

Underwater wonders

The Port Stephens-Great Lakes Marine Park is well known for its huge variety of marine life including animals such as whales, seals, dolphins, turtles and many types of fishes. Marine scientist and keen diver DAVID HARASTI * explains that it is this marine life that makes the area a very popular destination for scuba divers to visit and enjoy and the protection provided by the marine park is to the benefit of these species.

SHORE DIVES

Port Stephens is considered to have the best shore diving in all of Australia with several well known dive sites found in the Nelson Bay area. The dive sites are commonly known as Halifax Park, Little Beach, Fly Point, Seahorse Gardens and the Pipeline and each site is uniquely different from one another.

HALIFAX PARK

This is the best choice of the sites when the water is clear and visibility exceeds 10 metres.

The currents can be very strong here so always dive on high tide.

Large schools of fish, such as bullseyes and yellowfin pike, can be seen hovering around the bomies at 18-20 metres whilst down at the bottom of the site (approx 28 metres) it's a good location to look for large snapper.

This is also the best site to see wobbegong sharks and the more elusive white spotted moray eel.

LITTLE BEACH

This site is seldom dived however it's the best spot to avoid the crowds if there are lots of divers around. Enter the water between the two jetties at the western end of the beach and swim towards Fly Point at a depth of about nine metres.

You will come across the yellow gorgonian forest which is home to seahorses and many different varieties of cowries and

nudibranchs (bright and colourful underwater sea slugs).

There is also a sunken barge and A-Frame at 12 metres which are covered in fish and it's usually a good spot to see a turtle.

FLY POINT

Best location to visit is the 'ledges' which can be found around 11 metres to the north-west of the entry point.

Species to look for include the pineapple fish and the tame Maori cod and Fly Point is also a great place to find nudibranchs. If you swim towards the east and keep to a depth of eight to 10 metres you will find unusual species such as walking gurnards, striped pyjama squid, pipefish and occasional seahorses.

This site has been protected from fishing since 1983 and hence the fish life is incredibly abundant and diverse and it's a very important sanctuary zone in the marine park.

SEAHORSE GARDENS

As the dive site name suggests, this is a great spot to find seahorses.

The site is full of large cauliflower soft corals and hiding in amongst their branches are seahorses, decorator crabs and basket stars.

This is the best dive site to find anglerfish, a sought after fish by underwater photographers.

The best time to scuba dive this site is approximately two hours before high tide and you enter the water in front of the toilet block at

BOAT DIVES

The offshore islands of the marine park are renowned diving destinations with local dive boats visiting them on a daily basis.

The most popular location is Broughton Island that has resident grey nurse sharks at several sites whilst the Looking Glass is a must do dive site and is spectacular when the sun is shining and water is clear.

Looking Glass also has resident Blue Devilfish and if one is fortunate they may even come across a Weedy Seadragon.

Another popular island for diving around is Cabbage Tree Island

located just outside the Port Stephens heads.

The Little Wreck is a protected dive site from winds and swells and the remains of two old boats have become home to a variety of fish including wobbegongs, flathead and blue groper.

This is also the site to look for the rare but spectacular Donut Nembrotha nudibranch and the Red Indianfish. Other dive sites around Cabbage Tree include the wreck of the SS Oakland and Boondelbah and Little Island nearby provide an alternative option.

the Fly Point end of Nelson Bay main beach.

Stick to a depth of eight to 10 metres and head in a southerly direction towards the marina and this is where all softcoral and sponge gardens can be found.

PIPELINE

The Pipeline was rated in 2009 as one of the best shore dives in the world and it's the best site for night diving.

This is the site where rare and unusual species can be found such as the thorny seahorse, the blue ringed octopus and the elusive Nelson Bay anglerfish.

The best area to find the marine

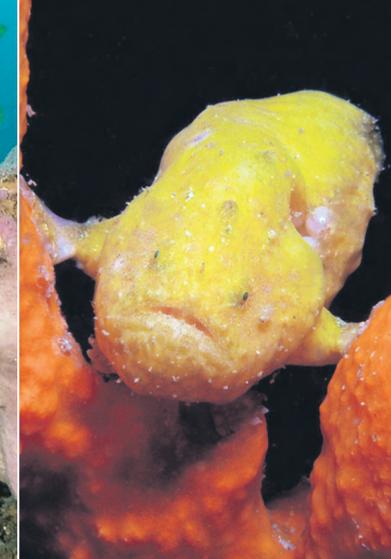
critters is between the pipe and the break wall searching around the sponges and softcorals at a depth of 7-9 metres.

CONSERVATION

Don't forget that you are diving within a marine park so the taking and harming of marine life is prohibited so please ensure you respect and look after the marine environment.

For further information on the marine park visit www.mpa.nsw.gov.au

**Dave Harasti is the Research Scientist with the Port Stephens-Great Lakes Marine Park*



RESIDENTS: Marine animals in the Port Stephens - Great Lakes Marine Park, clockwise from left - White's seahorse, at Seahorse Gardens; donut nembrotha nudibranch at Cabbage Tree Island; grey nurse shark at Broughton Island; pineapple fish at Fly Point; Nelson Bay angler fish at Pipeline. - Pictures by David Harasti

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