

ONE PERFECT DAY

Near Shoreham, Seal Rocks came into view without its characteristic lacework of white foam. Instead, it stood high above a totally unmoving sea — Bass Strait was glassy-smooth, merging with the clear blue sky. Our perfect day had arrived. After a quick launch across the hard sand next to Flinders Pier, we rounded West Head to be greeted by a superb scene — 15 kilometres of cliffs fringed with a sea of remarkable stillness and clarity. Our options were wide open — exploratory dives at Elephant Rock, Picnic Point, or Pulpit Rock were definitely “on”, but we decided to return to one of the most spectacular locations in the area — Pelican Point.

Pelican Point:

Situated near the eastern end of Bush-ranger's Bay, we first dived Pelican Point two years ago. An extract from my dive log at the time reads —

“... anchored in the lee on the western side of the bommie, perched over a wall that dropped vertically from three metres to 16 metres. Followed the wall to a series of huge overhangs, caverns and swimthroughs. Sea Sweep everywhere, Silver Trumpeter, Blue Devils, Snook, Port Jackson Sharks, plus the usual Leatherjackets and Wrasse. Invertebrate life was dense in the many undercut ledges and overhangs. Chasms and gutters everywhere...”

We elected to explore the eastern corner of Pelican Point, anchoring adjacent to the channel which cuts through the network of bommies to the western side. Descending into 25-metre visibility, Sea Sweep were our companions for the duration of the dive, following us into ledges festooned with rich sponge life and delicate gorgonian fans shared with *Blue Devilfish* and *Bullseyes*.

A gutter framed by vertical walls plunges from four to 16 metres, the opposite edges of basalt bommies topped with dense kelp forest. Hidden by kelp, a deep cleft in the wall reveals a small patch of Southern Jewel anemones growing a brilliant pink in the strong sunlight. The surrounding walls are richly covered with gorgonian fans of every colour — pink, yellow, vivid orange, pale orange and crimson decorate every square metre in a blaze of colour — no doubt they are dependent on the rich currents which flow through the gutter for their planktonic diet. Dull by comparison, but more impressive for its twisted, tree-like form, a Dusky Sea fern, a type of hydroid colony, continues to feed, its polyps expanded in the gentle flow. The gutter eventually narrows, leading us through the bommie to the western side where the seafloor deepens into a sharp crevasse, the home of a thriving community of Leatherjackets and Blue-Throat Wrasse. We rest for a moment, reclining on the floor of the chasm watching schools of Pike and Sea Sweep wheel overhead whilst we, in turn, are studied by curious Magpie

It was one of those magical days that only eventuate every two years or so. We had heard that there was no swell running in Bass Strait and rumours of 30-metre visibility were circulating amongst the usual dive shop

gossip. Anticipation was high as we headed down the Peninsula towards Flinders — the preceding days had been still with only the slightest afternoon seabreeze.

Perch and Senator Wrasse. Here on the chasm walls we find several Verco's Nudi-branches, amongst yellow zoanthid anemones and occasional purple bryozoans and fragile solitary hydroids.

We drift back to the boat, eased along by the weak current that flows around the bommie between tide changes, followed up the anchor line by the resident escort of Sea Sweep, their steely sides glistening in the strong sunlight. It had been a great dive, but the day was young and there were other areas that demanded exploration.

Simmons Bay Sea-Caves:

The coastline stretching from Pelican Point four kilometres to the east consists of basalt cliffs studded with large sea caves 5-12 metres in diameter. It is usually impossible to approach these caves, due to the persistent swell and its reflection from the surrounding vertical cliff faces. Yet, here we were, anchored in the mouth of one of these yawning black holes gearing up for an exploratory snorkel dive.

As the bubbles clear, Herring Gull dart



Magpie Perch (*Cheilodactylus nigripes*) amidst sponges and orange bryozoans.

amongst the kelp fronds below whilst the Sea Sweep again keep us company. Blue-spotted Goatfish fossick in the sand gutters, and the commotion they create attracts a small cluster of Blue-throat Wrasse and Six-spined Leatherjacket. Swimming to the back wall of the cave, a Port Jackson Shark lazily makes its way through the kelp towards open water. Deep chiselled ledges are common — some really tested our breathhold abilities as we probe the darkness, fervently hoping to catch a glimpse of that delicacy of the deep — Southern Rock Lobster. This is one area that certainly warrants closer SCUBA inspection in the near future, indeed, there are many more caves to explore.

Lady Face Point:

Heading east, we pause at the headland off the old bluestone quarry, an area known as Lady Face Point. This location is now closed to shore access, and offers excellent diving down to 25 metres, though we planned to take advantage of the calm conditions and stay shallow on the inshore reefs 5-10 metres deep. After finding a



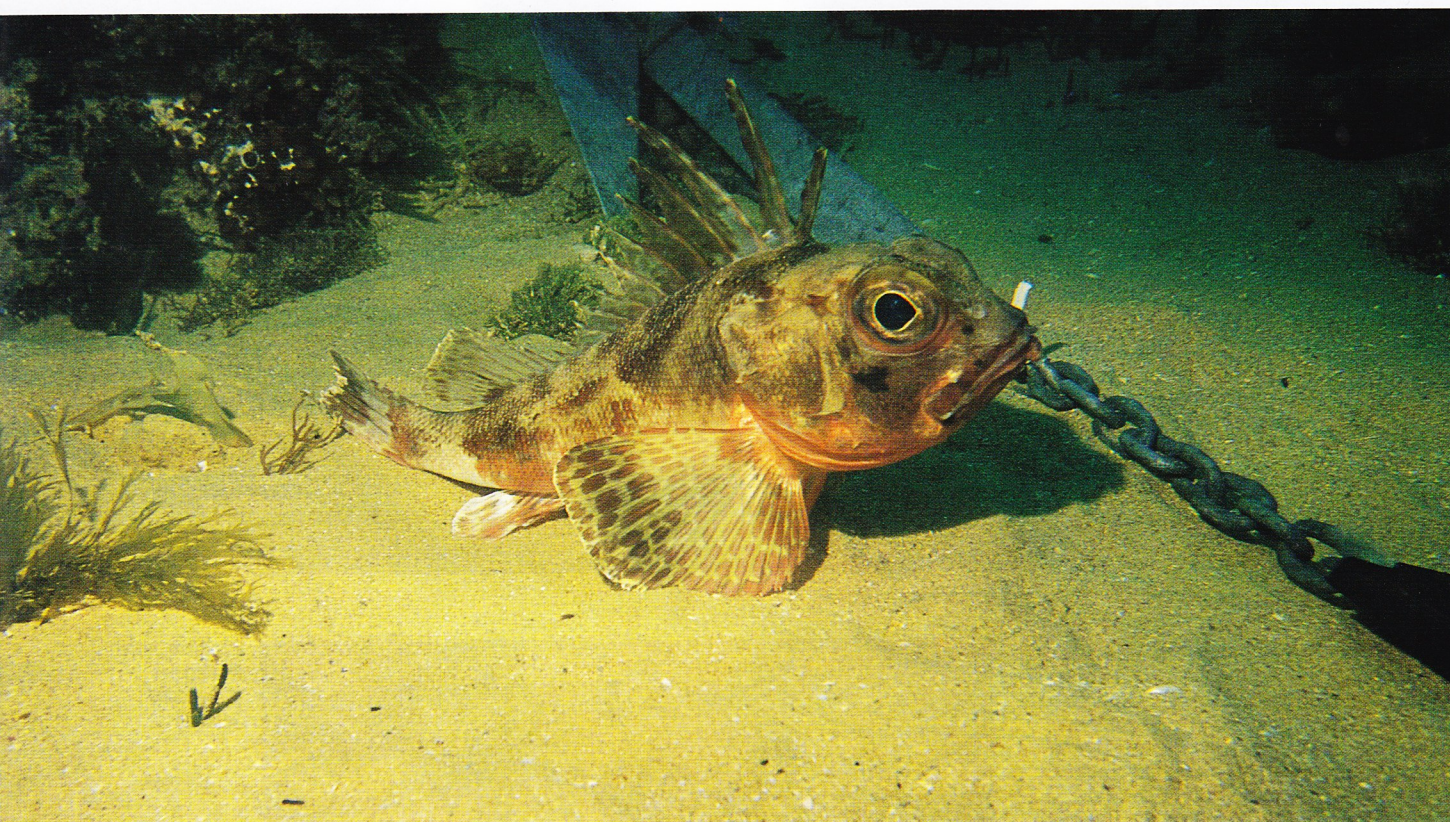
Southern Jewel Anemonies (*Corynactis Australis*).

suitable reef edge on the depth sounder, we anchor securely and descend to 10 metres. The wall here is rich in grey soft coral and yellow gorgonians, the gutter below being carpeted in Black-lip and Green-lip abalone. Ledges shelter Blue Devilfish, Conger Eels and Moonlighters whilst Blue Throat Wrasse, various Leatherjackets, Sergeant Baker, Magpie Perch and Old Wives cruise along the walls and gutters, keeping a wary eye on us. Above our heads, Long-fin Pike and Snook (up to a metre long) patrol midwater, as Herring Cale, Dusky Morwong and the occasional cat shark rummage around in the kelp on the reef plateau.

Peering into the dark gloom at one ledge, it took me a moment to realise that the little sticks pointing and waving at me were crayfish antennae! We spotted dozens of crays in these ledges, often in groups of 5-8, but they were all juveniles and

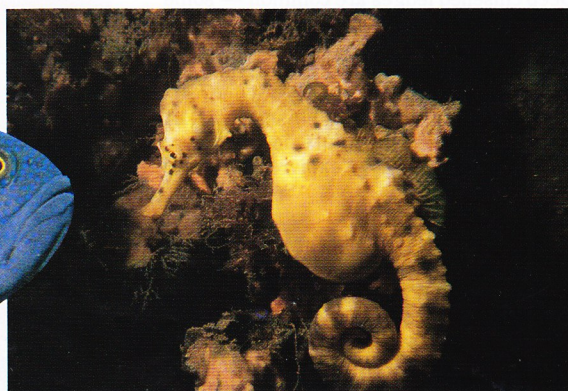


Pelican Point, looking west towards Cape Schanck.

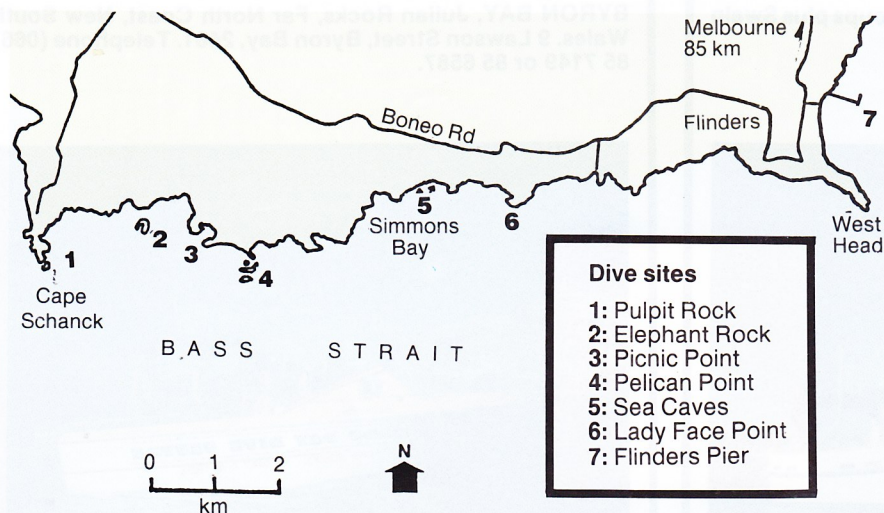


Gurnard Perch (*Neosobastes pandus*) props next to the anchor.

Western Blue Devilfish (*Paraplesiops meleagris*)



Big-bellied Seahorse (*Hippocampus abdominalis*), a "pregnant" male carrying its brood of eggs.



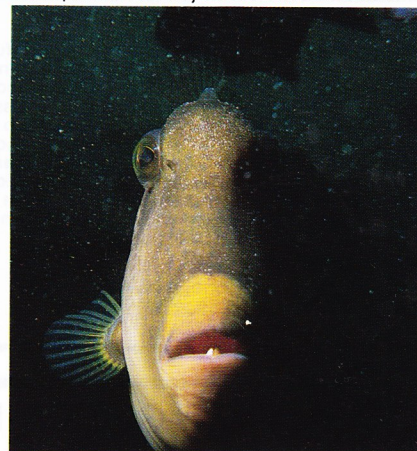
although fascinating to watch, will have to wait until next year. I only hope they stick around that long!

Flinders Pier:

On our way back to the beach, we dropped into Flinders Pier to snorkel the small wreck off the south-western tip of the pier. This wreckage consists of the fairly intact deck of a fishing vessel, and despite being quite a recent addition, a good coverage of marine growth, and a resident population of Bullseyes and Globefish offer some interesting photographic opportunities. Likewise, the convoluted patterns of a swimming sea anemone, or the delicate hues of a Big-bellied Seahorse are a macro photographer's delight.

Returning to the pier, we are joined by

An inquisitive Leatherjacket studies the camera



an Australian Fur Seal, an adult female curious and friendly, mimicking our every move underwater. She seemed particularly fond of barrel rolls and bubble-blowing, but soon grew weary of our physical ineptitude and departed for the deep.

Watching her bubbles tail off into the distance, this really seemed a fitting end for one perfect day.

Access:

With the exception of Flinders Pier, the dive locations discussed in this article are totally inaccessible from shore.

There are no boat launching facilities in the area, although it is possible to launch small boats across the beach next to Flinders Pier, using either a four-wheel drive vehicle, or a strong rope and lots of muscle (the local abalone divers use a fleet of tractors to pull their opulent, leviathan sharkcats from the water). A rising tide makes launching easier, as the exposed sand will have hardened considerably, but beware of the brisk swell and the short, steep seas that build up around West Head.

In conclusion, although there are some difficulties in access (or perhaps because of it) this area offers diving that is adventurous and challenging — a wilderness experience not to be missed. ■



Flinders Pier on a perfect day.