

Diving Rowley Shoals

Warm, clear ocean a real wonderland

These reefs are home to almost 700 species of fish and more than 230 corals, writes **Cameron Wilson**

TRY finding Rowley Shoals on a map of Australia, and you'll most likely take a while. To pinpoint their location, take a northwest bearing from Broome, then it's 260km to three coral atolls that dot the outer edge of the Australian continental shelf.

From the air, Mermaid, Clerke and Imperieuse reefs all appear remarkably similar – tear-drop shaped, each covering an area of about 80sq km.

The reefs are home to almost 700 species of fish and more than 230 coral varieties, but perhaps the most distinctive feature of Rowley Shoals is that they're subject to some of the biggest tides in Australia – the sea level can rise or fall up to 5m in just six hours. This tidal surge makes for some of the most exhilarating coral channel and coral wall drift diving on the planet.

Owner and skipper of dive boat *Great Escape*, Chris "Trippy" Tucker – brilliantly nicknamed after Tripitaka, a character from the cult '80s television series *Monkey* – reckons the shoals offer the best diving in Australia.

"You won't have been in water this clear or warm. On some trips, we've

had 30-degree sea temps and visibility (greater than) 50m. The Great Barrier Reef has nothing like the variety of corals and fish life we see," he says.

Of the 12 passengers on board – *Great Escape* carries no more than 14 – nine are diving, including a four-person crew from Channel 9 travel program *Postcards WA*. There's nervous excitement as we chat over dinner, knowing we're headed into the deep blue of the Indian Ocean. Most have experience diving fringing reefs near the mainland. By contrast, these atolls rise with near-vertical sides from the continental shelf – Imperieuse Reef from 230m, Clerke Reef from 390m and Mermaid Reef from 440m.

After motoring through the night, we reach Mermaid Reef about 9.30am. Dive master Adrian ("Adsy") sketches our first dive site on a whiteboard, a section of reef christened "V in the Wall".

Moorings are few and far between out here, so the moment we're suited up we splash in off the transom, with the boat still moving, and slip into the current.

Descending to 26m, we follow one side of the V as it cuts into the reef wall. Clams ranging in size from 10cm to 40cm are everywhere, resplendent in shades of purple, green and blue or else creamy browns flecked with yellow. Slimline white-tip reef sharks glide along the sandy bottom, while a pair of silver-tip whaler sharks – broader and altogether more "sharky" – swish by overhead with a hint of menace.

Back on board, everyone's giddy about the warmth and clarity of the ocean and the fact we're set to spend the next four days a long way from

Go2 ROWLEY SHOALS

Getting there

Qantas flies daily to Broome via Perth from Australian state capitals year round, and direct from Sydney June-October

(www.qantas.com.au); Virgin flies daily to Broome via Perth from Australian state capitals

(www.virginaustralia.com). *Great Escape* runs trips to Rowley Shoals late October to late November, fares from \$4120 a person twin share (ph: 08 9193 5983; greatescape.net.au).



anywhere. After lunch, a turning tide means conditions are ideal for a visit to the "Cod Hole". We have only to sink to the bottom of a lagoon and wait to be ogled by enormous black-and-white potato cod while reef sharks emerge then vanish amid the bommies (coral bomboras).

The atolls were first charted in 1818 by Captain Phillip King of the British navy. King named them after Captain Rowley, who had reported them

during his own expedition 18 years earlier. Rowley was commander of HMS *Imperieuse* and King's vessel was HMS *Mermaid* (Clerke Reef was named for a whaling boat captain who frequented the shoals in the early 1800s).

Although we're far from home, on *Great Escape* no one's slumming it. For dinner there's Kimberley barramundi fillets followed by passionfruit pannacotta. Booze is BYO, and all of us have. There's after-dinner entertainment, too, as the floodlights on the rear deck attract first tiny bait fish then dozens of trevally.

Soon a full-blown feeding frenzy is under way, enlivened by juvenile reef sharks patrolling the perimeter, calculating the moment to launch a lightning attack.

Next morning at breakfast, Adsy confirms the tide is running fast and we're set for a dive that will require



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