



Melbourne offers the perfect opportunity to get down and dirty with the local seal population. Port Phillip Bay is a huge expanse of water and it offers fantastic reef and wreck diving. Often seals will join divers on deco or buzz them whilst on the dive site. But if you want to get closer to the seals and would rather not sit around fiddling your thumbs waiting for them to come to you, you can head out to Chinaman's Hat for a closer look.

Chinaman's Hat is a platform inside the Bay on which seals choose to rest their tired bones in between hunting expeditions. Despite this being a rest area the seals are extremely playful and a whole heap of fun. They are happy to show off for the odd snorkeler or diver, frolic and chase each other around. Chinaman's Hat is the perfect place for a snorkel or a second dive of the day.

The original Chinaman's Hat, depending on who you talk to, was either an old channel marker designed as a refuge for anyone lost at sea or a dilapidated defense post. Regardless, since those bygone years fur seals had taken a liking to the platform and used it as a rest station. A few years back the structural integrity of the old Chinaman's Hat was considered a bit dodgy so a new platform was built right next to it at a princely sum of \$250,000. It was officially called the Port Phillip Bay Seal platform but didn't impress the seals much. The skeptical seals continued to use the old platform despite its dilapidated state until in desperation Parks Victoria demolished the old platform... leaving the seals little choice.

The seal here are fantastic and there are plenty of them. They are fabulous fun and extremely playful. Wildly proclaimed the puppies of the ocean they readily come out to play with snorkels and divers alike. Many argue that a snorkel set up gives you more flexibility and maneuverability when playing with the seals. For those of us who can't hold our breath or want to watch the seals from below or perhaps take photos, strapping on a tank is the way to go.

Drop down onto the sand near the platform and the seals, being a rather curious sort, will come to you. From here you are free to watch them frolic... they often chase each other around, bite each other, spin, dive, play with bits of sponge and sea grass and generally show off. It is not

entirely uncommon for them to chew on a divers head or fin or other bits for a bit of fun or out of curiosity, so don't panic... its only a gentle affectionate nibble. They are very quick darting around and just do not stand still, so taking photos of them can be tricky but it is fun nonetheless.

Now for the **warnings**... especially important if you take your own boat and don't use a charter.

- Be careful when approaching the landing as the remains of the old platform still protrude off the bottom.
- Don't dive in too close to the platform... a great big seal landing on top of your head might not be the most pleasant of experiences.
- The area is prone to currents so a live boat and boat sitter are essential.
- They are generally gentle creatures but don't try to touch them or otherwise harass them off... wild animals have a habit of rebelling against unwanted attention.