

An underwater photograph of a vibrant coral reef. The central focus is a large, fan-shaped coral structure with a red base and yellow tips, growing from a rock covered in smaller, colorful corals. The background is a clear blue sea with several small fish swimming. The text is overlaid in the top right corner.

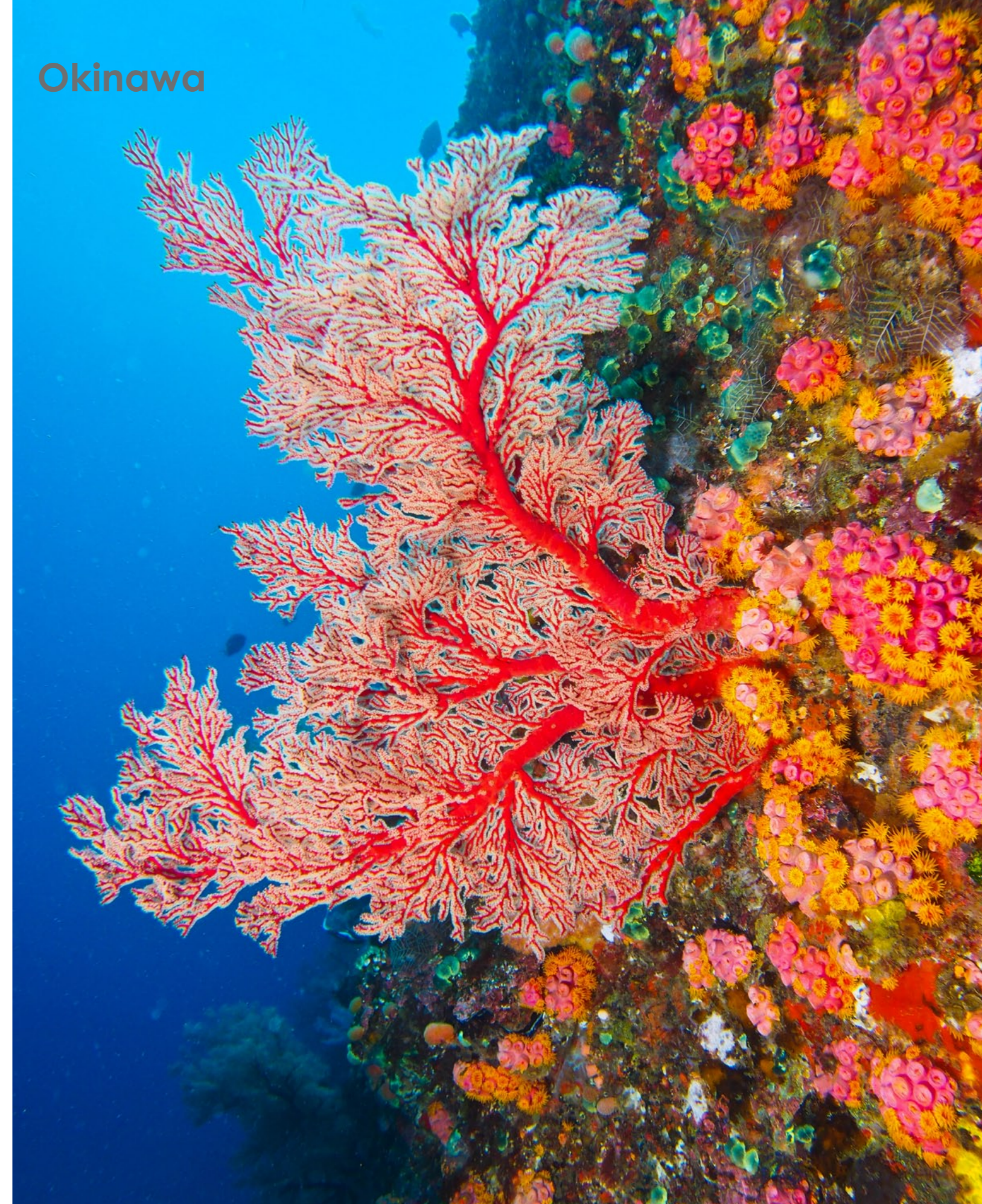
Text and photos by Farhat Jah

Okinawa

—Diving the Kerama Islands of Japan



Okinawa



The rugged landscape of Okinawa makes the island look a lot like the western isles of Scotland

Text and photos by Farhat Jah

Okinawa—simply saying the name has so many connotations. The island itself is huge, and yet it's an oceanic island far from the Asian continent. It takes two and half hours to fly from Hong Kong, the closest point on mainland China, to get here. The main Japanese islands are even further away, with Tokyo a good three-hour jet flight from Naha International Airport. Ostensibly part of Japan, Okinawa is very different from the main islands of the country. The air and sea temperature are warmer and the atmosphere is very different. The people are slower—the traffic and the public transport, basically non-existent.

Sea fans are abundant on Okinawa reefs; *Pseudoceros ferrugineus* flatworm (left). PREVIOUS PAGE: Yellow gargonian



THIS PAGE: Topside scenes of life in Okinawa, where military planes can be seen flying overhead to and from the U.S. military base

In the south, Ishigaki is the biggest island in the Yaeyama group with a small city, a large naval base disguised as a coastguard facility, a series of beaches, resorts and an airport that can handle the 737 jets. Irimote is a larger island of primal jungle and a hundred nautical miles to the west is Yonaguni Island (ed.— featured in *X-RAY MAG* #54.)

History

Okinawa's history is prevalent. Okinawa itself has scores of islands around what the locals euphemistically call the mainland. Originally called the Ryukyu Kingdom and independent from Japan, the islands were brought under Japanese control before WWII. The second World

War has indescribably shaped Okinawa ever since.

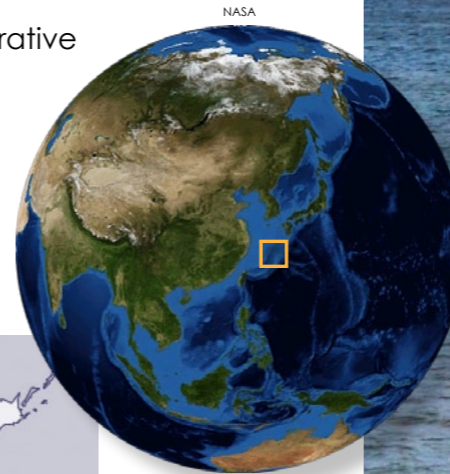
The American forces needed an island with which to bomb Tokyo, and so took Iwo Jima and Okinawa Jima. The battles were

long and bloody and explain the total devastation of Naha. The United States then went on to rule Okinawa until well after my own birthday in 1971.

In the early 1970s, Okinawa had a referendum in which the Okinawans were given the choice of reverting to the Ryuku Kingdom and independence, joining Japan or becoming a U.S. protectorate. The vote was precariously close with many voting to remain with the United States. To this day, some Okinawans grumble about the authenticity of the vote.

In 1973, the islands were handed over to Japan, and the whole of Okinawa with ancillary islands became a prefecture of Japan. Regardless

of administrative power, the United States kept their military bases and



ABOVE: Global map with location of Okinawa, Japan
LEFT: Location of Okinawa on map of Japan

Japan has a plethora of Pacific Ocean islands that are unknown to the world. There are three main sets of islands south of Kyushu: the Nansei Islands, the Sakishima Islands and the Yaeyama Islands.

thousands of personnel on the islands.

In 1990, a young U.S. Marine called Doug Bennett was posted to Okinawa. He liked the people,

and he liked the diving. When he tired of protecting his nation's interests in Africa and Japan, he returned to Okinawa in 1995 and opened a new dive operation called Reef Encounters. Doug's

center became a ground-breaking business.

Japanese dive centres cater mainly to Japanese clients. They dive the Japanese style, with 30-minute, highly rigid guided dives.



Sunset over Sunabe Sea Wall



Lionfish at Sunabe Sea Wall

Diver swims over Sunabe Sea Wall, covered in an array of coral growth

Diving

We arrived in Naha Airport on a blustery day. Doug's youngest instructor, Daisuke, arrived to collect us. As we drove up north to Chatan, he briefed us on his surprisingly very positive take on Okinawa and the United States.

"When you see the demo's, it's just the same few people," said Daisuke. "The Americans are a huge part of the economy here, and they are generally very polite and nice people."

Our hotel was more like a motel in that the reception was tiny but the rooms huge. They were very American in their make up, with kitchenettes, microwave, bedrooms, lounges, and TV's.

"This used to be U.S. officers'

accommodation for Kadena Airbase," Doug later told me.

The next morning, we arrived at the dive centre very late. Huffing and puffing, lugging our cold water gear, we had misjudged the distance from the hotel. Daisuke was amused and not bothered.

"Doug had to go to a meeting," said Daisuke. "He told me that I should take you to the Sunabe Sea Wall."

Sunabe Sea Wall. We loaded the Reef Encounters minibus with our kit and tanks and drove back to our hotel. We kitted up and climbed over the sea defence wall and walked over the reef top to drop in. This was weird—we were diving off a road, on the exact same place where the U.S.



21°C. I had no name 5mm Cambodian wetsuit combination that I had picked up in Istanbul on the cheap. It was good enough—my hood did its job, and I felt okay. The cold water seeped up my legs and arms, but 20-21°C was not cold enough to make it unpleasant. I twisted the bezel on my momentum dive watch. At least I did not have to wear gloves, I thought to myself.

In order to access the deeper water, we had to swim out through the cut. This was not at all onerous, as the walls were paced with hard and soft coral and abounded with fish. Daisuke tried to gather us together

forces had landed on the island. The reef started just below the surface of the water. We entered by lying on our backs and paddling a few metres until we reached the edge of a long "cut" or channel that was about ten metres deep. We descended to eight metres and started to move along the sandy bottom.

I gasped. The water was a chilly



Saddled toby (above); Hector's reef goby (left)





Scorpionfish hiding in reef (left); Hard coral cover on reef (above)

some other hapless diver. The experience while disconcerting was quite unique.

Eventually, Daisuke managed to herd us out of the cut, and we popped out and turned right.

Okinawa is famous amongst the knowledgeable diving community for its macro life. I was expecting the scores of nudibranches and tube worms that we did see, but I found myself astounded by the marine life. Schools of small jacks and fusiliers sped by. The visibility has been promised to be ten metres, but even on this grey day, I could see 20m.

The soft coral was as exquisite and colourful as any in southeast Asia. It waved gently in the sea action, as we swam by. The end of the cut made a natural north-south facing wall,

but spurs of reef stuck out to sea in an easterly direction. These made for long shallow walls that started at 10m depth and went down to 20m.

Daisuke now came into his own. He knew exactly where we were, took us along the reef spurs into deeper and deeper water. Then we headed off into the blue to find a coral bommie packed with anthias, nudibranches, moray eels, and "critters various".

My air was not doing well with the excitement and the photography. I signalled Daisuke, and he led us back to the sea wall. We climbed out as a pair of F22 Raptors flew overhead and landed at Kadena.

We switched tanks over and had



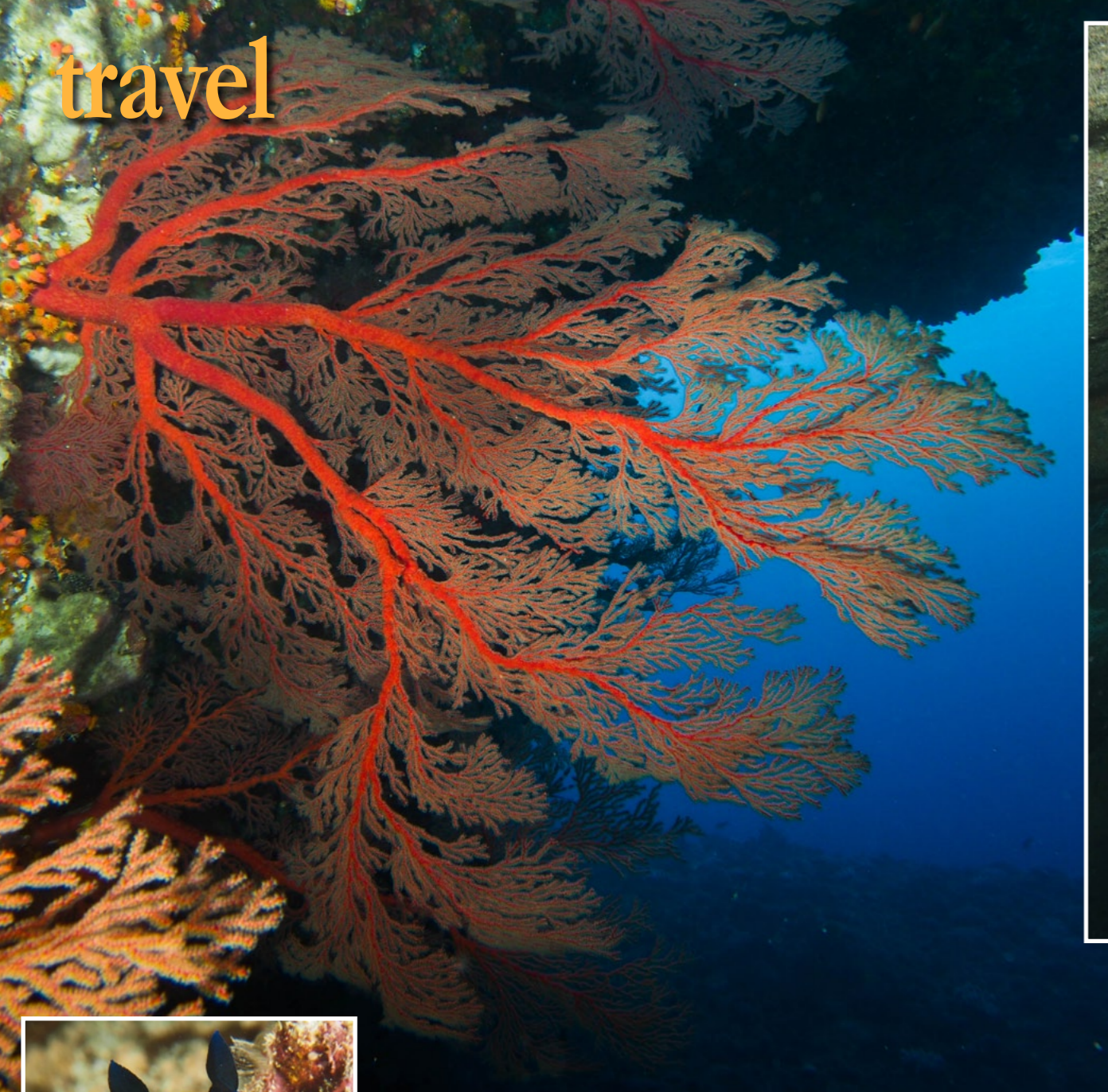
Chromodoris nudibranch



Cardinalfish at Sunabe Sea Wall

and lead us out, but I was mesmerised by some nudibranches and had my Olympus OMD snapping away happily.

Doug had briefed Daisuke well, and he gave me the leeway a photographer so craves. A highly venomous sea snake came by, and to my consternation, found me mesmerising. It played below me and then swirled around my legs giving me some excellent photo opportunities, but doing nothing for my air consumption! Eventually it left me in peace, and went off to play with



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Large sea fan on reef wall; Pinnate batfish under ledge; Soft coral on reef wall; Nembrotha nudibranch (inset)



an *onigiri* for lunch—a ball of rice wrapped in seaweed with a salmon interior. A Hercules sailed lazily by as Daisuke told us that a decent interval had ensued.

We strapped our tanks on, I adjusted my bezel and swam out to repeat the experience. This time, we did not turn right but left. Again my air did not last as long as I would have liked. As we climbed out a second time, I was left feeling that I had barely touched the surface of the Sunabe Sea Wall diving area.

House Reef. Without wishing to sound overly dramatic, I was simply

blown away by what could only be described as Okinawa's house reef. Sure it was only 22m deep, it lacked massive pelagic action but under the flight path of a U.S. airbase and diving the most dived site in Okinawa, (which was still not crowded), we were presented with impressive tropical diving.

Kerama Islands. The Sunabe Sea Wall is one of the many dive sites on Okinawa, but the Kerama Islands—20 miles off the east coast of the Okinawa mainland—were reputed to be the special dive location of the Northern Ryukyu.

Reef Encounters has an impressive Taiwanese dive boat that looks suspiciously like a Bertram. A team of us were now assembled—Scots, English, American—along with our Japanese guides, Daisuke and Toyo. Doug was our skipper, and we assembled at the marina early in the morning. The weather was idyllic but the sun had not come out.

"I cannot believe this is February, man," Doug muttered, as our twin diesel engines opened up, and we

steamed into the channel. I sat on the flying bridge, ostensibly taking photos, but really just chatting to Doug, picking his brains about the Ryukyu Islands.

These islands and their beauty fascinated me. Their size was massive, and yet the Japanese had built carefully and with some taste. Naha was a city but a small

city, and the resorts on the northern coast were built with an eye to blend into the greenery. The only downside of Okinawa was that the tourism infrastructure was almost entirely designed for the Japanese.

The presence of the U.S. forces had created an English speaking section of the Japanese populous who made their business serving



Okinawa



LEFT TO RIGHT: Spotted grouper; Soft coral growth on reef; Brilliant yellow gorgonian

Okinawa: Diving's best kept secret

Organising diving adventures in Yonaguni and the Okinawa Islands



www.insidejapantours.com

UK T: 0117 370 9751 US T: 303 952 0379

E: diving@insidejapantours.com

Americans. These people were only too happy to adapt their services for tourists.

What made it all work was the sheer friendliness of the Okinawans. When we took a bus somewhere, the bus driver would explain in single words or hand signals what we needed to do next. Where communication failed, the sheer goodwill of the average Okinawan would bridge the gap—and we, as tourists, always felt extremely welcome and safe to get lost.

My thoughts were interrupted as a series of rocks appeared at the side of the boat. Classic Okinawa fishing boats sat at the edge of a clear light-green reef, with the men casting their nets as they always have. Away from the reef, the water was a gorgeous blue. We motored slowly on around the reefs and between some islands.

"Some say there are 27 Islands here and some say five," Doug

drawled. "It sort of depends upon how high the tide is."

"How many dive sites do you have?" I asked.

"Oh about 200," he replied nonchalantly. We were only to do three this day.

We circled a large rock masquerading as an island. Goats strolled around on the steep grass that came down to black rock cliffs.

Kuroshima. Doug stopped the boat and moored up. We rolled into the water—between twin rocks—a site called Kuroshima. We dived along a wall that led off onto a spur, which joined onto one of the other rocks making an island. Daisuke took his divers around the island, but we could not get past the main coral strewn wall.

The water was clear with 30m visible in all directions. Small yellow soft corals were surrounded by angelfish.

We descended lower and lower to some emperor angelfish that were sitting at depth—around a fan coral. They watched us lazily, not bothered by our

appearance at all. I snapped them, and the twin flashes of my camera popped and lit them dramatically.

I looked at my gauge. We had reached

32m. My computer was downcalculating rapidly, and I did not really want to go into decompression. I signalled my dive buddy, Cisca, and asked what she



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Varicose phyllid nudibranch under sea fan; Big-eye squirrelfish under ledge; Lush sea fans and anthias decorate a reef wall; Diver in swimthrough

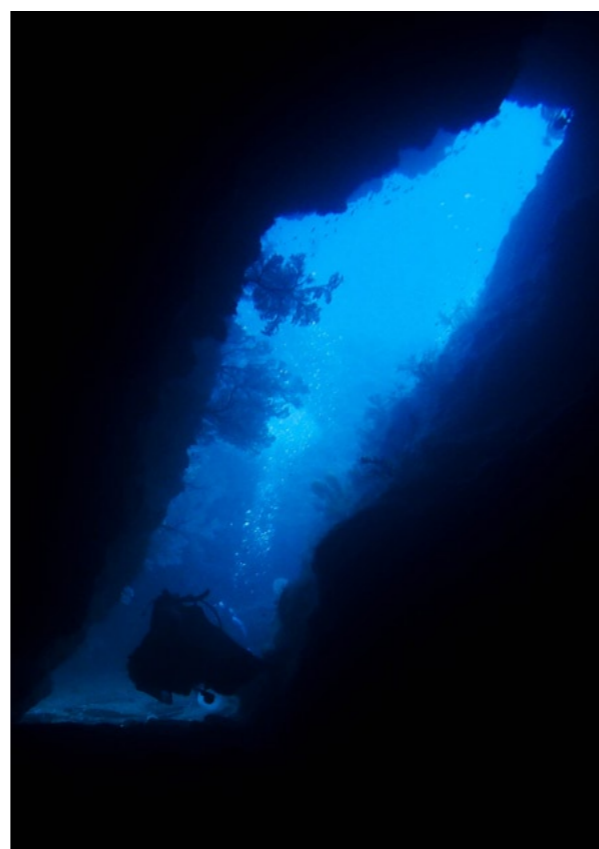
in this shallow location, but in our thick suits and heavy weights, every movement was an effort and my air consumption was hammered.

We swam back to the top of a coral cliff where the boat was moored and went to do our safety stops.

Azu's Cave. Our next dive was on a large square rock in the middle of the ocean. Named Azu's Cave, it was marked by a black and white post warning passing boats about the rock. The sea had picked up slightly, and we dropped in and entered the rock.

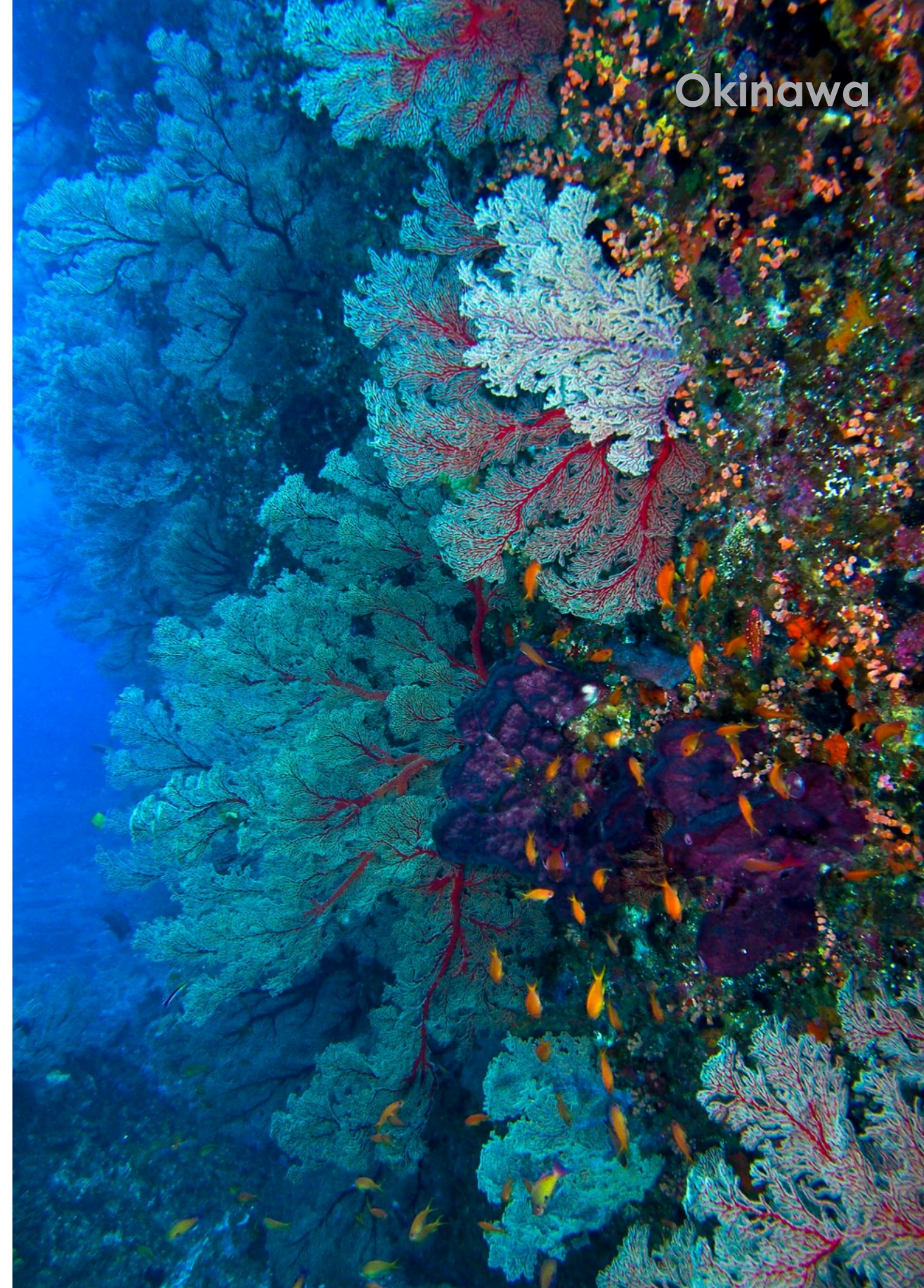
We literally swam 20 metres through the most dramatic swim-through. All the way along the tunnel emperor angelfish mingled around the large gorgonian sea fans. I kept stopping to look up, with my strobes on torch mode. I felt I could spend half an hour in here alone, but I did not want to test Daisuke's patience.

As we exited the cave, Daisuke led



the group forward. He motioned me and asked if we wanted to join. We could not. The rock was so large, and such a magnet of life, that we opted to stay there.

As he headed off, we circled it, slowly



at 20m depth, taking in the fan corals and fish. Daisuke had headed off down a sand river; I noted it for future reference, waved and he was gone.

The surge pushed us around the rock. This was big boys diving. It took all of our skill to stay stable and enjoy what we were looking at. Lionfish crawled all



Diver follows the trail of a 'sand river' underwater

Okinawa

PLANNING YOUR TRIP:

The Kerama Islands are a hidden gem. Famous in Japan for their diving, they are a world-class destination with sharks, manta rays, orcas, schools of fish and macro creatures.

Japan, however, is unique. The public transport on the mainland is excellent, but in Okinawa, it is non-existent. You will end up hauling your kit all over airports train stations, and often enough, down the street. Divers are encouraged to take a single wheelie bag and keep kit down to a minimum, such as regulator, suit, mask and fins. Reef Encounters has excellent Aqua Lung BCD's and regulators.

Spring and summer are idyllic with tropical water and air temperatures. Dive operator, Doug Bennett, of Reef Encounters knows the Ryukyu Islands like no other diver. He and his team do packages to Okinawa, Irimote, Ishigaki and have tie-ups with local hotels of all comfort levels.

We also travelled on the main islands of Japan with the excellent Inside Japan Tours. They organised our entire itinerary from trains to planes to busses. They also do dive packages in conjunction with Reef Encounters and others. With their contracts and contacts, they are often cheaper than doing it independently. Registered in the United Kingdom and abroad, they are a first class outfit that knows Japan. You must, however, tell them that you are a diver and carrying dive gear. They will tailor your journey accordingly.

The Japan specialists offer a range of dive packages across the sub-tropical islands and the mainland to include the Iseki Stones of Yonaguni, the manta rays of Ishigaki, coral and stunning visibility in Okinawa and hammerhead sharks off the Izu Peninsula. InsideJapan fully tailors dive packages to suit all time frames, budgets and interests. ■



Banded sea snake (top left); Resting scorpionfish (left)

was almost stormy. I climbed back onto the boat with the others, and we steamed the last few miles home.

Afterthoughts

A few days later Daisuke was roped into dropping us off at Naha Airport. It was sad saying goodbye to the Reef Encounters team; they were excellent professional divers who guided us and others through calm and advanced diving. They were super safe and took the time to demystify Okinawa for us. ■

Farhat Jah is a dive writer and underwater photographer based in Pemba, Tanzania. He leads specialist dive safaris around the globe and operates a dive resort on the island of Pemba. For more information, visit: Orientafrica.com

over one wall and soft coral and fans on the other—the leeward sides of the rock being more alive than the others.

After our circuit, we thought we should follow Daisuke. I thought I had selected the correct sand river and finned slowly up the coral trench. In this way, we kept our selves away from the current. Schools of jacks and emperors sped by clearly minding their own business. When our air was getting low, I looked around. There was simply nowhere to do a multi-level dive—nowhere to do a stop and look at anything. So, I sent a buoy to the surface, and we ascended to stop.

We surfaced, and the weather had taken a definite turn for the worse. I looked around and inflated my BCD even more. I could now see for miles. I saw a spot and waved the SMB. The boat was there, and turned towards us.

"Sorry dude," Doug shouted from the bridge. "The others came up miles away

and then a pod of whales turned up so we watched them."

"No stress," I gasped, as I climbed up the ladder laden down with my kit. "The dive was awesome, and we knew you were coming."

Nagando Reef. The weather had turned, and Doug wanted to be closer to home. Doug took us to Nagando Reef, North Wall, where we all jumped into 18m water and landed on a reef. We were in full drift.

This time, we stayed glued to Daisuke and sped along the reefs and sand.

A sea snake followed us for a while, and then a reef shark appeared. It swam alongside us and then wandered off on its own business. In the midst of the dive, we

spotted a leaf fish and had the interesting experience of trying to shoot a macro photo in a three knot current. I think I just about managed it.

By the time we surfaced, we had covered an impressive distance, and it