THE GREAT BARRIER REEF (AUSTRALIA)

The Great Barrier Reef is the largest coral reef in the world. It is more than 1,243 miles (2,000 kilometers) long. Corals are not plants, rather they are cnidarians (like jellyfish). They consist of many small animals called polyps, which make colonies. If you look at the Great Barrier Reef in its entirety, you could say it is the largest creature in the world. The reef was formed over a hundred thousand years through the accumulation of countless coral skeletons. The algae that settle on the corals cause them to glow in lots of different colors. Coral reefs tend to develop just below sea level as they need sunlight to grow.

Coral

Corals come in all colors, shapes, and sizes. They can be soft or hard—the latter kind have solid skeletons made mostly of calcium carbonate and are the basis for the formation of coral reefs. Thousands of mini polyps grow and collect on them, as seen at the Great Barrier Reef.

Bleached coral

Corals are very sensitive to changes in their environment. The rise in water temperature due to climate change is particularly hard on them. If it is too warm for too long, they repel the algae with which they live and lose their fascinating colors. In recent years, patches of completely white coral reefs have emerged.

WHAT A COINCIDENCE!

The story goes that Captain James Cook was the first European to discover the Great Barrier Reef in 1770 when he ran aground on the reef with his ship *Endeavour*. Of course, the Indigenous people of Australia knew about the reef long before he did. Searching for a way out, the crew of the *Endeavour* explored the fascinating underwater world and then stripped their ship of goods and weapons to lighten its load, allowing them to enter an estuary and continue on their journey.

OTHER REEF DWELLERS

Seahorse

The female seahorse gives birth to the eggs and lays them in the male's abdominal pouch. The male incubates the eggs until baby seahorses hatch.

Clownfish

Clownfish live near or even inside anemones. Fortunately, they are immune to the stinging venom of anemone tentacles, so once they have found one they are protected from predators. The clownfish eat food left behind on the anemone and keep it clean. This is how they help each other!

Blue surgeonfish

Although they are normally harmless, these fish can sting! They have sharp spines at the base of their tails called scalpels.

Sea turtle

The ears of sea turtles are on the inside of their heads, which is why they have muffled hearing. Their beaks are particularly well suited to eating crabs, jellyfish, and other aquatic animals. Although they have no vocal chords they can still make sounds and communicate.

Starfish

If a starfish loses an arm, it grows back again, much like with crabs or lobsters.