

Solitary Islands Marine Park

Featured Dive

Category: Boat dives

Depth: Various, shallow (snorkel) to over 30 m

Rating: Moderate to advanced due to the exposed nature of the islands

Access: Commercial boat operators out of Coffs Harbour or Wooli

Special equipment: Surface marker buoy and reel

Photos: <http://bit.ly/solitaryislands>

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The Gantry. Pimpernel Rock. Shark Gutters. Manta Arch. With names like these, you can feel the excitement before you even get in the water in the Solitary Islands. Thanks to the East Australian Current (EAC), there is something quite special about The Solitaries... but more on that later.

The Solitary Islands sit just offshore from Coffs Harbour in northern NSW and form the basis for the Solitary Islands Marine Park. Split Solitary and South Solitary is popular for diving and snorkelling. Pimpernel Rock and North Solitary, with the wonderful Anemone Bay, are features in the north of the park.

The special nature of the Solitaries was recognised by the declaration of the Solitary Islands Marine Park in 1998. In the ensuing 16 years, diversity and abundance of species have rebounded. Despite this, recent challenges to zoning in the park serve as a reminder that this is a treasure we can't take for granted.

So – why are The Solitary Islands special?

They offer a unique blend of tropical and sub-temperate species due to their special location. They are far enough north, and far enough off-shore, to pick up the warm flows of the EAC. These bring not just tropical water, but a steady stream of fish and invertebrate plankton from the Great Barrier Reef – so the Solitaries have a mixture of species found no-where else in the world. Corals, anemones, cowries, sea fans, wrasse, damselfish, black cod, and many species of shark and ray make this a marine wonderland for anyone



Diver with fish, South Solitary Island **Photo:** John Turnbull

adventurous enough to catch the boat ride out.

The operators that go out to the Solitaries are aware of the regulations and the importance of observing them, so as a diver or snorkeler you can just go along and enjoy the experience. Anchoring is typically prohibited but there are plenty of buoys for mooring. Dive boats will often organise a drift dive, where you start at one location, drift in the current then surface to find the boat waiting for you. For this type of dive, and in fact any open water diving, you should have a surface marker buoy and reel. This inflatable device makes it much easier to spot you and pick you up if you get separated from the group.

In my view, underwater cameras are a must in the Solitaries; chances are you'll be diving or snorkelling on a site you may never come back to, so when that black cod pokes its head out you want to be ready! Wide angle lens and natural light work well as the panoramas are stunning; you can then switch to strobe lighting and normal lens for close up shots of sea fans and corals.

I've dived the Solitaries on several occasions and still have only scratched the surface. All the sites are worth a visit and you're best just going to the site that has the best conditions on a given day. You can easily spend a week up in Coffs and dive something different every day – and why wouldn't you?