her immediately. It proved that I fought off a large and cozy meadow from the pack of sharks. Feeling a rush of pride, I sat down at the centre of a new property and looked at George. A shiver of coloured tiny fishes obviously caught his interest

more than my resonant triumph. I looked at his fishes scornfully and swam further.

This was a leopard shark's day. I fought off four meadows more in a much similar way. Each time, a shiver's leader came out, headed on closely and turned aside at the last moment. After that, the entire shiver abandoned their sites immediately. Having studied the photographs of all the leaders later, I discovered that all the shivers were different. This could be seen by scars around their mouths.

Rays are a specialty for leopard sharks. Although, not a single ray has given his life without an attempt to defend oneself. And, judging by traces from the ray's thorns on the sharks' mouths, most rays carry out their last attack quite successfully. As a result, each shark's nose carries a characteristic pattern from many stab wounds. So, it is impossible to confuse them.

A touch of manta

Undoubtful is the fact that all of the underwater dwellers possess their unique charm. The sharks will conquer with a predator's form of perfection, the rays – with gracefulness of wavy movements, and the small fishes possess an incredible variation of colours and tints. They all may be marveled at for long. If you ask me if there exists something underwater at which you may look for eternity, I will reply yes. On the dry

land, you will look as long as you want at fire burning, water flowing and others working. Under the water, you can look endlessly at a charming manta.

A manta's grace is comparable to nothing. Immense and stately, they literally make you stare at them as if they possess some magic. A few times while observing them, I disconnected from the course of time so much that I forgot to check the air level in my tank. It is good that all these sites are relatively shallow and there was enough air left to rise to the surface.

The mantas are very curious. *The devils* will right often play in their eyes set wide apart. If they are not frightened by quantity of friends – as long as all divers follow rules of good conduct with these magnificent animals – they can afford a closer contact.

* * *

That day had quite a promising beginning. Before that, the wind –which had been annoying the whole week – had rested, and the waves calmed down after. The ocean was almost still and a small divers' boat went at its highest pace. The sun rays pierced the blue deeply and made the underwater world below play from the light lively. The dolphins deeply love such weather. Their shining, black backs followed us almost up to the reef.

Having tied our cutter to a buoy, George and I put up equipment slowly and stepped into the water. *Water world* was at its best that day as well. Turtles, rays, spotted eagle rays and leopard sharks would come up there every minute. We swam towards our favourite site where a dozen of big underwater stones form a particular labyrinth with a maximum concentration of living creatures inside it. A wave-like sand between these stones is the best underwater bed for me, besides having grand views of surroundings,.

Having settled down with comfort one of such meadows, I started my usual observation, when, suddenly, somebody's shadow closed the sunlight cast upon me for a couple of seconds. Dear me! It is Australia and a big shadow can be cast by many of those who I would not much want to see. I raised my head slowly.

A manta! I will always welcome such shadow. Not too big, some three metres in its span, it swam very closely above me, skewing at me slyly with its nearest eye. Then, having done a small pirouette, it headed down to me. It seemed that it felt bored and it wouldn't mind playing a little. I decided to participate in her play.

Somewhere, someday, somebody told me how a manta ray could be attracted. According to that version, one should wave his hand synchronically with her movements. In such case, the manta will assume you are a far relative and comes closer. '*That's nonsense,*' I thought then, but I remained in my head.

Now, holding a stone with one hand, I started making smooth, wavy motions with my other hand. Having glanced at George who was sitting quietly behind the stone, I understood that he was shaking with suppressed laughter. Well, if I had been resembling the manta's relative, that would have seem like a very ill one and much mutated.

Although, the manta, it seemed, didn't think so. Having stopped to circle around, it stood near me and started moving her fins slowly. I tried to fit in with it as much as I could by keeping the tempo and bending my back. Our 'fins' started approaching to each other. Half a metre, ten centimetres, five, a touch! As if I had been galvanized. The manta moved slightly away, perhaps I had shuddered. Having turned around to George with a triumphant look, I saw in his eyes what I had wanted to see – a big diver's jealousy.

The manta did not come back anymore. Everything is as with the people. Sometimes they return and sometimes they do not. Everyone has freedom of choice. Well, enough for my underwater philosophy. There are many more places that are much more suitable for such purpose. Let us swim back to the cutter, Georgie, I have got a wonderful theme for a night's beer talk.

Revenge against a parrot

Once, having been in a splendid mood after a great diving, I put my key into the key hole of my room's door. As I entered the corridor, I held myself still. A view that my eyes beheld reminded me of an average devastation. There laid bits of apples all over the floor. All the packet of chips and cakes were torn apart with cruelty. But the most terrible thing happened with my pack of coffee. I will always take a pack of good ground coffee for all my travels. My love to this divine drink is rightly endless, and now it was done away with by using the worst form of cruelty. I counted twenty holes in the pack. The pack itself lay on the floor in the middle of the room bleeding with a noble brown-coloured powder from all of its lethal wounds. I would forgive the robber for everything, but not for the coffee...

It was a big beautiful island called Hamilton, located off the north-east Australian coast. It almost sunk in a fleshy green, but the most amazing thing was the quantity of local birds. They sat almost on every branch, every pole and roof there. A roar of their singing often howled down our talk. Undoubted leaders of this feather army were big white cockatoo parrots with strong, hooked beaks.

I immediately liked my room – a spacious landscape with a splendid view and a large balcony. There were some notices with instructions hanging in front of the balcony exit. I did not really wish to practice reading this when I first arrived at the hotel. I only read what was underlined in red saying that it was always necessary to close the sliding doors. Now, I will read

instructions when I arrive at new places much more attentively. Initially, I did not pay attention that it was namely about glass doors. When I left the room to go diving, I diligently only closed the balcony doors that had a mosquito net.

Now I was standing in the middle of the devastation with my heart leaping from a righteous wrath. In the balcony net, there was a real door bitten through, forty to twenty centimetres in size.

A desecrated coffee called for revenge. Having remembered that the revenge is a dish best served cool, I decided to calm down and sat in an armchair. Little by little, details of a future vendetta against a parrot (I didn't doubt it was him) appeared in my head.

Two hours later, I sat in the same armchair amidst a clean room. I sat motionlessly as if I had become part of the furniture in the room. A rubber was tied to my index and middle fingers. It was a type of camp slingshot. Here, I put my miscellaneous childhood to use. My right hand was pressing a big pellet folded from a piece of thick paper. A metre from the hole in the net laid a big red apple which had been bought specially for this operation. All the decorations were set in their places, and music from a spy film was sounding in my head.

It flew in about twenty minutes later. It was a big white parrot with the most arrogant muzzle. I did not hesitate for the slightest moment that it was him who had plundered my room several hours before. There was something in forensics known as the drive of a criminal to the crime scene. He stood for a minute in front of the hole, looking at the apple. It was obvious that his intuition excluded such positive involvement of the situation out of those possible. But, the apple was too red.

He made his first step, then one more. Almost with an invisible movement, I started drawing my slingshot. Any mistake of mine would be equal to losing. The parrot approached the apple slowly, making half-steps. Having reached it, he parted with any cautiousness and opened his beak.

With a shout *for the coffee*, I fired at the burglar. The shock in his eyes was the best reward for me. The pellet slapped him sharply in the area where his legs grew from. With a cry of terror, the parrot rushed towards the balcony spreading his wings. Due to this, he first did not seem to get through the aperture he had bitten. Then, shrinking somehow, pretty thief literally fell out of the room. The coffee was avenged...

The following morning, I discovered that my balcony had been dirtied with a thick layer of birds' droppings. A small nasty trick, fitting right in with my burglar's style. In order to collect such large amounts of it, the parrot would have had to

call all its feathered fellows on the island. That is what the cleaner would have wondered as he had to come back with a square point shovel. Well, it was a good time to go for diving. And then, a cup of good black coffee, certainly!

Fruits of the sea

Someday, we will surely open a museum room dedicated to underwater findings in the diving centre. We would gather hundreds of various items that people have lost that we picked up from the seabed of Australia. It should be interesting to see what kind of items the humankind will mostly lose to water? To find that out, we tried conducting our own analysis based on the materials we had. Perhaps, this will help somebody somehow to prevent losses in the future.

So, taking first place with a big handicap was sunglasses, of course. Their overall percentage rate makes half of all our trophies, and, if expressed in quantity, they have already filled two buckets. The sunglasses that were lost were of all possible kinds: from cheap ones costing five dollars, which dropped from the nose of a schoolgirl, to very expensive ones, which fell off from an impressive sized-nose of a prestigious boat's owner.

Some day, we will decorate a big Christmas tree with them for the New Year and will immediately be added to the

Guinness Book of World Records. Parts of these glasses lost their transparency from rubbing against the sand for a long time, and now are only suitable for cat Basilio to deceive a trusting Buratino again.

The second place in our list is securely held by the swimming glasses and masks. These goods will fill a full bucket too. Thus, despite the fact that a human head is the most clever body part, considering the things that dropped out of it, it may rightfully be placed much lower than it is.

Naval anchors are in third place. They totalled twelve in our collection, not counting those that we gave away. The smallest anchor weighs only three kilograms, and the biggest one weighs more than a hundred. I don't want to remember how George and I dragged it. It was not a dive, but an hour of underwater heavy weight lifting. But now, it is the best item in our anchor collection.

The fourth place is held by simple and underwater knives. There are only four of them. It seems they dropped into the water when not quite experienced skippers tried to cut the ropes of those anchors, which are in our collection too.

Furthermore, there are screws. There are only two of them. One of them is absolutely new and awfully expensive. From time to time, we are often greatly concerned with the problem of where to stick them too. And, what versions have not been

suggested there! An underwater Karlsson on the reef – is only one of those decent only.

In the category of single finds, there are: an umbrella, a harpoon gun, a fishing rod, a landing net, and *an instantly water-welcome* wrist watch.

And, finally, the most precious thing – jewelry. We have got about half a bucket of these. Got you! Joking, of course. In fact, we have got three items of jewelry. People will part with these things somewhat painfully. All we managed to find during these years – is a massive silver ring, a golden earring and a golden chain. In fact, they were found in the same order according to the increase in their cost. This seems to be promising and provides us with some hope that someday, at the end of this list, a good chest from a Spanish galleon will appear.

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