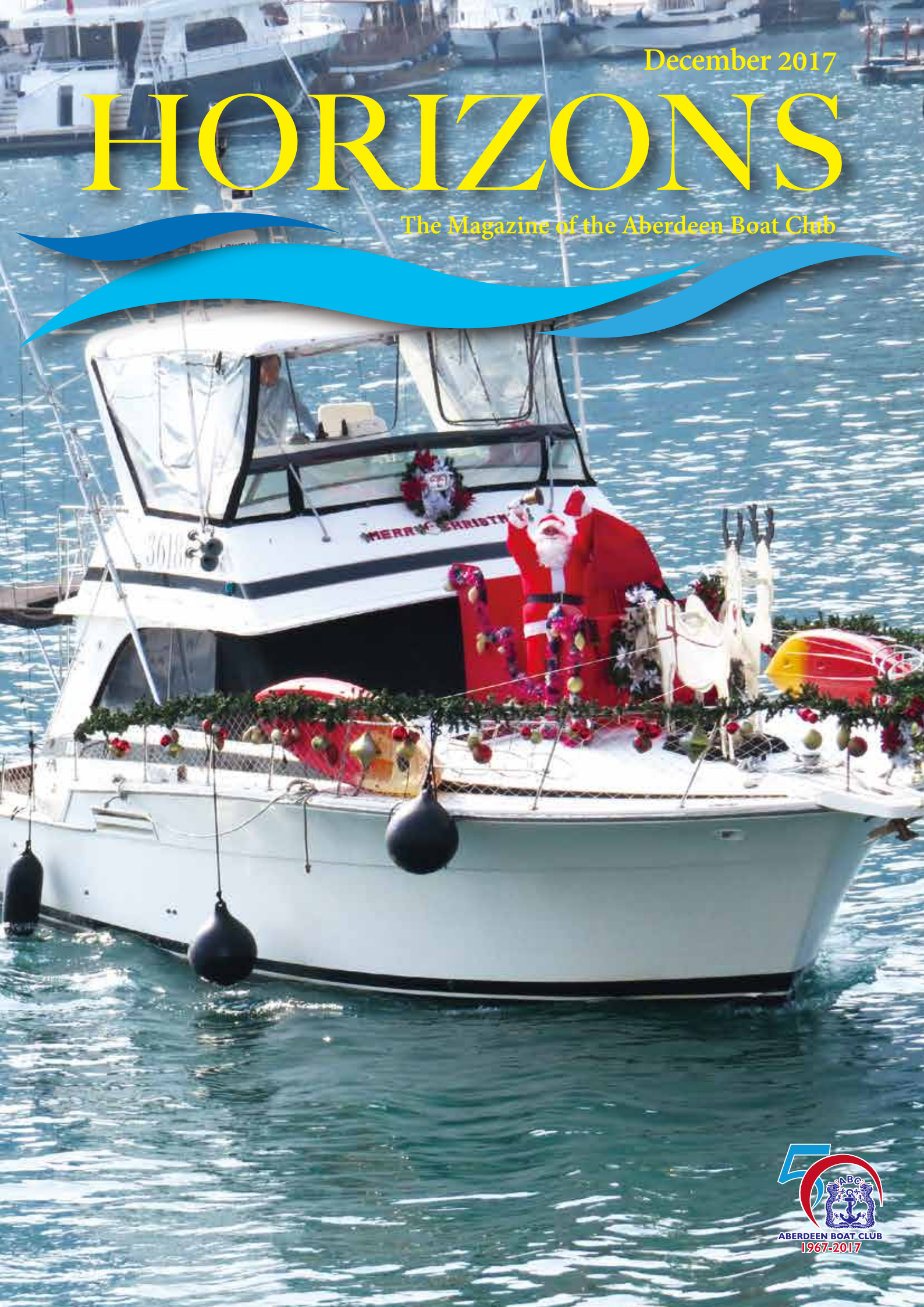


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HORIZONS

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South China Diving Club Expedition to Christmas Island

By Rob Christie





In October, the South China Diving Club took a trip to Christmas Island with 20 of their own divers (some of whom are also members of Aberdeen Boat Club). SCDC leads overseas dive expeditions at least once per year, and prefers to choose destinations based on their offering of the natural marine environment, as opposed to above water accommodation. In today's world, finding dive sites with minimal impact by human activity is difficult. Dive operators in particular can be focused on parading as many divers through a site as possible, and focusing more on delivering creature comforts on the surface to make the "perfect dive holiday". A destination such as Christmas Island is perfect for SCDC because it is far from heavy tourism, and is instead focused exclusively on the diving.

Located just south of the equator in the India Ocean, Christmas Island is an oceanic outcrop

that formed off the peak of ancient volcano, which pushed from the seafloor above the water 10 million years ago. Virtually alone in the middle of the ocean, the island is home to a variety of indigenous and unique wildlife that includes many species of birds and land crabs. For anyone who loves BBC nature documentaries, Christmas Island was made famous in 1990 by David Attenborough, when he presented the mass movement of the red land crabs from the jungle to the coast in a spawning event that is truly awesome in size and intensity.

Like other islands with the same or similar holiday names, Christmas Island was spotted on Christmas Day by the crew of a merchant ship. For many years it was not considered habitable, due to its jagged and rocky coastline and dense jungle. However, once phosphate was discovered in its soil in the late 1800s, a mining operation was set up to start excavation. Later, when the territory was



DIVERS OF ABC and SCDC TRIP



transferred to Australia in 1958, the mining operation was expanded and a year around community was established to support the industry. There are now around 2,000 full year residents, who form a truly diverse community that mixes Asian and Australian culture and customs in this small outpost.

But it was what lies underneath Christmas Island and hidden from sight that SCDC was seeking to explore. Due to cool, nutrient rich water flowing north from Antarctica, and strong currents flowing westward from the Timor Sea into the depths of the Indian Ocean, Christmas Island is a virtual crossroads for marine life great and small. The seafloor shelf that formed around the island, which briefly levels at 30m depth before dropping hundreds of metres into the darkness, supports a coral garden that is breathtaking in density and diversity.

Abundant marine life

Large fish such as reef and white tipped sharks, whale sharks and hammerheads pass by Christmas Island throughout the year in search of food during their migrations. Meanwhile, the coral gardens that ring the island are home to large moray eels, green turtles, batfish, groupers, snappers, butterfly fish and schools of jack fish. Together, the undersea world of Christmas Island is a perfect marine ecosystem that is unexploited by commercial fishing or other industry.

Anyone who is familiar with diving in places such as the Philippines or Indonesia or other locations around the Coral Triangle will find much of the sea life of Christmas Island familiar. However, the diving conditions are more challenging than many other popular dive destinations in Asia. Current surges and rough seas still make their way around the edge of the island from the southerly exposed side. But as all experienced divers know, the most diverse and active marine areas happen to be where the current surges strongest. So, diving where the conditions are roughest may take more effort, but the payoff is always breathtaking.

Sadly, the coral reefs of Asia are being badly damaged by warming and acidification of the ocean. Although the problem has been



emerging for many decades, within the past few years the rate at which coral is dying off is alarming. Christmas Island is no exception, and the coral in this highly secluded place has been recently decimated by warm ocean currents. Even the casual diver can easily spot the damage to coral that has bleached and is devoid of life. One can only hope that the decay is reversible, and the coral can spring back to life and start to rebuild the reefs that have taken hundreds if not thousands of years to build.

SCDC is dedicated to making "zero impact" to the sites that it dives. This means emphasising dive technique that doesn't touch or damage the marine life, in particular the coral: take only pictures and leave only ripples. Finding dives sites like Christmas Island is important to SCDC members, to not only enjoy and photograph the natural beauty of the marine environment, but also to witness what a natural environment should look like.

