

AUSTRALASIA SCUBADIVER

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THE BLACK & WHITE COLLECTOR'S EDITION

Oceanic Whitetips

Shades of Grey

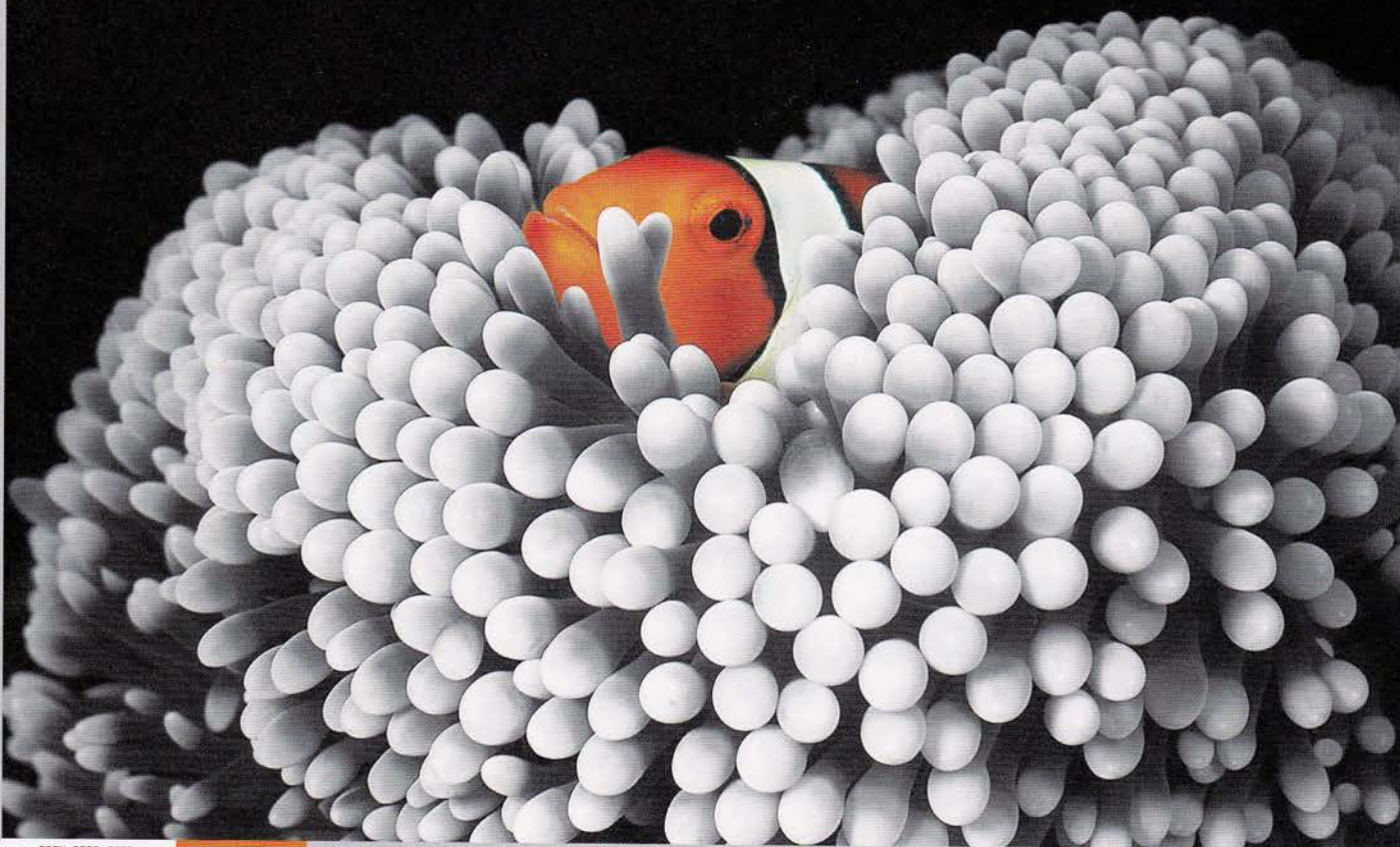
Shell Shocked Turtles

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BARE BONES OF NINGALOO

A rare find in Western Australia brings raw nature to the fore, laying bare a grizzly side to the Circle of Life

By Luke Riley

■ To witness one of nature's purest yet most dramatic events is a rare gift. These events can sometimes seem cruel or harsh, even underwater, but they are simply part of the circle of life. On the Ningaloo Reef in Western Australia, once a remote outpost in something akin to frontier country, the raw power of Mother Nature is startlingly evident.

First sighted in the 17th Century, the northwest cape of Australia, or 'Cloates Island' as it was known, has been used as a navigational aid by many a seafarer journeying north from the frigid Southern Ocean in search of warmer tropical waters. A virtual graveyard of long-forgotten ships, the jagged reef and meandering coastline provided little relief for the mariner searching, often in vain, for a safe haven from large seas rolling in from the Indian Ocean. But long before Cloates





Island, or 'Point Cloates' as it is now known, struck its first crushing blow to an unsuspecting mariner in the dead of the night, a more worldly seafarer cruised these waters, seeing Cloates Island as just another turn in the long road northwards.

Hunter & the Hunted

Humpback whales migrated through these waters in immeasurable numbers for centuries until, in the early 20th Century, man discovered an untapped bounty and established the first modern whaling station in Western Australia. The advent of the exploding harpoon saw whales slaughtered in vast numbers, their bloody carcasses hauled ashore to be processed for oil and other products. This outpost thrived until 1963 when whaling went into decline. But by the time the killing of whales was officially outlawed, the population was estimated to have been reduced to a mere five or six percent of its original size.

Thankfully, all that remains of the Norwegian Bay whaling station today is a rusted framework of machinery scattered like a hunched skeleton in the sand, and a few broken beer bottles – haunting reminders of days gone by. Slowly but surely the humpback whale population is increasing in number. More whales are continually

turning the corner on their voyage north from Antarctica towards the warm Kimberley waters where they mate and give birth. While the demise of whaling has made this journey a little safer, the path for these whales is still fraught with danger. For nature has a way of staking her own claims.

Wild Blue Yonder

Nowadays, few navigate their way into Norwegian Bay and explore the remnants of the whaling station and the surrounding waters; Sail Ningaloo is one company that does. Cruising aboard the sailing catamaran Shore Thing, we set sail from Coral Bay prepared for five days of snorkelling and kayaking at rarely-visited parts of a unique reef system. We explore new dive sites, snorkel at cleaning stations and float over marine nurseries. The sea offers up her secrets as we explore the tangled wreckage of ships struck down by the jagged reef. Rarely do we see another vessel and the feeling of Nature as a tangible, controlling entity is strong, even when the boat gently rocks us to sleep each night. But on our final day, we are privy to one of the ocean's purest and most powerful displays, an unforgettable gift.

Having explored the waters south of Norwegian Bay, we start our final leg back into Coral Bay. Suddenly, we notice a large tiger shark cruising through one of the shallow sandy lagoons. This in itself is not an unusual sight, but it is always exciting to see the power and grace of these impressive apex predators. Watching it from the bow of Shore Thing, this three-metre marauder of the oceans is not intimidated by our presence, swimming undeterred on its predetermined path.

opposite page: The skeleton of a humpback whale serves as an eerie reminder of marauding tiger sharks seen feeding on the carcass weeks earlier
above from left: The Ningaloo Reef consists of delicate coral gardens, among the most beautiful in the world | We watched in awe as the tiger sharks gorged themselves on the dead whale's flesh



Looking around for a broader perspective, we then notice another tiger shark, and another, all cruising with a precise order and plan. Thrashing at the surface alerts us to the centre of activity, and we venture closer. Our adrenaline surges and our hearts race with the realization that the sharks are feeding on something. Our presence goes unnoticed; these sharks have only one thing on their mind.

The shark count has now reached over twenty adults, the majority being tiger sharks and a few well-muscled bronze whalers; whatever they are feeding on must be large in order to support such a sustained frenzy.

Leviathan Lunch

Approaching closer, in just four metres of water now, the bottom is sandy and the water column is clear. We can make out the tail of what they are feeding on, and a sense of sadness rears up with the realization that it is the carcass of a humpback whale. Despite the regret, there is a feeling of amazement at this rarely-seen event, and there is a hunger to see more. Any sentimentality is rapidly suppressed by the sheer adrenaline of seeing so many large wild predatory sharks in such close proximity.

From the surface, the tail of the whale is visible and the shape of the head is outlined sharply against the sand. The carcass must be that of a juvenile whale measuring some eight metres in length. The major-

ity of the whale's flesh is gone, and the rib cage is exposed. All vital organs are gone. Torn pieces of oily blubber drift in the water column.

The sharks move in controlled order; always approaching from the east. They are large mature tiger sharks. Up to five sharks feed at once, biting down leaving saw-like impressions on the whale's bones. They try to reach areas of flesh that have not been exposed yet, turning upside down to reach the underside of the whale. The white of their bellies, gorged and full, is visible from the surface. Despite the excess, the sharks just keep on going, biting, tearing, thrashing. Their power is raw; the scene tugs at a primal place buried deep within us, bringing up alternating waves of awe and fear. Eventually, after three days of feasting, all that remains is a pile of bones and the remnants of baleen plates that slowly break down, and drift off, in the current.

Rare Spectacle

No doubt out in the open ocean, on such large migrations, weaker whales are often picked off by large apex predators. It is survival of the fittest, after all. In the waters surrounding Coral Bay on the Ningaloo Reef, orcas have been sighted pursuing young humpback calves. But rarely is the aftermath of a kill witnessed in such an ideal location. It is likely that orcas killed this whale on the outside of the reef before the carcass washed in over the reef with a rising tide and a large swell. Once the buoyancy of the whale was lost the carcass settled in

shallow lagoon waters, on a sandy bottom, right next to a large coral outcrop covered in flashing reef fish. And that's when the tiger sharks moved in, and when we made this once-in-a-lifetime discovery.

It is clear from this awe-inspiring experience that whales and sharks deserve our respect as fellow players in the circle of life. We are privileged to be able to witness the scales tip toward sharks on this occasion, just another example of the fragile balance of nature. And even though industrial whaling is a thing of the past, the humpbacks and the tiger sharks are still threatened by the hands of men. The environment here in Ningaloo is in check, and the food chain still wild and raw. But we must ensure that it stays that way, so that our grandchildren are one day able to experience such heart-racing sights as well, should nature let us bear witness once again. SDAA

opposite page: The reef has claimed the wreck of an old whaling vessel, turning the rusting remains into a refuge for an array of marine life
below, from top: Snorkelling with manta rays in shallow, clear waters is an inspiring and invigorating experience | Eye-to-eye, a snorkeller and green turtle discover each other for the first time



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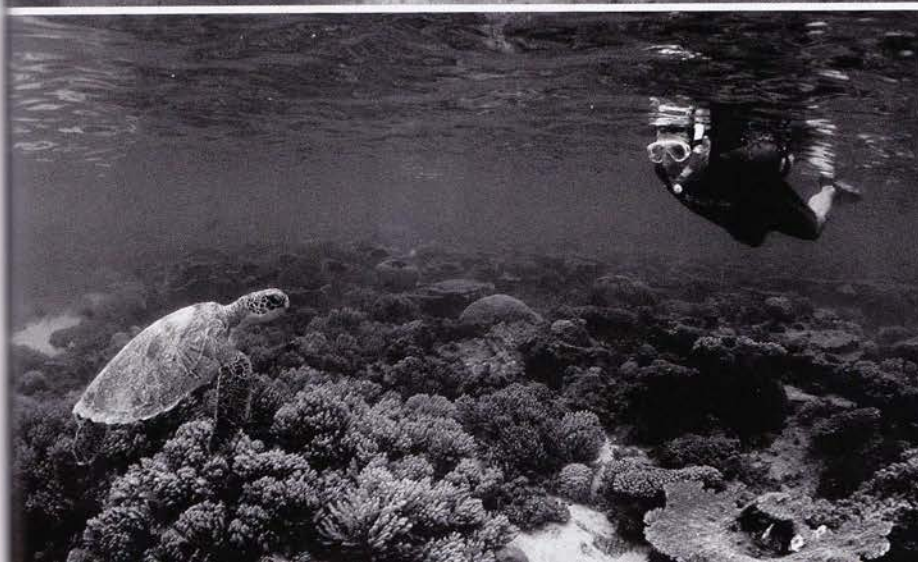
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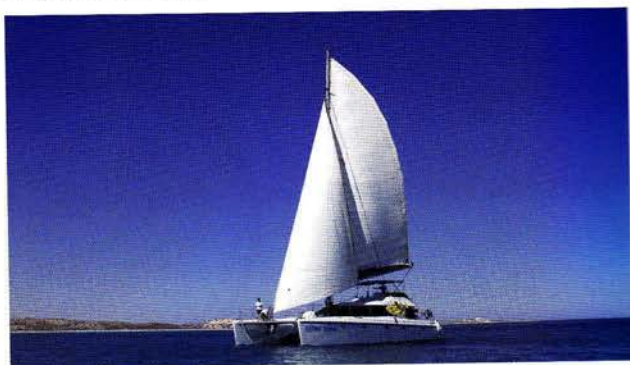
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SAIL NINGALOO

SailNingaloo.com



DESTINATION: Coral Bay, Ningaloo Reef, Western Australia

ABOUT: Sail Ningaloo is Advanced Eco certified, cruising and exploring the waters of the Ningaloo Reef Marine Park. Offering professional and personalised service aboard Shore Thing, our spacious and luxurious sailing catamaran caters for up to ten guests. Tours are perfect for those seeking an exclusive experience on one of the world's most pristine, untouched coral reef systems. Scuba diving and snorkelling, along with all other activities, are included. We are passionate about showing you the best Ningaloo has to offer! Tours depart for three to nine days.

ATTRACTION: Considered remote and unspoiled, Ningaloo is a Mecca for whale sharks and manta rays. The unique structure of world's longest fringing reef provides real adventure and close encounters with a diverse range of marine life, along with pristine coral gardens – an underwater photographers' paradise!

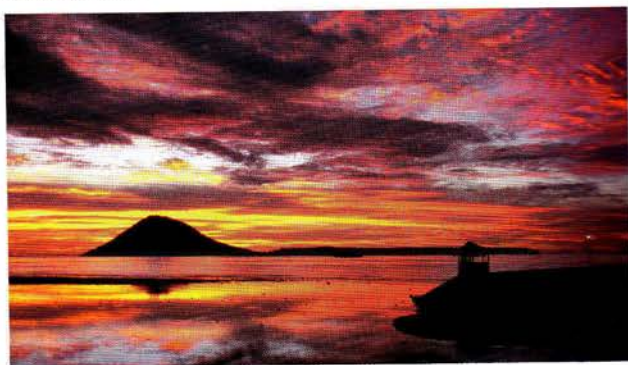
HOW: Departures out of Coral Bay, on Australia's northwest coast, an 80-minute drive from Exmouth. There are daily air services flying to Learmonth from Perth domestic airport.

SPECIAL: Bonus free night onboard in 2011. Group rates available. Contact us for more information: info@sailningaloo.com.au.

PS: No one else goes where we go.

DIVE CENTRE THALASSA AT SEASIDE RESORT SANTIKA

thalassa.net



DESTINATION: Manado, Indonesia

ABOUT: The 5 Star IDC Centre Thalassa offers specialist support with a personal touch. Located on the mainland, in the heart of Bunaken National Park, with unbridled access to sea and land tours. Sites are only five minutes away by boat, and you can dive the whole