



2020 Reef Explorations

*The Capricorn & Bunker Group
Reefs Offshore of the Whitsundays*

The year 2020 was an incredibly difficult year for many including the crew on *Anui*. For us it was a time of health challenges for both of us, but especially for Wade, of deep sorrow with the loss of Chris' Dad and a dear friend, of way too much maintenance on the boat and of course it was a tumultuous time through the pandemic, with its multiple lockdowns and border closures.

Rather than recount our struggles through many months of hardship, we are focusing our 2020 cruise story on the most positive aspects that filled us with a sense of wonder: our time exploring the reefs of the Capricorn and Bunker Group and those offshore of the Whitsundays. We did not go as far north as we had originally envisaged, choosing instead to be gentle on ourselves and limit how far we would travel.

Coral reefs are a gathering of brilliant, vivid marine life which provides the most spectacular underwater experience. Once you have had a taste of this, you are hooked. We are self-confessed reef addicts! Reefs never cease to amaze us; the more we see, the more we want to see, and the more anxious we are to discover as much as we can while they still exist.

As we all know, coral reefs are among the most threatened regions on Earth. Today they face multiple stressors. When global threats like warming waters combine with direct threats such as overfishing, Crown of Thorns invasions and water pollution, it severely compromises the ability of corals to grow, reproduce and thrive. As much as one third of all reef building corals are at risk of extinction. Scientists predict that all corals will be threatened by 2050, with 75% facing high to critical threat levels. The threats are real and we want to act fast to keep what we have got! The Great Barrier Reef is resilient, despite the huge challenges that man and climate change throw at it. But as humans we need to minimize our impact on the Reef so it can continue its natural cycles. A damaged reef not only loses its vibrant corals. It also loses the fish population so crucial to its recovery. And it will be such a disastrous loss if the predictions come true. We can't bear the thought of losing this precious natural world.

Our aim in writing about the Reef, sharing experiences, taking underwater and seascape images are to capture the wonder of the marine life and special moments at sea that make people stop, look and care. Imagery enables people from across the globe to see what is at stake if the Great Barrier Reef is not looked after. We hope the magnificent reefs we are describing here entice you to connect and find something you love in a world many people could never imagine themselves entering. Because we protect what we love. We look after the things we learn about and understand better.

This is the story of our 2020 reef excursions rather than a comprehensive documentation of all the reefs in each region we went to.

Different Types of Reefs

Every reef and cay you go to is different, and that to us is what is so fascinating and appealing. You can travel from one reef to another and see diverse corals and fish under the surface; if there is a cay it might look different from one location to the next in its elevation and vegetation, or the birds it attracts, and the shape of the reefs will also vary. As you spend time in this enthralling world you notice some common characteristics which impact the look of the reefs and how as a yachting you experience them.

Reefs fall into three main categories:

1. Platform Reefs, including elongated ones, which are flat topped
2. Lagoonal Platform Reefs which have a kind of basin with shallow water
3. Ring Reefs where the reef wall encircles a large lagoon of moderate depth, but which do not always have a navigable entrance.

The most popular reefs in the Capricorn and Bunker Group are undoubtedly Lady Musgrave and Fitzroy Reefs. Both are ring reefs with a small gap in the wall allowing navigable access to a stunning lagoon inside. For cruising yachts, they offer more protection from chop and current inside the lagoon, extensive sandy areas clear of scattered coral outcrops for anchoring, the ability to swing in different wind directions and a variety of areas to snorkel, dive, kayak and fish. Weather allowing, you can easily stay there for multiple days even if the wind picks up or changes direction. Of course, this also means you will rarely have the place to yourself. In fact, it is not unusual to share these sites with over 30 boats, particularly in calm conditions.

One of the things we learnt in the previous two years of cruising on *Anui* is that she is a very stable craft. Most people prefer to be at the reef in light winds: 10 to 15 knots or less. But if you wait for these idyllic conditions, you won't be there very often! On *Anui*, we have regularly been at the Reef in 18 to 20 knots and have been comfortable. And if you find yourself inside a lagoon, you can withstand more for a short period while a change comes through.

The platform reefs or lagoonal platform reefs will always be less visited. You may see boats fishing during the day, even runabouts from the coast, but you will find very few anchored overnight. You will also be more limited with weather conditions because these reefs offer far less shelter than a lagoon. Most of the reefs have relative protection from one side at low tide but are exposed on the other and if the breeze switches you lose any shelter. They are also subject to swift current running alongside them.

Anchoring tricks are worth talking about here. The enemies at the reef are the bommies: the outcrops of coral, often resembling a column and which can be partially exposed at low tide. They are appealing to snorkelers, but a menace to yachts. We therefore like to look for three elements: we prefer to anchor in less than 10 meters of water, over a clear patch of sand free of coral outcrops, with a full 360° swing room in case the wind changes as it often does. We have learnt the hard way over the years and will now rarely anchor overnight at a reef if these three elements are not working with us. If the chain gets stuck around bommies, and we can't maneuver the boat around to clear it, the only option is to dive down. Once the water is deeper than 8 or 10 meters, we have little hope of clearing entanglements with a mask and snorkel! We are not free diving aficionados and have not had dive gear on board up till now although this might well change.

Anchoring inside a lagoon offers the least stressful option because our preferred conditions are often easily met there. The only challenge is entering the lagoon which is typically through a narrow entrance funneling a lot of current. The best time to go through is between 10am and 2pm when the sun is overhead or high behind you for best light, at low tide if there is enough depth so you can see exactly where the edges of the reef are, and polarized sunglasses are an essential piece of kit. If only one aspect can be met, we choose the light. This is the entrance to the Fitzroy Reef lagoon, a deep but snaking and narrow entrance.



Anchoring alongside a platform reef is different. Although the same preferred conditions apply, you have to be prepared to deal with strong current running alongside the reef. Your boat will lay with the current which at some stage could mean wind against tide conditions, creating choppy seas. The current may also lead to your anchor not laying in front of your boat but next to it or way back in between your hulls on a catamaran. It is rare to have a totally quiet night next to a platform reef. There is always some movement for a few hours.

Whether in a lagoon or next to a reef, as a rule, we always lay a track as we move to our anchoring spot. It makes it easier later to exit the way we came in, presumably through an area free of obstructions. We ensure we have pulled back on the anchor to satisfy ourselves we are not dragging, and we set our anchor alarm. We definitely don't want to have to re-anchor in the dark! But if for some reason we move outside our safe circle, we want to be alerted immediately.

If we are lucky enough to have picked up a mooring, we set our anchor alarm also. We have had the experience of a mooring rope failing in the middle of the night, but the anchor alarm meant we were able to react quickly.



The Tools we use

Going to a reef is always a bit daunting, even if you have been there before. You have to deal with currents, changes of depth, you have to negotiate your way through areas that are not always very well charted. Over the years we have gathered some knowledge, built first-hand experience, picked other cruisers' brains for information, have recorded and saved our own tracks, have gathered anchoring coordinates. That's what you do when you wish to spend extended time at those remote places.

We also access some readily available tools to plan, guide us and make our approach safer. Here are a few of the reference material we use:

- **The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority zoning maps** which at a glance show the reefs for the area you are in, colour coded for the activities that are allowed. The Green Zone are ones to watch out for: no fishing or take of any kind.
- **The Eye on the Reef**, a free downloadable app also from the GBRMPA, the electronic version of the charts showing where you the boat is on the map, again the colour coded zones, and also allows you to report sightings and contribute to the protection of the reef.
- **Motion X**, another downloadable app for the iPhone and iPad, available for a small fee, which shows a satellite view of the reefs, allows you to hone in and see the structure of the bottom for anchoring, shows your GPS position and allows you to record waypoints and tracks. All the satellite images in this cruise story are screen dumps from Motion X.
- **Navionics**, a subscription charting software on our tablets and phones to supplement our navigation software.
- **Time Zero with Cmaps** as our navigation software on the boat.

Chris is the 'expedition photographer'. As well as being a hobby and passion, photography enables us to have a record of our sensational escapades for ourselves, and to share the wonders of the world we are lucky enough to explore through our cruise stories and blog. Here is Chris's kit:

- For seascapes and wildlife photography: Canon 7DII with the two most often used lens being a Tamron 18-400mm zoom and a Canon wide angle 10-22mm lens.
- For underwater photography: Olympus TG6 with Ikelite underwater housing and Ikelite Dome Lens, the whole lot set on a tray
- For aerial photography: Drone DJI Mavic Air, a recent addition to the kit

All photographs are processed using mainly Lightroom, but also Photoshop in a few cases.

All satellite images of the Reefs included in this journal have been downloaded from Motion X

Reefs of the Capricorn & Bunker Group



The coral cays and reefs of the Capricorn and Bunker Group are the southernmost of the Great Barrier Reef. This really is where *Great* in the Great Barrier Reef begins and where we have felt contented at last during the tumultuous 2020 year. Situated some 30 to 55 nautical miles offshore and adjacent to the coastal towns of Bundaberg, Gladstone, 1710 and Yeppoon, these jewels are on a line running southeast to northwest, from Lady Elliot Island at the southern end, to North Island at the very northern end of the group.

During a year with more heartache, health concerns and gear hassles than is fair for one cruising couple to handle, being able to spend several weeks at the reefs of the Capricorn and Bunker Group in August 2020 was a godsend.

Because of the Coronavirus, lockdowns and state border crossing restrictions, we got to the Southern Reefs very late in the season whereas normally we would be starting our reef explorations in May! The water was quite cold for the tropics – about 20° - so we most definitely needed decent wetsuits. But we were so delighted to be there at last that it did not matter, particularly when the rest of the country was still in lockdown.

There is an extraordinary amount to explore along the Group. The Capricorn and Bunker Group comprises 22 reefs with 16 permanent coral islands known as cays which are breeding sites for many seabirds and marine turtles. Although not all reefs and cays can be visited since some are reserved for scientific research, many are readily accessible and offer wondrous experiences. Between snorkeling, diving, birdwatching, kayaking and fishing (outside the green conservation zone of course), there is plenty to enjoy when the weather conditions are right. And the colours are to die for.



In 2020, we spent three weeks at the Southern Reefs, without coming back to the coast. We had provisioned *Anui* and were not returning to civilization in a hurry! Let's face it, we were away from harm on our boat, happy, physically and mentally far removed from trouble. Anybody we met had been in self-isolation themselves for weeks so we felt a lot safer offshore than in a busy harbour.

The Southern Reefs are visited by many passing vessels cruising the Queensland coast. They are particularly appealing because their distance from the mainland has served to protect them from human influence such as introduced pests, weeds and sedimentation, while being not so remote they are difficult to get to. They have to date been spared from coral bleaching and disease, the numbers of Crowns of Thorns Starfish are low and the fish life abundant, particularly in the reefs surrounded by Green Zones. The Southern Reefs may be teeming with life but they have suffered though. There is no doubt that over the years we have seen some deterioration from increased storm intensity and frequency: upturned corals, rubble, algae smothering the coral in places, less dense coral cover, less vibrant colours. However overall, we have found the Capricorn & Bunker Group in good condition.



Lady Elliot



Located at the very southern tip of the chain of reefs of the Capricorn and Bunker Group, Lady Elliot is typically the spot we aim for when we leave the coast. It is about 45nm north west of Rooney Point at the northern end of Fraser Island or 46nm from Bundaberg. The coral cay is home to a small eco resort and boast an airstrip. Yachties are not welcome ashore, but anchoring or mooring, diving and snorkeling at the beautiful reef are of course unrestricted.

We have stopped in front of the coral cay a few times, but have never had a very comfortable stay, with strong currents wrapping around the edge of the reef. There are two public moorings on the western side of the island, the first useable in a NE, the second best in a SE. If these are taken, your only option is to anchor in 18m+ on the edge of the reef. We have marked the spot with a yellow star on the satellite image.

This year the moorings were taken when we got there and we had to anchor which was tricky in deep water and somewhat strong wind conditions. With 100m of chain, we were okay, and knowing there was help available at the island if our anchor got stuck, we put up with those far from ideal anchoring conditions.

On a good day, this is what the island looks like from the moorings:



We generally can put up with quite a bit of movement, but that anchorage in 20 knots was officially the most uncomfortable we have ever been at! Why did we go there? Because the forecast was for the wind to abate and we had hoped to snorkel. This site is renowned for its sea life, particularly manta rays, turtles, carpet sharks. It is best to time your snorkel or dive at slack water so you don't battle the swift currents. But given the conditions this year, the inky black water and chop under tormented skies did not appeal. The next day was looking pretty rough too, so we left.



Lady Musgrave



If you want to see breeding birds, if you enjoy snorkeling with a multitude of fish surrounding you, if you have a soft spot for sea turtles, if you wish to play castaway on a coral cay, Lady Musgrave is the place to be. It is a great location to start at because if you have never been to a reef before it is relatively easy to get inside, you will be protected, and you are sure to be mesmerised by the marine life and brilliant colours of the lagoon. Even if you have been there a few times, you will still find new discoveries to enjoy in a relaxed setting. This is what the entrance to the lagoon looked like when we got there in very overcast conditions:



The Lady Musgrave Island and lagoon are 52nm from Bundaberg and typically the first or last stop along the Southern Reef yachts come to. Anchoring is straight forward with plenty of sand patches free of bommies, or you may be lucky to pick up one of eight public moorings located close to the cay. The beauty of being in such an extensive lagoon is that you can anchor in the company of other boats or well away from the crowds, you can dinghy and explore numerous bommies in the middle of the lagoon, snorkel along different parts of the reef wall, both inside and outside, and of course you have the option to stretch your legs and go ashore on the coral cay.

This is a busy spot though! Many yachts anchor there, as well as commercial tour boats. We arrived under very grey skies with a fair bit of wind, and yet look at the fleet!



Although we have been to Lady Musgrave multiple times, we have enjoyed an amazing variety of marine life and ended up staying there for a couple of weeks, exploring in all corners of the lagoon as well as outside of it along the reef wall.

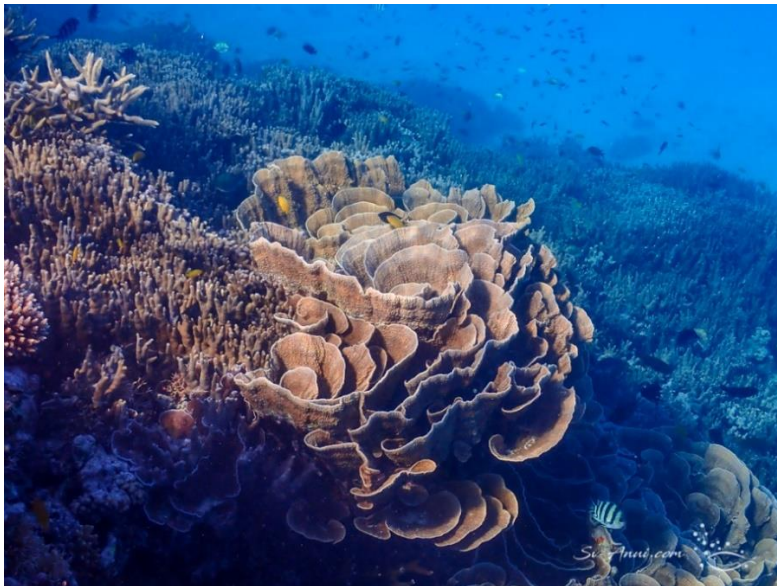
Lady Musgrave island from outside the lagoon, view from the cay, Pied Oystercatchers



Green Sea Turtles abound, Black Axil Pullers, and the quintessential reef fish, the Morish Idols



Squids, Turbinaria Coral, and a variety of hard corals reflected on the water surface



The highlight of our 2020 winter trip was swimming with manta rays on the outside of the reef wall at slack water high several days in a row. This was the first time we had the opportunity to be with them at close quarters. They are huge at some 10m wingspan! When they come towards you, you have to remind yourself they are plankton eaters!



Hoskyn Reef and Islands



If the breeze is light, allowing you to explore, from Lady Musgrave you have the option of exiting the safety of the protected lagoon and venture to nearby reefs for a few hours then return to the lagoon. Hoskyn Reef is one of these nearby attractions. It has two islands: a vegetated sand cay located on the leeward side of the reef flat, the other a shingle cay located on the windward side. There is a beautiful shallow enclosed lagoon and you will see the most amazing colours.

You can anchor in 8 to 10 meters of water along the northwest side of this reef. We have marked the spot with a yellow star on the satellite image. We consider it as a day anchorage only because there are scattered corals which you need to approach with caution and you have only a narrow strip of sand in clear water. This gives insufficient swing room in our opinion to be there overnight. However if throwing the pick there for just a few hours, a dinghy or kayak trip to explore the little lagoon and check the small islands is a spectacular experience. A dive or snorkel in the deep hole near the beach is called for. Be aware though that access above the highwater mark on the coral cays is not permitted and the surrounding waters are Green Zone, so no fishing, and no taking of any kind, except for photos!



Boult Reef



Just the next reef on from Hoskyn Islands is the beautiful ring reef of Boult Reef with an enclosed lagoon but no navigable entrance. You have to get quite close as you sail to Boult Reef before you see it. The first hint of a reef being there are the breaking waves in the distance. Once next to it you see the characteristic layers of colour: dark ultramarine in the deep water, a line of white breaking waves, the brown of the reef wall, the stunning turquoise of the lagoon and then in the distance those same colours in reverse order. We would hate to have been wandering around these parts before the navigation gear is what it is now! You can see how easily ships could get into strife. Anchoring happens on the NW side of the reef in about 8m of water. You can see on the satellite image where the shallower area is, and we have marked the spot with a yellow star. We have stayed there overnight on several occasions.



Snorkeling at Boulton Reef is really impressive. We observed larger fish in big schools, quite a thrill as you swim along. There is plenty to catch with a spear gun too, and numerous kinds which are far too pretty or small to eat, like the Convict Surgeonfish, the Orangespine Unicornfish, both shown below, and the usual band of Parrotfish or Butterflyfish. You go up narrow gutters in the reef where all sorts of marine life congregate and it feels like you are swimming through a fish highway. But watch out for some of the ledges which can often harbour rather large carpet sharks... harmless as long as you don't annoy them, but impressive in size nevertheless and if you are scaredy cats like us, you will back paddle!





Fitzroy Reef



Fitzroy Reef is a large reef with a navigable lagoon situated about 32nm from the coastal town of 1770. It is always impressive to get inside as the entrance is narrow and does a tight S. But it is well marked and we arrived at noon with excellent visibility. And once in, the shades of blue and aqua are remarkable.

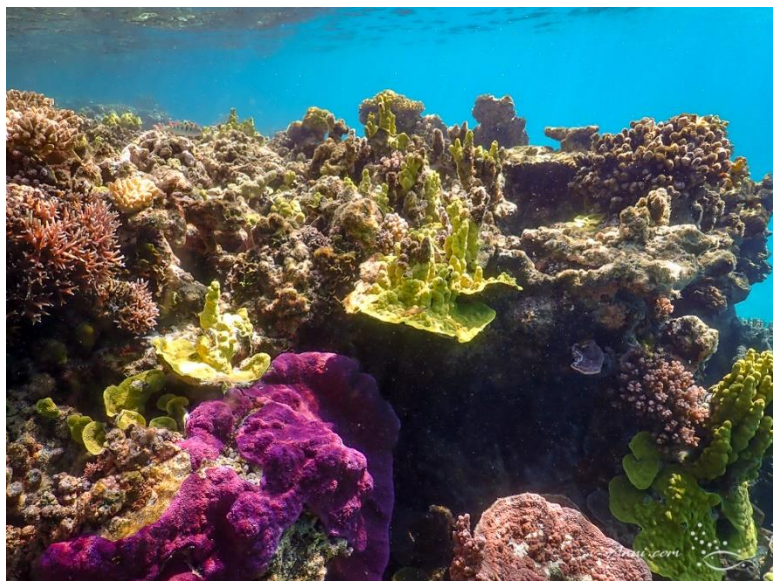
Because this is a lagoon anchorage, you can easily stay at Fitzroy Reef for several days. There are three public moorings close to the entrance and plenty of clear space to anchor in 8 to 10m of water over sand, although the area is not as extensive as at Lady Musgrave. We were there for a few days, trying different dive spots each day. The lagoon is beautiful and well used, with dozens of small runabouts coming for shelter every night after a day's fishing, however you have the place to yourself during the day.

The quality of the coral and variety of fish was hit and miss though. Some of the bommies were very colourful, yet nearly devoid of fish, others, particularly in the centre of the lagoon were damaged, with algae smothering the coral, but with a good variety of small fish. You could see storm damage on the edges of the wall with a fair bit of upturned coral heads and rubble. It is disappointing to see the deterioration of the reef over the years. We found the best snorkeling and spearfishing happened along the reef wall, both inside and outside.



One of the real pleasures of cruising is meeting kindred spirits. We spent a lot of time with Wendy and Alex on Gipsy whom we met at Lady Musgrave. We chatted, snorkeled, enjoyed beautiful meals and sailed together. The photo above shows our two boats together in the lagoon, while we are snorkeling and spearfishing just outside the entrance.

Humbug Damselfish among the Acropora, Anemonefish, various colourful hard corals



Fascinating patterns of the brain coral, Wade on the hunt outside the lagoon wall



Anui and Gipsy at sunset at Fitzroy Reef – such serene moments



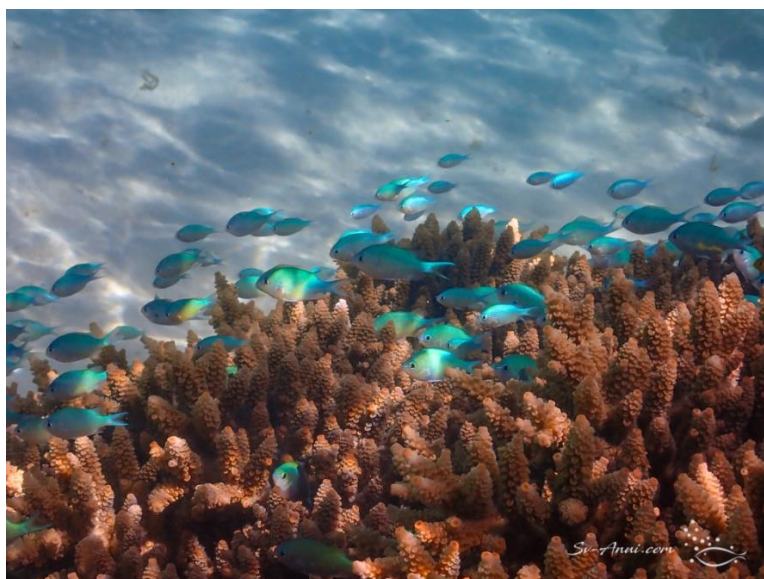
Wistari Reef



For a very different feel, we highly recommend the coral gardens of Wistari Reef. You can anchor on the northern side of the reef in 8 to 10 meters of water, marked with a yellow star, or if you are lucky pick up a public mooring. There are two, one on the northeast corner of Wistari Reef, the other in the channel running between the two reefs in front of Heron Island. The mooring in the Wistari Channel is exposed to a lot of current and can be lively in wind against tide conditions.

Wistari is a lagoonal platform reef with outstanding coral pools and a large number of attractively patterned fish such as angelfish and butterflyfish. Soft corals abound. Broccoli anyone? Cabbage leaves? A bunch of pink flowers? At low tide the coral gardens are like a veggie patch. Another attractive aspect is the fact that the bottom is sandy and refracts the sunlight, which gives amazing flickering patterns on the sea floor. We tend to go there at mid time to allow us to float above the shallow but elevated platform. You can snorkel there in 50 to 80cms of water. It is ideal for close up underwater photography, but beware of the current which still flows despite the low depth so you don't drift onto coral outcrops. You can also reef walk at low tide. And at the other end of the spectrum, with dive gear you can follow the wall as a drift dive. The reef wall attracts pelagic fish like trevally, mackerel and reef sharks, but no fishing is allowed here, as it is a green zone.

Broccoli Coral, yellow Christmas Tree Worm, Blackaxil Pullers



And then there were drifting critters – loads of the type in the first image which was intriguing with its fascinating texture, apparently a type of sponge, and a few floating seaweed!



Tryon Reef



Located nearby North West Reef, Tryon is a platform reef with an attractive cay. There are a couple of patches of sand to throw the anchor in 10 to 12 meters of water on the southern side of the reef, but they are not big, and the bottom is mainly rocky.



Tryon Reef is recognized as one of the best northwest anchorages of the Capricorn Group, in up to 30 knots, but you would not want to be there in those conditions! In fact, even in very light conditions, there is movement at anchor and as with all platform reefs, you have to beware of the current running alongside the reef. We anchored there with our friends on Gipsy, who happened to have a scuba tank. Without them, even though we were the ones who had suggested going to Tryon Island, we probably would have given this spot a miss as an overnight anchorage.

This reef and its island are protected. It is located in a green zone, so no fishing is allowed. The island has in the past been covered with dense vegetation, notably pisonia trees, but suffered a scale insect infection which decimated 90% of its forest. The satellite image shows the island after this plague. Although the plant life is recovering, access is restricted at present to below the highwater line, to protect the vegetation as well as the nesting birds.



On the way to Tryon Island, our friends caught a beautiful mackerel and we shared a memorable meal together. Wendy is a wonderful cook. Here is some of our tasty spread:



A very nice way to end our sojourn in the Capricorn & Bunker Group.

Gipsy and Anui left the Capricorn and Bunker Group together to set sail towards the Keppel Isles at the end of August.



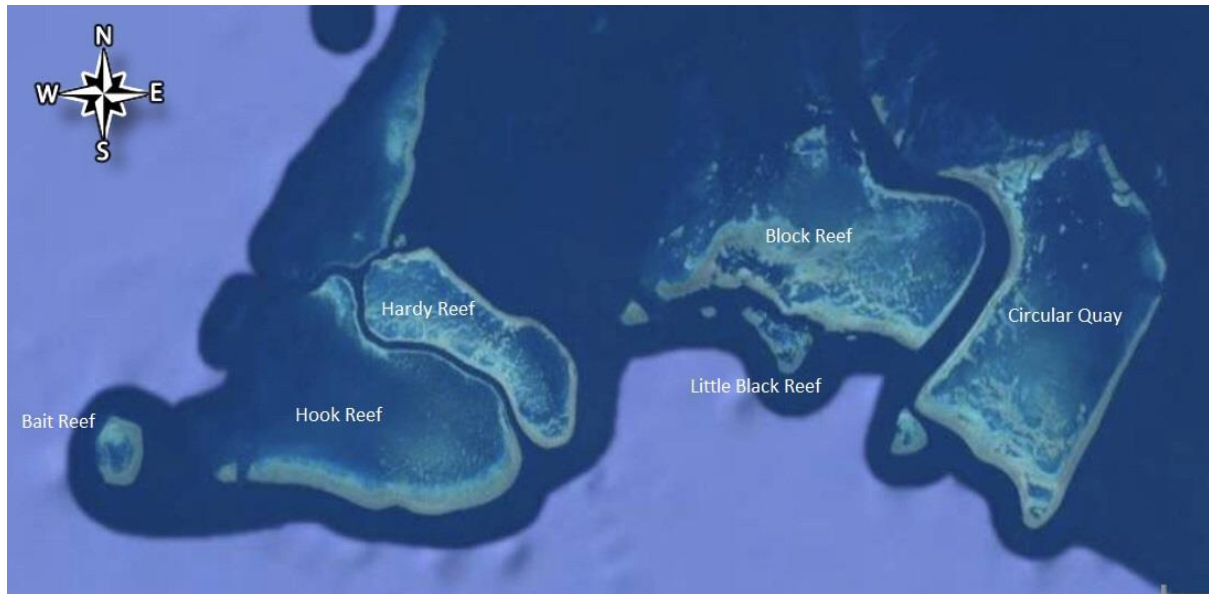
Reefs Offshore of the Whitsundays



The Whitsunday Islands were as far north as our 2020 voyage took us. We spent about six weeks there, and made a few excursions to the reefs north of the islands.

The reefs offshore of the Whitsundays are easily accessible from Hayman Island or the northern shores of Hook Island. The closest is Bait Reef, only 16nm from the islands, with Little Black Reef about 35nm. No overnights required, an easy half day sail for the western reefs, a day sail for the eastern reefs.

There are many more reefs we would love to explore to the west and east of the Great Barrier Reef section shown in this satellite image, but in October 2020, these are the reefs we concentrated on:



Bait Reef



Bait Reef is a ring reef with an area on the western side with shallower water where 8 public moorings have been provided. We have marked the area with a red star. If all moorings are taken, you have to keep sailing to Hook Reef as anchoring on the Western or Southern sides of the reef is prohibited.

Being the closest to the Whitsunday Islands and absolutely spectacular it is popular in light conditions. But what a treat when you get there. First you have to make your way through the Stepping Stones, a string of 18 coral pinnacles, then hook on to one of the moorings. It pays to get there with good light so you can find a safe passage between the pinnacles. There used to be a buoy to mark the spot, but it disappeared in the last cyclone!



Bait Reef is a favourite of ours. It is worry free with *Anui* clipped onto one of the buoys so we don't have to fret about anchoring among the bommies. We can just jump off the back of the boat to go snorkeling along the reef, but first you have to say hello to the welcoming committee: the resident Giant Trevally and a band of Batfish!



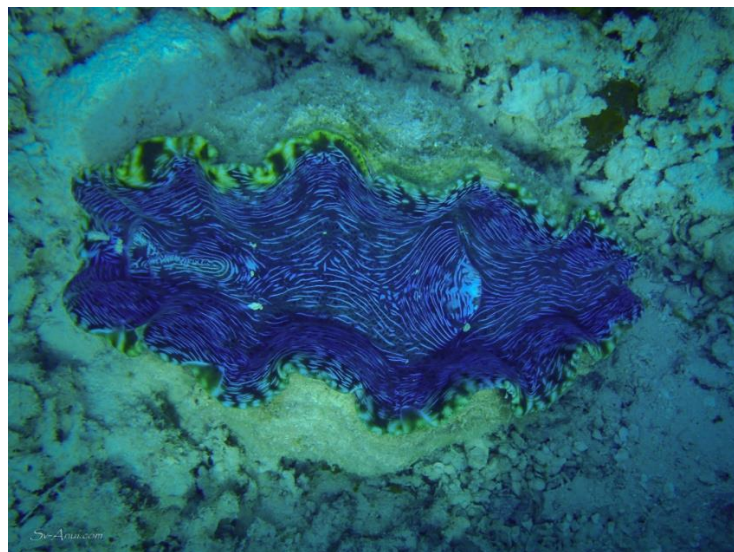
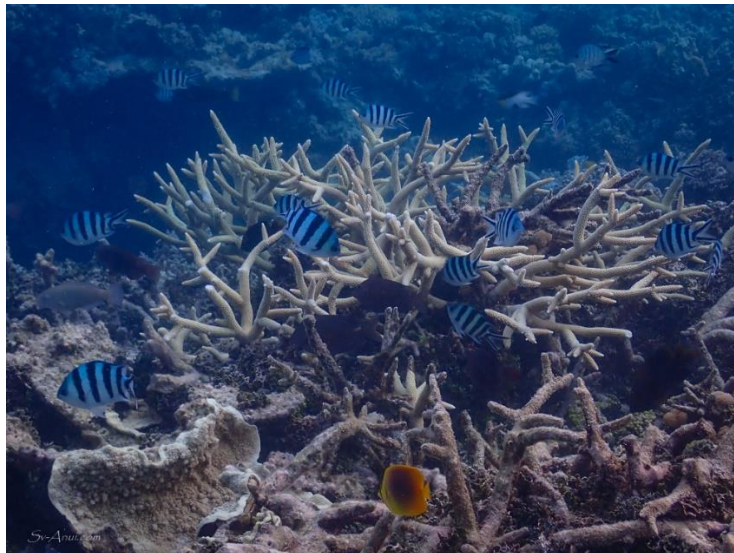
We went to Bait Reef a couple of times this season, one of these with our cousins Grant and Debbie. It was great fun to bring them to the outer reef, a first for them and of course they were excited if a little nervous. It was a special occasion for us too. Part of the joy of cruising is sharing the adventures with friends and family. We normally have people on board regularly. With the pandemic, this was not possible. Grant and Deb were the only guests on *Anui* in 2020, staying with us for two weeks.



The reef is a veritable coral garden. When you snorkel at low tide, you follow the edge of the platform, gazing at the variety of corals and amazing reflections. Soft coral dominates, but there are also boulder corals and Acropora.



Pulsing Xenia, a soft coral, surgeonfish amongst the Acropora, brilliantly coloured Giant Clam



The colour yellow dominates: Masked and Foxface Rabbitfish, Yellow Boxfish, Longnose Butterflyfish

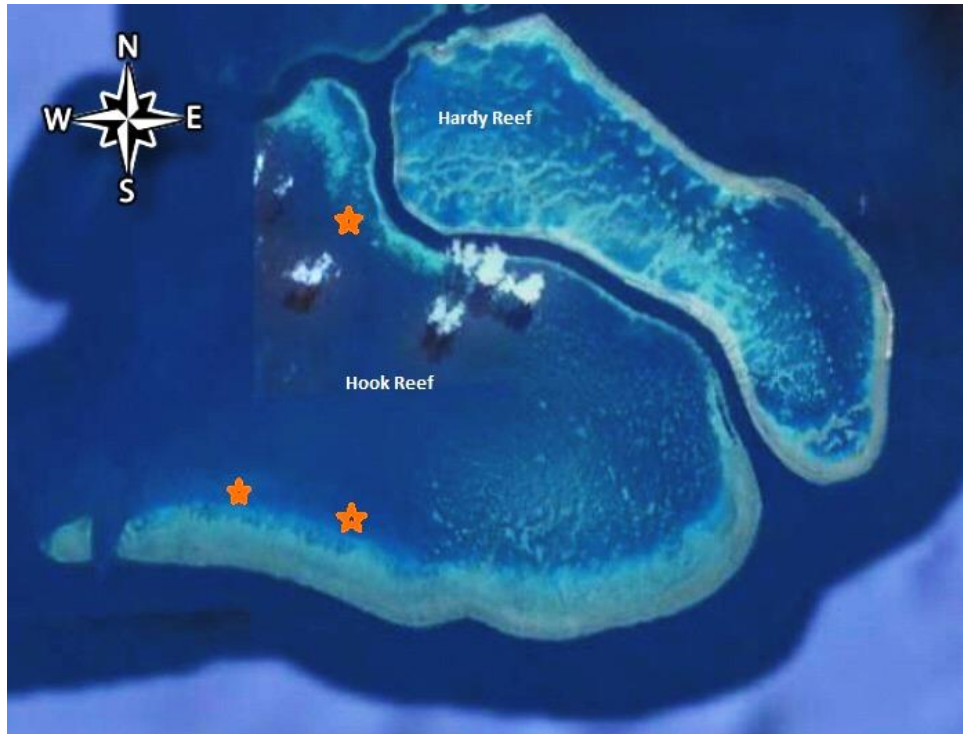




The Stepping Stones offer different type of diving: doing figures of eight around some of the pinnacles. But you have to watch out, the current runs swiftly alongside them, so you drift one way then have to swim hard against the flow, which is particularly tough work when you have to tow the dinghy, since there is nowhere to anchor it or tie it up. The pinnacles were fairly barren where we went, but it would be different further along the stones, away from the passage inside the reef. The pluses were the big fish such as the Giant Trevallies, Whitetip Reef Sharks, or Maori Wrasses like the one below, and the schools of small fish such as the fusiliers. It is a different feel, more like being on the edge of a drop off to deeeeeeep water where big fish live! The pinnacles are probably best seen with scuba gear so you can dive deep down.

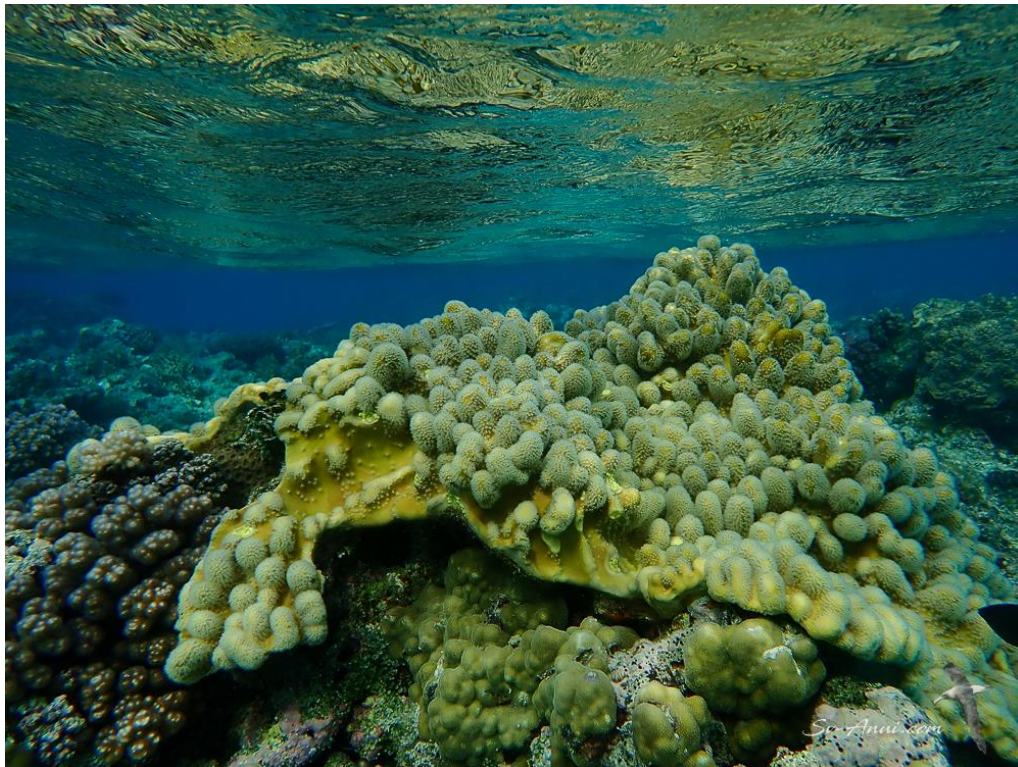


Hook Reef



Hook Reef is one of those places you will often have to yourself, or if any other boat is about, it will be far away. This reef is extensive. We have anchored in the spots along the reef wall marked with an orange star. You can pretty well anchor anywhere along there as long as you don't want to be too close to the wall. The closer you get, the lesser the depth but the more bommies. On *Anui* we tend to stay in 8 – 10m of water with plenty of swing room clear of coral heads. This is one reef where we are very picky with selecting our posy as the wind can swing and it is easy to find yourself uncomfortably close to bommies as the tide changes.

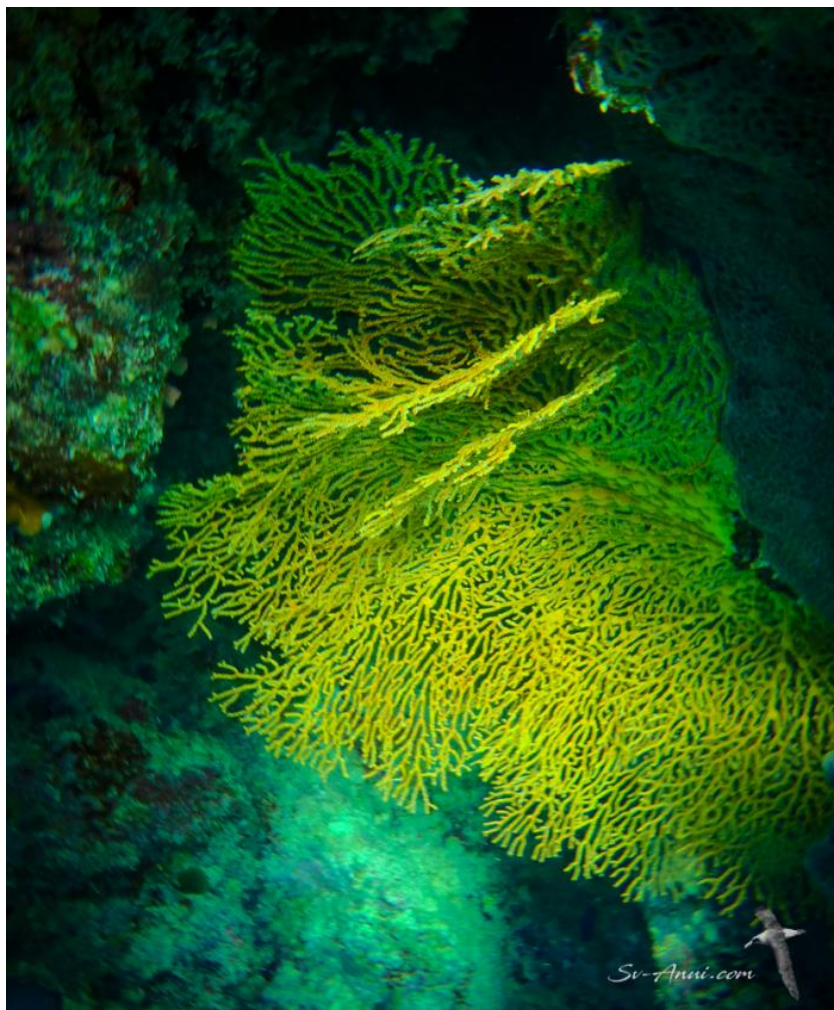
Bommies might not be our favourites for anchoring but they are fantastic for snorkeling and for spearfishing. You can meander from one to the other and find an abundance of corals both hard and soft and all kinds of marine creatures. Beware of the current though which runs along the reef wall. Start your snorkel up from your boat so you can let yourself drift back later.



We saw the most intriguing critters at Hook Reef, including sea squirts or tunicates like this purple and yellow ink spot species which tends to lurk in deeper water. Aren't they weird?



And we collected photos of our all times favourites: Gorgonian Sea Fans which you find fairly deep down on the side of the pinnacle walls. They come in vibrant greens, yellows, oranges... and always look like delicate lace.



Another favourite, and let's face it we have a lot of favourites, are the Christmas Tree Worms which we find in shallow water and come in all sorts of colours. It can be hard to get close to these as at the slightest threat, such as a photographer approaching, they retract into the tube dug in the coral.



Little Black Reef



Some 22nm East of Bait Reef and about 35 from the Whitsunday Islands is gorgeous Little Black Reef. Because it has a number of lagoonal nooks, it offers quite good protection. There is a variety of spots to anchor in over sand in 8 to 10m of crystal clear water in the main part of the lagoon. You can also anchor in the basin at the southern end in much deeper water of about 15 to 18m.

Of course, you will rarely have this place to yourself, but there is plenty of space to shelter a small flotilla. There were up to nine catamarans when we went there on one occasion. In the photo below there were five of us anchored, all friends!



The appeal of Little Black is that there is so much to explore, with a number of snorkeling spots of varying quality; you can fish there and are assured of great catches, and like other lagoons you can use your anchorage as a base and take the dinghy to go further afield. We stayed there 3 days on our first visit by ourselves, and 10 days when we returned in October with friends Robyn and Gerry on Aqualibrium and Neville and Amanda on Bossa Nova. It was a fun time full of laughter, great food, fantastic photography and experiments.

This was the location where Chris dared to launch and land the drone from the deck of Anui, a nerve wrecking but satisfying experience! Here are a few aerial images of our surroundings... so stunning!



Our friends on Aqualibrium and Bossa Nova



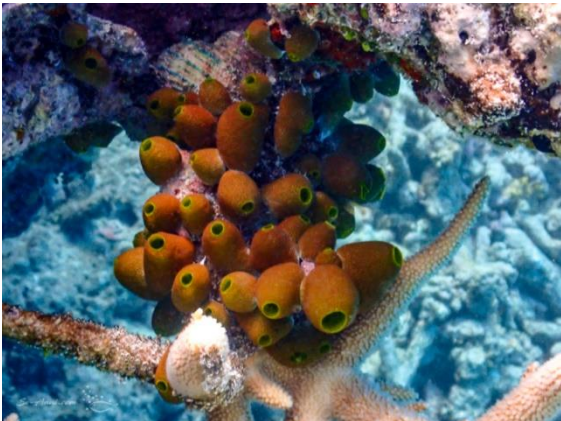
Wade had a lot of fun spearfishing in the lagoon. He is a pretty sharp shooter and gets most of the fish he aims the spear at. He is quite selective, favouring coral trout and sweet lip - nice size, manageable. So why he went for the huge GT in the photos below, who knows! After the struggle to bring the beast in the dinghy, then deal with it on board and clean the bloody mess, he swore never to spearfish something as big ever again... it could have ended up very badly! Had he read this quote in the Ocean Blue Fishing Magazine, he might have let this one go! *"Giant trevallies have in the past been referred to as the gangsters of the flats, and they have a reputation for being thugs, bullish and unforgiving. They are insanely aggressive predators and can cause havoc and destruction on gear and angler alike"*. Lesson now learned, but we filled the freezer, fed the troops and ourselves for ages: sashimi, in panko crumbs, marinated, pan fried, baked... it was death by GT! We ate our last frozen bits on New Year's Day!



Another fun thing to do in the shallows of the lagoon and far less dangerous is experimenting with split shots. These can be difficult to get as you are trying to focus on both what is above the waterline as well as below... tricky for the camera even with a dome lens. You want mirror smooth water, a shallow spot to stand on or kneel so you are not bopping around, really bright light ... conditions we don't often get!



The quality of the coral in the lagoon was patchy. Some areas were in good condition, others were affected by storm damage. You just had to give each patch a try and move if it was not the best. But the marine creatures and fish were alive and well!



From left to right, top to bottom:

Sea Star, Yellow Boxfish, a colony of Didemnum Molle Urn Sponges, Christmas Tree Worm, Giant Clam, a colony of Tube Coral or Tubastrea

Block Reef



Block Reef is a large lagoonal platform reef. While anchored at Little Black, we took the dinghy and motored to the western side of the reef to investigate the anchorage marked with a yellow star where a number of boats had been on previous visits. On the day we were there, a lot of current was flowing through despite calm conditions and we decided that it was more comfortable to stay put where we were in the shelter of the lagoon. However, what we did do was to snorkel along the southern side of the reef, across the channel from Little Black at slack water low tide to minimize the current, and also investigate the lagoon at mid tide, when we could get across the reef wall.

This is the channel on a dead calm day. It was hard to see where the sky ended and the ocean began!



The coral cover at Block Reef was far superior to Little Black, the fish life abundant on the edge of the channel in particular and the variety of marine creatures astounding. We so enjoyed Block Reef once we gave it a try that we focused our daily snorkels there, going across to different parts of the wall each time with our friends from *Bossa Nova* and *Aqualibrium*. We could not anchor the dinghies because the drop off was sharp, with some 30m depth; instead, Wade would tie the painter from our dinghy to a boulder on the edge of the wall and the other two dinghies would tie to us like a line of little ducklings.



The two most addicted snorkelers and photographers in the gang: Chris and Amanda!



Here is a collection of our favourite images:



Brilliant Giant Clam

Gorgonian Sea Fans and Crinoids are often seen a couple of meters below the surface along the reef wall



Coral fields as far as the eye can see, densely packed and colourful







This concludes our 2020 Reef Explorations.

We hope 2021 is kinder to us all

and allows us to indulge our addiction.

The Swain Reefs and Ribbon Reefs beckon!

How could you ever tire of these sights?
How would you feel if they disappeared?



*The sea once it casts its spell,
holds one in its net of wonder forever.*

Jacques Cousteau



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