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YOUR ULTIMATE GUIDE
TO NATURE AND ADVENTURE IN

Tropical North Queensland

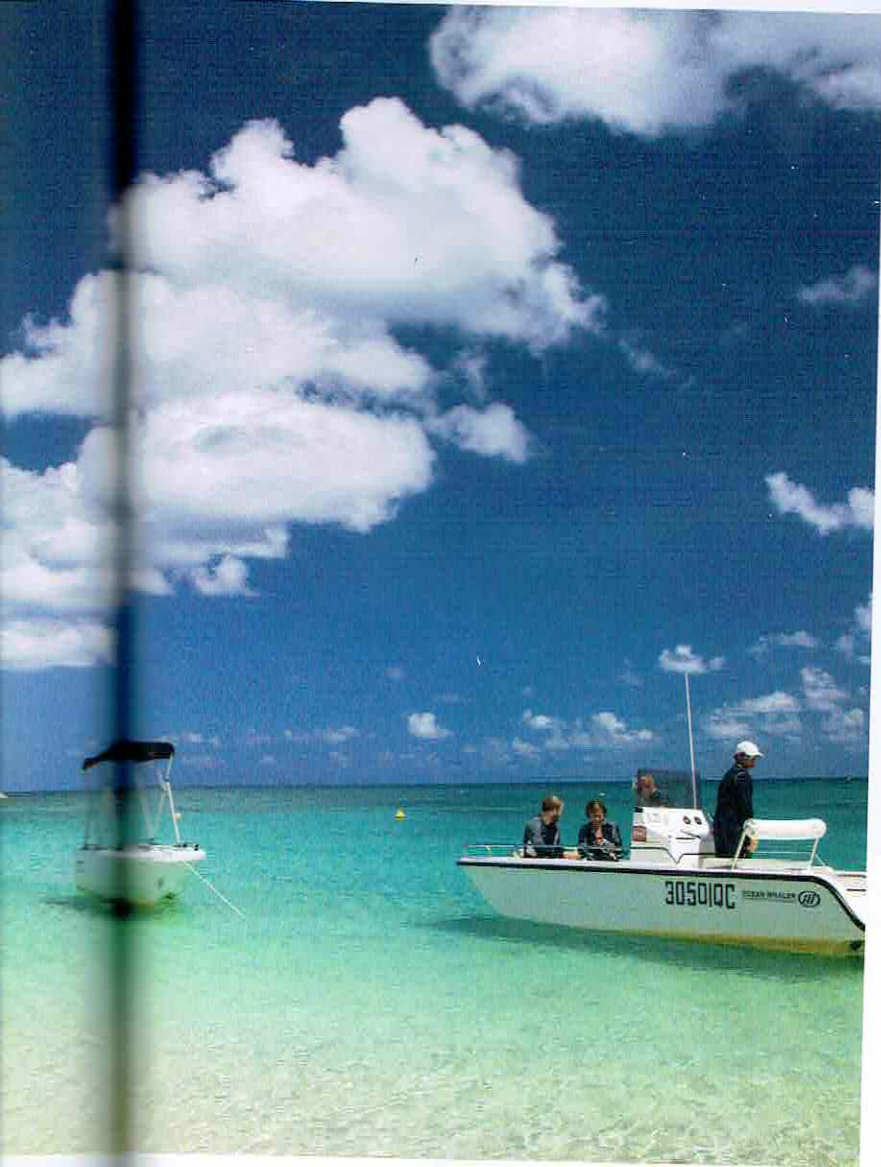
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▲ Colourful hinge-beak, or camel, shrimps, a type of cleaner shrimp, tend to congregate in coral crevasses.

Five of the best islands

Who doesn't dream of finding themselves on an island surrounded by azure waters that lap at white sandy beaches, under a blue sky and a warm sun? With more than 1000 islands, the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) offers plenty of chances to turn dreams into reality. And you don't have to be a millionaire to make it happen. There are island experiences to appeal to most budgets, from the very top of the scale to accessible islands lying just off the coast, which have budget camping spots and convenient ferry services.

1 GREEN ISLAND

The most accessible stable-vegetated coral cay on the GBR, this 13ha national park is just 27km from Cairns. The underwater observatory at the end of the pier, opened in 1954, was the first of its kind in the world. There's great snorkelling off the beach as well as semi-submersible and glass-bottom boat tours. It's possible to stay overnight at the Green Island Resort. Camping is not permitted on the popular island.

www.green-island.com.au



2 FITZROY ISLAND

Just 29km to the south-east of Cairns, Fitzroy is a popular day out with great snorkelling off the beach. There's the turtle rehab centre to visit and water-sports gear available for hire. The newly refurbished Fitzroy Island Resort offers a range of quality accommodation and there's a small campsite nearby. Bookings are operated by the resort.

www.fitzroyisland.com

3 THE LOW ISLES

These picturesque coral cays 15km, or a one-hour sail, from Port Douglas, are among the most incredible places to snorkel with green and hawksbill



turtles in Queensland. It's not uncommon to swim alongside numerous turtles here on the pristine reefs surrounding Woody and Low Islands, which can also be enjoyed from glass-bottomed boats or explored from the beach. The Wavedancer (full day) or Reef Sprinter (half day), are two of the excursions that head here from the Port Douglas Marina.



4 LIZARD ISLAND

This stunning group of six isles around an impossibly blue lagoon is serious bucket-list territory. The top-notch luxury resort here has been rebuilt following recent cyclone events. Visiting yachties moor in Watsons Bay, which is also where the camping ground is located. The island can be reached either by private boat or boat charter, or via a scenic light-plane flight, which takes about an hour. Air transfers are organised through the resort. The Lizard Island Research Station conducts weekly tours.

www.nprsr.qld.gov.au/parks/lizard-island and www.lizardisland.com.au

5 DUNK ISLAND

This 1000ha isle is about 70 per cent national park. There are walking trails through its western half, taking visitors through luxuriant rainforest rich in birdlife, with more than 150 species recorded. The island's resort is being upgraded at time of printing.

www.dunk-island.com

Excellent coral reefs lie straight off the beaches on Fitzroy Island. After the last ferry of the day leaves, the island appears almost deserted.



on plankton in the surrounding water. These corals play host to thousands of species of fish and invertebrates, as well as marine reptiles and mammals, and seabirds above the waves. It's a finely balanced ecosystem in which every living thing is dependent directly or indirectly on something else, creating a vast and complex web of life.

Any inventory of the reef's natural wonders also has to be tempered with a list of the threats that face it. The GBR is under pressure, and, as threats accumulate, questions have been raised over its future and Australia's custodianship of it. With climate change the major driver, an increased frequency of extreme weather events, such as cyclones and floods, is one of the major dangers. Aside from damaging the reef directly, these events cause pollution, fertiliser and sediment to drain into the Coral Sea, reducing water quality and disrupting the natural balance of fragile ecosystems. This leads to outbreaks of the coral-devouring crown of thorns starfish (COTS).

Shipping, fishing and other human impacts also take their toll, but a rise each year in mean water temperatures and the problem of ocean acidification – both due to increasing greenhouse gas emissions – are killing the world's corals at an accelerating rate, leaving little time for species to adapt. It's a bad news story that has challenged the reef's UNESCO World Heritage status and led to negative PR. Despite this, the Queensland government believes that the GBR retains all of the values for which it was originally listed, and continues to be Australia's greatest tourism drawcard.

MY NEXT PORT of call after the snorkel excursion is the Lizard Island Research Station, and here I ask Dr Lyle Vail, the co-director, about the impact of tourism on the reef and what kind of threat it poses. He is positive about the

It's a finely balanced ecosystem...creating a vast and complex web of life.

way the reef is managed both for tourism and to mitigate the threats posed to it.

"Tourist operations are run pretty well. Operators know that if they wreck their patch of reef, they can't just move to another. They have a lot invested in their infrastructure, so they look after their patches very carefully," he says. "If you look at the proportion of reefs that are heavily visited, in the scheme of things it's a very, very small number. There are certainly other parts of the world where reefs are loved to death, but the GBR is very big and tourism is limited to areas sheltered from strong south-easterly trade winds, so nature herself protects it from overuse."

Tourism also brings benefits. The research station opens its doors once a week to guests from the nearby Lizard Island Resort to satisfy their curiosity and promote understanding of the natural processes and the vital role played by scientific research. Just about everywhere I visit during my week-long stay in Tropical North Queensland, the conservation message is constantly reinforced through interpretive displays and well-versed guides.

IT'S HARD TO leave lovely Lizard, but my 24 hours are up. I'm due on Fitzroy Island the following day, so I catch the afternoon flight back to Cairns. Our small plane passes over



▲ **Jennie Gilbert** with Ella, an injured green turtle, about 25-years-old, at the Fitzroy Island Turtle Rehabilitation Centre. Ella was hit by a boat propeller and sustained injuries to her head and shell.



▲ **Dr Lyle Vail** points out the location of the Lizard Island Research Station. The facility, which is part of Sydney's Australian Museum, has been a centre for vital reef research since 1973.

reefs of all shapes and sizes. To our right, row upon row of steep, forested ridges slope down to meet the sea, defining the remote coastline. For almost an hour we see scant evidence of human activity. There's little agricultural development on this section of the Cape York Peninsula, and the resulting lack of sediment makes these northern waters relatively clear and the reefs among the most pristine in the entire system, so I'm keen to don my snorkel again as soon as I can.

I spend the 45-minute journey aboard the Fitzroy Island ferry in the company of Jennie Gilbert, a marine biologist from the Cairns Turtle Rehabilitation Centre (CTRC). She's heading to the island to conduct a public tour of the CTRC's Fitzroy Island outpost, located several hundred metres along the beach from the jetty. The vivacious former veterinary technician established the volunteer-run clinic along with Paul Barnes 15 or so years ago, after an injured turtle was brought in to the Undersea World Aquarium in Cairns where she worked.

It was the first of many sick turtles to arrive. Most suffered from 'floaters syndrome', a condition that sees air trapped under the shell as the result of a gut obstruction. The air prevents the creatures from diving down to feed. "At first we had a success rate of 30–35 per cent. People used to think that a turtle floating on the surface was cute, but now through education, they realise that those turtles are in trouble, so we get early notification and our success rate has gone up to 80–85 per cent," Jennie says.

I'm introduced to eight turtles of varying species and at different stages of recovery, as well as a group of youthful volunteers at the centre on the island. The former prawn farm was a gift from Doug Gamble, owner of nearby Fitzroy Island Resort, after extra capacity was needed following a series of mass turtle strandings in the wake of 2011's Cyclone Yasi. To witness these huge animals up close is a real thrill and I'm amazed to see some of the long-term residents interacting and responding to Jennie, who clearly adores her charges.

I leave Jennie and her volleys to the next group of visitors and head back to the resort, keen to get back into water. This time I'm snorkelling straight off the beach at Fitzroy. The island is a magnet for day trippers from Cairns, but seems to handle its daily influx well and doesn't feel crowded. This is no ordinary snorkel trip, however. Once I have wriggled into my lycra stinger suit – a must

in summer when box jellyfish can be present – I'm introduced to 'Seabob'. It's a personal jet that you ride through the water a bit like a miniature motorcycle, and it reminds me of the kind of kit that 'Q' might issue to James Bond. Once I get the hang of it, I power silently through the water, occasionally diving below for a closer look at the coral. The quality of the reefs here surprises me for an area with such high visitation. I hover above large purple anemone with resident clownfish and spot a turquoise parrotfish nibbling the coral as well as hundreds of tiny, pretty fish I'm not familiar with. I cover a much larger area on my Seabob than if I had been propelling myself – it's great fun and I'm reluctant to hand it back afterwards.

I'M STAYING AT the newly refurbished resort here and I experience the change that happens after the last ferry departs at 5pm. Fitzroy transforms into a near-deserted isle. I take the old stone path through the rainforest to Nudey Beach, about 20 minutes from the resort. All along the track I disturb large bronze skinks that scuttle off rocks into the leaf litter. There's a famous vista over the beach here that I've seen 100 times in photos (it's on the cover of this magazine) and it doesn't disappoint. Apart from a couple of snorkellers out in the water, there's no-one else to be seen.

It's high summer around Australia and the schoolkids are still on holiday. And yet I stand here among granite boulders on a white-coral beach lapped by warm tropical waters – one that's accessible to anyone for the price of a ferry ticket and camping spot, and I'm the only one here.

Such revelatory moments will come again during the next few days in Tropical North Queensland, once I hit the mainland and head north to the Daintree and Cape Tribulation. But for now, I reflect on the wonder of my surroundings and of the broader GBR. It's such a source of national pride, and almost half of all Australian's have visited it, but if we want our grandkids to be able to marvel at it with their own kids, we really can't afford to take it for granted.

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