



Finding Nemo

A scuba-diving MD scours the seas for the world's underwater hot spots

text and photos by Dr Brad Bowins

People who have never dived often think that plunging beneath the sea is claustrophobic. But the experience is one of unsurpassed openness and freedom. My frequent childhood dreams of flying only stopped when I took up diving at age 15, prompted by the undersea adventures of Jacques Cousteau.

Sweeping over the lip of an undersea wall and looking down hundreds of metres without falling was as close to human flight as I could imagine. Add to this the incredible beauty of the coral reef environment, the magic of exploring submerged wrecks and the adrenaline rush of encounters with large critters such as sharks, and I was hooked from the start.

Before long I discovered that underwater photography was incredibly rewarding and motivated me to research the subjects I captured on film. Despite the challenges of shooting underwater — and dreaded disasters like a flooded camera housing — I have made it back with scores of memorable images, some of which have won awards from the Toronto Camera Club. Most recently my photo of a green sea turtle was published in the club's 2004 World Wildlife Calendar.

Scuba travel is also an adventure in itself — the best sites for diving just happen to be in some of the most spectacular places on the planet. Largely to escape the Canadian winter, I have concentrated my dives in tropical destinations. What follows is a list of some of the most unique and best all-round sites. Ranking them was a challenge — they are all excellent, and a different experience on another day could easily lead me to shuffle the order.

It has been said that what's important is not the number of breaths you have in your life but the number of times life takes your breath away. Scuba travel has certainly done that for me more times than I can count.

Dr Brad Bowins is a psychiatrist working in private practice and at the University of Toronto Health Service. He has completed over 1000 dives, most of which were devoted to underwater photography.

1. RICHELIEU ROCK, THAILAND

The one creature that all experienced divers want to see is a whale shark, and the best place to find one is at Richelieu Rock in the Surin Islands. During March and April, currents carry large amounts of plankton through the region and whale sharks take full advantage of the offering. Reaching lengths of over 10 metres with three-metre-wide mouths, these majestic creatures are as huge as underwater buses. Our first dive at Richelieu Rock was a letdown despite the sight of mating cuttlefish (cousins of octopus and squid). On the second dive we drifted away from the rock's pinnacle and into the plankton and in no time came upon a 12-metre whale shark. On subsequent dives we came across three at a time — a

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truly awesome sight. Access to Richelieu Rock is by live-aboard dive boat out of Phuket, a very scenic island with great beaches and excellent sea kayaking amongst limestone islands, where you can paddle through caves to inner lagoons. Cruises routinely visit the nine

Similan Islands where the fish life — including brilliant golden sergeant fish hiding in colourful bladed soft coral — is profuse and dramatic.

2. COCOS ISLAND, COSTA RICA

Sharks, sharks and more sharks are the main undersea treasure at this incredible island 500 kilometres off the coast of Costa Rica. During the day, whitetip reef sharks lie along the rocky bottom, often as many as a dozen together. At night, we saw the sharks come alive in search of fish, their eyes lit by the beams of our underwater flashlights as they raced by. The reason most visitors come to Cocos Island are the schooling hammerhead sharks — the sight of 200 hammerheads swimming in formation is not one you'll soon forget.

Mobula and manta rays are also commonly spotted gliding along the rocky slopes. This remote and rugged island, rumoured to be the hiding place for famous pirate caches, has equally impressive natural treasures during periods of heavy rain when a thousand waterfalls surge. Cocos Island is uninhabited and is accessible only by live-aboard dive boat.

3. GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS, ECUADOR

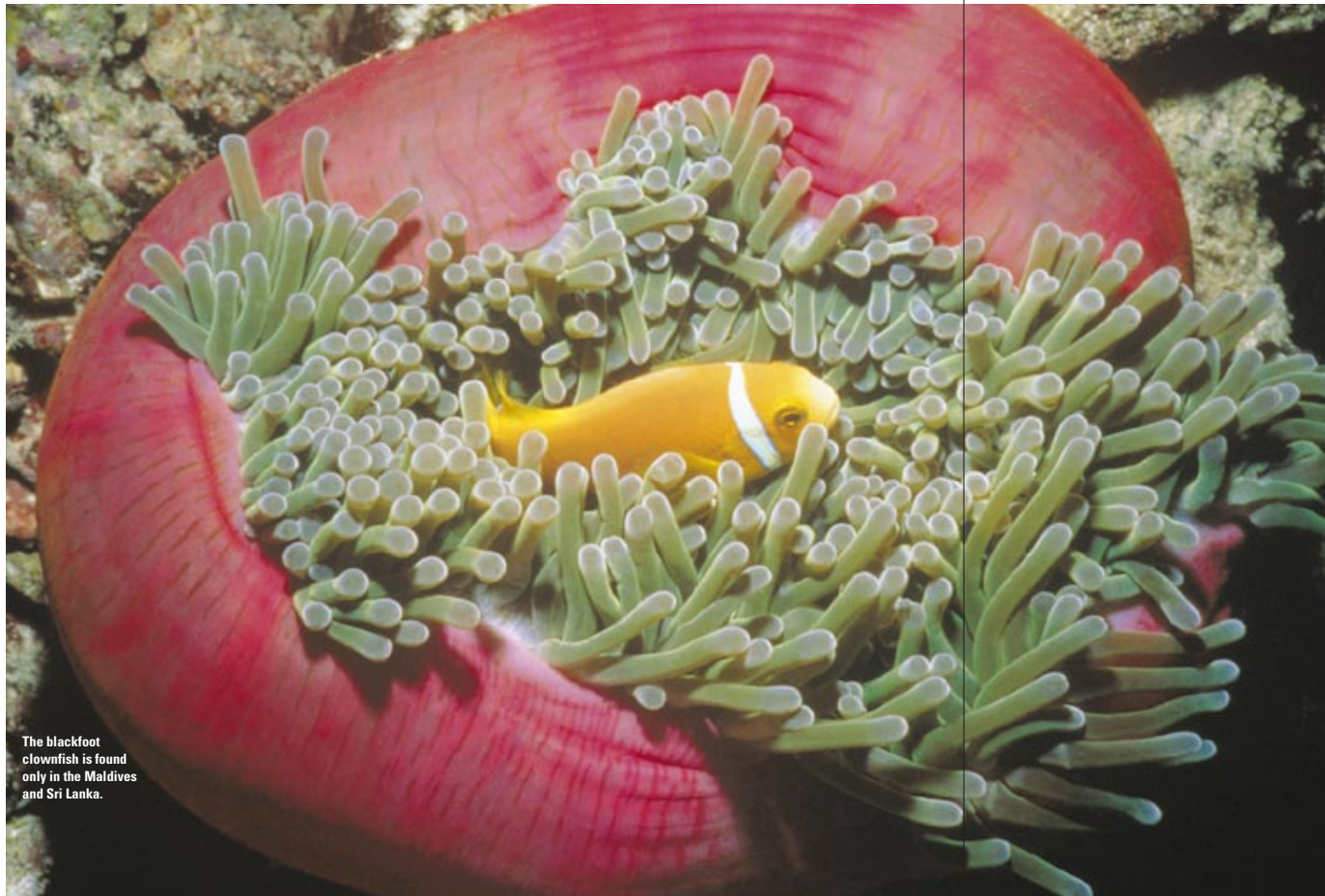
The majority of visitors to these enchanted islands come for the islands' unique turtles, iguanas and bird species. The animals encountered are so used to humans that they go about their business while cameras snap away. A small percentage of visitors focus on the vastly more exciting attractions found under-

water. A limited number of live-aboard dive boats provide itineraries which generally include the more interesting land excursions and a great deal of diving. Encounters with playful Galápagos sea lions are common in the main group of islands. Unlike the well-preserved land environment, the unregulated waters off the islands have seen their shark stocks depleted from overfishing. Excursions head instead to the remote Wolf and Darwin Islands where sharks and larger marine creatures are still plentiful. For three days, I dove with Galápagos sharks, cousins of the grey reef shark. On one dive, about 20 or so were circling around me. My most memorable encounter, though, was with a green sea turtle that lifted its left flipper to slow down as it

approached, giving the impression that it was waving. Fortunately, I had the camera set just right; this photo was eventually published in the Toronto Camera Club's calendar.

4. GANSBAAI, SOUTH AFRICA

Gansbaai, west of Cape Town, is the great white shark capital of the world. Progressive conservation laws have protected these magnificent sharks which feed on the area's abundant seals. Using cell phones to communicate between dive boats and chumming with bait, we didn't have to wait long to spot one. For each of three amazing days, we stood in two-person cages and came face to face with up to four of these awesome creatures at a time. On the last day I was in the cage



The blackfoot clownfish is found only in the Maldives and Sri Lanka.



The elaborate nostrils of this Fijian blue ribbon eel help it locate food.

alone for 45 minutes with three great whites, one almost six metres long. In contrast to what many people think, they are careful predators, slowly surveying their potential prey. They circled at the edge of visibility, five to seven metres away, often approaching from behind or below. Only once did one rush the cage, hitting it with such force that I was knocked back. Suspended alone in cold murky water watching these incredible hunters circle was an experience that made me feel more alive than I ever had.

5. PALAU AND YAP, MICRONESIA

Water action has carved out the base of Palau's limestone Rock Islands, leaving stunning formations resembling mushrooms capped with tropical vegetation.

The prolific marine life includes giant tridacna clams over a metre in length, large schools of barracuda, massive Napoleon wrasse, sea turtles and sharks. On a few of the islands, inner lagoons cut off from the sea led to the evolution of a stingless variety of jellyfish. Snorkelling surrounded by thousands of jellyfish was an unforgettable experience. At Blue Corner — where strong currents carry nutrients up an undersea wall providing a banquet, particularly for grey sharks — we hooked onto dead coral using large fishing hooks and cords, and swayed in the powerful current while taking pictures. On one dive I encountered a living fossil — a chambered nautilus, the shelled cousin of the octopus that was common about 500 million years ago.

On Yap, the Mi'l Channel is one of the best places in the world to encounter manta rays. We hid by a cluster of rocks as six manta rays moved in and hovered while cleaner fish removed parasites from their backs. With pectoral fins that can be three-and-a-half metres from tip to tip, the elegant rays never fail to impress.

6. FIJI, SOUTH PACIFIC

Known as the soft-coral capital of the underwater world, the Fijian Islands offer an enchanted adventure both below and above the sea. With a 16-kilometre spine of volcanic peaks, the garden island of Taveuni is extremely rugged and picturesque. Numerous waterfalls dot the eastern coast, offering secluded spots to swim. On most of the outer islands, the permis-

sion of the ruling chief is required before diving. The Somosomo Straits offer spectacular dive sites including the Great White Wall, named for the soft corals that extend their tentacles when the current is running, and where delicate blue ribbon eels and poisonous banded sea kraits dart between divers. Beqa Lagoon and Kadavu are also prime diving spots.

7. SIPADAN ISLAND, MALAYSIA

A walk around this island off Borneo takes no more than 20 to 30 minutes, so there's not much to do here but dive. At low tide we were able to step over the undersea wall and drop into the depths, particularly impressive at night with giant humphead parrot fish swimming about.

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Sea turtles abound in the reefs surrounding the island as do whitetip reef sharks. The diversity of fish and other marine creatures is truly mind-boggling given the tiny diving area. Thanks to restrictions on the number of divers and protection from fishing, the marine environment has been

well preserved. Visitors here usually spend some time on Borneo where headhunting persisted until half a century ago. Kota Kinabalu is an interesting modern city from which excursions can be arranged to stilt villages above the water, or inland areas increasingly threatened by extensive logging.

8. MALDIVES, INDIAN OCEAN

Diving opportunities in the Maldives — a vast archipelago of 1200 tiny islands — are extensive and spectacular. Island resorts are a good base for divers, but for the more adventurous, live-aboard dive boats set out on longer itineraries. My 10-day dive tour included North and South Malé Atoll, Felidhu Atoll and Ari Atoll where we encountered whale sharks

A green sea turtle in the Galápagos waves to adoring fans.



Crinoid shrimp are among the most ancient and primitive ocean invertebrates.



The spiny black legs of a sponge brittle star cling to a tube sponge.

and manta rays. A 1998 rise in ocean temperatures caused portions of hard coral to die off, but much of the coral is still preserved and there is solid regrowth. Fish life has remained very strong due to conservation policies. Barring any massive warming of ocean temperatures in the next few years it is likely that the Maldives will remain one of the top all-around dive destinations. (For more on the islands see my "I prescribe..." article on page 135 of the November 2003 issue of DOCTOR'S REVIEW.)

9. CAYMAN ISLANDS, CARIBBEAN

Lying south of Cuba are the three small coral islands of Grand Cayman, Little Cayman and Cayman Brac. A popular hideout for pirates in the 18th century, the Cayman Islands became a diving haven in the 1960s when the abundant mosquitoes were largely eliminated and its undersea wonders were discovered. Stingray City off the north coast has been described as the best shallow dive in the world. In five metres of water southern stingrays come on cue to the sound of boats. Although Grand Cayman still has a large number of excellent sites, the sheer number of divers has taken its toll and the best spots are now at Little Cayman, which is truly world class. In addition to the pristine corals there are abundant varieties of fish. Here we dove down brilliant limestone sand slopes that resem-



Dr Bowins holds a chambered nautilus off Palau.

bled ski hills, passing through tunnels beneath massive hard coral reefs and exiting over vertical walls that plunged into the depths.

10. SABA, CARIBBEAN

One of the most distinctive islands in the Caribbean, this tiny member of the Netherlands Antilles is the tip of a massive undersea volcano. Arriving from the nearby island of St. Maarten in a small aircraft offers awesome views of this incredibly steep isle, its 13-square-kilome-

tres soaring 1500 metres to the summit of the aptly-named Mt. Scenery. However, the real appeal here is underwater. The fish life is profuse and sea turtles seem to love gliding along the currents among underwater pinnacles. Protected as a marine park since 1987, well-preserved dive sites include walls adorned with colorful coral and pinnacles like Eye of the Needle and Diamond Rock. Dives can easily be arranged while staying on the island or from a live-aboard dive boat. 