

Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> March found me in Adelaide, South Australia for my first qualified dives. It was a lovely bright morning at around 24 deg.C and the calm sea looked inviting. The dive shop, Adelaide Scuba, have a brightly coloured dive boat which is moored in Patawolong Creek and to reach the sea we had to access the marina via a lock gate where we were held for a few minutes. Here I spotted my first creatures of the day, two dolphins feeding just a few metres away. My anticipation level went through the roof at that point! Soon we were heading straight out into Holdfast Bay and the site of our two dives. The Dredge and The Barge were scuppered at the end of their working lives in 1984 with the intention of forming recreational diving reefs, both lying at a depth of 18 metres, so perfect for a novice diver.

After twenty minutes or so we approached the marker buoy close to The Dredge. During the journey we had been put into three buddy pairs, the remaining four were Advanced SSI students on their qualifying dives with an instructor. I had been paired with a very pleasant, if bonkers old lady of a similar age to myself who has managed seven hundred dives in her ten years of diving. Originally from New Zealand and now living in Perth she is obviously a really passionate diver and keen photographer. She had some great stories to tell and has dived in all the places around Asia that I dream of!

So after a briefing we leapt off the platform at the rear of the boat and made our way round to the anchor chain at the front. The plan was to descend down the chain but as I approached it I saw that all the trainees were clinging to it for dear life and Laura had swum beyond them. I assumed we would wait for them all to descend but as I looked across at Laura she gave the descend signal and disappeared. I broke the surface just in time to see her duck dive and descend out of sight in a second. I really feared for her eardrums but she was gone! Hindsight is a great thing and many times since I have thought that I should have just descended at my own speed and looked for her at the bottom, but in that moment I had a bit of a panic attack and couldn't breathe. The leader saw what had happened and saw me back to the boat steps. I felt so foolish and embarrassed and wondered if maybe I'm not really cut out for diving. After about forty five minutes the divers all returned. Laura was incredibly apologetic and said she had looked for me at the bottom and hadn't realised that I was a complete beginner, although I'm fairly sure I had told her. The leader had signalled to her that I was back on the boat so it was okay.

I was in two minds whether to attempt the second dive and had half decided to wait for the following week and the two easy shore dives that I had planned in Sydney.

A really kind giant of a man with long crazy hair, an Austrian ex pat offered to buddy with me and descend slowly down the chain at my pace and return to the boat with me if necessary. I really didn't want to spoil his day, but I knew that I really ought to give it a go and was so glad that I did!

The Barge was magical! The visibility was about 7 metres and first thing that struck me was the variety and brightness of colour there; purple and orange sponges and beautiful corals. There were so many fish in every direction, schools of Old Wives, a large Samson Fish, a Gurnard, Scorpion Fish, crabs, Stingrays, a few nudibranchs and even an electric Coffin Ray sitting on the back of a Wobbegong shark! We circumnavigated the barge and then swam down inside the belly which was a mass of the same colourful sponges and coral as well as a very exotic looking sea urchin which I have struggled to identify, (see picture) and along to the front before ascending to a safety stop and back to the boat.

On the ride back Laura showed me the amazing pictures she had taken and promised to forward them on. I'll attach them for your enjoyment!