
The jaw-dropping landscape of Whitehaven Beach on Whitsunday Island.

DECADENCE DOWN UNDER

Hamilton Island resort in the Great Barrier Reef delivers opulent amenities amid spectacular vistas. By Doug Wallace

The first thing you notice after hopping off your flight onto Hamilton Island are the immaculate golf carts — dozens of them waiting to whisk you to your villa. The second thing is the cockatoos winging their way onto your balcony railing to welcome you to your new favourite place in the world.

The hub of the Whitsunday Islands archipelago, Hamilton Island — located off the coast of Queensland — is a luxury retreat rife with posh pampering, exclusive boating, fine dining and full-on Great Barrier Reef adventures.

The island is run like one big happy town, the marina its high street, ringed with the basics in amenities — post office, general store, pharmacy, liquor mart, novelty shops and galleries, and numerous specialty restaurants. Luxury condos, big and small, are self-catering, offering all the comforts of home.



TOP: Taking in a moment of solitude at the lookout on Hamilton Island. Photo by Doug Wallace. ABOVE: The island's cockatoos ensure visitors are never lonely. Photo by Tim Stewart.

You preorder supplies in advance from a grocer in the mainland port of Airlie, which are then picked up after check-in. A fishmonger at the marina delivers the freshest seafood right to your doorstep. A golf cart is your mode of conveyance for the week to shuttle you to and from the marina and yacht club, the pools and beaches on the island, and the bounty of other attractions and distractions. There's even a small zoo, where you can commune face-to-face with kangaroos, koalas and wallabies.

Although a major cyclone earlier this year caused damage to Hamilton and the surrounding islands, as well as to the mainland, renovations and repairs were swift. With the exception of Hayman Island resort and Daydream Island, both of which are still undergoing renovations until mid-2018, the region and the tourists have safely weathered the storm, most of them barely missing a beat.

DAY TRIPPING

Hopping on and off boats is the order of the day here. Guests can take in a wide cross-section of marine activities, ranging from a romantic tall-ship cruise to a sporty yacht adventure. You can even explore the region by raft or jet ski, or sail around all 74 Whitsunday Islands if you like, skippering yourself or chartering a crew. There's also the option to soar over Heart Reef's stunning coral composition via seaplane or helicopter and then picnic on a private beach. Or trek the Ngaro Sea Trail and stop in at the historic aboriginal caves at Nara Inlet. The choices are plentiful and the vibe is easy breezy.

BEACH TIME

Take in an afternoon on the world-famous Whitehaven Beach on Whitsunday Island proper. This seven-kilometre strip of brilliant white sand consistently makes the world's top-



ABOVE: A plethora of boats man the still waters at the Hamilton Island Marina. Photo by Doug Wallace. BOTTOM LEFT: Snorkelling above the Great Barrier Reef.

10 lists of beach destinations. The sand itself — purportedly 98-percent-pure silica — is comprised of granules so fine that it feels like you're walking on cornstarch.

Meanwhile, back on Hamilton Island, if you can't justify spending all of your time swinging in a hammock, take a hike. The views are superb, especially on the Passage Peak trek, which offers 20 kilometres of nature trails plus a guided audio tour via app.

MUST DO

A visit to the Great Barrier Reef is a no-brainer. Cruise Whitsundays will take you to Reefworld, the tour company's now-refurbished pontoon platform stationed at Hardy Reef, where you can snorkel or scuba dive amid 400 types of coral and enjoy glimpses of up to 1,500 species of fish. Go for the Reefsleeper option and spend the night on the pontoon's top deck, where you'll be

sleeping on a comfy swag — a low tent equipped with snug bedding — underneath the stars.

Viewing the Great Barrier Reef up close is a breathtaking and humbling experience. You feel privileged to be here, with so much to see per square metre — white, red and green feather stars lighting up the ocean floor; bumphead parrotfish do everything but bump heads, and giant schools of yellowtail fusilier swimming by you in a glorious cascade of colour. You may even spot turtles and stingrays gliding past your shoulders. The giant clams, which you'll see plenty of, are a good sign of a healthy reef. Out here, marine life gets to grow big because they're well protected.

DAY TRIPPING

Although you can fly to the resort town of Airlie Beach on the mainland and take a ferry, the best route to Hamilton Island is to fly direct via Qantas Airways or Virgin Australia. The best time to go Down Under is October through May (keep in mind that December and January can get busy), while June to September are great months for sailing and whale-watching.

For more information, visit hamiltonIsland.com.au, tourismwhitsundays.com.au and cruisewhitsundays.com.au. □