

A full-page photograph of a male diver in a blue wetsuit and yellow mask swimming over a vibrant coral reef. The diver is looking directly at the camera. The water is clear blue, and the reef below is lush with green and brown corals.

Swimming with Wally, the Maori Wrasse

An experience on the outer reef in Queensland, Australia.

Words: Janet Myers

Photography: Jonathan Myers

AN EXPERIENCE ON THE OUTER REEF IN QUEENSLAND, AUSTRALIA.



Swimming with Wally, the Maori Wrasse

An experience on the outer reef in Queensland, Australia.

He was big, blue and ugly with giant pouting lips. He had a hump on his forehead and from his size he was a full grown adult. With a flip of his tail he rose from the water and slivered across me to get the tit bit offered by the diver. My body quivered with the feel of his touch. It made my day but if anyone had told me that my encounter was going to be so up close and personal I doubt whether I would have been sitting with snorkel in hand on the edge of the floating platform, but I'm glad I did.

Earlier that morning we had boarded the high speed catamaran in Cairns and travelled for an hour and a half to Marine World, a floating pontoon on the outer edge of the Great Barrier Reef. My son, who is a confident scuba diver went off with the reef sharks. My husband was brave enough to don a suit to protect him from jellyfish stings and with the aid of an air filled helmet went down with Bob the Marine biologist who picked up different pieces of coral and even a transparent jellyfish without tentacles for them to touch! I on

the other hand was less adventurous. My main experiences, except for a limited snorkel, did not involve getting wet but they do serve to illustrate that you can still enjoy your time on the Great Barrier Reef whatever your limitation.



In the underwater observatory the parrot fish paraded endlessly near the glass. They were bright and colourful and shimmered in the sunlight which penetrated the water from above. I watched them and others as they swam slowly past. They seemed almost unaware of the eyes behind the glass which were watching them. Then up comes Wally. He seems to me have such pronounced eyes which seem to connect with ours. We have a good opportunity to see the intricate patterns on his face which look as if they have been painted by some accomplished artist. They seem almost iridescent. There are tinges of green and on his main body the squiggly patterns on his face are



THE BARRIER REEF FROM ABOVE

ON OF THE OUTER REEF BOATS

THE FLOATING PONTOON



replaced with more straight ordered lines. For some time he lingered close to us before turning tail and swimming away. No doubt he was up to his tricks within minutes as he re-joined the swimmers in the water in the main diving area.



On board the catamaran in the morning I watched the video presentation which explained the complexities of the reefs ecosystem so when I met Wally I already knew quite a lot about him. I knew for instance that he might well have started life as a female and had a sex change around nine for it is quite common amongst the Maori Wrasse. They live for up to thirty years so he was probably no teenager, although from his playful nature and agility he was a long way from old age. More like a college student living it up on a spring break! Some of those who swam with him and squeezed his lips gently, which he seemed to adore, were probably unaware that behind those big blue lips were teeth strong enough to feed on sea urchins, molluscs, crustaceans and the toxic crown of the thorns starfish, boxfish and sea hares!



On board the sub in the afternoon we encountered many reef sharks and saw much more of



SITTING ON THE EDGE OF THE PONTOON PLATFORM AS WALLY APPROACHES

JON DIVES TO SEE MORE FISH

A REEF SHARK

the coral, but I never saw Wally again. All too soon it was time to return to shore. It seemed hard to think that we had been on the reef for five hours. As everyone gathered for dinner stories of the day's activities on the reef were exchanged by all those who had been out that day. Everyone spoke about Wally, including our friend who had taken the boat to the Quicksilver pontoon which was equipped with a hydraulic lift to enable transfer between the lower deck and the water. From her wheelchair she had been able to put on a mask, snorkel and look into the water from the chair and as they fed the fish she too had spotted Wally!

It seemed that every expedition to the outer reef had encountered him! Some spoke of him being 5 feet in length. Others put him around three. With so many boats it seemed impossible that he could have been seen in so many places at once. In conclusion I suspect there are many Maori Wrasse out there and given their friendly nature all have been named Wally! Who cares? My Wally gave me a memory I shall always remember

PARROT FISH

CORAL

RETURNING TO SHORE

