



The Coral Sea a pelagic paradise

The Coral Sea is revered the world over as a mecca for divers and fishermen alike. But it's not until you go there and experience it first hand that you can really come to appreciate the riches we have on our doorstep.

■ Text Billy Hayes ■ Images Robert Torelli

Jim and his 47 kg Dog Tooth Tuna



This would be my second Blue Water Hunting International trip and it would prove to be everything I expected and more. We set off from Port Douglas, in north East Australia aboard the M.V. Phoenix, bound for the outer Great Barrier Reef and the Coral Sea. Once again I was lucky to be aboard with a great bunch of divers from all over the world - 3 Melbourne-based free divers, 2 Americans, 1 South African and 1 Russian. The trip was guided by Rob Torelli and Dr. Adam Smith. Their skill and experience, combined with the captain and crew meant we were always given great opportunity to land the fish of a lifetime.

The first day was spent securing reef species from the outer Great Barrier Reef with Coral Trout being the main target. Our selective catch included enough to feed us for the remainder of the trip. An overnight steam saw us in the Coral Sea as we awoke to calm conditions and the promise of crystal clear waters with 30 metre+ visibility and Dogtooth Tuna. During our time in the Coral Sea we visited Veema, Shark, Bouganville and Holmes reefs. All divers managed to land Dogtooth Tuna with several over 40kgs+. The heaviest being a 47kg monster speared by Jim McCollem. Andrew Cutajar was also very successful, picking up a nice selection of Dogtooth to feed his extended family and friends who'd put in orders for their share of Coral Sea delicacies. Some were even kept aside for the wedding of Rob's great dive buddy, Andy Ruddock.



Jim McCollem and the remains of his magnificent Wahoo.

Techniques used to lure these powerful pelagic fish within range of the divers are a combination of burley and flashers. First we'd drift over shallower reefs, collecting burley. Then as it drops off to bottomless blue the flashers come out. A quick jingle and the sharks appear. Then the small Rainbow Runners school near the surface. Then you wait, eyes peeled, looking for the distinctive two white dots on the tail of the Dogtooth Tuna. Working in teams of 3 and 4 it's 1 diver down, one preparing to dive, one spotting and Rob or Adam burlying. In between times a lot of shark poking goes on to keep them off the burley. Dives of 15 to 20+ metres are made to get a good shot off. The first time in such clear waters can be deceptive. When you think you're close enough, swim closer. Sometimes a tap on your gun can get the attention of big tuna and turn them enough for a head shot. Other times you simply have to dive bomb and get a shot off as the burley distracts them. Wahoo were also on the menu and several were taken. My only regret was my lack of practice with my blue water gun and missing two large Wahoo. Oh well, best save something for next time. Rob showed how it was done by nailing a nice Wahoo with his 130 cm gun with a reel and playing the fish beautifully. Jim was able to land a 'Wah'. A large Silvertip Shark claimed the 'hoo'. The other fish targeted here is the Jobfish. First timers like myself can find the Jobfish extremely frustrating and difficult to get close enough



Veteran spear fisherman Bernie 'Fin Dog' Finnerty with a Dog Tooth Tuna.

to spear. If you swim toward them they'll slowly swim away, keeping enough distance and diving deeper and deeper. It's not until you realise the Jobfish is balancing its natural wariness with its insatiable greed that you can predict its behaviour. Sitting off to the side and lining up on a piece of burley without looking at the Jobfish works a treat. Some tasty Jobfish were taken with this technique. Gennady Chumachenko became the Jobfish specialist.

The prize fish of the trip and eventual 'most meritorious' went to Eduardo Godhino's Yellowfin Tuna. These awesome tuna are usually hard to line up on as they dart in and out at great speed, snapping up burley. This time it was apparently unusual to see one on its own, curiously sitting deep below the flashers. Andrew spotted it on his ascent. So I dived. I reckon I got to about 18 metres. I could see its trademark yellow fins like ribbons waving to me in the blue. But it kept its distance. So I signaled to Eduardo, a 30 metre diver, to have a crack. Ed was up to the task with a great shot through the spine that completely immobilised the fish. Sashimi never tasted so good.

Other than the great fish taken, just being in such a magnificent environment was an experience in its self. Deep drop-offs into the dark blue, coral shelves and bombies teeming with life and isolated coral cays made it the trip of a lifetime. Add to that the sighting of Marlin and Sailfish in their natural habitat, bubbling bait balls near the surface herded by schooling tuna and over 400 hundred sharks counted for the National Shark Count with 8 different species spotted including Hammerhead, Bull, Leopard and close encounters with Tigers - what more could you ask for? What about a menu of fresh Sashimi, Tuna steaks, Coral Trout, Jobfish and Crayfish.

But in the end the best part was the camaraderie and friendships forged by sharing such great memories. Our average age was 49. Dr. Adam Smith can swim men half his age into submission. Ric Fallou hand crafts his own guns and enjoys the satisfaction of blooding them himself. And Bernie 'Fin Dog' Finnerty, at age 67 is a true inspiration, diving as deep as any, sharing his lifetime of stories and experiences and proving its never too late to beef up your obituary.

I'd scuba dived in the Coral Sea before but there's something more natural and pure about freediving in such a pristine environment. Once again I was the least experienced diver on the trip and learned more in 9 days than the majority of my life in the water. Along the way I managed to snare my first Dogtooth, Coral Trout and Jobfish. Thanks to the crew from the M.V. Phoenix, Rob, Adam and the other lucky divers who all helped make the unreal real. Better start training for the next trip. There's a Wahoo out there with my name on it.



The boys at the start of a classic Blue water spearfishing trip.



Winners are grinner's, Eduardo and his Yellowfin Tuna.

Funny man McColeem and a catch of tasty crayfish

