

A most memorable experience

My name is Peter Mc Ilhatton; I am a Diving Instructor for Allways Diving, Moorooka in Brisbane. I've done over 1000 dives to date and yet experienced my most unforgettable dive ever just a week ago, off Cook Island, Tweed Heads. I had such an awesome, once in a life time experience; I just had to share it with everyone. So here goes.....

It was Saturday 1st July 2006. I was Dive Leader on an advanced dive trip on Ocean Dive, a locally owned and operated dive boat that has been exploring the Cook Island area for over thirty years. There were nine experienced divers in the group – two of them hoping to complete their Deep Dive course.

6.45 am- The skies were clear, and the seas were calm. We were a group of nine fairly experienced divers all looking forward to catching a glance of our first grey nurse sharks for the season. Chris Mair, local diver and skipper of our boat Ocean Dive, suggested we head out to Nine Mile Reef for the day as the conditions were perfect for that location and divers on board. We would be able to achieve our required thirty plus metre dive on the reef's southern wall.

7.30 am- The boat was loaded with up and we headed out along the Tweed river. The boat was a buzz! Divers were chatting about past experiences at Nine Mile, what they were expecting to see on this dive (leopard sharks, wobbegongs), what they were hoping to see on this dive (shovel nose rays, grey nurse sharks) and what they were dreaming about seeing on this dive (the whales). Everyone was scanning the horizon for any sign of the humpback whales on their migration to warmer northern waters.

8.10 am- We arrived at the Nine Mile Reef - Southern Wall. The current line identified a fairly strong current was running at the site. Calling on our skipper Chris Mair's local knowledge of the site we knew that there was a sheer drop from approx 12m down to approximately 26metres. Once the divers followed the anchor down they would be able to drop behind the shelf and there would be very little, if any current

8.30 am- The majority of divers decided conditions at this site were not ideal and decided to save their air for a drift dive on Nine Mile reef itself. I think they were more enticed by Chris's guarantee they would see Grey Nurse Sharks at the next site. Craig, Jason and I had our deep dive to do, so we were going in. As we were kitting up, Omar changed his mind and decided to join us – a decision he would not regret!

8.45 am- All ready to go, Craig was the first one to roll into the water, and after some effort made his way to the anchor. Jason, Omar, then I all made our way to the anchor and then started our descent to the bottom.

The visibility was at least 20m, as we were descending you could clearly see the outline of the shelf and make out the bottom. We all grouped together at the shelf and dropped down to our 26m mark. While there we found there was no current whatsoever. Past experience on this sight has proved it is quite easy to lose your reference to the exit point, so, for some basic skills we ran a line from our exit, out about 70m and tied it off.

9.05 am approx- After completing some skills, and achieving 29.6m we returned to the reel, and to the exit point. I remember feeling a bit disappointed at not seeing any grey nurse sharks.

The 4 of us started our slow ascent up the anchor line, and when we reached approximately 10m the current grabbed hold of us. We all got ourselves comfortable and started our 5minute minimum safety stop.

We were fortunate the visibility was so good because you could actually see the bottom, the visibility had improved.

After 5 minutes Jason said he was going up, however Omar still had 1 minute until his safety stop was over. It was better that we all stayed as a group because of the current, so we stayed. I was at 6m and looking down towards the bottom and over to the shelf when a school of eagle rays swam below us. Omar was just above and I saw him looking at the rays as well. I kept an eye on the rays as they disappeared into the haze and caught a glimpse of some white and black speckles. I watched and watched as it came closer and closer, I finally made it out to be a Humpback whale.

I turned to see if Omar, Jason, and Craig could see what I was seeing. I don't think they even noticed me. I watched as the whale came closer and closer towards the shelf and spotted the second Humpback. Both whales swam towards us and stopped. We were hanging onto the anchor line and the whales literally stopped directly below us and watched. If I was at 6m, the bottom was 26m and these two whales were between us, they must have been no more than ten metres away. The second whale then swam slightly over the top of the first whale and stared directly at us.

I was looking into the eyes of a whale which was looking at me. I remember trying to look at everything, there was just so much to take in. The whale on the bottom rolled slightly lifting one of its flippers and looking, you could see its eye moving and blinking. We must have been watching them for minutes. If I said I could tell you how big they were I would be lying, how big does a Humpback grow?

After at least three minutes both whales slowly turned and began to swim away, we watched the entire whale swim literally metres below us. I remember looking at its tail as it pushed up then down, waiting for a huge surge of water. There was nothing! The whales were gone. I turned to look at the others and I think we all felt the same.

As we hit the surface and made our way to the rear of the boat, the others were saying, you should have seen the whales they were right next to the boat. We told them all what we had seen, I think there was some disappointment, but generally everyone was excited for us.

This was undoubtedly the most memorable experience I have ever had.

After pulling up anchor we headed back to Nine mile to look for the sharks. They did not let us down either. To finish the day off we did a drift dive in 25m+ visibility along Nine Mile reef and watched the grey nurse sharks. (From a distance of course).

A special thanks to Chris, who always does that little bit extra and takes us all on a brief whale watch tour after the dive. Thanks mate!

Also thanks Dave (hope to see the photo's of the sharks Dave), Lee, Mel, Caz, Omar, (good luck charm), Jason, and Craig. You will all be remembered as part of that day, and in my dive log as number 967.

So remember, if you're thinking of a diving destination, put Brisbane at the top of your list.

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