

R A P I D B A Y

South Australia



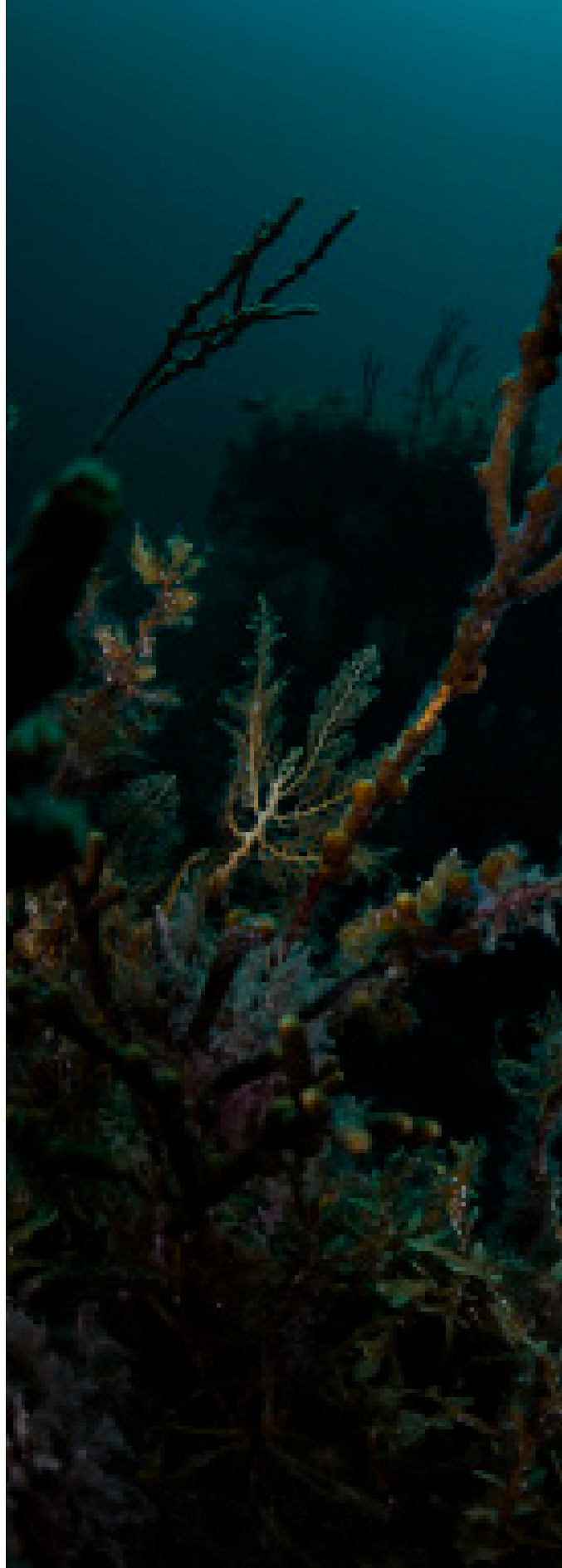
They're found only in Australian waters, are David Attenborough's No. 1 animal and their camouflage makes them so tricky to spot, divers consider them a good-luck charm. **Alexis Buxton-Collins** goes in search of the elusive leafy sea dragon. Photography by Carl Charter.

Quite frankly, the place is a mess. Scallop shells litter the ground around me. Discarded crab legs and lobster remains poke out from colourful weeds. My guide, having sought out the main residence, points me towards it – it's nothing more than a hole in the ground.

Eight metres below sea level, conversation is impossible but when we return to the surface, my cheerful divemaster, Daniel Kinasz, tells me I've just visited the home of the "redneck of Rapid Bay". More commonly known as the Maori octopus, it acquired the singular nickname because "it likes to keep the house clean but doesn't care about the yard".

Rapid Bay, on South Australia's Fleurieu Peninsula, is crowded with aquatic characters like this but the species I'm searching for – the leafy sea dragon – leaves less of a trace. Despite its name, there's nothing fearsome about this animal, which Sir David Attenborough called his favourite. In fact, my biggest worry is that I'll swim right by one without noticing. A relative of the seahorse, this curious creature is covered in leaf-like appendages that make it resemble a bit of seaweed floating through the water.

In a small valley between imposing limestone hills, Rapid Bay is the best place to see them. One hundred kilometres



A deep-sea dragonfish, characterized by its bright orange and yellow bioluminescent stripes, is shown swimming in a dark blue, deep-sea environment. The fish is positioned in the center-right of the frame, facing left. In the upper-left corner, there is a large, branching, brownish coral structure. The background is filled with various other deep-sea organisms and structures, creating a complex and mysterious underwater scene.

T H E R E
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south of Adelaide, this area is a popular dive site, with a range of operators leading multiple trips here every day, year-round. It make sense: “leafies” have a reputation among divers as a lucky charm, likely because it requires a good deal of fortune to spot one – unless you have an experienced guide.

Most tour guides emphasise that there are no guarantees when it comes to spotting wildlife. But when I meet Dan at the offices of Diving Adelaide (divingadelaide.com.au), he’s bullish about our chances. “We’re gonna have a good dive today,” he tells me. “And we’ll definitely see some dragons.” After more than 400 dives at the site, he tells me, there’s only been a single time he failed to spot one and that was in very poor visibility following a powerful storm.

Three other groups are heading out with Diving Adelaide today, each with its own guide and just one or two divers per group, meaning there’s no risk of getting stuck at the back. So I’m in high spirits as we set off under a clear blue sky. We drive through Adelaide’s sprawling southern suburbs then the broad expanse of McLaren Vale, where lush green vines are interspersed with dry fields of yellow grass. We navigate hilltops and narrow valleys, passing towns with names that reflect the lilting nature of the topography: Carrickalinga, Yankalilla, Congeratinga.

As we turn off the highway, the road descends steeply to a wide bay. Two jetties stretch out past the turquoise shallows and into the inky water beyond. The surface sparkles in the hot sunlight. The Fleurieu is a few degrees cooler than the Adelaide plains and has long been a summer getaway for city residents but today there’s no escaping the heat – at least not on land. Because we’ll be under water for an hour, Dan tells me I’ll need to wear a wetsuit underneath the scuba tanks. I’m sweating before I’ve even finished putting it on. “This is the hardest part of the trip,” he assures me as we walk clumsily past fishermen listening to boom boxes and snorkellers diligently applying sunscreen.

Between cliffs that rise precipitously from the water on either side, their faces studded with sea caves and their hairlines receding into dry grass-covered slopes, lies a set of steps. At the bottom, I do a final check of my equipment then hop eagerly into the deliciously cool water.

Our destination is the longer old jetty. Fifty metres away, it’s just out of reach of anglers and since closing in 2004 due to storm damage, it has become a haven for marine life. The pylons are encrusted with colourful corals and sponges and old wives swim on either side of me, their black and silver stripes catching the sun even at this depth. I look up and see

The leafy sea dragon could easily be mistaken for floating seaweed (above); the weedy sea dragon (opposite) is also related to the seahorse



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a huge school of yellowtail scad above me. Exhaling, my air bubbles cause the fish to scatter. When I stop moving, it feels like I'm at the red light of a busy intersection. Traffic streams both ways and I watch the fish passing just centimetres from my face. I wonder how anybody can remember to look out for rogue bits of seaweed.

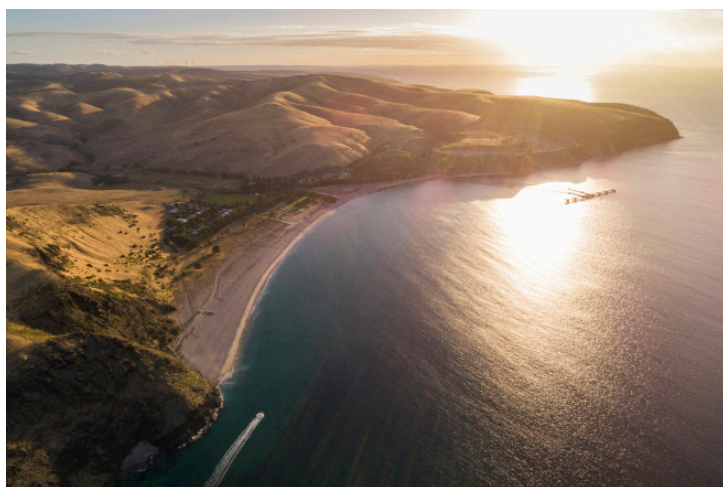
At the end of the T-shaped jetty, Dan slowly turns in the water until he's looking upwards. I follow his lead and stare in awe. Dark columns rise up towards the surface on all sides and sunbeams pierce the water around them. Shadows of fish swim all around "the Cathedral" pylons. This is completely unlike anything I've ever seen on the Great Barrier Reef or at more famous dive sites and I'm captivated.

After righting myself, a bright-orange nudibranch covered in blue spots catches my eye. "Sea slug" seems too drab a description given its lurid colouring but we've seen so many that Dan has stopped pointing them out. And then I see it. Or rather, I see Dan pointing at it.

A piece of "seaweed" sways gently with the current. I stare at it like I would a Magic Eye picture, wondering if I'm looking in the right place, before I notice the long, tubular snout. An eye swivels to watch me. This is an adult female and it's larger than I expect – maybe 30 centimetres across. White stripes line the light-green body, which stretches out diagonally. Along the neck and spine, tiny fins flap as rapidly as a hummingbird's wings, a blur of motion. Watching her rock back and forth is hypnotic. A forest of imitation weeds billows out, drawing my eyes away from the fragile body they're protecting and I marvel at how complete the disguise is.

Fortunately, she's not going anywhere – the leafy sea dragon's camouflage is so good, it has no natural predators once fully grown. Nevertheless, habitat destruction and limited range – it's found only on mainland Australia's western and southern coasts – mean that populations are decreasing.

Dan estimates there are 14 resident leafy sea dragons around the Rapid Bay jetty – a smaller number than when he started diving here six years ago. Overzealous divers



Stunning above sea level, the Fleurieu Peninsula's Rapid Bay is also an underwater wonderland brimming with marine life

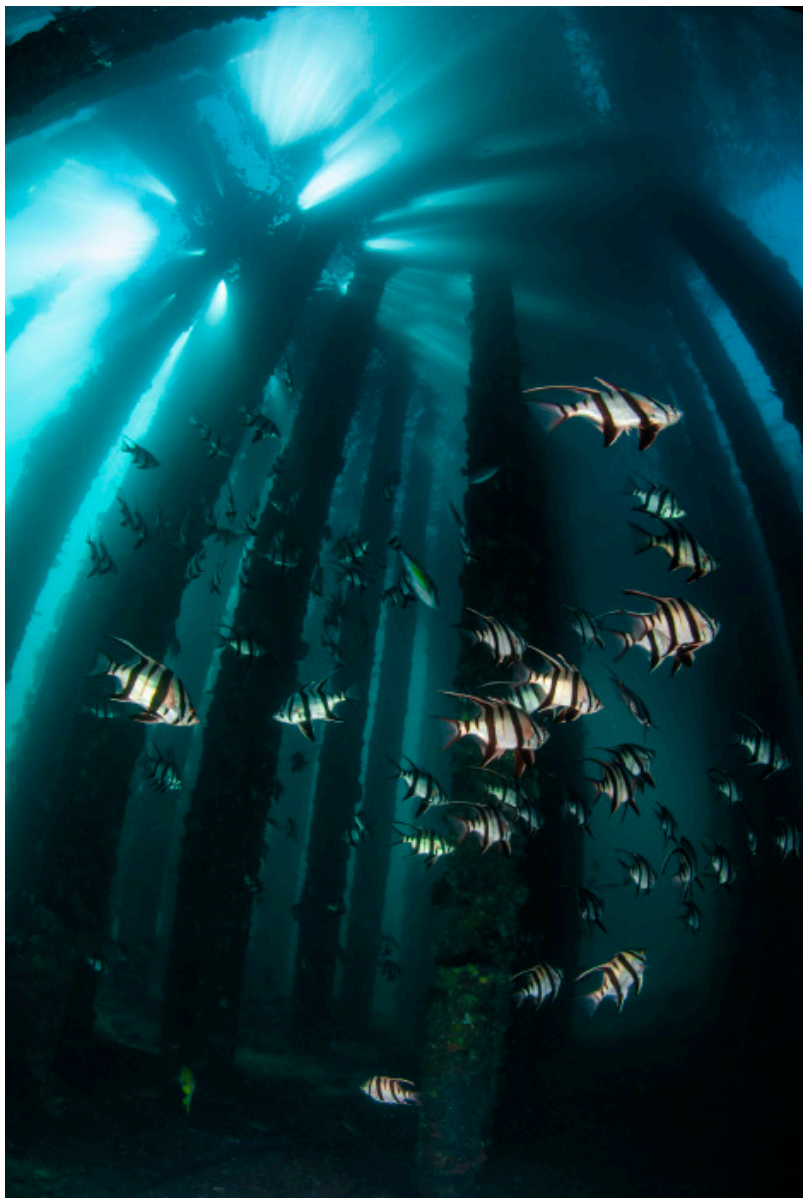
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disturbing them is just one of the reasons for their decline so we move on and I'm soon glad we did.

One of this fish's quirks is that males incubate the fertilised eggs. The next one we see has a large cluster of pale-pink eggs bulging from the underside of his tail. I later learn his name is Leo, the only named leafy at Rapid Bay. Apparently, he takes off when females approach during breeding season, which lasts from October to January and culminates in an elaborate courtship dance. The evidence suggests he wasn't fast enough this time. In four to six weeks, the eggs will hatch and the baby dragons will be left to fend for themselves. Approximately five per cent will make it through to adulthood but for now he's protecting them well.

Back on the surface, the divers compare notes and confirm that everybody found their own personal good-luck charm. Then we excitedly start listing our other discoveries: a blue devilfish peering up from below a rock, its iridescent spots glowing in the dark; a juvenile of the leafy's equally enigmatic cousin, the weedy sea dragon; and a bright-orange frogfish clambering over the sea floor on its pectoral fins.

With the glaring sun still hot overhead, I rip off my wetsuit and thank Dan for his eagle-eyed expertise before rushing to the sweet relief of an air-conditioned car. Driving back past sunburnt hills, I'm thinking of the many residents of Rapid Bay. Their yard may be a mess but what a glorious one it is. ●



Stripey old wives swim around the coral-encrusted "Cathedral" pylons beneath Rapid Bay's jetty

Three more great dive sites

Ningaloo Reef, Western Australia

Get set to feel really small. From around March to August, massive whale sharks dwell around Ningaloo Reef on the state's Coral Coast, gliding through the water as snorkellers stare in wonder from above.

Solitary Islands Marine Park, NSW

Cuttlefish, grey nurse sharks, manta rays, turtles, clownfish – the Solitary Islands, stretching 75 kilometres along the NSW coast north of Coffs Harbour, is like a pick'n'mix of diving and snorkelling favourites.

Heron Island, Queensland

The Great Barrier Reef serves up endless spectacular diving opportunities and the coral cay that is Heron Island is one of its best, with more than 20 dive sites. Expect to see turtles, stingrays, reef sharks and much more.