



Whitsunday Best

Sheltered by the Great Barrier Reef, the Whitsunday Islands deliver pockets of pure opulence and camera-ready topography in Queensland, Australia.

BY DOUG WALLACE



"A FISH MONGER IN THE MARINA DELIVERS THE FRESHEST SEAFOOD RIGHT TO YOUR DOORSTEP."

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, is a luxury retreat off the coast of Queensland, Australia, rife with posh pampering, exclusive boating, fine dining and full-on Great Barrier Reef adventure.

The island runs like one big happy town, the marina its high street, ringed with the basics: post office, general store, pharmacy, liquor mart, novelty shops and galleries, and quite a number of specialty restaurants. Luxury condos - big and small - are self-catered with all the comforts of home. Visitors pre-order supplies in advance from a grocer in the mainland port of Airlie, which are then picked up after check-in. A fish monger in the marina delivers the freshest seafood right to your doorstep. And then you're set, with the golf cart as your wheels for the week, to get you to and from the island's pools and beaches, attractions and distractions, marina and yacht club. There's even a small zoo, where you can commune face-to-face with kangaroos, koalas and wallabies.

Hopping on and off boats is the order of the day here. Guests can take in a wide cross-section of marine activities - everything 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. Or how about soaring over Heart Reef by seaplane or helicopter and picnicking on a private beach? You can also explore the Ngaro Sea Trail and stop in at the historic aboriginal caves at Nara Inlet. The choices are plentiful and the vibe is easy: the only thing you have to hurry up and do here is relax.

A trip to the Great Barrier Reef is a no-brainer; you didn't come all this way not to experience it up close. Cruise Whitsundays tour company takes guests to Reefworld, their now refurbished pontoon platform stationed at Hardy Reef, where you can snorkel or scuba dive with up to 1,500 species of fish around 400 types of coral. You can even spend the night on the pontoon with the company's Reefsleep option.

Visiting the Great Barrier Reef 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 sea stars light up the ocean floor. A crown-of-thorns starfish looks like a fir tree. Sea cucumbers resemble big, fat worms. Mangrove jacks hide in their shells, while bumphead parrotfish do everything but bump heads. Sergeant fish are everywhere, supervising. Giant schools of yellowtail fusilier are a cascade of beauty. The turtles and stingrays you may spot are always an added bonus.

Here at the reef's south end, the giant clams, which you'll see plenty of, are a good sign of a healthy reef. Things get big out here because they're well protected, including three-metre-long George the Giant Queensland Grouper, who has been living under Reefworld since the





early 1990s. He keeps pretty much to himself, sometimes scaring the wits out of night divers, turning up at their shoulders after being drawn to their lights. All the better to find his dinner, it seems.

An afternoon on the fine white silica sands of world-famous Whitehaven Beach on Whitsunday Island proper is time well spent. This seven-kilometre strip of sand consistently makes the world's top-10 lists. There's not much to do here except soak up the view, float in the surf and read a book, but it's so achingly beautiful that you will not be the first person to think you're living in a TV commercial. The sand is so fine, it feels like you're walking on cornstarch, making a squeaking sound when you drag your heels. The sand comes courtesy of an ancient underwater volcano, around which two tectonic plates are grinding together, creating new silica that sifts to the surface.

Meanwhile, back on Hamilton Island, if you can't justify spending all of your time swinging in a hammock, take a hike: the views from the trails are superb. The Passage Peak hike in particular offers 20 kilometres of trail, with a guided audio tour you can listen to via app. And when you're done with the beach, the marina and the exercise, you can simply sit on your balcony and drink it all in. Your cockatoos will always be up for the company.

When You Go

Although you can fly to Airlie Beach on the mainland and take a ferry, the best route to Hamilton Island is to fly into its tiny airport directly. Qantas Airways or Virgin Australia can get you there and back from Sydney. The best time to go is October through May, keeping in mind that December and January can get very busy. June to September is a great time for sailing and whale-watching. Visit HamiltonIsland.com.au, TourismWhitsundays.com.au and CruiseWhitsundays.com.au for more details.

