



St. Some Times

Special Dragon Edition



After 30 Years, I Have Been With the Leafy Sea Dragons

I fell in love with the endangered, unique, undersea animals about 30 years ago. Since then, I have only seen them on Blue Planet, a random discovery special, or in the best aquariums around the world.

According to some scientists, the Leafy Sea Dragon has no natural predator because the dragon's camouflage is too

remarkable. No animal can find them to feast on them. Hah.

The plan was for me to see them in Australia at some point. The trip was made clear by my recent short summer trip to the USA and the longest winter break I've had in many years. Three weeks should be enough time to travel to Kangaroo land and find a few dragons. That was my thinking. That was my plan.

First day in country...score! Let me tell you a little story. (Next page)

Leafy SeaDragon Quick Information

- ◆ Phycodurus eques is the only genus phycodurus member of the family Syngnathidae with Seahorses and pipe fish
- ◆ Only found in the Southern and South Western parts of Australia
- ◆ No natural predator.
- ◆ Protected by Australian government due to over collecting by fishermen for the lucrative aquarium industry or Chinese medicines.
- ◆ They eat sea lice and very small crustaceans
- ◆ Dragons don't have a digestive stomach so they have to feed constantly to absorb the nutrients

Dragon Quest 2019

I flew several thousand miles just to see the Leafy Seadragons. It was sheer good fortune that I did just a little research and booked a dive with Diving Adelaide several months ago. Usually I don't research, but this was my focus.

I arrived at the Intercontinental a day before my scheduled dive. It cost me about 20\$ (US) for a taxi, one way, but I wanted to do a little reconnaissance before my dragon dive the next day.

What I had booked was a private dragon dive. The only way they sell this experience. The two beautiful, blonde, female kangaroos at the desk informed me the instructors were totally booked for the days leading up to the 27th. Good to know. If this was a scam, I wasn't out much. I'd show up at 9am the next morning and go for two shore dives with a guide (DM or instructor) about an hour away by van.

It was up to me to arrive by 9am for paperwork, bring my own food and water. There might be another tour but I was with a personal guide to show me where There Be Dragons.

Getting There

I arrived by taxi right before 9am. The taxi dropped me off at the strip mall and I sat in front of the store for about five minutes. Boring. I decided to poke around and see if anyone was in back where I had seen a few vans the day before.

Sure enough, there was Jake, a long-haired 20something surfer looking dude. Turned out to be my DM guide. He kitted me out with an XL 8ml wetsuit that took me 20 minutes to get on - even using all the tricks like water and a plastic baggie. I really hate "wet ties" but Jake said the water was 16degrees and freezing! Ok. I took the damn suit and put it in the van.

We waited around for the second diver, but she didn't show. Jake called the boss and worked out we would meet her later at the Bluffs of Victor Harbor. Jake and I piled in the "stubbier"-small cylinder steel tanks- and headed out.

Brush Fires!!

Jake is a good conversationalist, but he didn't get a lot of words in. I couldn't shut up. Too many questions and anticipation! Jake explained the dive scenario and seemed nervous after putting so much pressure on him.

As we drove along the south coast to the East, we passed vast fields of grape vines, herds of alpacas, and smoke from the brushfires. Australia is all over the news because the past month had been record high temperatures resulting in brushfires all over the country. Adelaide is a valley city surrounded by hills of brushfires. Lots of roads were closed. Lots of residents were losing their homes to the winds changing directions.

Houseflies While "Kitting Up"

Jake and I rolled into the little residential town along the Pacific Ocean and parked off the side of a coastal road with the bluffs overlooking a small sand and rock beach. Waves were rolling in and grouping the seaweed swaths. The first thing that hit me was the copious amount of common houseflies that attacked us while we unloaded our gear onto the entrance to a bike path meandering up into the bluffs. I hadn't been attacked by such a swarm since visiting the Maasai tribe in Tanzania back in 2004. Uggh.

The temperature had risen to 85 or 90F but the winds from the Pacific had cleared the skies of any residual smoke from fires and the blue skies were crystal clear.

I spent another 20 minutes putting on the Pilsbury Dough Boy wetsuit while Jake chatted up the other instructor. His diver was a nice German woman and her family. The husband and daughter were there to be fly food while mom looked for dragons.

Jakes official dive briefing was short and to the point. We would do a shore entry together. Put on our fins in the shallows and swim along the rocks out to the lookout point for about 10 minutes on the surface. Once we got to the lookout, he would dump the backup weights by the ladder. What? A ladder? I asked why we didn't just park at the

lookout lot and descend the ladder. Silly me. I guess a ten foot ladder is too risky with gear on. I further deduced no one had thought of lowering the gear down into the water via a makeshift pulley. Surface swim it would be.

Disasters, plural!

The waves were rolling in. I waddled into the cold water and followed Jake as waves rolled in. I could barely bend down. My -which I had only tried once before with my warm water fins - decided to be difficult. A wave crashed into me, threw me off balance, and swept one of my fins off a foot into the strong undertow. Miraculously, Bill (the other guide with the German client) spotted the fin under a pile of seaweed riding the next wave into his direction.

I felt like such an idiot. Here I was, the most experienced diver, of the four of us, and I lost my fin! Bill and the German headed out on their surface swim while I attempted the fin again.

I felt so out of my element and it was the confining feeling of the wetsuit. All I had to do was get underwater, but the waves were crashing over us in waist deep water and the undertow was making me dance from a two foot rock to the sandy bottom. I finally bent far enough to get my foot in the fin but my leg hit a huge rock and my body dumped backwards. I turned around to check for waves. The impending wave was just cresting a

foot over my head. As I reached up to secure my mask in hand, the wave crashed into me and swept my mask and incomplete fin into the undertow of seaweed. Ughh.

Now I was the super idiot. Jake and I were looking for the neon orange strap of my mask and the neon yellow of my second fin for five minutes before Jake informed me he had extras in the van.

“Awesome, Jake. This is a waste of time” I replied in frustration.

Jake nimbly navigated rocks and seaweed saying “I just figured since those are your absolute favorite fins of all time, you’d want to keep looking.”

“Forget them. Let’s go see dragons” I replied. He fetched them from the van while I continued my search in the seaweed and crashing waves.

Minutes later, I was breathlessly kicking towards crashing waves and low visibility, already down two personal items and simply hoping my two new cameras would be able to capture a “money shot” of the elusive dragons.



Just When it Couldn't Get Worse!

We reached the lookout point and Jake dropped the extra weights. I was pretty loaded down already. It wouldn't matter. Our dive plan was to simply follow the rocky ridge that fingered out to a depth of 5-7 meters underwater.

We dropped down into what can simply be described as a washing machine full of sand and seaweed with brief forays into a sandy desert bottom. Jake led the way as I followed a foot behind, so as not to lose him.

Once we got into the groove of finning with the outgoing surge and anchoring our fingers into the sand with incoming, I focused on preparing my cameras in case he started to shake. (Jake has a shaker. If he spots a dragon, he'll shake with one hand and point with the other. He instructed me to signal once I see what he is pointing at. If he loses sight of it before I get locked in, it will disappear.)

So I had a few surge cycles to keep him in the corner of one eye while I got my cameras ready. This was my maiden voyage with both cameras, so I needed that time to prepare.

First up. The iPhone. I have never used it underwater. There are a few tricks and I was pretty sure I had well prepped it in the van. When I held up the phone case, it was asking me to hit the home button. What? The home button doesn't work because of pressure? I had setup an alternative to avoid this. What was happening? Shit. I wasn't prepared for this mistake. Nothing I could do. I tried the button a few times to no avail. Disaster. It wouldn't happen on this dive.

I cut my losses, barely managed to bend my arm enough to shove the damn thing into my BCD pocket. My other camera is brand new, but it's just a simple step up from my last two UW cameras I had taken hundreds - if not thousands - of pictures with. The battery was fully charged the battery and three spares were ready for my other dives.

I heard a shake! Jake was pointing! Camera on, no Time to check my white balance! I followed his arm down to his pointing finger and there it was - blending in perfectly with the colors of the kelp, a floating yellow and green piece of seaweed just above circle of sand. A dragon. I brought the camera up for my first shot and the viewfinder had a message on it: Not Able to Read SD Card!

I couldn't believe this shit luck. The camera had worked fine in the hotel room. The SD card was the same card from the previous camera. It was trustworthy. There is no way this could be happening. I dropped the camera in frustration - it was on a wrist lanyard. I just sat there in the surge, back and forth, back and forth, observing this wonderful creature.

I cautiously finned a bit closer to it, pointing to it so Jake knew I hadn't lost it. He watched a while and then meandered off to find another. Jake didn't go far. He stayed within a few feet while I watched the dragon so as not to lose me but still be able to search for more elusive "weedies".

Amazing. I just watched the dragon. He turned his tail towards me in defiance and turned his head once in a while to keep an eye on me as a threat. If he floated a little to close, his dorsal fins would move a little faster and he'd gain a bit of distance while I kept my fins still. The surge would sweep us by several feet in both directions. Suddenly, I lost him. A quick look around and I spotted Jake searching a few feet further on.

While I finned with the outgoing surge, I attempted to start and restart the Nikon. On and off. Message. On and off. Message. And so it went, until shake shake! Jake was pointing at two dragons. I negotiated the surge and pointed at both of the dragons to let him know I had them in my sights. Once again, I simply sat and watched them. I noticed the dragons have a bashful reaction to humans like African Zebra herds do: turn around and show the human your ass. I mean seriously. Then, just like zebras, the dragons try to evade you. Both of the dragons headed out of the weeds and headed for the sandy desert surroundings. Weird, right? When they split up, I followed the nearest one. No idea where Jake is.

Luck of the Dragon gods!

I raised my camera one last time. The dragon I had followed stopped swimming and was simply floating back and forth in the surge. I hit the power button and looked away with a silent prayer to the SeaDragon gods that went something like this:

*"Come on you F\$#*in camera, I flew 6,000 miles to take a few pictures . Nothing is working. Please just work long enough to take this picture and then I won't ask for anything else."*

It worked. Of all the crazy shit. It actually worked. The card was working for some



unknown reason. Snap, snap, snap.

I looked around for Jake, found him, and lost the SeaDragon in the weeds again. But the camera was now working, for the time being, and I spent a few seconds adjusting the white-balance as I edged towards Jake. Once I got close, he took off to find another dragon.

Successes

Altogether, Jake found about seven or eight different Leafy Seadragons. Once my camera was white-balanced, it was time to start working on getting the right shots. The only way to get the animals to look at me was to stay with one long enough for the dragon to understand you aren't a threat. If the dragon stops moving away from me, I can use my left arm to coral it's attention to the right. Snap.

As you can see by the photo above, the white-balance settings really make a difference. For

some reason, the camera kept reading the card with no problem. At 50 minutes, Jake motioned a thumbs up, meaning "should we surface and take a break?". I certainly needed a break from the washing machine effects and we hadn't spotted a Weedie in the past fifteen minutes.



As we rode the waves back in to the shore, Jake pointed to the rocky beach in excitement. Bill was waving with my other fin. It had washed up on shore.

Rest, Flies, and no Restrictions

It took me no less than a minute to get out of the wetsuit. I immediately decided the next dive would be on my terms. No matter what, besides any intense advice or cajoling, I was going sans wetsuit. Of course, I kept this to myself. I've learned in the past, when everyone else is wearing full wetsuited kits, they feel it is important to give you strong advice to the contrary. Some instructors get unruly and "I told you so" or concerned parently about hypothermia. I kid you not.

In my opinion, a lot of divers have become wimps. They've been sold every conceivable piece of diving equipment, including underclothing and wetsuits. I'm not trying to be macho. I just hate the constriction of most wetsuits. Besides, even in this case, the water temp isn't much different than the Legion Park Public Pool was at 7am on a June morning. Swimming lessons at Legion must have toughened me up.

Second Dive is Always Better

Now that I think about it, the first dive was difficult for several reasons. Firstly, I was still completely jet lagged. My sleeping patterns were so off that I hadn't fallen asleep until 3am and woke at 8am. Add to that, my last dive was part of an 11day Carpe Novo experience in Maldives. It's been a while. I was out of practice.

At any point in diving, the best dives are those that limit unknown factors. For example, adding a new or foreign piece to your "kit" can negatively effect any dive. Since the Maldives, I had not been able to test out either of my cameras. Like I explained before, the new Nikon should not have been any problem. I have used not just one, but two of the previous model AW100. The AW300 was simply updated from 12mpxl to 16 mega pixels. However, it was still a camera that had not been used before and risked impacting any important dive.

Bringing along my new iPhone case was certainly an impact. No matter what dive, no matter how shallow of a learning curve, it was a new and unknown piece of equipment on my dive.

Now add the damn wetsuit. Psychologically, if I have to get into a wetsuit first, it initially ruins my mood. Diving is a psychological event. Successful divers control what they can, like equipment, so we can focus on being safe in the underwater environment, where we don't have control over nature.

I was too excited and stacked the odds against myself by adding unknowns. I had decided to take the risks. Then nature added the huge waves, strong undercurrents, and low temperatures. What I DID have in my favor was diving experience. The second dive would be more successful.

Surprise!

Without the wetsuit, I was first in. I waded into the rocks, seaweed, and breaking waves and had both of my fins on in seconds. I turned around to watch Jake enter the breaks and noticed a small audience of Aussies looking on with awe. Look at

that crazy idiot without a wetsuit!

Within a ten minutes, Jake and I finished our surface swim and descended back into the washing machine. Like before, while Jake was looking for the weedies, I kept one eye on him while I set my white-balance.

The water was a bit chilly, but I've been on a lot of other dives that were colder - even with a wetsuit. Maybe it was just the excitement of dragons? I was back in my regular "in control" diving mode. I turned my attention to finding the weedies before Jake did. It wasn't easy. Jake has done nothing BUT look for weedies for the past three months. Remember, there is nothing else to see here and this is the only dive site he goes to.

The surge was still really strong. Jake and I would be swept up to ten feet out, ten feet in, and even several feet up or down, depending on the incoming wave sizes. The conditions were pretty incredible, but I didn't worry about corals. There are no corals. Just see weed and worn rock formations. Shake Shake.

It had been about ten minutes. Jake had two hands out, using two fingers on each hand. Two leafiest over there, two leagues here. Then he moved his hand and pointed to two more over there. Six. Jake had found six Leafy Sea Dragons in one little circular sand patch. All six were in the same frame of eyesight. I raised the camera, got all six in the frame. I pressed the shutter button. BLACK SCREEN. BATTERY IS EXHAUSTED.

Make a list of words you know that should not be uttered. I know three languages. Every bad word I've ever uttered came out of my regulator at that moment.

I simply let the camera dangle from my wrist and enjoyed the view of six dragons. The three separate pairs had something planned. They split into two groups of three. One group slowly swam into the weeds in one direction. The other group swam slowly over the seaweeds and headed for the open sandy area. Jake and I followed the three out into the sand and hovered around them once they stopped moving. They had gotten used to our presence.

I stayed a little while longer and then headed to find Jake. At just over 35 minutes, we hadn't seen any more dragons and Jake lost sight of me. He had gone into a section of weeds that had a huge surface seaweed patch on the surface and a swirling sand cyclone at the bottom.

I found Jake before he found me. I gently touched his shoulder and signaled a thumbs up. He gave me the folded arm "chilly?" signal. I gave him the "no" head shake and followed it with the hand swipe over the face signal - "no viz". I'm sure he was thrilled I was ready to surface.

We surfaced and started our return surface swim to the beach. Jake spent the surface time talking about how he had never experienced such conditions, telling me he wished he had put on his other layer (but didn't want to look like a wimp since I was not even wearing a wetsuit at all), and asking me what had happened with my camera this time?

I couldn't explain it. I had checked the camera. The camera sensor had shown "full" up to when we had descended. It had shown "full" while I had set up the white-balance. Suddenly it had died.

As we got closer to the beach, there was Bill again. This time he was waving both arms in triumph. My mask was in his hand. Obviously, the lost mask had washed up on the beach.

Jake gathered up the gear from the German woman and we loaded up the van. All four of us shared stories about our experiences and asked each other questions. No, they hadn't seen any dragons on the second dive. The German woman had gotten cold after 15 minutes under. They had come back and found my mask in the seaweed on the beach. No, I hadn't been too cold. Yes, we had seen six dragons together but nothing after that.

We packed up and headed back. I might just be back!

Adelaide Scuba - Last Minute

I was lucky enough to secure a place onboard with another dive club, Adelaide Scuba, for Christmas Eve. We only dove one 5m dive. It would have been extremely boring for me, but Steve Stafford, the captain and Course Director, made it fun.

I boarded and had my gear ready in a matter of minutes. Nobody knew what was going on. There were no DMs, just seven other people getting their rental gear ready. I asked where people were from, in my "not-so-bashful-energetic-I-love-diving" way. The first six were all from Adelaide! Weird. The last lady, a rather chunky monkey, was taking up a lot of space while she pulled out all of her own diving equipment (you know, the kind of diver that has three lights, knives, shakers, pointy stick, gloves, special mask, c-clips for everything, and a \$3,000 brand new wetsuit that all matches). When I asked her where she was from, she growled at me: "Michigan, grrrrrr, but I have lived here for 30 years." What a bitch.

I simply said "Merry Christmas. Go Pack Go!" It wasn't easy on the small boat to give her a wide clearance, but I didn't talk to the grinch any more. We all just talked around her.

We only had a short jaunt out to the dive site. Steve told us it was his hidden "gem" of a site that no one else knew about. Fine with me. I just wanted time with my iPhone case.



Practice iPhone Dive



Meet the ornate cowfish. These two brilliantly colored fish made my dive. Since we were only underwater for 35 minutes at 6 meters,

there wasn't a whole lot that could happen. I basically stuck with the instructor as she led some newbies around in concentric circles around the anchor line.

No one bothered me as I played with the few settings on my new camera case. It will take a bit of practice though. I was using



the wide angle lens with the red filter cover on it.

Once the camera is in the housing, there is nothing you can really do but play around with the software. Using the DiveVolk app seems to use up the battery twice as fast, so I decided to start by just using the native camera app on my iPhone 7plus. ios13 has improved the camera and photo apps on their phones, but I still don't know how it will all work out in low light under water.

The one drawback on this iPhone case will be the decision for macro or wide angle. I cannot do both. Even though the lenses are wet lenses (meaning there is water between the case and the attached lenses) and I could, in theory, change them out underwater, where would I store the alternate lenses? I'd probably scratch one or simply lose one under water. Therefore, I'll have

to decide on what to shoot before going under. I have already decided to use the wide angle lens on my Great White Shark dives. (dripping with sarcasm)



At one point, I was taking this picture of a crocodile fish, when the guide made the shark signal. I ignored her figuring it was a nurse shark under the coral outcrop. That was a mistake. I could have included a nice

picture of a Wobegon shark from my own camera. Instead, here is one from the www.



That pretty much captures the Dragon experience from beginning to end. I spent the rest of my time, up to the Great White experience, in the Intercontinental going through pictures, writing, and talking with Aussies at the hotel bar. On Christmas Day, I was preparing my iPhone and practicing macro shots with a plastic plant at the bar, when an older gentleman said



“Now you've peeked my interest, what the hell are you doing?” My resulting explanation opened an hour or two of conversations with none other than

Glen Shorrock - lead singer and songwriter from The Little River Band. He is a very fun personality. He and his partner drove down to Adelaide from Sydney just for the holiday.

Did I mention the kangaroos yet? Let me share.



Hoppy Holidays - haha

The one thing I wanted to do after talking at the bar with all of the Aussies, was to hug a koala bear. If you are in Australia, don't ever call a Koala a "Koala Bear" - just Koala. My bartender, also known as the current Miss Australia - I'm not kidding you, told me to look into the Cleland



Wildlife Sanctuary. So I did. The super concierge tried to set me up with a koal hugging experience, but this was actually booked until January 13th. Can you believe it? Kreiky! My goal was to grab a video of me hugging an actual koala. Nope.



Didn't happen. I decided to go for some kangaroo experiences instead.

It turned out to be quite expensive to hire a taxi to take me out there, wait, and bring me back. I opted for an Uber to take me out there. He was more willing to make a deal.

The fare turned out to be 30Au\$ out there. For another 30Au\$ he was willing to wait an hour in the parking lot for me. We shook hands on the deal and I set off

into the park. Think of it as more of a petting zoo with an expensive gift shop attached.

There was a pitiful snake and insect exhibit. The snake picture booth was offering pictures with some very small garden snakes, well maybe they were special deadly Australian varieties, but the snakes were small and crawling all over the screaming children ahead of me in line. Not deadly I guess. I escaped the rest of that exhibit to allow interview time with Kangaroos.

Hoping for the best, I wandered around the rather large exhibit area passing butterflies and sleeping Tasmanian devils. It was too hot for the devils to come out of their holes. No park employees were willing to take bribes for opening up the koalas or devils to me so I followed a few families into the kangaroo pens.



The area required quite a walk. Most of them were not interested in my 10Au\$ bag of "kangaroo food". I began to wonder just what kind of racket this petting zoo was running when I was rewarded with a "mob" of kangaroos.

Now, let me meander a bit here. I had to research exactly what a group of kangaroos is called. The five minute google search turned up several answers. It seemed quite simple for me to solve this problem. I asked my waiter. Before I continue, it is important to understand many Aussies regularly employ the "F-word" in their everyday language. Americans may look upon this word as vulgar, but Aussies find it to be colorful, useful, and quite normal.

*“A F***ing Heap of Em!”*

That’s was my waiter’s first response when I asked him to clear up my dilemma of what to call a group of Kangaroos. He explained that if you see a kangaroo, there are usually “f***ing heaps of ‘em out in the field”. Then he returned with a freshly ordered cider and told me a group of kangaroos is officially a “mob”.

I’ll have to investigate the use of the F-word further in this country. It should be fun. It sure made my Kangaroo experience more fun.



Kangaroo Information

According to bushheritage.org.au, kangaroos belong to the Macropedidae family, which means “big foot” in Latin. They are the only National Icon that is eaten. The meat is still eaten as a great source of protein, but most Australians would rather eat a nice steak.

Roos can reach hop speeds of 60km/hr (38mph).

Roos cannot move backwards.

They live in a mob.

They are marsupials, which means they carry their young in a pouch. Roos have an annual joey but are capable of “embryonic diapause” - keeping one embryo dormant until the other one is born.

Like cows, roos eat their food twice.

I hope you enjoyed this issue.
Check out the next issue...
great white sharks.



