

# a drop in the ocean



Norfolk Island is freckle on the immense face of the Pacific – to step off it and explore the surrounding ocean is to embrace the beckoning abyss. Throw in a death star dive and a cave full of large finned predators, and you have a real adventure on the shark side...

**STORY + IMAGES** Chris Ord

**W**hen I quipped that I'd rather swim in a cave full of sharks than grapple a lectern for a spot of public speaking – my biggest personal fear – it was a throwaway comment, not meant to be taken literally.

Thing is, Norfolk Islanders like literal. Theirs is a literal paradise, no qualms. In many respects they live a literally idyllic existence on their spot of volcanic rock, breaching the waves on an eyeball with Byron Bay about 1600km east of Australian shores.

And when they say swim with sharks, it's just as literal. No bars. No cages. In a cave with one exit only. And so I found myself getting lined up for an experience that, in print at least, screams like a headline in one of Tim Cahill's Men's Testicle adventure magazines (see 'Second Hand Adventures', page 74).

While my imagination had only delved as deep as a night dive adventure, this is what Jamie Edward, owner and instructor at Norfolk Island's

Bounty Divers, has in mind when approached about a 'Dark Side' adventure exploring Norfolk's underbelly.

A bulk of a man carrying as much muscle as the sharks he's suggesting we go nose to nose with, Jamie doesn't flinch at the thought of sharing water with these beasts of berley.

In fact, his survival credentials are genetic; he's a direct descendent of John Adams, last of the original Bounty mutineers left alive on Pitcairn Island after infighting brought the Utopian dream to a murderous demise. Shaved head, piercings and biceps as thick as the scuba tanks he lugs – you'd nearly put him on even money in a wrestle with one of the local fin kings. Almost.

Jamie displays his shark affinity, like ghetto gang colours, in the form of a Polynesian-style hammerhead tattoo on his foot. Hammerheads are just one of the species that call the waters around Norfolk home. Cruising alongside is a multi-cultural mix of great white, tiger, whale, thresher, mako, grey reef and Galapagos, all attracted by the unique oceanic conditions.

Norfolk and its offshore siblings, Nepean and Philip Islands, are the tips of a giant underwater mountain ridge that runs from New Zealand to New Caledonia. Thanks to the particular currents



that swirl around the ridge – the Tropical Convergence Zone created by a meeting of warmer waters to the north and cooler waters to the south – it attracts both warm and cold-water species. The best of both worlds you could say. If you were Vic Hislop that is.

Aside from the smaller rigs and reefies, we're not talking undernourished specimens here. Five- to six-metre monsters are not uncommon. Yet their size, along with the abundantly healthy marine ecosystem clinging to Norfolk's submarine world, is a bulwark of confidence for divers. They're already well fed, the logic goes, why would they want to risk indigestion with a gristly piece of meat the likes of me, wrapped in an entanglement of surely tasteless neoprene and metal?

Plus, there hasn't been a registered shark attack around Norfolk ever, emphasise the locals. And they should know. Like Jamie, many have lineages going back to the Pitcairners, the mob descended from the Bounty mutineers – Fletcher Christian and his disgruntled gang – who landed here after Pitcairn, the mutineers' original hideaway from the fury of Bligh's retribution, became overcrowded and under gene pooled.

Queen Victoria, knowing that Norfolk Island was uninhabited and a virtual gift to the French scouring the Pacific for more footholds, decided it was a perfect second home for the Pitcairn residents who could, in their landlordship, claim it for Queen and Country.

As far as their particular history records, the Pitcairners are correct – none have knowingly ended up as fish food for a Norfolk Jaws. Yet Norfolk has a history beyond the Pitcairn custodians. A rather dark history in fact, one that earned it a reputation as being worse than hell.

During two stretches as a penal settlement (1788–1814 and 1825–1855), it was where the worst felons were sent for the hardest of labour. Many convicts preferred to jump off Norfolk's towering cliffs rather than suffer the tortures of island life under cruel captors. However, some convicts didn't go so willingly to the dark depths of the Norfolk Ridge.

In his book *Shark Tales & Yarns from Norfolk Island*, Rob Tofts records the odd fatal encounter. He recounts one incident where a convict, who had been positioned to dangle a lump of beef on a line to keep a roving shark from scaring the target cod being fished by his prison officer, lost his concentration:

"Fortescue ...secured a very fine cod fish, the unfortunate convict [was] looking at them instead of his line, when a number of sharks were about it. One swallowed, and made away,

pulling the convict over the cliff. Up and down this unfortunate man went after the shark for nearly half a mile, when he was eaten up by his followers: the line being tied around his waist, he had no chance to escape."

So the term 'ever' is relative to the Pitcairner's era only. Still, it also applies to the entire history of scuba diving on Norfolk, "which is only thirty years," notes Jamie, the third scuba operator in the lineage and the only one operating on the island at present.

"They're well fed," Jamie reassures me. That they are. The waters around Norfolk teem with life, from close to shore to the maze of underwater formations made oversize and unique by the unique conditions. While the entire underwater geology is volcanic reef there is plenty of soft and hard coral cloaking the marinescape with species many, varied and even rare.

In 2003, a joint Australia–New Zealand deep-sea research expedition reported that: "Norfolk Ridge supports a remarkably high number of species and genera that are new to science." They described their findings around the region's undersea pinnacles as being: "like exploring a lost valley of the dinosaurs."



It was the seamounts that attracted *Outer Edge* to dive Norfolk in the first place. At the Bounty Divers' HQ, Jamie nods to a wall chart, pointing out a pinnacle that tops out at 14 metres below the ocean's surface. This was our target expedition prior the shark cave.

The unfortunate thing about a literal paradise is the literal weather: it's unpredictable and when it pushes it shoves. Arriving on island, we'd taken in the soaring nature of Norfolk's topside beauty on a three-day kayak circumnavigation, the first ever we're told (read about the paddling adventure in the upcoming December–January edition of *Outer Edge*).

This left limited time to explore Norfolk's underbelly, and with swells rising the danger had nothing to do with sharks – it was all about getting pummelled against an underwater cave wall or swept away on a surge passing the seamount. Ultimately, both went un-dived by us and as Jamie tells it, remain un-dived by anyone.

No dramas, however. For an island measuring only eight kilometres by five, with two smaller siblings Nepean and Phillip spotted two and seven kilometres offshore respectively, Norfolk packs a lot of adventure punch.

"There are always options on Norfolk," says Jamie who reels off a number of safe sites despite the turning weather. "You like *Star Wars*?" he asks. To be honest, I've always thought Darth Vader's cape a bit girly for a man of the dark side, but otherwise...yeah, I do.

He's referring to a dive site at Duncombe Bay on the island's northwest, one he describes as being: "like the scene in *Star Wars* on the Death Star where Luke is hurtling through a corridor, lights flashing by either side."

## gear on assignment

### Led Lenser Frogman D14 Large

The D14 not only performed admirably, it literally outshone everything else we had on hand during a murky night dive. Robust – the lamp head consists of high-grade steel, the body of shock-resistant and shatter-proof plastic – the torch's simplicity of a two-way flick switch, operating via a magnet, made operation instinctive and easy with gloves. Limited weak points (casing joints, switches) meant there was no chance of leakage. The 3W Cree LED light was punchy with a focused beam delivering excellent range. Test was only 18m, however the German manufacturer claims safety until 60m / 7 BAR. Its small size (160mm) and weight (220g) were major benefits. The chip has a service life of 100,000 hours – ie if the lamp is operated for three hours per week, the diode will last for 600 years. Battery: 4 x AA. Working time: 50hours. Lumens: 120. Light colour: white. [ledlenser.com.au](http://ledlenser.com.au)



### Olympus Mju Tough 8000

Claimed as the toughest point-and-shoot on market. We took it diving to 10 metres (its limit) plus three days aboard a sea kayak and it happily waved off wet and wild conditions. Images were sharp on sunny days, but low light did test the unit. Shockproof to 2 metres, snowproof to -10°C, and crushproof to 100kg this is an excellent choice for those wanting to capture adventure moments while on, under or in the outer edge zone. Could be improved by the lens being positioned so it is more easily wiped clear of muck. 12 Megapixels with a 3.6x optical zoom with wide-angle lens. [olympus.com.au](http://olympus.com.au).



### The North Face Stretch Diad Jacket

This is the latest water wear innovation for TNE. Its two-way ultralight stretch fabric weighs in at 303g, making it a great choice for high-energy activities where you need to pack light but when the conditions could turn nasty. Like a second skin it moves and stretches with you upping the comfort factor. The Hyvent DT membrane with sealed seams keeps you dry while also shutting down any gale slapping around you. Pit-zips let sweat escape easily and my heavy-handed perspiration evaporated well through the membrane. Utilitarian design means no fancy extras, just the zip-covered, Velcro wrist fasteners and a hood with brim well designed to keep the spatter from your face. [thenorthface.com.au](http://thenorthface.com.au)



“Caves, tunnels, chasms and chimneys: there are at least thirty regular dive sites dotted around Norfolk just begging for visitors.”



# TOUGH BLOKE CHALLENGE

## TIME TO HARDEN UP!

From the stables of Maximum Adventure comes an off road running event that combines the challenges of cross country running, man made and natural obstacles, water crossings, mud and some unexpected surprises. The challenge is simple, clear the obstacles and get around the course in as short a time as possible to be in the running for the coveted Tough Challenge Trophy!



Contrary to the name, the event is also open to females in the "Tough Chick" category and a range of age categories, starting from 16 years of age.

**SYDNEY - 4 & 5 July 09 • MELBOURNE - 3 October 09**

**CONTACT: Henry van Heerden**  
Mobile - 0423 735 779 • [henry@maxadventure.com.au](mailto:henry@maxadventure.com.au)

For more information visit our website:  
[www.toughblokechallenge.com.au](http://www.toughblokechallenge.com.au)



# ADVENTURE SERIES

## HAVE A REAL ADVENTURE THIS WEEKEND

The Kathmandu Adventure Series incorporates simple navigation, mountain biking, kayaking and trail running on a secret course. All you need is a pair of trainers, a mountain bike and a sense of adventure!

The 2009 series consists of seven adventure races lasting between two and six hours for male, female and mixed teams of two.

**CONTACT: Nic Arney**  
Mobile - 0431 963 632  
[nic@maxadventure.com.au](mailto:nic@maxadventure.com.au)

For more information and online entry:  
[www.maxadventure.com.au](http://www.maxadventure.com.au)

CENTRAL COAST	1 AUG 09
MAX 24HR SYDNEY	19-20 SEP 09
MELBOURNE	14 NOV 09



True enough, we're soon finning into long reef channels, through short caves and under arches, taking us down to 18 metres and into a world of fish – trevally (called ophey by locals), Norfolk clownfish, trumpeters and plenty of bait fish, one school so thick I thought it was a reef wall until it darted to my left with ballet synchronicity.

Despite the chop above, visibility is 20–30 metres and the ecology, reef structures and marine life is in pristine condition. Everything is full and large, just like the sharks.

No wonder the vitality: Norfolk is a reef oasis in a desert of water, empty of human visitors yet flush with fish; as a diver you're alone in an alien environment that is the highest rung on a undersea chasm striking to the earth's deepest reaches.

Our follow-up forays only magnify the drama of the island's undersea architecture. At Moo-oo Stone, a gargantuan rock rising from the waves just off the point near where Captain Cook first landed on Norfolk in 1774, we drop down 16 metres.

Squeezing through a tight hole, careful not to knock tanks on a sharp ceiling, we explore a corridor leading to a natural underwater grotto. The interplay of crystal light shafts and inky shadows makes for a dreamy backdrop for walls of coral, king fish and trevally, macro and micro organisms, all playing out life against a thousand shades of blue.

It's serene diving until Jamie's hand rises suddenly to the top of his head, pointing straight up in a fin signal: shark. Kicking up and over a reef wall we get a brief glimpse of a reef shark the

length of a pool table. In a few seconds it's gone, uninterested in tourists.

"But they're all around us," says Jamie when we're topside. "All the time, they just stay out of sight, mostly." Unless you're in a cave, I counter.

Braver than the shark is an eel sighted on our third dive at Little Organ on the north coast, amid perhaps the most stunning stretch of island coastline. Sheer cliffs rise up in rock columns and unique, geometric geological shapes, formed millennia ago when the island was an undersea volcano.

The eel's beady eyes dart nervously as it edges halfway out of a crevice under yet another



archway, one Jamie reckons is the biggest he's ever dived under. It's an impressive judgement from a man who has worked as an instructor and diver in the Middle East, Greece, New Guinea and Malaysia.

Caves, tunnels, chasms and chimneys: there are at least thirty regular dive sites dotted around Norfolk just begging for visitors. One experienced scuba journalist was so impressed he considered: "Phillip

Island [off Norfolk] arguably the jewel of all South Pacific diving." And there are plenty more virgin sites going begging for divers with more a dash of Cousteau's explorer blood.

That includes a particular cave, one which still offers first dive rights for anyone game enough when the swell dies down. Which reminds me, the next time someone asks me to do a public presentation of any sort, my response will be more literal than throwaway: "I'd rather go diving in a cave full of sharks on Norfolk any day." 🦈

## diving norfolk

Norfolk Island offers year round diving with sites ranging from reef-protected coral-infested coves to ocean diving amongst pelagic species. Visibility is usually 20 meters plus, with a minimum water temperature of 18° in winter. Volcanic rock architecture provides long drop walls, spectacular rock formations and pinnacles. Emily Bay and Slaughter Bay are ideal for learners with a safe shore entry. Experienced divers using boat drops can try more adventurous spots featuring swim throughs, drift dives and, of course, shark spotting. Courses are available to earn your international diving qualifications.

### Contact:

Jamie Edward at Bounty Divers  
[info@bountydivers.com](mailto:info@bountydivers.com)  
+672324375  
[bountydivers.blogspot.com](http://bountydivers.blogspot.com)

### General information:

Norfolk Island Tourism  
+6723 22147  
[info@nigtb.gov.nf](mailto:info@nigtb.gov.nf)  
[norfolkisland.com.au](http://norfolkisland.com.au)

Adventures Norfolk  
[adventures@norfolk.net.nf](mailto:adventures@norfolk.net.nf)  
+6723 50208

### Get there:

Two airlines service Norfolk Island with regular flights from Sydney, Brisbane, Newcastle, Melbourne and Auckland. See [norfolkair.com](http://norfolkair.com) Packages available through Norfolk Pacific Holidays: [norfolkpacificolidays.com](http://norfolkpacificolidays.com)



## bounty divers' top five norfolk dives

- 1 Johney's Stone**, south east – a 30-metre-plus dive next to Headstone, great for seeing plenty of big and small marine life. Riddled with cavernous swim-throughs and deep vertical walls with plenty of Norfolk nanwi - known as 'dream fish'. Also a great place for Nudibranchs and flatworm spotting with wide varieties found. Sharks often congregate here due to the rubbish (including carcasses) dumped nearby. Site of many big shark stories.
- 2 The Crack off Nepean Island**, south – famous for "ridiculous amounts of fish" and abundant coral.
- 3 Shark Point off Philip Island**, south – for the sharks, obviously (mostly bronze whaler and Galapagos), but also the coral and structures, all of which are impressive no matter if at 5m or 30m. Always something to see here and the visibility is invariably good. Could sight turtles, too.
- 4 Little Organ**, north – for the sheer size of the arch and underwater volcanic architecture.
- 5 South Rock off Philip Island**, south – sharks, again (hammerhead) and notable for the biggest specimens and the biggest fish, too, including kingfish. Also has a sheer column that rises 60 metres from the floor to just breach the ocean surface.

