

1: BIG CATS

DEE, CAM AND I SPEND a while trying to close on a large leopard shark relaxing at 20m at the foot of a wall. We don't want to disturb it, but it seems unbothered.

Eventually we move off and head up a wide ramp that leads towards the top of the ledge. The surge here holds and then propels us upwards in starts.

Then we turn and follow the other side of the crack back and around the corner, admiring the extravagant coral turrets that top the wall.

It's at this point that I become aware of a sizeable something heading along the wall in the other direction, as if on an urgent mission. The vis isn't great, but then I catch its eye.

It's just my imagination, but I read surprise into its expression as I turn towards it in a vain effort to get a decent shot. As the indistinct but unmistakable vertical stripes on its flanks register on my consciousness, I have time to think: "Wow, first a leopard and now, isn't that a tiger?"

The faded stripes indicate a mature specimen and it looks to be at least 3.5m long. The tiger shark continues on its magnificent way and we continue on ours. However many sharks you see, it's the unscheduled encounters that linger in your memory.

But we're soon preoccupied with the spectacle at the top of the ledge. You rarely see such meadows of healthy hard coral these days, but it's the constantly shifting layers of fish that mesmerise us.

Dominating the scene are beautiful streamlined buffalo bream, along with jack, convict surgeonfish and sergeants. It's like some marine equivalent of the Serengeti. We spend a long time just soaking up the view.

BACK AT THE SURFACE there's a bit of a swell, and it takes a while to spot the distant speck of the boat.

As Dee inflates an SMB, I'm reminded of a recent editorial in which I had written about surfacing in the Indian Ocean with no boat in sight, and pondering one's insignificance in that vast expanse of water.

The boat doesn't seem to be moving and the excited conversation dies away. Have we been spotted?

After what seems actually quite a long time, the boat gradually starts to grow larger, until the distinctive square catamaran shape becomes clear.

As we climb aboard, skipper Luke is apologetic. "We couldn't start the engines because we had humpback whales breaching all round us," he says. "We even wondered whether you might get to see them down below!"

WHALE
SHARKS?
THEY'RE
THE

CHERRY



Ningaloo is known as a world centre for whale shark encounters, but as **STEVE WEINMAN** discovers, for divers in search of big marine life, it has the lot. No worries! Whale shark experience pictures by **ANT WARREN**

Above: The race is on – a whale shark runs the gauntlet at Exmouth.

Right: Impressive fish soup at Lost City.

Fair dos! That's Ningaloo, folks.

Luke's own echo-sounder had located what he had christened the Lost City dive-site, one of many he has discovered where you know you won't bump into other divers because there are no other boats, but where any kind of marine animal could conceivably mooch past.

"Ningaloo" is an Aboriginal word for reef, so we're on Reef Reef. More than 250 coral species and 500 tropical fish dwell in the marine park, basking in the warm Leeuwin current. It's July, early winter in Australia, but we need only 5mm wetsuits this far north.

Luke and Lannie Riley are living the

dream. Australia's biggest continuous fringing reef is their playground, and after more than a quarter of a century living or visiting the marine reserve, its inhabitants behave as if aware of their protected status.

The Rileys have operated Sail Ningaloo and its 16m catamaran *Shore Thing* for three years now, and they're bursting with ideas to develop their service further. Based in Coral Bay, halfway along the 125-mile-long reef, they both have a passion for the environment and for diving.

Being a shallow-draught cat, *Shore Thing* can access remote reaches of

ON TOP



Singaloos that other craft can't reach, slipping inside and outside the reef as conditions and whim dictate.

She can accommodate 10 guests, but there are just six of us on this two-night water trip, the others being travel writers covering Western Australia's topside as well as marine attractions.

All but Australian Cam, based on the far side of the continent in Sydney, are here to snorkel rather than dive, but even snorkelling here trumps many dives I've done elsewhere.

I join the others surface-swimming between dives, and each time we see not only seascapes of vibrant hard corals

filled with fish but bigger stuff such as turtles and blacktip sharks.

On one occasion, a big copper-coloured torpedo lazily lifts off and moves vertically through the water to breast the corals and find somewhere quieter – it's a tawny nurse shark.

Then there is the manta snorkelling. Luke gets everyone up on the forward deck to spot, but it's his vantage point up at the helm that helps him locate the rays on this occasion.

Once we're in the water, it's a case of the fast and the furious. I admit it, chasing the pack of younger people while holding a camera, and more used to finning in a relaxed manner without use of arms for propulsion, it's not that I'm breathless so much as making limited progress.

Switching to smaller, less floaty fins improves matters, but it's a half-hour spent fixated on keeping the backside of a fast-moving manta in view. I've been spoilt by scuba, as I tell the others later – I'd rather take up a position on the seabed and let the rays come to me!

I'M GLAD TO GET INTO A BC again, and quickly fall in love with Lannie's Lumps. Lannie loves them too, as does *Shore Thing's* dive pro Dee. They're a series of undistinguished bommies set in white sand at about 10m, but these coral outcrops suck in a whole lot of life from the surrounding waters.

Lannie's Lumps illustrate the benefit of getting to know a single site well, because we three divers, certainly the only ones for many miles, make our acquaintance with it on an afternoon dive, later savour the nocturnal



Above: *Shore Thing's* resident dive instructor Dee with her trusty GoPro and a lionfish at Lannie's Lumps.

Below: A tasselled wobbegong, one of a number of carpet sharks best seen at the Lumps by night.

transformation on a night dive, and witness a whole new side as we watch day break over the site next morning.

The first dive introduces the black sailfin catfish. I've never seen one before, but then I'm told that the species is unique to Ningaloo.

It has a catfish head and whiskers and a flattened ling-like body, and with its dark colouring and perpetual skittering motion it and its many fellows defy my photographic efforts.

But there is so much more to see, like a tasselled wobbegong peeking out from beneath an overhang. These extraordinary flattened carpet sharks have mosaic markings and elaborate

fleshy lobes around their jaws.

I needn't worry that this one is half-hidden, because on the night dive we see four of them, each more exposed than the last, and one sharing a resting place with a big cowtail ray.

That first afternoon we see many familiar tropical fish and everything from nudibranchs to large sting rays.

By night, the first thing we spot is a huge loggerhead turtle breaking cover. Then, as one expects after dusk, the crayfish, cleaner shrimps and crabs make their presence felt. There are giant puffers, butterflyfish chasing their own tails in our lights, and elegant bannerfish flitting around in pairs.

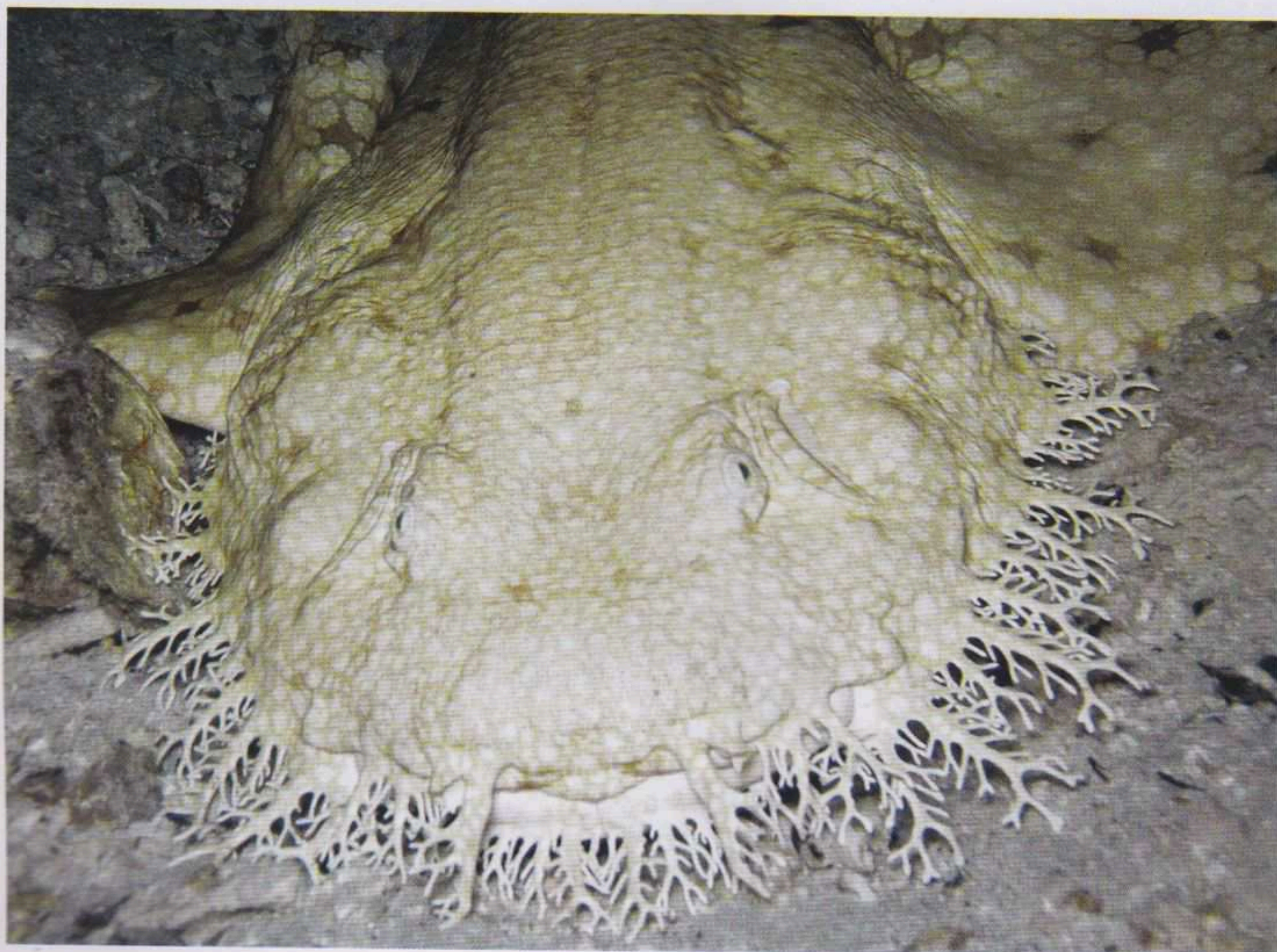
But the morning after I am fascinated by the resident shoal of yellow snapper and hanger-on sergeants, which is being continuously harried high above the bommies by big Rankin cod, the males mottled black, the females pale to white.

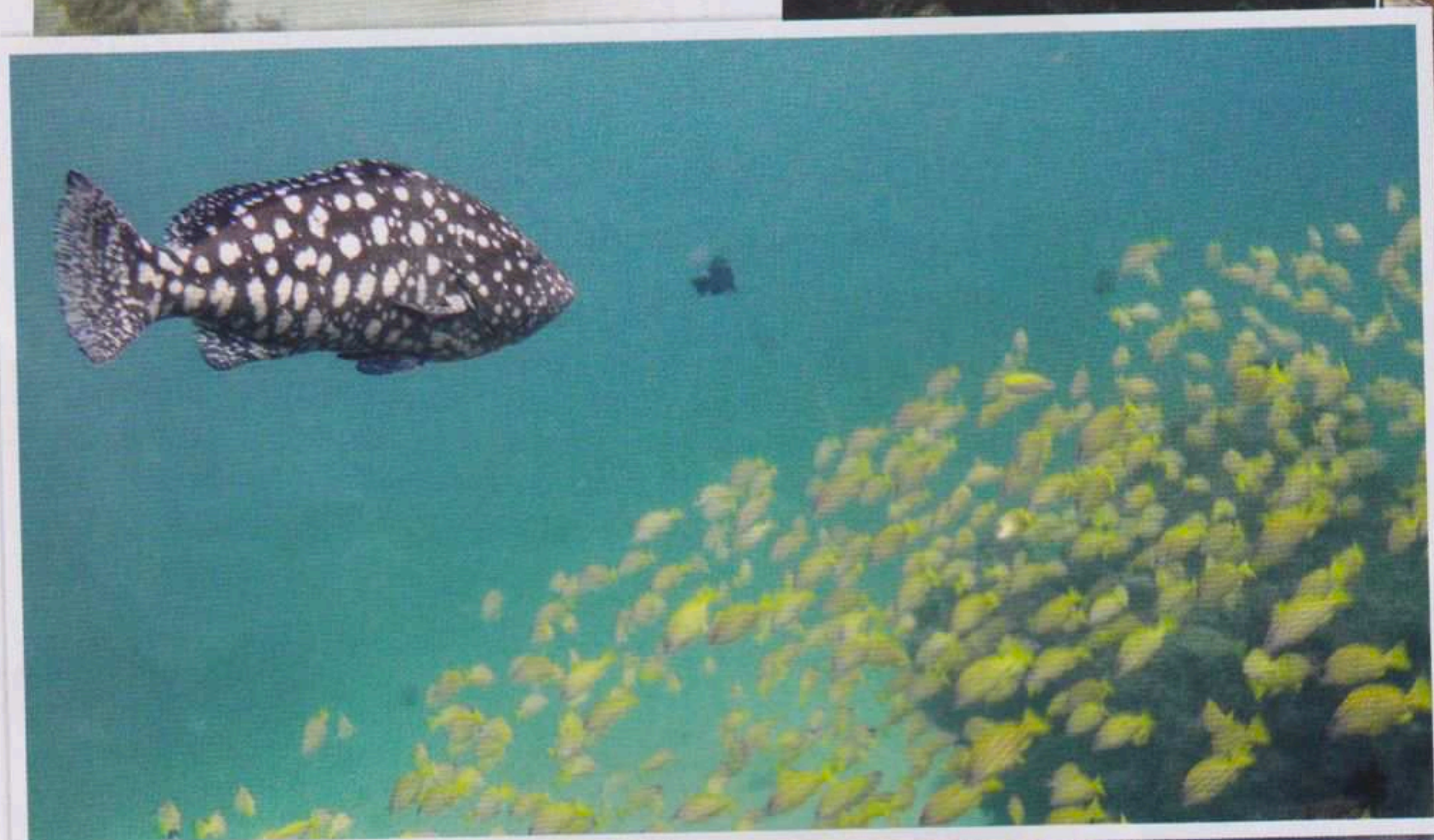
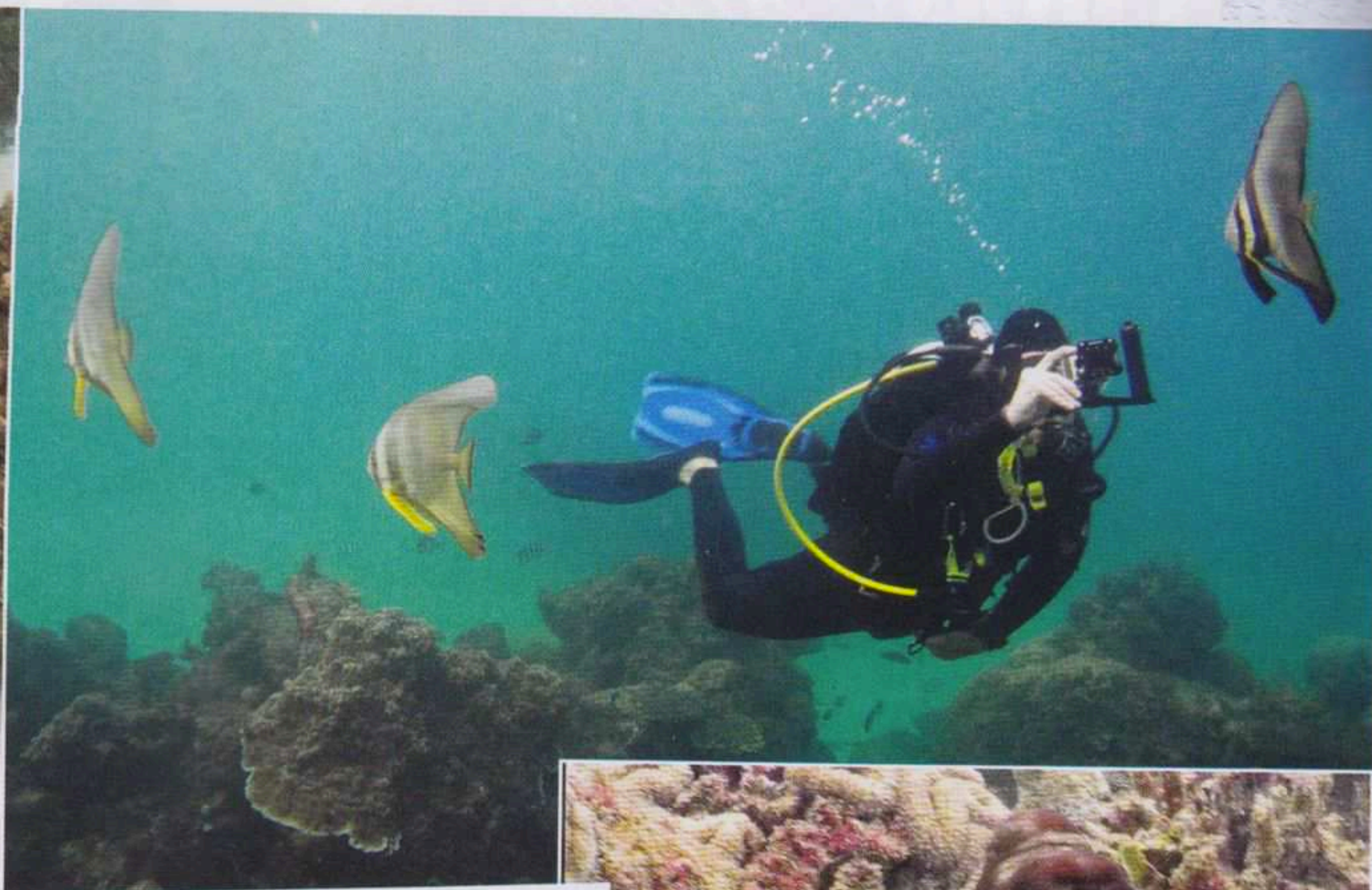
The rest of the time I take pictures of the elegantly poised Dee as she GoPros from bommie to bommie, posing variously with a troupe of batfish, an exposed octopus and a lionfish. It's a great start to the day.

SHORE THING IS AS STABLE as you would expect a catamaran to be, and the *en-suite* air-conditioned cabins are very comfortable, the foredeck huge and the rear deck as good for eating out on as it is as a launch pad to the water.

And the food is fresh, simple and amazingly good, as we all agree, Lannie working culinary miracles in the small saloon/galley.

We arrive on Sunday afternoon, start diving almost immediately, and leave after lunch on Tuesday. It's just been





Clockwise from top left: A tawny nurse shark, which is not unlike the Atlantic nurse; Dee gets among the batfish; octopus; the catamaran *Shore Thing* enjoys the less-accessible northern reaches of Ningaloo Reef pretty much to itself; a Rankin cod eyes up the snapper shoal at Lannie's Lumps.



an appetiser, so why do we feel we've known the Rileys and Dee for a lot longer when we say goodbye?

This exceptional liveaboard has provided a glimpse of the riches offered by the uncharted northern stretches of the reef, but now we have bigger fish to spy, in Ningaloo's southern reaches.

2: SURFACE INTERVAL

SOME PEOPLE ARE BLESSED with unexpected whale shark encounters soon after learning to dive. I, on the other hand, have travelled widely on dive trips and learnt to dread the words "If only you'd got here last week!" When it comes to missing whale sharks – and they're big fish to miss – I'm the master.

But now here is a genuine blue *Rhincodon typus* heading towards me, and if I didn't have the end of a snorkel between my teeth my mouth would be hanging open, not in imitation but in awe.

The whale shark seems to be coming



very close, but I'm concerned not about a collision so much as breaking the law.

Divers used to encounter whale sharks on scuba at Ningaloo, but this was stopped some years ago as it was thought to be affecting their behaviour.

Now encounters are strictly regulated, limited to groups of up to 10 snorkellers at a time, and you must keep at least 3m away from the animals.

This way the sharks won't feel threatened, and that's in everyone's interests. People are paying Aus \$400 to spend the day out here, some splashing out for their whole families, and a spooked whale shark will simply plunge away into the depths. But this specimen seems unaware of the regulations.

Mind you, for much of the time I'm playing catch-up, as with the *Shore Thing* mantas. The 10 of us line up on the back of the boat, shoulder to shoulder, while the spotter-plane buzzes overhead doing its thing. On the command, we slide in and form a neat line, marked off like soldiers on a parade ground – or at least, that's the idea.

We're aiming to form a guard of honour as the object of our veneration passes in stately fashion between our

ranks, then we peel off and fin furiously in a bid to keep up.

It's hard work, but every now and then a red-wetsuited mermaid with freedive fins will grab your wrist and propel you into a better position.

Four times we make the most of the patience of a half-dozen whale sharks. They aren't huge, ranging up to about 6m, but big enough.

EXMOUTH, 90 MILES SOUTH of Coral Bay and our new base, is a sprawling town with a small population and a bit of a frontier feel.

Whale sharks, manta rays, humpback whales and Ningaloo's other transients are the town's fortune. Totems are everywhere, from "100% success rate" whale shark-spotting notices to cuddly toys or Ningaloo Nectar water bottles. Sightings are constantly discussed.

The dive centre and whale shark experience teams exude an enthusiasm and pleasure in their work that would be hard to fake. They're keen to share what they believe is Australia's best-kept secret. So much emphasis is placed on protection of this golden egg that it feels less exploitative than an appreciative

interface with the marine world.

If there was an Olympic event in talking about whale sharks, marine biologist Brad Norman would take gold. We meet him one evening to hear about his whale shark ID programme, in which he invites international visitors and divers to submit photos that reveal each individual shark's spotty "fingerprint".

The project complements his efforts to build a picture of the animals' global movements through satellite tagging. As the research reveals the most perilous parts of their route, it's hoped that the evidence gathered will help to protect them from human predators.

Other parts of the world with marine-life assets would do well to adopt the Ningaloo approach as a model for educating the public and protecting an investment.

The whale sharks are here from April to July, humpbacks from June to October and mantas ever-present, so we're in Ningaloo at a good time.

We've watched pairs of humpback whales and dolphins roll spectacularly close to the boat, and now it's time for another manta snorkel.

In place of a high-speed pursuit,

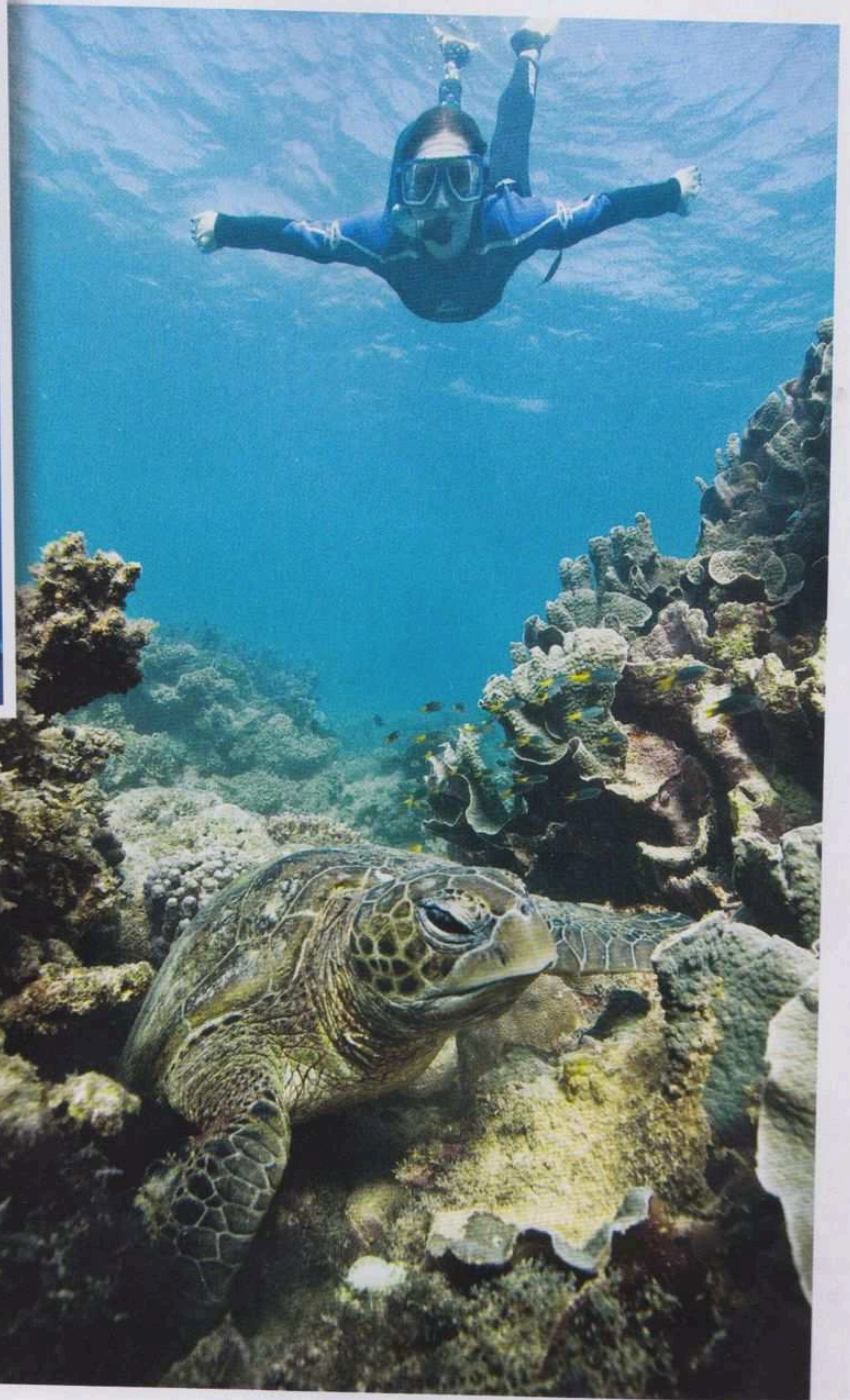
Above: After the whale sharks, humpbacks and dolphins have done their turns, it's the mantas that provide the grand finale.



Above: Whale shark at Exmouth.

Right: Turtle seen on the reef during the whale shark experience warm-up snorkel.

Below: Grey nurse or sand tiger shark under the US Navy Pier.



3: WEST SIDE STORY

GIANT STRIDE, THEY'RE NOT kidding! This entry is probably an 8ft drop from the platform, and I'm told it's not unusual for divers to shed equipment on impact.

I manage to retain all my possessions on the drop, though my buddy is less lucky, but eventually he retrieves his weightbelt. We're embarking on another much-anticipated experience.

Drive out of Exmouth and up around the North-west Cape and the skyline is dominated by a cluster of 13 slim masts.

The tallest structure in the southern hemisphere when built during the Cold War, these mark the submarine-tracking Harold E Holt Naval Communication Station, where superstition dictates that the masts are numbered 0 to 12.

The US Navy first based itself in this part of Australia during World War Two and stayed on after the Japanese were

defeated, Exmouth growing up to service the base. The last American personnel left this US enclave to the Australians in 1993, but the US Navy Pier, built to facilitate the construction of the station, retains its name.

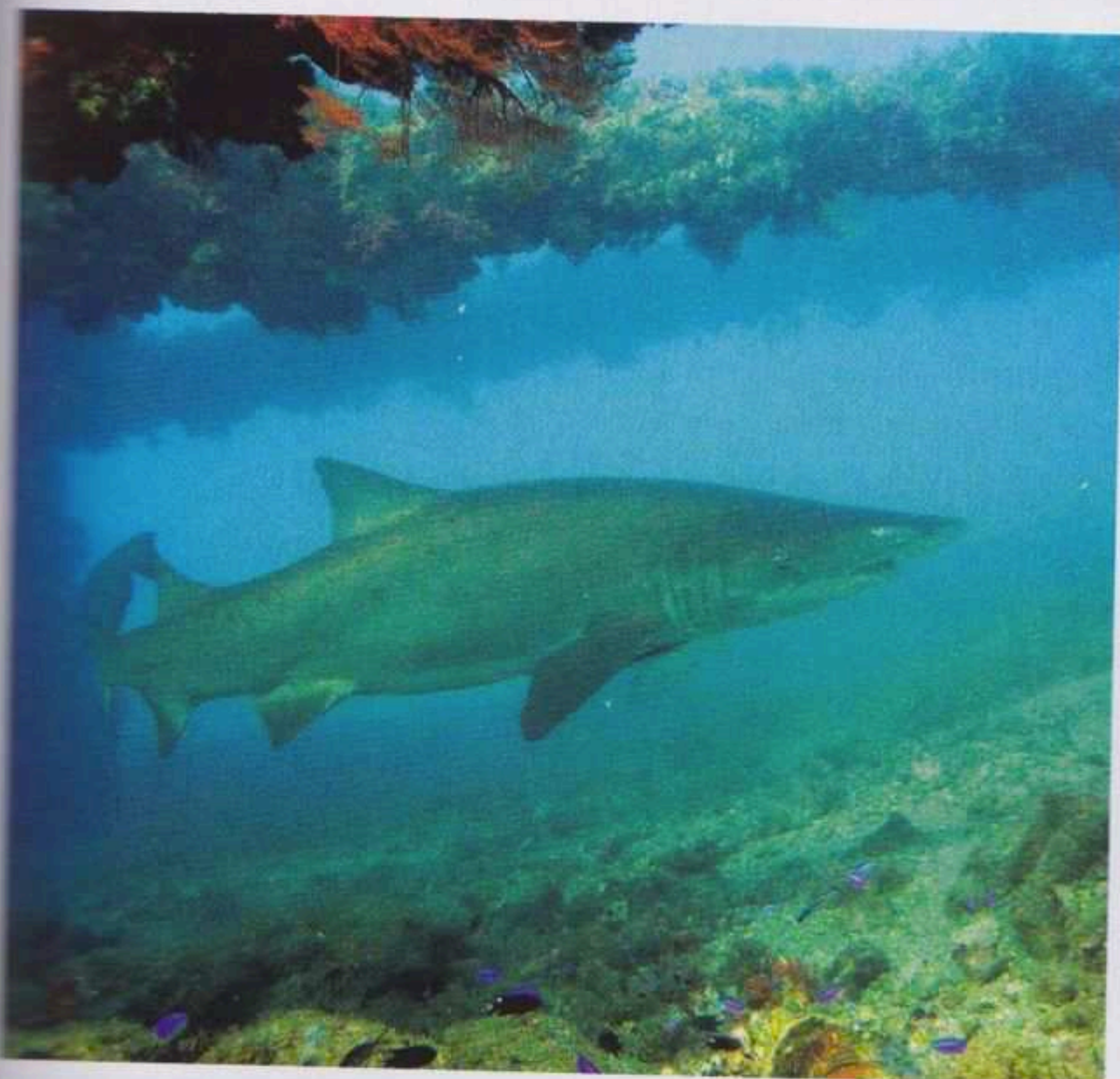
The surrounding bay has long been closed to fishermen, and that and the strong tides around the cape have earned this pier its reputation as a world-class dive site. Only one dive shop at a time is granted a licence to take groups diving here on slacks, and at present that's Ningaloo Whaleshark-N-Dive.

A duty officer at the checkpoint enters the bus and we have to show our IDs and promise to take no photos topside.

We then pass through a series of gates before rattling onto the pier to kit up. The security procedures all help to build up expectations for the dive.

And now we're between the pier-legs, and at first I wonder what all the fuss is about. But as soon as I look up, I get it.

The spaces between the metalwork, heavily encrusted with sponges and corals, are thick with trevallies



fighting for space with barracuda and other fish, with big cod cutting through the crowds at intervals.

You want to find a vantage point and settle down to watch the frenetic activity, but then your eye is caught at ground level by the amount of life seething in and under a single discarded metal grille.

A toadfish, a wobbegong, an octopus, moray eels, lionfish, multiple plump nudibranchs – the longer you look, the more you see, and all in about 12m.

We do settle down a little further on, to watch first some whitetips and then a big grey nurse shark prowling restlessly close by. If you are more familiar with dozy Caribbean nurse sharks, these are nothing like them.

Otherwise known as sand tigers, they are related to great whites, though quite docile. A handful hang out at the pier, along with a dozen whitetips.

I notice multitudes of

coral grouper lying around under the pier like beached boats, unperturbed by passing divers, and mention this later to dive-guide Tash.

"Everything here does just as it likes, because it knows it can!" she replies.

Central Station, the morning site I visit the next day with Exmouth Dive Centre on its West Side package, seems quiet by comparison, but we're here because, as its name implies, it's where big animals hang out to get cleaned.

We are rewarded by a distant sighting of some mantas, but they soon depart and we proceed on a tour of the sand broken mainly by the presence of large sting rays and sailfin catfish. It's the second dive, at a site called Beverly Hills, that captures my imagination.

It's a Saturday, but EDC's dive-boat is crammed not only with the centre's own staff but with others from Ningaloo Whaleshark-N-Dive, with

whom I had dived the pier.

That's nice, I think – shows the passion, and they obviously all get along well.

The selling point of the dive is a passage overflowing with glassfish. You enter the crack in the reef at seabed level 22m down, but have little idea where the sides are or indeed what's up ahead, because you're engulfed by millions of the tiny transparent fish.

I can only just make out the fin-tips of the diver ahead, and if I stop, the fish form a close-fitting shroud around me. Clap my hands and they spring away like a single organism.

The passage rises imperceptibly until I find myself clear of the vast shoal – and the first thing I see are a couple of mobula rays.

Then it's all about watching the diners surveying a lunch on which they could never make significant inroads – Rankin cod, trevallies,

barracuda and Spanish mackerel dip in to their heart's content.

ONLY LATER DO I DISCOVER why all those dive pros had been so keen to dive Beverly Hills today. The previous day, apparently, a couple of divers had seen and photographed as evidence a great white shark at the site, and everyone wanted a piece of the action.

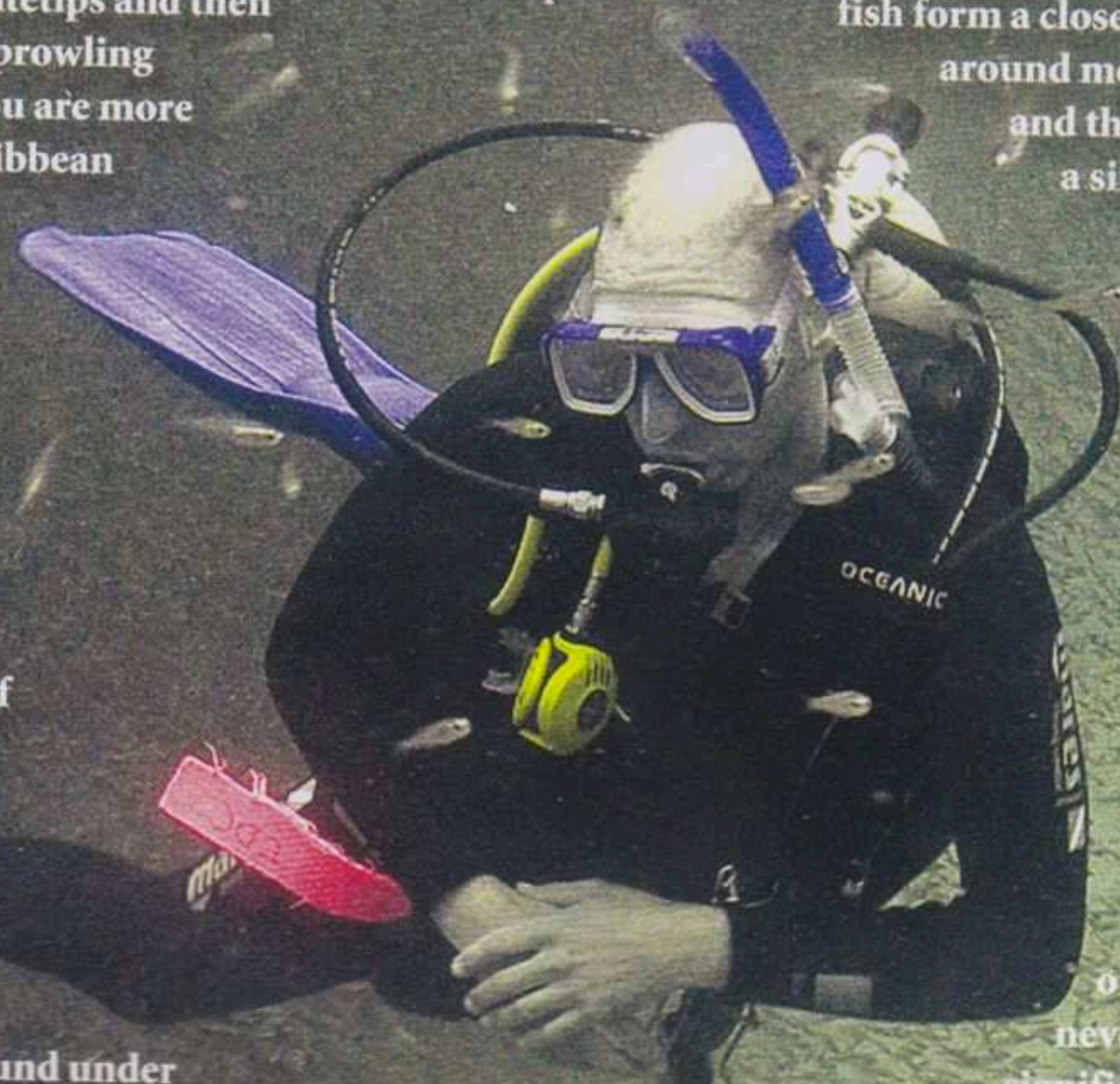
They hadn't mentioned this to the punters – can't think why – but I do recall having joked innocently to my neighbour, as we kitted up in the cramped conditions: "We're gonna need a bigger boat!"

Well, if the great white showed up at Beverly Hills that Saturday, we must have been immersed in the pea soup at the time.

I can hardly complain, however, having seen no fewer than eight species of shark already on this trip.

I drive into Cape Range National Park on my deco day and snorkel in Turquoise Bay. It's all fine hard coral, giant anemone colonies complete with anemonefish and little turtles ambling past with no apparent concern.

I've been here just over a week, and the underwater life has been extraordinary. If the chance arises, don't hesitate – do do Ningaloo.



Pictured: Diver with glassfish in abundance at the Beverly Hills site. Who knows if the great white was still lurking!

Below: Coral grouper take it easy under the US Navy Pier – because they can.



FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ Fly Emirates via Dubai to Perth. Skywest/Virgin and Qantas connect to Learmonth Airport in Exmouth, and Coral Bay is a 90-minute drive south.

DIVING & SNORKELLING ▶ Coral Bay liveaboard: Sail Ningaloo, www.sailningaloo.com.au. Exmouth: Ningaloo Whaleshark-N-Dive, www.ningaloo-whalesharkndive.com.au. Exmouth Dive Centre, www.exmouthdiving.com.au. Ocean Eco Adventures offers daily Whale Shark Discovery cruises, www.oceaneco-adventures.com.au

ACCOMMODATION ▶ Exmouth: Novotel Ningaloo Resort has one-bed studios to three-bed bungalows, www.novotelningaloo.com.au. It has an excellent restaurant, but also of note in Exmouth are Pinocchio's and the Pot Shot.

WHEN TO GO ▶ Air temperatures range from 37°C in Exmouth in mid-summer to 25°C in winter (June - August). Water temperatures range from 28°C to 19°C.

CURRENCY ▶ Australian dollar, about \$1.7 to the £1.

PRICES ▶ Dive Worldwide offers a Ningaloo package from £3595pp, including all flights, the three-night full-board Coral Garden Spectacular with Sail Ningaloo, three nights' B&B at Novotel Ningaloo Resort and transfers, www.diveworldwide.com, 0845 130 6980. Expect to pay \$185-220 for a double dive in Exmouth. The Whale Shark Discovery tour, including souvenir DVD, costs \$395pp.

FURTHER INFORMATION ▶ Western Australia Tourist Board, westernaustralia.com. Ecocean (Whale Shark Photo-identification Library), whaleshark.org

