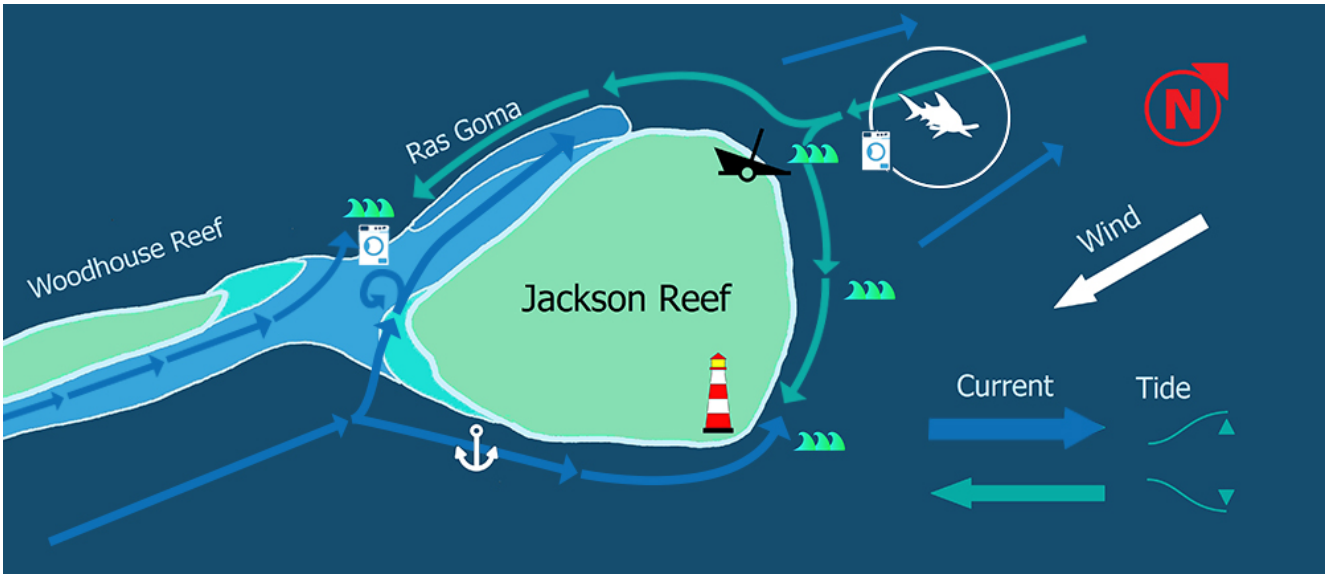
Cult Dive: the treasures of Jackson Reef (Part 1)

Gulf of Aqaba, Egypt. Between the island of Tiran and the Sinai east coast of, the Gulf narrows. In the middle of the Straits, an underwater ridge comes near the surface. Where nutrient-rich currents rage, corals and bright light created a system of four semi-emerging reefs. Jackson, the northernmost in the system, faces winds from the north and currents of the Gulf of Aqaba when it empties at low tide. It is a sort of amusement park for scuba divers, with rollercoasters and five totally different sites: the Lighthouse, the Garden, North Jackson, Ras Goma, and the notorious Sella, also called Washing Machine. However, some of these dives can turn into a nightmare if you miss planning, in a complex web of waves and currents. From October onwards, the entire Red Sea basin tends to be emptied as a result of evaporation, complicating forecasts.



We celebrate the richness and beauty of Jackson reef with a two-part series, highlighting features and potential dangers. Let's start with the first three dives: **Lighthouse, Garden** and **North Jackson**.

The Lighthouse

GPS

- Long. 28° 0'21.70"N
- Lat. 34°28'17.68"E

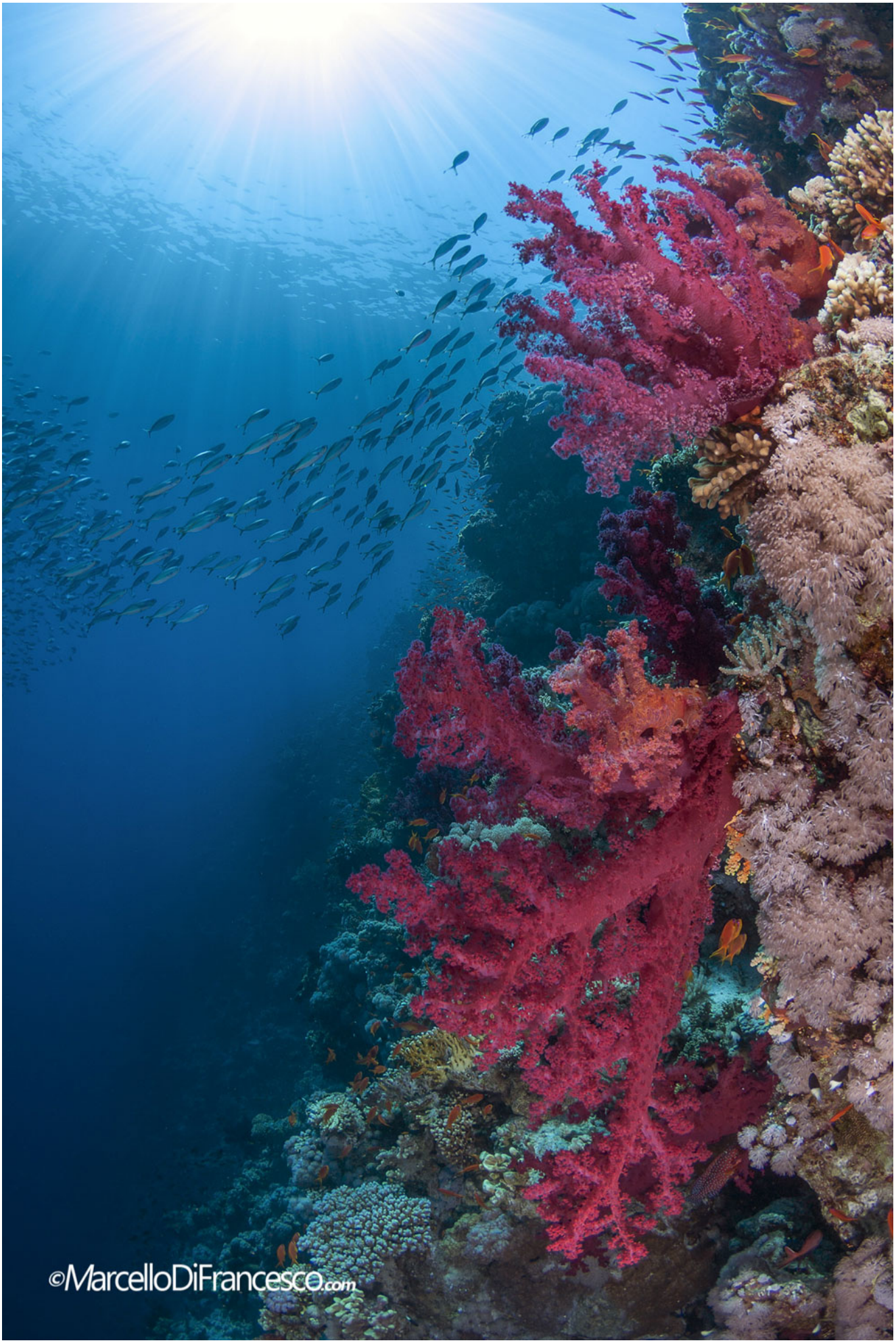
Level: Novice, advanced.

Scenario

In front of the moorings, on the south side, the wall descends vertically to 55-60 meters on a sandy seabed. Towards the lighthouse, the wall loses its slope and descends more gradually, with a fall of between 20-15 metres.

What to see and when

It is an all-season dive. The wall, rich in gorgonians and soft corals, towards the surface is beaten by swarms of carangids and fusiliers. Tuna, Napoleon fish and sea turtles represent regular encounters. More rarely you get to meet with sharks, especially threshers, which were once seen often in the blue, near the lighthouse.


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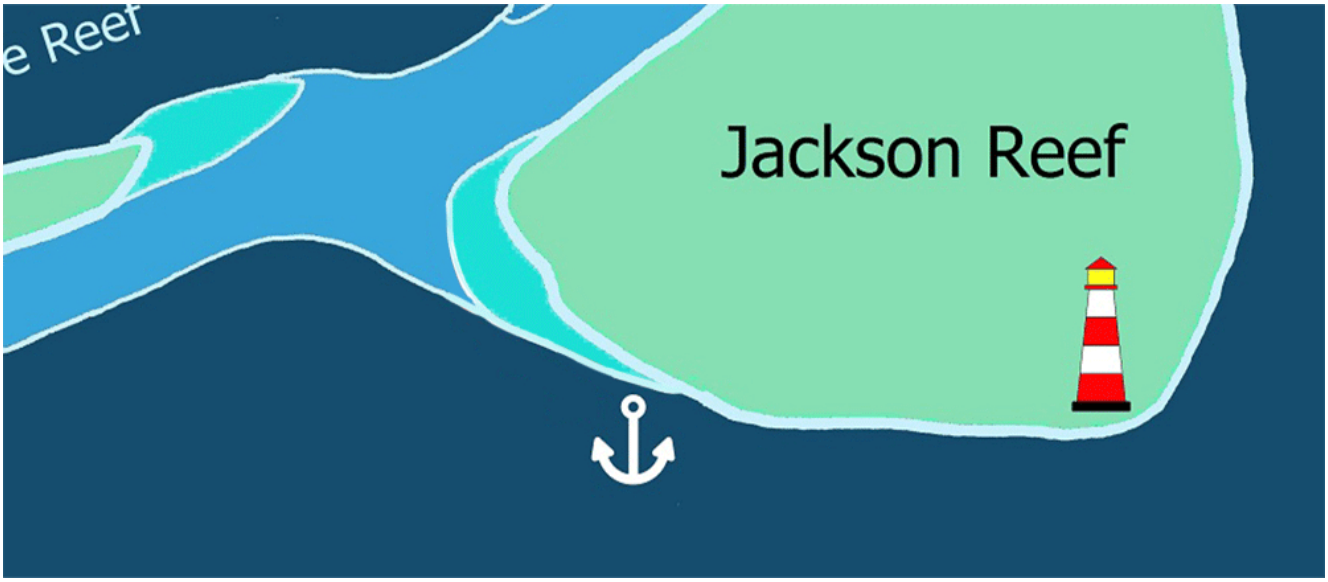
BRIEFING

Round trip
Starting from the moorings on the south side, you can explore the wall while keeping the reef on your left. You can proceed as long as the current, which tends to increase towards the lighthouse, allows for an easy return.

WARNING: Currents may increase dramatically during the dive, making the return very difficult. Best not to get too far from the moorings if you are not sure of the current trend, especially if there are waves beyond the lighthouse.

Drift recovery
This route gives you the opportunity to explore the beautiful coral garden at the lighthouse and proceed along a section of the North Wall, where you may encounter grey reef sharks, sea turtles and barracuda. Beyond the lighthouse, the wall falls again, dark and magnificent.

WARNING: This dive should only be made with calm sea beyond the lighthouse, or if you have a zodiac. Even if you surface in the sheltered area, currents can push you in high waves in a blink of an eye, making it dangerous to return to the boat.



The Garden

GPS

- Long. 28° 0’21.70″N
- Lat. 34°28’17.68″E

Level: Novice, advanced, second trip and current conditions.

Scenario

Probably the most beautiful coral garden in the Sharm el Sheikh area. Travelling from the moorings towards east, the reef gradually takes the form of a half dome. Endless varieties of corals stretch as far as the eye can see, especially between 15 and 5 metres, between sandy pitches and gentle slopes, covered with bright marine life.

What to see and when

Throughout the year, you will admire stone fish in the pitches. Where the reef is steepest, over 18 meters, numerous gorgonians and table corals dominate the scene. There can be frequent meetings with whitetip reef sharks in the first 10 meters. Also, hammerhead sharks and grey sharks are found deeper, towards the saddle between Jackson and Woodhouse Reef.



BRIEFING

Conditions for a drift recovery here occur very rarely. The return journey is assessed based on currents. The most interesting part is the shallowest, between 5 and 15 metres depth, thanks to its colour and variety. A look at the saddle, at around 27m, is also worth mentioning. Currents, if present, increase towards west, and at shallower altitudes. The particular shape of this reef causes the mass of water to rise up along the reef, pushing it towards the saddle and upwards. In this case, it is wise to keep away from the reef and at higher depths, especially on your way back. A good planning of air supply and effort required is essential.

WARNING: Currents can be very strong and drag even a fit, well-trained diver on top of the reef or towards an area with extremely turbulent waters. Conditions of recovery at that point may be difficult with a zodiac, even dangerous with a boat. We recommend to constantly check your buoyancy, to avoid being

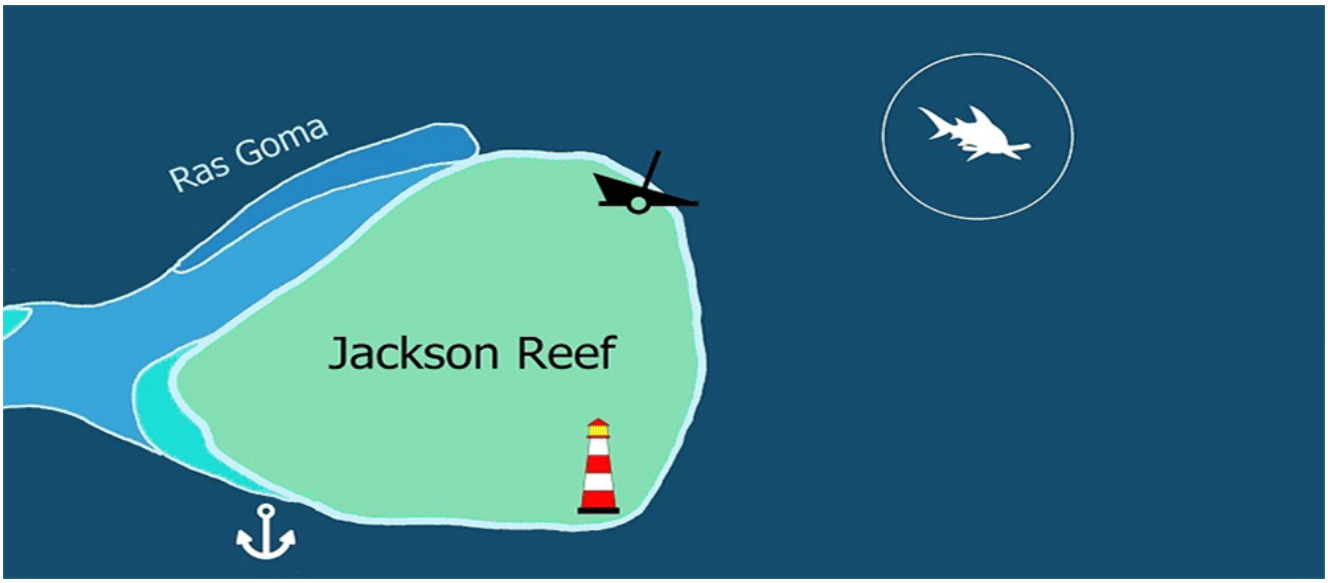
dragged from the currents to the shallowest part or to the turbulent wave zone.

North Jackson

GPS: Entry point

- Long. 28° 0’43.66″N
- Lat. 34°28’24.84″E

Level: expert – advanced



Scenario

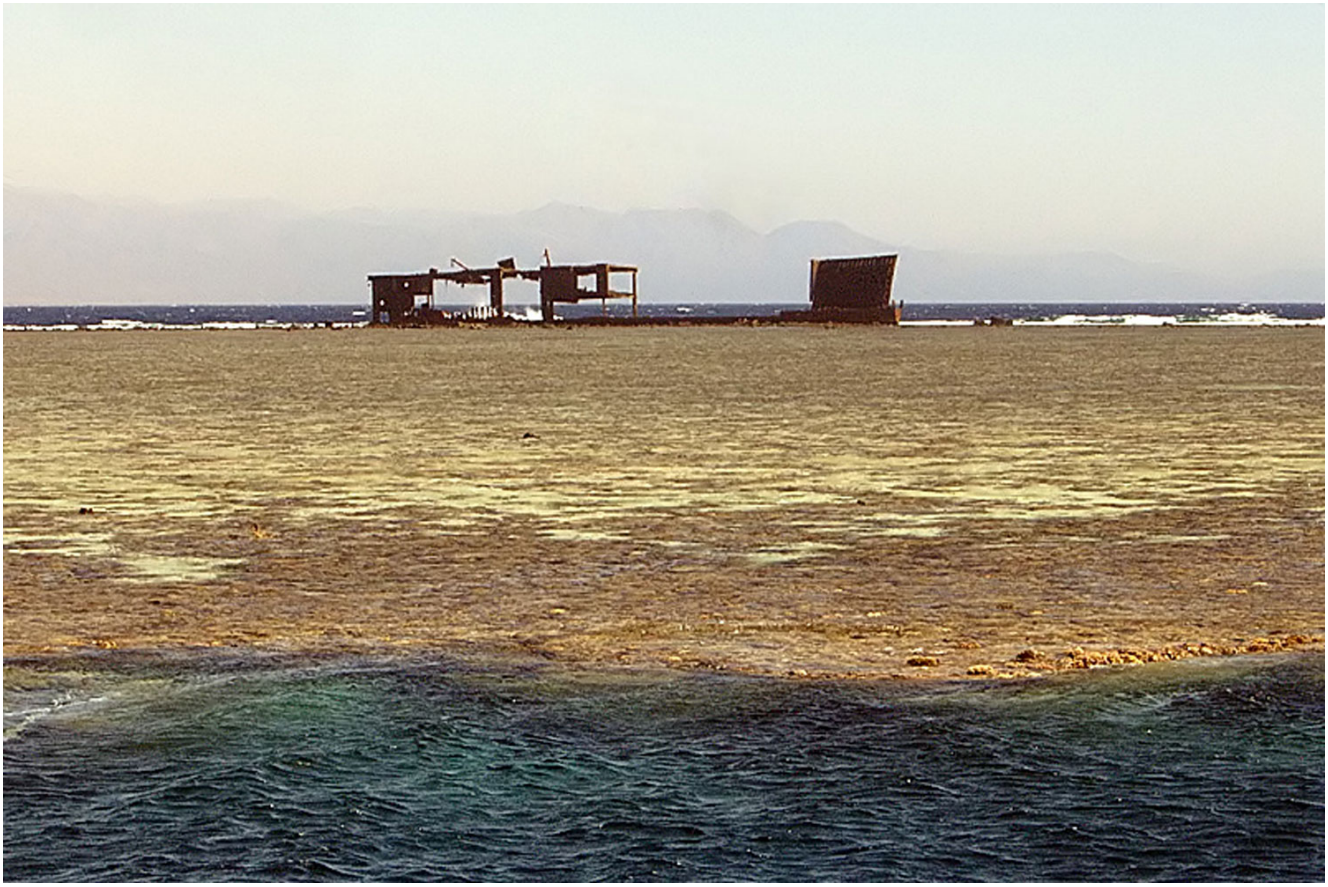
The wall, compared to other dives in the same reef is not of great interest. You want to dive at North Jackson for one reason: hammerhead sharks, although their number has remarkably lowered in the past few years.

What to see and when

The hammerhead sharks can be seen in the period stretching from mid-June to early October.

BRIEFING

Diving at North Jackson should be planned according to sea and current conditions. The best time to do this is when the tide is falling with the current going southwards. If you do not have a zodiac it is wise to dive when the wind is falling (usually early in the afternoon). Leaving the Lara wreck behind, we can swim immediately in the blue northwards at a depth of about 10-15 meters, until the shadow of the reef has completely disappeared.



At that point you start to go down, always swimming slowly if the current comes from the North, then you wait. The ideal depth is that of the thermocline, at 22-26 meters. You don't have to go deeper: if sharks are present, they will show up. Waiting more than 25 minutes is not recommended, to avoid drifting in distant or dangerous areas. After the dive, depending on sea conditions and means available, you can swim towards the wall and exit from one of the sides of the reef, or decide to surface in the blue. With ideal currents, the dive group should be able to move towards the wall without finning. If you are with low-consumption divers and if you haven't spent too much time at depth, you can continue the dive, drifting along Ras Goma.

WARNING

– Don't dive with currents towards North and rough seas, if you don't have a zodiac! Jackson Reef is located between Grafton and Enterprise Passage, two important channels for maritime navigation, incessantly crossed by cargo ships and container ships.

– It is always recommended to surface close to the reef, in an area where local crews are used to be looking for divers and DSMBs, so you keep safe from boats propellers. With wind from the North, ascending to the exposed side of the reef is unthinkable with a daily boat.

– Being in the blue can disorient you! It can generate dizziness and increase narcosis. The lack of reference points makes it necessary to keep your eyes fixed on instruments and on bubbles, continuously checking your buoyancy and staying close to your buddy and the rest of the group.

– With currents from the South, visibility, which is usually very good, dramatically worsens and turbulence phenomena can occur, with vortices, strong ascending and descending currents that, without references, can put a strain on the most experienced diver. In these conditions, I personally saw bubbles first go up, then going down a few meters away. The forces of nature need to be respected!

Acknowledgement

Big thanks to Franz, Andrea Zuccari and Francesco Pipino. With their experience they greatly contributed to the article, helping me better understand this reef and its laws.