

North Head (Sydney Harbour) Featured Dive

Category: Boat dives

Depth: Various, to 25 m

Rating: Moderate; deep rating recommended for the sponge gardens

Access: Dive boat operators, club or private boats

Special equipment: None other than usual safety gear for open water; torch recommended to bring the colours out

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North Head is a special place on land, with a National Park and Harbour Trust historic site. The social and ecological values don't stop at the water's edge though – North Head has some of the most spectacular and colourful marine life in the region.

Recent surveys of marine life in Sydney have shown the area from Manly around to North Harbour, which encompasses all of North Head, to be a biodiversity hotspot. Tropical fish recruitment is higher here than elsewhere in Sydney, and the diversity of species, particularly in Cabbage Tree Bay and North Harbour, is astounding. The top five sites in Sydney in terms of species richness are all in this area, with over 60 fish species recorded on some sites.

The colour and diversity doesn't stop with fish; North Head has some of the most extensive sponge gardens and sea fans that you're likely to see too. Of course to enjoy these you have to go deep, sometimes below 18 m, so you'll need deep certification. But it's worth it – plate, lobate, digitate, massive and encrusting sponges abound in reds, oranges, yellows and purples.

There are four main dive sites on North Head, but of course you can go anywhere along the reef. From east to

west the sites are The Blocks, Waterfall, Old Man's Hat and Red Indian Fish. All four sites get good tidal flows and the clean water on the incoming tide will leave you wondering if you're in Sydney at all.

The area does have limited protection. North Head Aquatic Reserve stretches to the southern tip of North Head, but it's only in-shore and protects invertebrates but not fish. Fishing pressure is therefore no less than elsewhere in Sydney, so you won't get the big schools of fish that you see around the corner at Cabbage Tree Bay.

Rare and protected species along North Head include Black Cod (one was spotted during surveys this year), Weedy Seadragons (although they haven't been seen in recent times), Blue Devil Fish and of course the ever-friendly Blue Groper. If you take a camera I'd strongly recommend a good strobe or two as the best stuff is down deep and the light is poor at this depth.

These are considered to be open waters, so take all the right safety precautions. Reel and SMB, whistle and torch. Stay with your buddy and share the experience – it will be one you won't forget!

Photos

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/johnwturnbull/sets/72157628784984369>



Giant cuttle *Sepia apama*, North Head
Photo: John Turnbull



Sponge Garden, North Head
Photo: John Turnbull