

THE GREAT BARRIER REEF

# In the octopus' garden

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RISHAD SAAM MEHTA



**Conde Nast Traveller has just added the Great Barrier Reef in its list of top 10 island destinations. Dive in to discover a whole new world**

BY RISHAD SAAM MEHTA

**A**xle sensed the Pacific Ocean vibrating around him and lethargically floated up from the sandy seabed, where he had been lounging.

They were right on time, and he loved being the cynosure of all eyes.

As the first group of divers descended into the crystal clear waters of the Pacific at the Castle Rock dive site, Axle swung his tail-fin a few times and gently glided into their view. Then came the part he loved best. As soon as they spotted him, their smooth, fluid movements were replaced by jerky contortions while they tried to direct each other's attention towards Axle and simultaneously form a ring with the thumb and the forefinger—the universal 'OK' sign divers use to indicate an awesome sighting underwater.

He swam right up to the diver who seemed the most excited, and stayed with him, enjoying the wide-eyed look of amazement plastered on his face behind the mask. He hung around till the diver reached out and patted him hesitatingly. Satisfied, Axle floated away to collect some more adulation.

Behind my mask, I was still in a daze as I watched the 1.2m-long

Malabar Cod swim away. During the pre-dive briefing, Richard, the dive master, had said we might see the cod, but I hadn't expected the fish to swim up to me, peer into my mask and demand attention.

It had been a wonderful day so far. That morning, I had driven up to the Port Douglas Marina Mirage and checked into Quicksilver's dive centre, where I had pre-booked a diving trip. The girl at the counter handed me my boarding pass and asked me to head out to berth No. 2 at the Marina.

Parked there was the Silver-sonic, a 29m-long modern catamaran capable of slicing the waves at 31 knots. Because of this high-speed capability, the Silver-sonic can get to the Agincourt Reef—on the edge of the Great Barrier Reef system, just 3.4km before the continental shelf where the seabed drops down to 1600m—in 90 minutes flat.

Standing on the gangway leading to the vessel was Jamie, holding his camera like a gunfighter. He was shooting everyone who stepped on to the boat that day. All through the day, Jamie and his colleague mingled with the divers both on the boat and underwater with their cameras and camcorders. The result was a CD full of pictures and a DVD that you could buy off them to show the world your underwater exploits.

While the 35 of us who were out diving on the day sat in the luxurious cabin and filled out forms about our dive experiences and medical conditions, the crew gave us the once-over to gauge sizes and retired to the rear of the boat to prepare our diving equipment. In the meantime, the skipper kept up a rapid fire commentary about the journey and our destination.

I was grouped with three divers of similar experience and briefed about the dive. Our first site was called Phil's Reef, and Richard told us about the circuit we would be doing underwater.

The only part of diving that I am not too fond of is the gearing-up. In this case, a nippy breeze was blowing and the boat swayed alarmingly as I struggled to zip up my wetsuit, buckle on my BCD (buoyancy control device), along with the heavy tank, the weight belt and finally, the long flippers. One by one, we jumped off the side of the boat into the water, deep into the heart of the green Pacific.



**The deep blue:** (clockwise from top) A nosy Malabar Cod; (inset) it gets the attention it came for; the Great Barrier Reef; snorkellers take a dive into the great unknown from the Silversonic at Agincourt Reef.

dive tank and wetsuit and jumped into the water with a snorkel and a mask. The water was so clear that face-down from the surface, I could see divers on the seabed 20m below. Beneath me, trigger fish swam about in shoals and Axle still waited along, demanding pats from visitors.

Once everyone was on board and we were on our way back towards Port Douglas, Jamie printed out the photographs and hung them up in the lounge, so we could select the ones we wanted on our CDs, while the onboard television played videos shot underwater during the dives.

The 40-minute DVD at Au\$105 (approximately Rs3,700) might seem like a bit of a splurge, but it is absolutely worth it. It allows you to take back memories and relive them and, what's more, is bound to impress disbelieving friends far more than any vocal assertion.

Write to lounge@livemint.com



You have to be at least 12 years of age to go diving. But, for a charge, children and non-swimmers can accompany divers on the boat.



## TRIP PLANNER

### How to get there

Qantas (www.qantas.com) flies direct from Mumbai to Sydney (round trip fares start from around Rs33,960 plus taxes) and connects to Cairns. If you book early and are lucky, you can get tickets as cheap as Au\$180 for this 190-minute flight. But a realistic budget would be around Au\$220 per ticket. Port Douglas is less than an hour's drive north of Cairns along a very pretty road. If you want to drive yourself, online advance booking can get you a small hatch for Au\$30 a day. The bigger the car, the more it costs, but keep your luggage in mind. Certain dive operators also offer pick-ups and drops from Cairns.

### Where to stay

A good place is the Mantra Tree Tops Hotel, conveniently located on the Port Douglas Road. This four-and-a-half star resort is built amid its own natural rainforest with free flowing waterways and lily ponds. www.mantratreetops.com.au

### Where to eat

Macrossan Street in Port Douglas has plenty of good restaurants and lively pubs. The Courthouse is ideal for a beer or a sumptuous pub meal. The Living Room on Wharf Street is a very fancy fine-dining restaurant, offering a divine sirloin steak. For a taste of home, try the newly opened Port of India in Grant Street. The ambience is good and the food authentic: They have three Indian chefs, one from Kerala and two from New Delhi.

### Dive operator

Scuba diving isn't an instant water sport like rafting or jet skiing, you can do 'try dives', but to really enjoy it you need to get certification. At Port Douglas or Cairns, a good dive operator to go with is Quicksilver. They cater to first-time divers, snorkellers and experienced divers. You can even do your certificate course with them. Go to www.silverseries.com.au and www.quicksilver-cruises.com for a range of diving and reef-visiting packages. A day out diving with full hire of equipment costs Au\$205 for one certified dive, Au\$225 for two certified dives, Au\$240 for three certified dives. Snorkelling costs Au\$153 for an adult and Au\$112 for a child (4 to 14 years inclusive). An introductory scuba dive costs Au\$215. The costs include a tropical buffet lunch and morning and afternoon tea.