

THE MACKEREL ISLANDS

– WA'S NEW DIVING HOT SPOT

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We were recently contacted by the Pilbara Tourism Association to see if we were interested in visiting a new diving destination in Western Australia called the Mackerel Islands. Having never heard of these islands before we grabbed a map to discover they were located just north of Ningaloo Reef. We were intrigued, so packed our bags and our dive gear to explore the Mackerel Islands.

The Mackerel Islands are a group of islands and reefs located off Onslow. Getting to the islands is no easy task – a flight to Karratha, then a three hour drive to Onslow (or a 16 hour drive from Perth) and then an hour long boat ride to Thevenard Island – one of the reasons that the islands are a undiscovered gem. It is hoped in future that commercial flights will fly directly into Onslow, which will really open up this area.

Thevenard Island is located 22km off the coast and is the home of Club Thevenard. Now a word of warning, Thevenard Island is no tropical paradise with swaying palm trees – just low scrub and also an oil storage facility, as the resort is an ex-mining camp that is still shared with Chevron Texaco. Using the word 'resort' is a bit of a stretch, basic but comfortable, the resort consists of 11 self contained beach bungalows plus 30 motel rooms in the village, this village complex also includes a pool, bar, games room and dining room. The place has a very rough charm that some may not enjoy, but we didn't mind once we sampled the fantastic diving around the islands.

Fishermen have known about the Mackerel Islands for a long time, but with the opening of MI Dive at Club Thevenard divers can also discover the rich marine environment around the islands. MI Dive is run by Greg Lowry, assisted by Drew Norrish (Island Manager) and Jamie Hornblow (Island Assistant). They offer dive courses and operate daily boat dives on



Beach bungalow accommodation at Thevenard Island.



Beautiful soft corals decorate the reef at Black Flag.



A large school of stripey snapper at Black Flag.

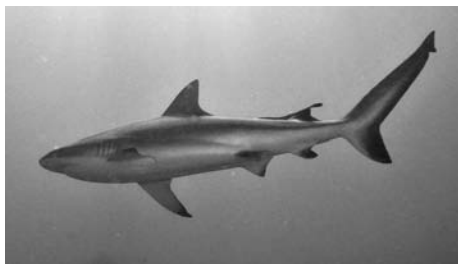


A tawny nurse shark at Black Flag.

two dive boats – Thevenard One which is an 8m leisure cat and The Specialist, a 12m purposed built vessel surveyed for 18 and skippered by Richard Burges.

Our first couple of dives were around Thevenard Island itself, which is surrounded by fringing reefs that are shallow enough to snorkel on. The amount of coral in the shallows surprised us – healthy hard corals, lush soft corals and colourful gorgonians – all in only two to 6m of water. But we were more impressed by the fish life. Reef fish darted about the corals and an endless parade of pelagic fish swimming by, including trevally and mackerel. We also encountered turtles, crayfish, stingrays, reef sharks and a huge variety of colourful nudibranchs. At Rob's Bommie we also found a large tawny nurse shark and two rarely seen northern wobbegong sharks.

As good as these dive sites were around Thevenard Island they paled when compared to the nearby reefs. At Sultan's Reef, Trap Reef and Greg's Grotto the coral was incredibly rich and packed with a multitude of reef fish and invertebrate species, especially nudibranchs. The number and range of nudibranch species was just astonishing, we saw hundreds on every dive, either feeding or mating, and photographed over twenty different species. At these sites we also saw reef sharks, stingrays, gropers,



A grey reef shark cruises overhead at Stonehenge.



The Specialist, one of MI Dive's dive boat.

coral trout, moray eels, octopus and turtles.

But the number one dive site at the Mackerel Islands would have to be Black Flag. This incredible dive site has caves and ledges to explore in 17m and some of the most colourful corals we have ever seen – the reef decorated with soft corals, gorgonians, sponges and even black coral trees – plus the reef is home to staggering amounts of marine life. We encountered gropers, reef sharks, tawny nurse sharks, stingrays, wobbegongs, turtles, sea snakes and thick schools of trevally, snapper, pearl perch, fusiliers, batfish and silver drummer. After only two dives at this site it slotted into our top ten dive sites in Australia!

After only a few dives at the Mackerel Islands we were stunned by the beauty of the reefs and the amazing diversity of marine life they accommodate, and the reason these reefs are so rich is because of the strong tidal flow between the islands. These strong tides wash the reefs with nutrients, but also limited the visibility at times, which varies from 6m to 20m.

We didn't think the diving could get any better, but we then did some exploratory dives, descending onto reefs that have never been dived before. Around Bessers Island we dived three new sites and found some wonderful coral formations, with schooling



One of the lovely sponges found at Greg's Grotto.



A selection of the wonderful nudibranchs to be found at the Mackerel Islands.



An olive sea snake encountered at Sultan's Reef.



A painted crayfish at Rob's Bommie.

fish, gropers, reef sharks, turtles and a very friendly giant potato cod.

At Brewis Reef we explored a maze of coral heads in only 9m of water that were decorated with incredible corals and swarming with fish life. But the best exploratory dive was at Rankin Road, where we dived a rocky ridge only two metres high. Undercut by caves this ridge was one of the fishiest dive sites we have ever seen. The ledge was overflowing with cardinalfish, and home to gropers, coral trout, white tip reef sharks, stingrays, lionfish and many other species. Cruising the ledge were schools of trevally, mackerel, fusiliers, Chinamen snapper and even queenfish; we also saw turtles, reef sharks, sea snakes and over forty rankin cod, that followed us around for the entire dive (for more detailed information about the amazing dive sites at the Mackerel Islands watch out for our feature article in Sportdiving).

When we first arrived at the Mackerel Islands we were very dubious about the claim on their website of 'world class diving' but can confirm that it is true, but we would even go so far as to say it has some of the best diving we have experienced anywhere!

For more information –
www.mackerelislandsdive.com.au and
www.mackerelislands.com.au

