

# Coral Sea Island Territories Expedition January 2018

By Todd Tai

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A good friend of mine once said to me as a challenge, “What is there left to explore?”. It’s now generally accepted that we live in a world where it is presumed that everything that can be discovered, has been discovered. But she pointed out that this is not the case. My friend believes that it is vital to preserve the instinct to explore. Her point was that if you look closely and do a little research, you can find an adventure, a chance to explore and discover, and it can be right at your doorstep.

So it was without hesitation that I said “Yes” to join an expedition to explore the Coral Sea Island Territories, far east off the coast of Queensland, Australia.

The Coral Sea Island Territories are an external territory of Australia. The remote and little visited area comprises of a group of small and mostly uninhabited tropical islands and reefs in the Coral Sea. Extending east and south from the outer edge of the Great Barrier Reef, from Osprey Reef in the North to Cato Island in the South, there are a total of fifteen reef/island groups.



Our expedition was to explore the seldom-visited south-easterly group of reefs and islands comprising of the Frederick Reefs, Kenns Reef, Saumarez Reefs, Wreck Reefs, as well as Lady Musgrave and Lady Elliot Islands. Our goal was to explore the underwater marine environment, investigate the many known and unknown shipwrecks on these reefs, do some fishing, collect and remove plastic and rubbish as part of the [“Take 3 for the Sea”](#) initiative. A perfect adventure!

We were equipped with an impressive fleet of three vessels comprising of the super yacht MY Beluga, game fishing boat “Zulu”, and “Minke”, a fast chase boat.

- 7 Jan 18 - Depart Hamilton Island
- 8 Jan 18 - Percy Isles National Park
- 198 KM - Hamilton to Percy
- 9 Jan 18 - Saumarez Reefs
- 354 KM - Percy to Saumarez
- 10 Jan 18 - Frederick Reefs
- 122 KM - Saumarez to Frederick
- 12 Jan 18 - Kenn Reefs
- 147 KM - Frederick to Kenns
- 15 Jan 18 - Lady Musgrave Island
- 463 KM - Kenns to Musgrave
- 16 Jan 18 - Lady Elliot Island
- 40 KM - Musgrave to Elliot
- 17 Jan 18 - Bundaberg Port



[MY Beluga](#) is a 114-foot-long superyacht. She is a long range, luxurious expedition ship with an ice strengthened hull. Beluga is diving enabled, equipped with jet ski, SEABOBs, and can provide water skiing from her fast tender. Beluga is designed to carry 10 - 12 passengers in luxurious comfort, and has a crew of 7.



[Zulu](#) is a 54ft Assegai, custom built game fishing vessel, launched late 2014. She is one of the most technologically advanced game boat to hit the waters of Australia thus far.



**Minke** is a brand new, 40ft, Assegai custom built chase boat that also serves as an ideal platform for diving and game fishing.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of January 2018 our expedition fleet departed Hamilton Island and set a course south-southeast for our first destination, Middle Percy Island, 203 kilometres and 12 hours away.



At dawn, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of January, the guests and crew of our fleet, Beluga, Zulu and Minke, moored in the stunning and protected bay of Middle Percy Island.



Middle Percy is the kind of deserted Island that the character played by Tom Hanks in the movie *Castaway* would create if he never got rescued. We departed on Beluga's tender to the shore of the coconut palmed lined beach where we were greeted by the islands' resident dog, Diamond. Diamond, who is part Dingo, took great pride in escorting us to the famous "Percy Hilton". The Percy Hilton is a rustic, split-level, A-framed beachcomber hut that sets the standard in castaway accommodation.

Inside it is covered with signs and souvenirs from passing boats, piecing together a rich history of boating to the island. Given time to sort through the lot, I found signs from boats that had visited before I was born.





Giving the feel of a funky children's clubhouse, the A-frame design of the accommodation consists of swings, hammocks and other devices of entertainment. Along with this are benches, tables, a huge pit BBQ, suitable for roasting whole beasts, and, most noticeably, the signs. Decorating the interior and exterior, the signs display the names of passing boats and crew, some painted and adored with great care, others very casual in comparison. A short distance away is the beach book club, a well-stocked book exchange library right there just off the beach.

If you are in the area you must pass by Middle Percy Island and visit the Percy Hilton, remembering to leave a souvenir from your boat. Get creative here! There are some fascinating relics of boats and their crews that have visited over the last 50 or more years.

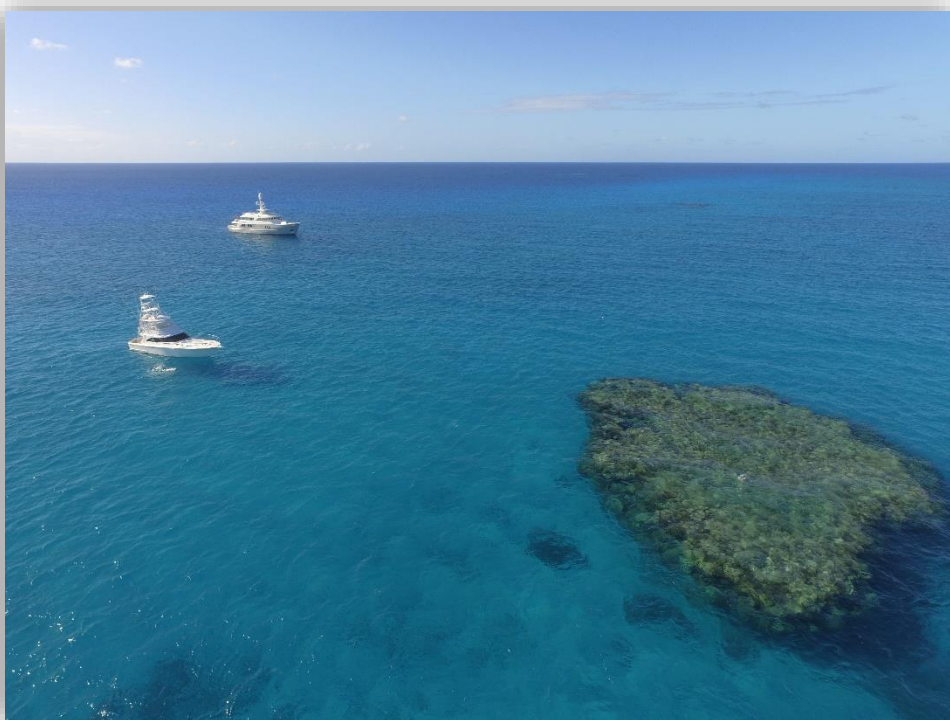
Departing Middle Percy Island our fleet continued its journey south, travelling through the Swains Reefs. Our goal for the rest of the day was fishing, so we transferred to the purpose-built game fishing boat *Zulu* and ran ahead of the fleet to the hot reefs that promised the best angling. We trolled several lines, catching a number of scaly mackerel, tuna and wahoo. We then tried our luck at bottom fishing.

After a hot run of coral trout, we hooked something enormous. A half hour battle ensued with three anglers tag teaming on the rod in a combined effort to bring the big fish to the surface. But alas, as our catch neared the surface the rod snapped back to reveal a line that ended with a fish hook that had been bent straight. Our best guess is that we hooked a 300-kilogram bull shark, but as with all good fish stories, this one got away.

After an action-packed day we caught up with the fleet and were transferred back to Beluga where we then began an overnight journey to our first wreck site at Saumarez Reef.



We arrived at Saumarez Reef in the early morning of the 9<sup>th</sup> of January. Saumarez Reef is one of the southernmost reefs in the Coral Sea Islands, located on the Coral Sea Shelf, 330 km northeast of Gladstone, Queensland .





We began the day with an exploratory dive on an unknown reef where we were rewarded with a 29-degree water temperature. The dive site consisted of three mountainous bommies, all encased in healthy coral, home to many fish and venomous, yet friendly, sea snakes. We had 50 metres of visibility in deep blue water, and saw, among many other things, two white tip reef sharks, a fully-grown nurse shark sleeping in a sand gutter, and many sea snakes.



That afternoon we explored our first shipwreck, *SS Francis Preston Blair*.



*SS Francis Preston Blair*

The *SS Francis Preston Blair* was an American Liberty ship of 7181 tons that was used to transport troops, equipment, and arms for World War Two in the Pacific. One report of her grounding tells that on July 15th, 1945 the *SS Francis Preston Blair* was enroute between New Guinea and Sydney when she was engaged with a Japanese Submarine that she was attempting to out run. It was during this engagement when the *SS Francis Preston Blair* ran aground and became perched high. The *SS Francis Preston Blair* was never recovered and was later purchased by the Australian Government to be used as target practice by the RAAF, which dropped dummy bombs on her. Although now a depleted rusted skeleton of her former glory, she sits eerily atop Saumarez Reef and is still recognizable from a great distance.





We decided to explore her by snorkelling around the wrecks perimeter. The wreck is still a very large structure, but it is far too dangerous to explore on foot. Parts of the super structure, like cranes, have broken away and can be found a short distance down current, creating their own mini reefs. The ocean floor around the wreck is covered with rusted munititions, bullets and shells.

There are hundreds of rounds of spent 20-millimetre shells scattered everywhere, an indication of her fight to the end. I found an item that looked exactly like an unexploded navy artillery shell, or possibly one of the dummy bombs that were dropped on her for target practice. Either way, I decided it was best not touch and just take a photo.



The site is rich with marine life, notably with numerous stingrays, and it is clear that many fish call this wreck home. Large drummer fish thrive inside her hull as it provides a haven from reef predators. Stoically, the bow continues to point to the seaward, with breaking waves straddling her as if she were still making her way through rough seas. With just a little imagination, you can still see the *SS Francis Preston Blair*, trying to make her escape from her submarine tormentor.

During the night the fleet travelled a further 120 Kilometres north-east so that on the morning of January 10<sup>th</sup> we woke to a glorious vision of the turquoise blue lagoon of Frederick Reef. Frederick Reef is in the Coral Sea Islands, 410 km northeast of Gladstone, Queensland.

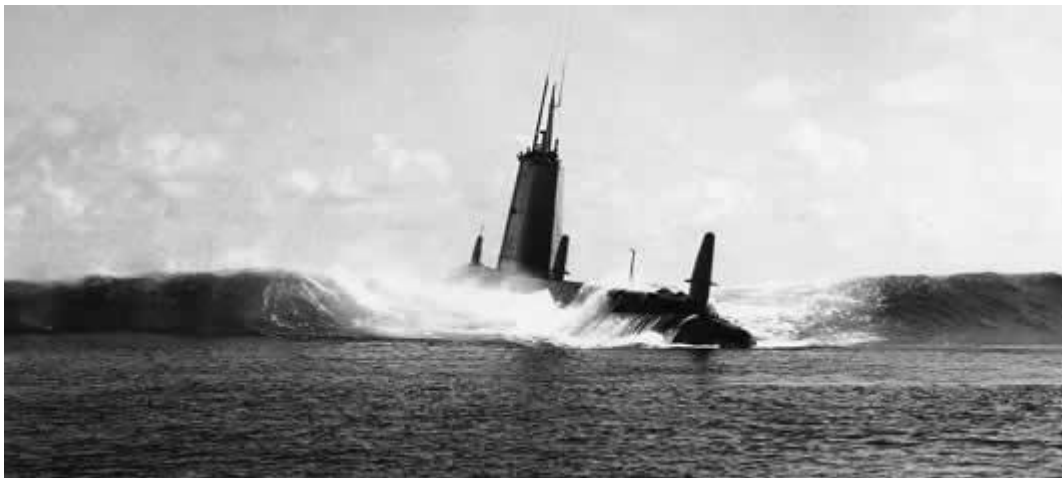
Frederick Reef is a small atoll with a large rock called Ridge Rock at the southern end, and a sand cay called Observatory Cay. At the northern end is an automated radio beacon perched on the only permanently dry land of this reef. However, there are a few other cays that immerge at low tide.

Frederick reef is located in deep water and drops sharply to over 2,500 metres on the western side.

Like most reefs in the Coral Sea, Frederick Reef has a rich history in shipwrecks and survival at sea.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of June 1825, *Royal Charlotte*, which was being used as a troop carrier from Sydney to Batavia, ran aground on Frederick Reefs. The masts were cut away to steady her while the crew and soldiers moved to shore with water and provisions before she sank. Only two lives were lost. A party took the surviving longboat and travelled to Moreton Bay, arriving in July and causing the brig *Amity* to be dispatched to collect survivors. The discovery of the wreck was announced recently in January 2012.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 1966, the United States submarine *USS Tiru* ran aground on Frederick Reef. For two days the submarine attempted to back off the reef under her own power, but was unsuccessful.



The *USS Tiru*, aground on Frederick Reef

The submarine was later towed to Brisbane, where she was dry-docked for emergency repairs and damage assessment.

We did three dives at Frederick Reef. As with almost all of our dives on this trip, we were looking for new, uncharted dive sites. Essentially, we looked at our marine depth sounder and, upon seeing a bommie, a drop off, or the scattered digital signs of prolific sea life, would stop the boat and jump in on snorkel for a closer look. If it looked good, we donned the scuba gear and giant strided into the turquoise sea.



After two days at Frederick Reef the fleet journeyed southeast another 140 Kilometres through the night so that on the morning of the January 12<sup>th</sup> we awoke to the spectacular vision of Kenn's Reef.



Kenn's Reef is a remotely situated reef in the south-eastern waters of the Coral Sea, 500 km southwest of the Australian mainland.

Kenn's Reef is a graveyard for sailing ships with a large number finding grief there.

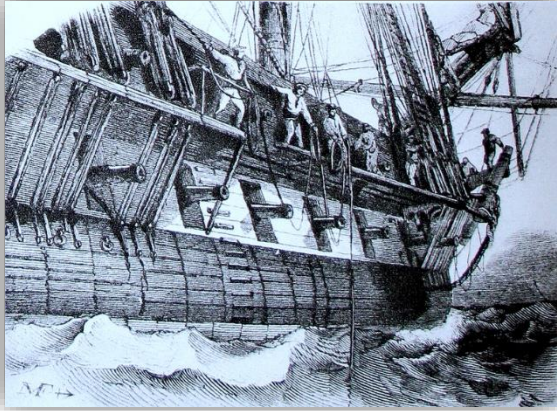
With her anchor still jutting out from the water, the most visible of all the wrecks on Kenn's Reef is the *Bona Vista*, which became shipwrecked on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March 1828. The wrecks on Kenn's Reef are numerous and include the *Jenny Lind*, wrecked 21 September 1850, the *Alfred Vittery* on 9 March 1884, the *Hester* on 21 April 1854, the *Doelwijk* on 21 April 1854 and the *Delta* which ran aground on 30 May 1854. Bizarrely, the *Oliver van Noort* and the *Rodney* were both wrecked on Kenn's Reef on the 7 January 1858.



Just walking around on one of the sand cays, we saw many items that looked like relics, including what we believe could be a “Plummet” which was once used for “Lead and Line Sounding”.

“Lead and Line Sounding” is a method used to measure the depth of water and its practice dates back to ancient civilisation. Before the days of modern depth sounders, “Lead and Line Sounding” was the only method to determine how much depth was below the keel, and the composition of the sea bed.

A sounding line or lead line is a length of thin rope with a plummet, generally of lead at its end, which is cast into the sea. Marks of calico are tied at intervals along the line. The marks were at every second or third fathom and it was possible to "read" them by eye during the day or by feel at night. The number of marks you count at the exact moment the lead strikes the sea floor indicates to the sailor what the depth is likely to be.



#### Lead and Line Sounding

Lead and Line Sounding also had another valuable use. The lead plummet often had a tallow-lined concavity at its bottom, which would strike the ocean floor with force. The tallow would bring up part of the bottom sediment (sand, pebbles, clay, shells) and allow the ship's officers to understand the composition of the ocean floor beneath them and better estimate their position.

Over two days at Kenna Reef we also enjoyed three exploratory dives from *Minke* and two action packed fishing excursions on *Zulu*.



We conducted a clean-up on all the cays we visited, collecting plastics and rubbish as encouraged by the [“Take 3 for the Sea”](#) initiative. These cays are extremely remote and therefore generally pristine. Sadly, there is nowhere on Earth that is remote enough to be completely devoid of the plastics and ocean rubbish deposited on beaches. This is why it is so important for initiatives like “Take 3 for the Sea” to be embraced by the public, so that on every occasion that we venture into the sea, we can leave it cleaner than how we found it.



During the night and all of the next day, our fleet travelled a marathon 459 kilometre southwest, so that on the morning of the 15<sup>th</sup> of January we found ourselves at the spectacular Lady Musgrave Island.

To be distinguished from the many cays we had visited on the expedition so far, Lady Musgrave Island is an actual island, based on shingle cay (coral debris) and sections of beach rock. Lady Musgrave is generously covered with vegetation consisting of *Pisonia grandis* (Grand Devil's-Claws), *Tournefortia argentea* (Velvetleaf Soldierbush), *Casuarina equisetifolia* (She-Oak), and *Pandanus tectorius* (Screwpine).

As such, there are an enormous number of birds on the island. During our island visit we found White-capped noddy terns nesting in abundance in the *Pisonia* trees and Bridled terns, as well as, Black-naped terns and Silver gulls nesting on the ground.



At intervals along the beach, we could see the caterpillar track-like evidence of Green Sea turtles that had come up onto the beach the night before to dig nests and lay their eggs.

We enjoyed a fast drift dive through the deep channel that separates the sheltered lagoon from the sea and observed whitetip reef sharks swimming in the fast current and Green turtles resting on coral bommies. The coral lagoon is a haven for a multitude of fish and coral species.



On the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> of January, we made a short 50-kilometre journey southeast to our last destination, Lady Elliot Island.

Lady Elliot Island is the southernmost coral cay of the Great Barrier Reef, Australia and lies 85 kilometres northeast of Bundaberg. The island is located within the 'Green Zone' of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, which is the second highest possible classification designated by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority.



Due to the total ban on fishing and prohibited removal of anything from the sanctuary, the waters surrounding the island are particularly rich in sea life.



In the crystal clear waters we enjoyed one of the best dives of our entire trip, seeing pristine coral and bommies full of fish, the highlight being the sighting of a very large green sea turtle and a manta ray.



With this last dive it was time to conclude our adventure. The fleet pulled anchor and plotted a course southwest to Bundaberg, 100 kilometres away.

In 10 days we had travelled over 1300 kilometres. At our most remote location, Kennis Reef, we were over 500 Kilometres east of Australia. Overall, we visited six remote reef systems and islands, collecting plastics and rubbish along the way.

We had unforgettable up-close encounters with marine life and sea birds, and explored shipwrecks, many of which linked us back to the days of Australia's colonisation, and all with a unique story to tell.

Every day we explored, we learned, we laughed and enjoyed our unique adventure.

Adventure may not be the meaning of life but, without it, life does start to lose its meaning.

### **So, what's left to explorer?**

Northeast of Australia lies a remote and seldom visit Island group. An archipelago where many of its Melanesian inhabitants still live mostly as they have for thousands of years. A paradise with lagoons full with rich marine life, and topical jungles that home to many exotic creatures. Located over 2,000 kilometres from Australia, it would be a long journey. Thankfully, the MY Beluga is a long-range expedition ship, perfect for a new adventure to The Solomon Islands.

Todd Tai

The Explorers Club, Australia and New Zealand Chapter