

OSPREY'S INCREDIBLE

DEEP SEA ARCADE

WE DON'T KNOW HOW MANY, BUT AT LEAST SOME EXPLORERS VISITED OUR PART OF THE WORLD BEFORE JAMES COOK. SOME, SUCH AS THE POLYNESIANS WHO COLONISED NEW ZEALAND, MADE JOURNEYS THAT WERE MORE DIFFICULT AND PERILOUS THAN EVEN COOK'S EPIC VOYAGES. YET ASK ANY AMATEUR HISTORIAN TO NAME THE PRE-EMINENT SEA-GOING EXPLORER IN OUR REGION AND THEY'LL ALL NAME COOK. SO WHAT MADE HIM THE 'PEOPLES' CHOICE' EXPLORER?

The answer is that Cook bought us back images, descriptions and maps that connect us to this day to what he found. Cook documented his discoveries compellingly; others didn't. We learned this lesson in a practical sense 10 years ago. On 14 May 2002 we made the first dive to what was assumed to be the wreck of Australian Hospital Ship *Centaur*, torpedoed off Brisbane in the Second World War. We discovered that the ship officially recognised as the *Centaur* was the wrong wreck, but our video light imploded during the descent and we returned without evidence. We had no proof to connect people to the discovery. Our claim was subsequently investigated by the navy, and their sonar images became the evidence we

were unable to provide. We were happy the truth was out, but it constantly niggled us that we'd failed to provide proof for what at the time must have seemed to many, an outlandish claim. We would not make that mistake again.

In 2009 we were aboard the Mike Ball Dive Expeditions vessel *MV Spoilsport* for a week at Osprey Reef. On a routine drift dive along one of the vertical dropoffs it seemed our eyes had begun to play tricks on us. The low afternoon light extended its prying fingers into the deeper reaches of the dropoff, like a torch into a darkened room. From our planned depth of 50m it appeared that something strange happened to the wall 5 or 10m below. It seemed to disappear. In the dim shadowy light we figured it out... it looked like there was a massive overhang, and intriguingly, it looked like there was some sort of exuberant growth underneath it.

Thinking about it later we decided we must have been imagining the growth. Every diver knows that coral life deteriorates rather than improves the deeper you go, right? Below 30 or 40m it's usually a waste of time looking for photogenic coral. But the mental image of a sub-60 overhang with Jurassic Park growth, whether it was a narcosis-fuelled imagination or not, played on our minds. Perhaps more than anything else, the potential of this site was the catalyst for an annual 'deep reefs' expedition on *Spoilsport*. The concept was that both recreational and technical divers would be encouraged to come on a trip

TREVOR JACKSON &
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IMAGES BY SIMON
MITCHELL © 2014

Opposite:

> Higher up the wall in shallower depths there's more light and some of the best large coral fans you'll ever see. Photo Damian Siviero.
> It wasn't only the deeper divers who got to see these unusual corals. Small pockets with similar species were found in shallower water too, with this example at 25m.
This page: The stunningly beautiful deep coral arcade extends along the wall between 60 and 70m at North Horn, Osprey Reef. Breath taking! Nikon D800 with 14-24mm f/2.8 Nikon lens in Subal Housing, ISO 800, 1/80th @ f/8. Twin Inon Z240 strobes on manual combined with twin Light and Motion Sola Video 2000 S/F lights on full power. Photo Simon Mitchell.





carefully scheduled to take in sites suitable for diving in both the normal recreational depth range and in the deeper range opened up by rebreather technology. Importantly, these expeditions would allow the exploration of sites like this overhang to be undertaken safely and properly, and non-technical divers could share in the excitement of it all.

The opportunity now presented itself, on Deep Reef 2012 we'd take the right gas, the right equipment, and go and find out if we'd been imagining things. What we found was a revelation.

It hadn't been an illusion; there really was growth, extraordinary growth... like nothing we had seen before. Even in the limited light of our small torches, the psychedelic palette of colour was eye-popping. But again equipment issues would plague us.

Simon explains :

"Literally weeks before the trip I'd retired my old Nikon D300 for a D800 in a beautiful hand-made Subal housing. I was shooting with a 14-24 lens which is so big that it has to be attached to the camera through the barrel of the housing after the camera body is mounted inside. Early in the phase of getting used to this configuration, every photographer will inevitably make the mistake of thinking the lens is properly clicked into the camera when it isn't. Tragically, I made that mistake prior to this dive. So, at 65m and staring in awe at this photographic-chance-of-a-lifetime, I realised that even though I could see through it, I couldn't control the aperture or focus of my lens! In desperation I just cranked the ISO on the camera up until I was recording something on the sensor, but the result was a grainy out-of-focus photo... the sort you always see of the Loch Ness Monster. It was not the James Cook standard of documentation the site was demanding." We'd opened a box of sparkling treasure then been forced to close it after only a brief look inside. Despite this, the dive deck was rife with excitement on our return; we were on the verge of something special

A whole year went by, our technical issues played on our minds again. On Deep Reef 2013, we were determined to

get the job done, to bring back definitive documentation of a dive site we thought was about to redefine deep ocean reef diving. The penultimate dive took place on a perfect day with a mild current flowing along the reef. Our plan was to descend to 65m up-current of where we thought the overhang started and drift along the wall until we hit it. This worked perfectly. We came to the overhang which extended perhaps 100m along the wall almost exactly where and when expected. What we didn't expect, however, was the sumptuous visual feast we found there. After decades of diving, genuinely new experiences are hard to come by, this was one of them. The walls of the overhang were festooned with hanging coral growth; there were some of the usual soft corals but it also seemed that everywhere we looked there were species we'd never seen before, and in every colour and hue imaginable. It was like a cross between a children's fairy tale and the jungle sets of the *Avatar* movie. This was a discovery crying out for documentation, but at the end of our bottom time, a glance down the water column suggested it went deeper and further; we'd need to come back

We had time for one more swing at it. We suspected there were not one but two sections of overhang, probably both over 100 metres in length. Our goal was to swim the entire stretch of wall in one hit and record the best of it on film. Videographer Damien Siviero would sequentially record the site as it unfolded. The photographic challenge of trying to depict this expansive vista of colour was considerable. Choice of ISO, aperture and strobe power and positioning would be critical.

Finally, it all came together. There were indeed two sections, relatively close together, and the entire site can be taken in with one jaw-dropping dive of about 40 minutes spent between 60 and 70m. Most importantly we've been able to document the discovery of Osprey's Deep Sea Arcade with some photos that vaguely do it justice. We present those images to you here.



Opposite:

> A typically happy Spoilsport crew ran a fabulous trip in which technical and non-technical divers were able to dive the same sites; just to different depths!

> Even the 'bare' surfaces are speckled with colour in the deep coral arcade. Photo Simon Mitchell.

This page:

> Decompression from the deeper depths was time well spent on this trip. Simon Mitchell prepares to photograph a large soft coral higher up the wall. Photo Damien Siviero
 > Brian Mecklem (right) dives his Hollis Explorer rebreather. Perhaps the first one of these new 'recreational rebreather' units sighted on an Australian liveaboard?
 > The ship's rebreather divers. From left Brian Mecklem; Fiona Sharp; Shannon Micallef; Simon Mitchell; Damien Siviero. Captain Trevor Jackson AWOL from this photos.

