

Cebu Divers Go to the Great Barrier Reef

Contributed by The Old Wolf
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The Trip Back

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I left him and my sister-in-law Emily, and wandered around the boat. At the bridge, the captain was surrounded with all sorts of navigation, electronics and communication gear. To the left was the station of the official photographer. I marvelled at all the high tech gear as I moved back down to the dive deck. Yes, there was a ton of well maintained dive gear. But for my money, the best feature on the boat was the availability of hot showers on the dive area. Straight out of the water, take your gear off, and rinse in its soothing caress. Priceless.

Boarding and Casting Away

"The herbal medication really doesn't work. If in doubt, just take the proper medicines and be done with it", a crew member commented on the available medication on the table, as we boarded the dive boat. I handed one to Bryan, as he has a penchant for getting sea sick. I have never been sea sick (well, not that sick!), and neither has my sister-in-law. I took the pill. Emily did not. Having spent for a diving trip to the Great Barrier Reef, I did not want to ruin it with mal de mar.

It was gracefully unfolding into a beautiful day. With the sun blazing in all its glory, plus a nice tropical breeze gently wafting throughout, the atmosphere on the boat was that of excitement and anticipation. At the top deck, we were scanning the activities at the dock, as we slowly made our way out of the Port Douglas marina, through the river mouth, and then forward to the great ocean.

There was a slight chop, and then the skipper increased the RPM to edge the boat forward. A few seconds later, spray splashed everywhere! It was as if water fell from the sky in biblical proportions – the effect of throwing the engine lever full speed ahead to thrust the monster wave-piercing catamaran forward! Yes, we learned that day that when it is a bit choppy, outside decks of a wave-piercing vessel is not the best place to be. We also later learned that the skipper gets a kick out of his little trick, or so we heard. Anyway, you have now been warned - when this type of boat penetrates the wave (ordinary hulls ride the wave), there will be water everywhere!

And as we struggled to get into the boat's sheltered, airconditioned area, the tell tale signs of queasiness were starting to show on my two companions, and on quite a few others. Oh dear! And Great Barrier Reef is still over an hour away.

Port Douglas and Cairns

We made it a point to stay at Port Douglas, as it is the closest departure point to the reef. A tropical oasis with a buoyant, vacation vibe, the town is about an hour's drive from Cairns. Tourism seems to be the major industry. Yet, despite the availability of modern worldly comforts, it's still very laid back with a distinctly "small village" atmosphere. And the climate seduces you. Or is it just that I miss Cebu that much? Or perhaps it's simply because I live in a place where it is cold for three quarters of the year at least! I never did really want to leave.

Cairns is the big, tourist city in the area, bustling with energy and youth. This is the gateway to the regions tourist destinations. We spent some time in Cairns on the way back, and what impressed me was that it was very evident that the city council nurtures the tourism industry. You can smell and breathe the well organized and very tourist-centric approach that the council, the town as a whole, take.

At The Reef

And then the sound of the engine softened, and the boat slowed down. Emily did get to experience the whole spectrum of mal de mar symptoms. Bryan, despite feeling bad and woozy, managed to keep it all together. I did not endure any light-headedness (well all right... just a little bit!). Anyway, I have had a lot of time on boats fishing, sailing, cruising, and the trip today was ROUGH. Had I not downed that pill, I suspect it would have been ugly.

As soon as the boat slowed down and it was manageable, divers were gearing up at a frantic pace. There was frenzy at the dive deck. And we were determined not to be last. Everybody knew that the best remedy for giddiness was to jump in.

After what seemed an eternity, we finally got all geared up. We checked and double checked. All ready to go.

And there we were. It was our turn. Lined up at the platform and ready to do the big step, the waters of the Great Barrier Reef beckoned.

One final glance at my son to scan his gear – mask on, snorkel, regulator in the mouth, octopus clipped on, BCD inflated, 3mm shorty suit over jelly fish stinger suits, fins on – he gave me the thumbs up and I watched him confidently enter the water and join Emily. I stepped forward. The ocean embraced us. We were afloat on the waters of the Great Barrier Reef.

Someone later said that he saw a shark, albeit a wee one. It is always somebody else that sees the shark, always the next guy who catches a glimpse of the ray. I saw a few things – sweet lips, snapper, cuttle fish, lion fish, and of course Nemo was there – but the trouble is, everybody else saw them.

I was in awe of the diving skills of the photographer – darting around the different dive teams, taking candid shots, asking divers to pose together and yet still managing to take shots of the reef and its creatures and to stay underwater for as long as the last dive team!

There were two dives on that trip, with a tropical buffet lunch in between. On both dives, my air did not last long, but we new divers were on the same team. Phew! Not a good feeling when the whole group has to surface because you consumed your air too soon!

I realized sometime during one of the dives that I was a fisherman lost underwater. I was a new diver then, and I recognized a few fish species, but that was about it. I have since improved a little bit. Nevertheless, the reef was breathtaking. Perhaps being there, diving, was good enough in itself. It is, after all, the Great Barrier Reef.

About the Author: Ray Vincent Arriola is a Cebuano diver who currently resides in Auckland, New Zealand. He dreams of retiring in Cebu and spending the rest of his days exploring new underwater worlds.

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