

ON THE ROCKS

Famous for its grey nurse sharks and magnificent cave, South West Rocks features New South Wales' best boat diving

By Dave Harasti



above: The shallow exit from Fish Rock's famous cave dive is filled with glassfish and remarkable sea fans

opposite page: South West Rocks' most sought after encounter, the endangered grey nurse shark (*Carcharias taurus*) has a fearsome look but acts more like a "puppy dog"

DIVING IS SUPPOSED to be relaxing. Picture turquoise water with schools of colourful fishes swarming over a pristine coral reef.

Diving at South West Rocks' Fish Rock is different. Which isn't to say it's not enjoyable. Just that you'd better be prepared to have a rush of adrenalin each and every time you jump in. The adrenalin starts to build as the boat approaches the site, because you know that within minutes you're going to be swimming among schools of massive sharks, or making your way through a 100m-long cave system lit only by the glow of your torches.

It's wild, and only going to get wilder.

THE CAVE

All along Australia's New South Wales (NSW) coast there is great diving to be had at many of the offshore islands and reefs. But out of the hundreds of different sites, none are as well known as Fish Rock, located off South West Rocks on NSW's north coast. Over the past 10 years I've been fortunate enough to visit the Rock on a regular basis – this iconic dive site is the best location in Australia to encounter and photograph the endangered grey nurse shark.

What makes diving Fish Rock so remarkable is that each dive is always different, and there are so many sites around the rock that can be visited. Some of the more popular include the Pinnacle, Black Forest, Fish & Chips, Colorado Pass, and Land of the Giants; it's the famous giant cave system that makes a visit to Fish Rock so worthwhile though.

Created by a fault in the island, the cave begins at the deeper seaward entrance at 24m and runs 125m straight through the rock, emerging into the blue, fish filled, silhouetted shallower entrance fringed by red gorgonian fans at 12m. Within the cave you'll find a smorgasbord of life including giant wobbegong sharks, threatened black cod, large rays, turtles, and rare species such as the hairy rock lobster and the gold cowry.

One of the more unusual things about The Cave is the temperature inside is always at least one degree warmer than the surrounding ocean, and the water throughout the cave system is always clear. The cave's shaft is completely pitch black and can be very eerie, so a torch is essential! There are two bubble caves located in the cave system, so for something different you can surface and have a chat with your buddy about what to do next.





above: It's not uncommon to see rare temperate species like the eastern blue devilfish (*Paraplesiops bleekeri*)

below: Grey nurse sharks are so numerous and unafraid of divers that it's easy to get up close and personal

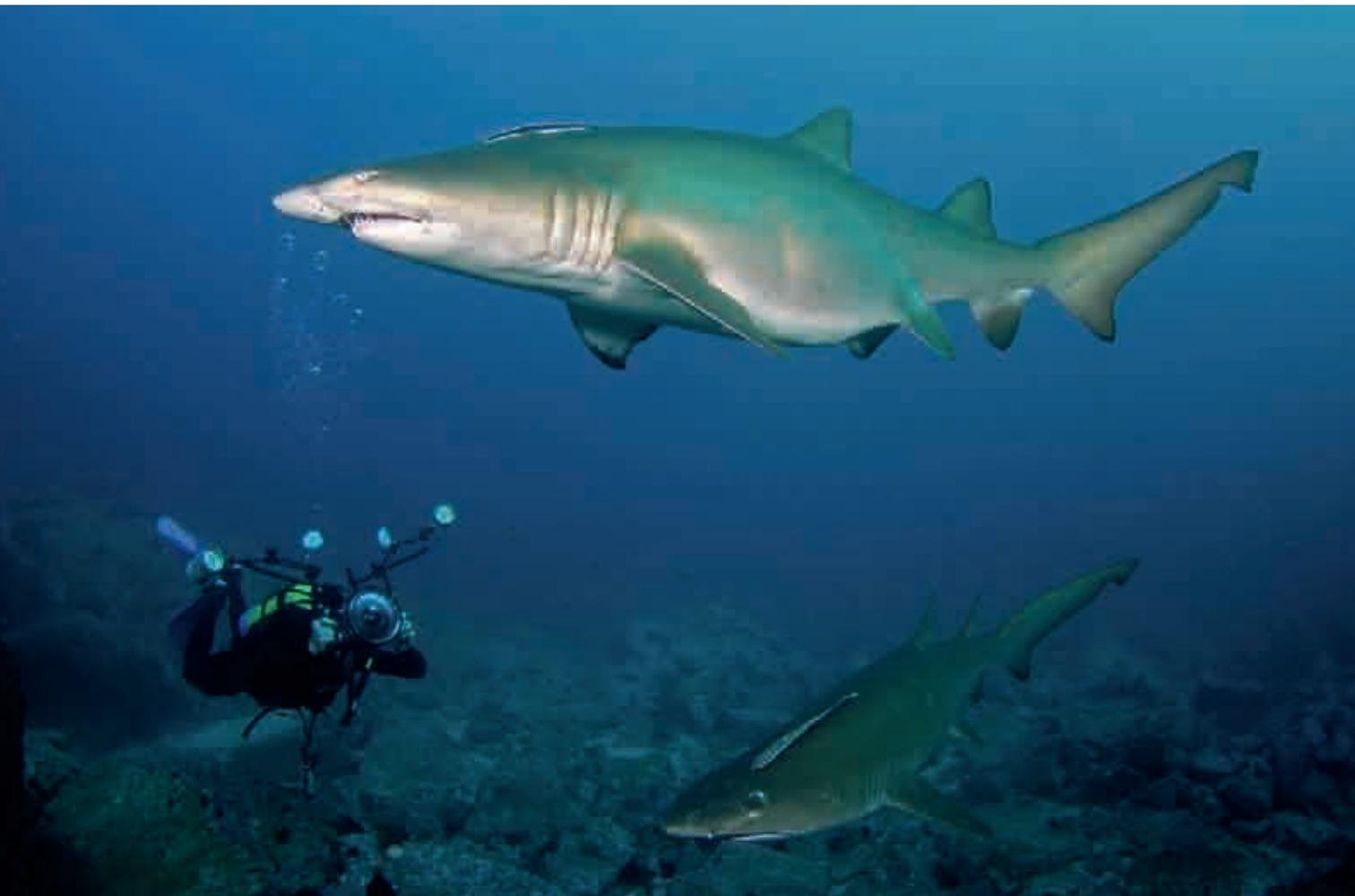
MARINE LIFE ON PARADE

Like everything in Australia, the marine life around Fish Rock is big – almost as if the fish are on steroids. There are strong currents too that run along the coast, but these currents bring nutrient-rich water from the continental shelf, which subsequently bring large schools of baitfish. And it's these baitfish that bring in the big stuff.

Biodiversity at the rock is also unique in that it features marine life from temperate and tropical Australia. It's not uncommon to see rare species such as the temperate eastern blue devilfish and the large tropical Queensland grouper on the same dive. One of the most incredible encounters I've ever had was a large grey nurse gliding down one of the deeper gutters, while hovering above it was a manta ray. Above them was a loggerhead turtle. While these are the sorts of scenes that photographers can only dream about, in true Murphy's Law fashion I didn't have a camera on me to record it!

The late Noel Hitchins, who pioneered diving at South West Rocks, had pet names for some of the local inhabitants. Fortunately I shared many dives with Noel, and I'd stare in disbelief when "Napoleon," the giant loggerhead, or "Buddha," the three-metre grey nurse shark, would instantly recognise him underwater and swim up for a hello. His relationship with these animals was incredible to watch, and it's not every day you get to see a grey nurse shark rubbing up along a diver. One of the current inhabitants is "Josephine," another photogenic loggerhead turtle that will often approach divers looking for a free feed of cunjevoi.

At the Land of the Giants on the northern side of Fish Rock, there is a seasonal Queensland grouper appropriately named "V Dub," after the VW Beetle. V Dub is overwhelmingly large at over two metres, and probably weights 400 kg.





Fish Rock is also the only location in Australia where you have a good chance to find the "sad seahorse." This large, shy seahorse species is seldom seen as it lives in deep water; however it's occasionally found around Fish Rock, clinging onto black coral trees and sponges at depths of around 30m.

My only ever encounter with this seahorse was in February 2008. I was incredibly fortunate, as it had been spotted the day before. Even with dodgy directions – "turn left at the big black coral tree, swim 20 metres until you see an orange finger sponge, it was around there" – I was lucky enough to find it sitting on a sponge pretending to be part of its habitat. Other unique species that can be found around Fish Rock include the rare nudibranch tiled hypselodoris and mosaic moray.

BEST OF THE REST

If you ever tire of the grey nurse sharks or the surreal cave (unlikely), there's a number of awesome sites around Fish Rock to keep you entertained.

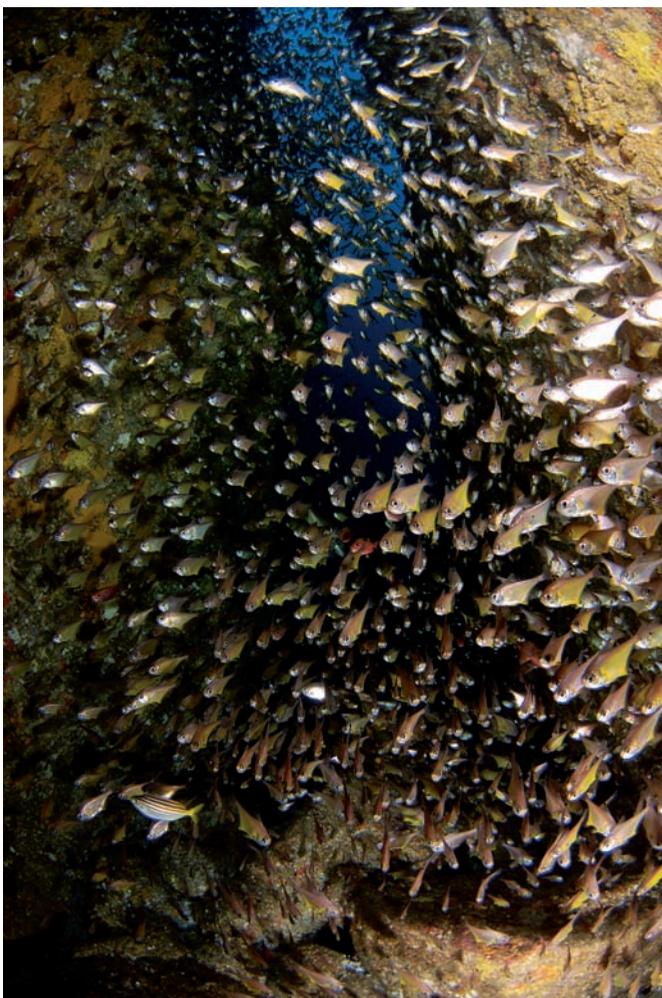
Green Island is located just north of Smokey Cape lighthouse and only a stone's throw from shore. This site is a popular second dive, especially if there's too much current at Fish Rock. The average depth for the site is 14m and the habitat is rocky reef sloping onto sand. This site can be thick with schools of fish like bream, drummers, and tailors; and once you get through the schools of fish you will see



above: Macro enthusiasts will enjoy nudibranch encounters like this rare tiled hypselodoris (*Hypselodoris jacksoni*)

below, from left: The rare "sad seahorse" (*Hippocampus tristis*), seen recently on a deep sponge; The Cave's deep water entrance;

opposite page: The boldly patterned mosaic moray (*Enchelycore ramosa*) is a photographic find



above: Because of South West Rocks' prime northern location in New South Wales, it's possible to find normally tropical species like the ornate ghost pipefish (*Solenostomus paradoxus*)



grey nurse sharks, large shovelnose sharks, and Queensland grouper on the sand flats. This is also the site where "Casper," the white grey nurse shark, was seen regularly during winter of 2007.

To the south of Fish Rock, Black Rock is 700m off the beach. It's similar to Green Island in that it features large schools of fishes; however, it's also a good site to see large predatory species such as kingfish and cobia. Through the middle of Black Rock is a large gutter where you can encounter grey nurse sharks and one of their favourite prey species, the mulloway. This is the only site where I have encountered three different turtle species – loggerhead, green, and hawksbill – on the same dive.

The most underrated site at South West Rocks, Ladies Reef is just 150m off the main swimming beach. A small reef with a maximum depth of 10m, you can easily rack up a two-hour dive at Ladies Reef as there's so much marine life to photograph. This is one of my favourite shore dives along the NSW coast, but if you're feeling lazy get the boat to drop you off on the way back from Fish Rock for a third dive, and swim back to shore when you're finished.

The reef is covered with soft and hard corals and colourful sponges, and is the prime location for macro photography. There are numerous species of tropical fish, nudibranchs, crabs, shrimps, cowries, moray eels, octopus, and cuttlefish to be found hiding in all the nooks and crannies. In the summer, unique tropical species such as ornate ghost pipefish and striped anglerfish can be found.

Ladies Reef is a great location for a night dive as it's generally protected from the weather, has an easy entry and exit off the beach, is only a 10-minute swim from shore, and isn't susceptible to current. Just remember to take your compass so you can find your way to the reef, otherwise you'll be up for a boring dive on sand! **SD**

SOUTH WEST ROCKS NAVIGATOR

PACK YOUR BAGS: South West Rocks is half way between Brisbane and Sydney on the Pacific Highway. Fly to Brisbane or Sydney, hire a car, and take the leisurely five-hour drive along the coast. Alternatively, take a regional flight into Coffs Harbour. The Rocks is just 90 minutes away by car.

ENTRY/VISA REQUIREMENTS: Overseas visitors require a visa or Electronic Travel Authority (ETA) to enter Australia. Apply online (www.eta.immi.gov.au) or through your travel agent.

BEST TIME TO DIVE: Year round, but February through June brings warmer water and lots of tropicals, while July through September is the best time for large numbers of grey nurse sharks.

DIVE WITH: Fish Rock Dive (fishrock.com.au), South West Rocks Dive Centre (southwestrocksdive.com.au)

ADDITIONAL INFO: If you visit, a five-day stay is recommended to ensure you cover the variety of dive sites. In addition to the diving, a trip up to Smoky Cape Lighthouse is recommended as it provides a fantastic view over the South West Rocks coastline. If you're really up for it there is a takeaway shop in town that sells deep fried Mars bars that's a test for the taste buds!

SCUBADIVER Shootout 2008 Series

Experience South West Rocks for yourself in the Scuba Diver AustralAsia Shootout at Fish Rock Dive, from 13–18 October. Get tips

from the pros – field editor and naturalist Dave Harasti, and prolific marine guide author Rudie Kuiter – and shoot for awesome prizes. See pages 2–3 or visit ScubaDiveraa.com for more details.