

# Your Great Barrier Reef

A masterpiece should be on display but this one hides its splendour under a tropical sea. Here's how to *really* immerse yourself in one of the seven wonders of the world. Yep, you're going to get wet.



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# Secret Islands

Want to truly unwind, far from civilisation? For the ultimate escape, maroon yourself on one of these little-known islands dotted off the coast of Queensland, suggests Catherine Marshall.

## Pumpkin Island

[pumpkinisland.com.au](http://pumpkinisland.com.au)

You'll find no pumpkins in the waters off Yeppoon in the Southern Great Barrier Reef, just a low-slung wedge of land that's shaped like a butternut cut in half and laid out horizontally upon the sea. But this impersonator is in fact Little Pumpkin, a rotund hillock tethered to Pumpkin Island itself by a ribbon of sand, which appears only during the lowest tides.

The main island snakes squat and narrow – just 150 metres at its widest point and 450 metres at its longest – into the Keppel Islands region of the southern Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

In summer the caterpillars nibble pockmarks into the island's tropical foliage; later in the season they retreat into their cocoons, hanging like tiny white sausages from the trees; and in early autumn – when the breeze blows warm and soothing across the bay – butterflies emerge in their thousands, decorating the island like confetti.

It's a 45-minute cruise from Yeppoon's Keppel Bay Marina across a choppy ocean and into the calm embrace of Pumpkin Reef. It's an unassuming view from the water: a scattering of beach shacks peeping out from behind the palm trees; a headland rising in rocky, volcanic aggregations on the

southern side; and Little Pumpkin looking over its big brother's shoulder from the east. The solar panels, wind turbines and rainwater tanks that power and quench this island are hidden from view.

And the beach shacks are illusory, for though Pumpkin Island has been used by families and fishermen since 1964, it has been recently reimagined by managers Wayne and Laureth Rumble as a stylish, eco-conscious island escape. The couple has incorporated all the elements of a casual beach holiday – troughs in which to rinse your sandy feet, barbecues on which to grill freshly caught fish and shucking knives for easy dislodgement of oysters from the nearby rocks – without sacrificing any modern comforts.

Pumpkin Island's seven self-catering cottages and bungalows (accommodating up to six people) are distinguished from one another by unique decorative touches: candy-striped deckchairs slung from hooks on a distressed weatherboard wall; linen bedclothes in this cottage, waffle-weave in that; mint-green accents here, blue over there. The theme is expanded with unobtrusively elegant touches, such as the driftwood towel rails and the pottery water filters in just the right shade of blue.

Hammocks and swing chairs hang temptingly from trees, the tideline just beyond reach.

Feel like you're marooned on an island hideaway (above); hosts Wayne and Laureth Rumble share their slice of paradise with guests



A pair of legs dangles from one – someone has fallen into a deep afternoon sleep.

The island's accommodation is self-catering so we arrive with enough food for an army: supplies pre-ordered from award-winning restaurant The Waterline at Keppel Bay Marina and packaged by request.

Inside the cold boxes we discover fresh prawns, tropical fruit, meze platters, salads, scones, jam and cream, along with fat steaks that come straight from Banana Station, a renowned Central Queensland beef exporter that permits just one Australian outlet to serve its produce: The Waterline.

We're staying in the most luxurious of the cottages, Pebble Point, which is located in a secluded spot over the rise from the main beach with a view of North Keppel Island.

(Clockwise from top left) Book Pebble Point cottage for the private deck pool; "self-catering" courtesy of The Waterline restaurant; accommodations are bespoke; harvest and shuck your own oysters

From here we could launch ourselves off the island in a Perspex kayak, exploring the reefs at a thin remove. We could snorkel or paddleboard, go fishing or oyster harvesting or follow the boardwalk to the Sunset Lounge, which sits on the west-facing beach, ready to capture those exceptional tropical sunsets. Or we could loll in the plunge pool on our private deck, wondering how on earth this paradise was kept secret for so long.



**Fitzroy Island**

[fitzroyisland.com](http://fitzroyisland.com)

Nudey Beach is not a nude beach, warns the skipper on the Fast Cat ferrying us from Cairns to Fitzroy Island. We’ve rounded the volcanic headland south-east of Cairns with its splintered rock face and livid-red striations and have caught sight of Fitzroy Island, a green “sponge” bobbing on the sea. We can spy the island’s cherished beach curving around its south-western rim.

“Please do visit Nudey Beach,” the skipper continues. “And wear appropriate swimwear.”

The beachgoers are wearing modest stinger suits when we visit (although unlikely, box jellyfish and Irukandji jellyfish can occur in the area and the resort recommends wearing the suits from November to May).

To get to Nudey, we must walk for 20 minutes through a tunnel of rainforest, climb up and down moss-slicked rocks, skirt waterfalls that trickle spontaneously through the undergrowth and pass through a channel delineated by beautiful, timeworn boulders.

And then it opens up before us: a beach composed almost

Peak hour on Fitzroy Island (above); Nudey Beach’s “sea bones” are a beachcomber’s delight



entirely of “sea bones” – coral and shells warped and twisted by the churning ocean and the passing of time. Finally lifting our eyes from this mesmerising collection, we see crystalline waters framed by those boulders and, behind them, a soaring, mangrove-lipped rainforest.

Fitzroy Island has long hidden in plain sight from travellers passing through Tropical North Queensland’s gateway city of Cairns. Though just a 45-minute boat ride from the mainland, it’s tucked secretively below the Cairns headland. But the trip to the outer reef is foreshortened

for guests staying on Fitzroy Island; from here it’s just a 45-minute trip by catamaran.

Once a backpacker destination, the island was relaunched six years ago with the construction of Fitzroy Island Resort. Understated and family-friendly, the apartment-style suites have a view of the beach and smaller rooms face the rainforest-clad mountainside. It’s compact, too; the resort’s footprint takes up just five per cent of this rainforest reserve, carving an inconspicuous wedge from the forest’s base, where it spills down the hill and onto



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Smooth, timeworn boulders guide the way to Nudey Beach (below)



a stretch of sand-and-coral beach. Baitfish cast dark shadows along the waterline; stalking them from the shallows are swallow-tailed dart fish, scissortail sergeants and fusiliers with butter-yellow tails.

Guests kayak, paddleboard and snorkel on the reef; they hike to the lighthouse or sip cocktails at the swim-up pool bar; and at night they dine on beautiful dishes – seafood broth with crocodile tortellini, paperbark-smoked swordfish and seafood platters – flavoured with native Australian plants such as muntie berries, quandong and lemon myrtle.

A short walk north of the resort is the Cairns Turtle Rehabilitation Centre, where sick and injured turtles are dispatched after receiving initial

treatment on the mainland. It’s a reminder of the impact of human habitation on the region and the role that tourism plays in funding such conservation programs.

Here we meet Ella, a green sea turtle named after the boat that lacerated his shell with its propeller. “We call her Ella the fella because she’s a boy,” says volunteer Barbara Bartlett, invoking the feminine pronoun. “Look how fat she is – she’s the most spoilt little diva on the planet!”

It has taken three years for Ella’s shell to heal; in a few weeks’ time the turtle will be released onto Flynn Reef, 50 kilometres from here. It’s as beautiful as Fitzroy, Bartlett says, with pristine waters and turtles aplenty. “We’ll cry happy tears when Ella finally leaves.”



Barbara Bartlett with her injured charge, “Ella the fella”, at Cairns Turtle Rehabilitation Centre (above); the reef is teeming with swallow-tailed dart fish (left)

Haggerstone Island

haggerstoneisland.com.au

Picture Haggerstone Island from above: it sits beneath a white-hot sky, an emerald droplet floating on a tie-dyed pool of milky white, translucent turquoise and cobalt blue. It appears below us like a trophy as we approach it in our tiny plane. The effort it takes to reach Haggerstone Island – a charter flight from Weipa or Cairns or, for the adventurous, a two-day journey by boat – is rewarded before we’ve even landed on the airstrip on nearby Hicks Island.

Haggerstone Island is legendary among the few people who’ve heard of it. Located off the Cape York Peninsula in Tropical North Queensland, it is the quintessential desert-island fantasy, a speck of paradise inhabited by just a handful of people – those intrepid enough to set forth into the unknown, to leave the world far behind them.

The visitors who’ve found their way here have in turn been inspired by the creators of this retreat, Roy and Anna Turner, who moved here 30 years ago and have managed to thrive on an island that seems to teeter on the very edge of the world.

In the years since they were dropped off here by barge, the Turners have made small incursions into the native foliage that strangulates the island, constructing their own accommodation as well as four unique huts for use by up to 12 visitors in total. Ours is the newest, House Mawu, a polished-concrete structure built in the manner of an African compound and set upon a rise.

The giant swamp paperbark that anchors the dining pavilion in the house has its own story to tell: Roy saw the tree trunk, with its root ball still attached, embedded in a cay 20 years ago; in 1999 he dug it out and towed it back to Haggerstone Island.

“The chance of it being there, on that cay, were a billion to one,”



Island life: Roy and Anna Turner have raised a family and a resort here (below); the two-day boat journey to Haggerstone Island (right) ends here (above)



he says. “And the chance of me coming along and saying, ‘That’s a nice tree,’ and then designing a house that the tree would fit into, were zilch.”

But the family – which grew with the arrival of son Sam in 1994 and daughter Tasha three

years later – is accustomed to living off the gifts of the land and sea. An orchard garden flourishes behind the main dining pavilion, supplying most of the island’s fruit and vegetable needs; rainwater tanks store the monsoon’s bounty; chickens



range free; a wild pig fattens himself on coconuts and other nutritious cast-offs.

And the infinite ocean, which ever so gently cups Haggerstone Island, can always be relied upon for its largesse. Roy aims his jet boat into the blue and teaches us how to catch our lunch: painted crayfish and coral trout with pale-blue polka dots freckling apricot skin.

Right there on the boat, Tasha poaches the trout in white wine, lemon, ginger, garlic and chilli. Sam offers us crayfish sashimi that’s so fresh we’re now spoiled for life.

The two-bedroom House Mawu is the most luxurious villa on the island (left); freshly caught seafood is served at sea (above)

Later, we moor near one of the Sir Charles Hardy Islands, which is circled by terns and slick with guano. Beneath the water’s surface we discover a world so exquisite it can’t be true: a bright garden of coral; damsels, sweetlips and fusiliers; and sardines, in their hundreds of thousands, surging through a rocky flue.

### Double Island

[doubleisland.com.au](http://doubleisland.com.au)

It's felicitous that Double Island – a twin-peaked fragment of land moored just off the coast of Palm Cove, north of Cairns – should have been named in 1848 by the captain of a ship called *HMS Rattlesnake*, for there were Indigenous people who believed it to be the resting place of the mythical Rainbow Serpent.

We realise the island's original inhabitants are long gone – and the snakes, too, it seems – as we pick our way around the island, searching for signs of the lives that once lived here, listening out for ghosts.

Just two souls live on Double Island now: a caretaker named Jack and a dog named Gypsy. But their peaceful idyll will be short-lived, for plans are afoot to bring the almost-deserted island back to life – Cairns-based Fortune Island Holding Co Ltd

is implementing a multimillion dollar refurbishment project.

It takes little more than five minutes to reach Double Island from Palm Cove's jetty – it's the closest island to Tropical North Queensland's coast – yet a stroll up the pontoon and onto the 19-hectare spread takes us back generations. It was here that Captain Owen Stanley, the man who named Double Island while charting the inner barrier reef, established a survey centre in the 19th century. It was later commandeered as a retreat for wealthy miners before passing through private hands, including those of the late Australian billionaire Robert Holmes à Court.

And herein lies another pertinent connection, for the luxury villas built for Holmes à Court were the handiwork of Haggerstone Island's Roy Turner when he was moonlighting as a builder in the 1980s.



Double Island's population of two is set to explode

The neoclassical structures stand empty now but their solid bones and airy proportions offer the restorers a sound template from which to work.

The rebranded resort will feature 24 villas sleeping 48 guests; some of them will contain their own plunge pools. A licenced restaurant, to be built beside a sundeck overlooking the island's sinuous, coral-flecked beach, will offer relaxed lunches, à la carte dinners and themed barbecues. Solar panels are already in place and will provide 100 per cent of the island's energy requirements.

Locals will be able to come across in their tinnies and enjoy the island's amenities – water-based activities such as fishing and snorkelling, beach volleyball and hiking – alongside paying guests. The company hopes to commence half-day tours in late June and to open the resort before Christmas this year.



## Hide & seek

Four more secret islands to experience in the Sunshine State.

### Humpy Island

It's an effort to get to Humpy Island off the coast of Yeppoon. Visitors must hire a boat (or take their own) and should bring fresh water and supplies if camping. But it's well worth it: walking tracks that lead through a variety of island habitats, spectacular views from the island's summits and possible sightings of whales and dolphins in the surrounding waters.

### Lady Musgrave Island

Dangling like a gem at the very end of the Southern Great Barrier Reef, Lady Musgrave is the only coral island in the

reserve with a navigable lagoon. Daytrips launch from the towns of 1770 and Bundaberg and visitors can expect to see plenty of turtles and nesting birds in this national park and World Heritage zone. Camping is permitted, although campers must bring along fresh water and other supplies.

### Facing Island

This wedge of land curves across the waters off the coast of Gladstone in the Capricorn region of Central Queensland, tempting visitors with its elongated beaches and unspoiled bushland. Just 12 kilometres

from the mainland and accessible by barge or private boat, it will appeal most to those with a taste for outdoor activities: fishing, surfing, four-wheel driving and camping.

### Keswick Island

Keswick Island hides a sweet secret: a colony of purebred Caucasian bees that produce a rich, dark-red honey unlike any found on the mainland. Located off the coast of Mackay, the island is encircled by shipwrecks, reefs and a rich marine life. Accommodation options include camping, glamping, cottages and Airbnb.



Reef at Horseshoe Bay on Keswick Island (left); whales off the coast of Yeppoon (above); an aerial view of Lady Musgrave Island





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# Into the blue

There's more than one way to dive into the Great Barrier Reef. Lauren Quaintance discovers five unique experiences.

## Explore an aquatic wonderland

There's a reason Lady Elliot Island ([ladyelliott.com.au](http://ladyelliott.com.au)), a 40-hectare cay ringed by coral on the Southern Great Barrier Reef, is sometimes known as "manta heaven". Researchers have spotted more of the winged creatures here than just about anywhere else on earth. Up to seven metres across and weighing up to two tonnes, manta rays are the graceful

giants of the sea – and you'll be swimming with them.

That's not all you'll experience at this family-friendly island, which has more than 1200 species of marine life. It's one of the first islands in the region to be named a "Green Zone" (which means there is a strict no-fishing policy) and visitors to Lady Elliot can reasonably expect to see turtles, dolphins, giant clams and parrot fish, as well as whales that pass by on their annual winter migration. You may even spot one of the astonishing epaulette sharks – a type of carpet shark that grows up to one metre long and can use its fins as muscular feet to walk on land.

Bird-lovers will also be transfixed by the vast number of species on the island, including crested terns, black-naped terns, buff-banded rails, eastern reef egrets, oystercatchers, plovers and godwits.

All of this makes it the perfect spot to take children who are keen to learn more about their natural environment.

Lady Elliot Island Eco Resort is an eco-resort in the truest sense, with simple, flat-roofed prefabricated cottages – many with bunk beds – and safari-style tents on the edge of the sand. Without the distraction of TV or their mobiles, kids will be focused on snorkelling in the safe lagoon, searching for nesting turtles and beachcombing.



Swim with magnificent manta rays (above left) and other aquatic life in the waters off Lady Elliot Island

## Snorkel in style on a remote island idyll

To get to Lizard Island you board a 19-seat charter flight in Cairns and fly 240 kilometres across translucent blue-green ocean to one of the most remote spots on the Great Barrier Reef.

On the north-western side of the 1012-hectare island (which is also a national park) you'll find the 40-room Lizard Island resort ([lizardisland.com.au](http://lizardisland.com.au)). Described as a "red carpet meets palm tree" experience, the resort was given a \$50-million makeover after it was damaged by cyclones in 2014. One of the first resorts in the world to be certified an eco-lodge, the luxury resort is understated but stylish.



Best of all, though, you can literally wade into the water from the beach directly in front of the resort and in minutes be snorkelling above one of the most remarkable parts of the



Lizard Island is the most northern resort in tropical Queensland (above left); take your pick from the island's 24 secluded beaches

outer reef. Within easy reach of the resort is the Clam Gardens in Watsons Bay, where giant clams measuring up to two metres long live among hard and soft corals. Or ask to be dropped off at one of the island's 24 powdery, white private beaches with a gourmet picnic and spend an afternoon spotting iridescent fish amid a forest of bright coral and pulsating sea anemone.

Back on land, you could visit the island's research station where scientists from the Australian Museum study the reef. Or order a glass of crisp white wine and watch the large monitor lizards that give the island its name make their slow passage across the resort's lawn.





### Commune with whales in pristine waters

You may have swum with dolphins or sea turtles but swimming with dwarf minke whales – the gentle giants of the sea – is a truly extraordinary experience. Despite the name, dwarf minke whales grow up to eight metres and weigh several tonnes – but their grace underwater defies their size. Pods of up to two dozen of these unique whales pass through the warm waters at the northern end of the Great Barrier Reef for a few weeks each winter. Exceptionally inquisitive, small groups are often happy to swim alongside humans for up to an hour.

Australian diving legend Mike Ball’s eponymous company (mikeball.com) has been leading expeditions to the Outer Barrier Reef to swim with minke whales since 1996. The voyages range from three to seven nights on his 30-metre vessel. With success rates on these live-aboard trips hitting 98 per cent, you’re almost

Memorable diving with dwarf minke whales (above); hike among Licuala fan palms in Daintree National Park (above right)

certain to find yourself floating among these graceful creatures. Each passenger can also take part in minke whale research, attend lectures on the ecology of the reef and quiz onboard research volunteers.

Another operation, Eye to Eye Marine Encounters (marineencounters.com.au), is run by a former commercial fisherman and offers four- to eight-day dive trips with just seven guests on a luxury motor yacht. It has a licence that allows it to have no fixed itinerary, which means it can adapt to weather conditions and follow whale sightings. It also includes night dives and educational talks.



### Kayak where the ancient rainforest meets the reef

One of the oldest rainforests in the world, the Daintree is an Australian treasure. The 2600-square-kilometre forest contains more than half of the country’s bat and butterfly species, plus mammals and birds – such as the colourful southern cassowary and the portly Bennett’s tree kangaroo – that are found nowhere else on the planet.

You could walk through the forest, of course, or you could glide alongside it in a kayak at the point where the rainforest meets the sea. As you skirt the coastline you can expect to see turtles, dugongs, sea eagles and the occasional whale. When you tire of paddling, land your kayak at empty beaches or trek inland to remote watering holes.

Paddletrek Kayak Adventures (capetribpaddletrek.com.au) offers trips suitable for everyone, from beginners to experienced kayakers, with half-day tours out of Cape Tribulation, around 90 minutes north of Port Douglas.

For something more adventurous, book an overnight tour with Daintree’s Crocodylus Village (daintreecrocodylus.com.au) and sleep in a tent on the lush, uninhabited Snapper Island,



Daintree National Park is home to the elusive southern cassowary

two kilometres off the coast. There are several small beaches and a small but perfectly formed reef that is great for snorkelling, with bright coral and even brighter fish. With a limit of six people per camping site, it’s just like being marooned on your very own desert island.

### Picnic on your own private island

This low sandy island is one of a number of cays that slowly reveal themselves at low tide on the Great Barrier Reef. From the air, Vlasoff Cay looks like a streak of snow-white sand suspended on azure water.

You might spend your time here with your significant other combing for seashells on the beach or donning snorkel and fins and slipping into the pellucid water. Or you might simply sit back under an umbrella together and feast on a gourmet picnic with wine glasses in hand.

To get to Vlasoff Cay, you could spend a leisurely morning cruising aboard a 22-metre motor yacht (aroonaluxuryboatcharters.com.au) with no more than a dozen fellow passengers; or opt for an overnight stay on board so you can spend more time at this remarkable spot.

Or you might choose to take a 30-minute helicopter flight from Cairns (nautilusaviation.com.au). You’ll skim across the reef and touch down on the sand in time for brunch.

While you’re snorkelling among schools of shimmering fish, your pilot will have laid out a picnic rug and cushions and a lunch hamper with chilled sparkling wine and beer. This is as close to perfection as a day gets.

Coming in to land at Vlasoff Cay





# Child’s play

There’s no shortage of heavenly islands on the Great Barrier Reef. But with the family in tow, it’s important to choose the right one, writes **Lauren Quaintance**.

## Best for babies and toddlers

### One&Only Hayman Island

When corporate legend Sir Reginald Ansett built a luxury resort on a 294-hectare idyll in The Whitsundays in 1950, he probably didn’t have children in mind as guests. In the past, Hayman was synonymous with adult excess. But with its recent \$80-million revamp by Dubai-based luxury resort group One&Only (oneandonlyresorts.com), it has

been deliberately reimagined to appeal to families, too. There’s the new infinity-edge pool, called “Aquazure”, with a gently sloping entry and an artificial beach that’s perfect for babies and toddlers. There’s also a new kids’ club for children aged four to 11 with a picture-perfect cubbyhouse. (Under-fours are permitted to attend with an adult or babysitter.) All the resort’s guestrooms have been doubled in size and there are plenty of options for families, including beach villas with an adjacent retreat room that would suit those travelling



The KidsOnly facilities at One&Only Hayman Island

with a nanny. There are also one- and two-bedroom suites with interconnecting rooms, along with penthouses that sleep up to six people. Take small kids on a tour of the sand flats directly in front of the resort, where they’ll find crabs, turtles and sea worms. Or just admire the luminous blue tiger butterflies that linger in the gardens. Harried parents, meanwhile, might escape for an hour to enjoy a massage on a bed that is literally floating in the green-blue sea or under the shade of a thick rainforest canopy.



## Best for tweens

### Magnetic Island

Island holidays with older kids are a delicate balance. While parents might dream about being cast away on a remote island, kids need to be entertained. Just off the coast of Townsville, Magnetic Island, or “Maggie” as the locals call her, is idyllic enough to appeal to adults but has plenty of natural and man-made activities to keep kids occupied for days. The mountainous island is thick with eucalypts and hoop pines and is surrounded by crystalline water. Over two-thirds of the island is national park and more koalas live in the wild here than anywhere else in northern Australia so a sighting is almost guaranteed. Check in at Peppers waterfront resort at Nelly Bay (peppers.com.au/blue-on-blue), grab a Mini Moke and explore the island’s 23 bays and beaches. Beyond bush and beach there’s plenty for tweens to do, including riding at the skate park, visiting night markets and spotting rare giant clams at the aquarium. The family-friendly cane toad races at the Arcadia Village Hotel on Wednesday nights (where winners kiss their toads before collecting their prize) are typical of the laid-back style of entertainment on this island gem.

- Four other experiences for kids on the Great Barrier Reef
1.

Discover one of the largest populations of nesting marine turtles on the continent at the coastal town of Mon Repos, near Bundaberg. [mantabargara.com.au/turtles.html](http://mantabargara.com.au/turtles.html)
2.

Climb aboard a bright-pink amphibious vehicle and learn about the rich history of Queensland’s birthplace, the town of 1770. [1770larctours.com.au](http://1770larctours.com.au)
3.

Visit the world’s largest living coral reef aquarium in Townsville and see 150 fish species. [reefhq.com.au](http://reefhq.com.au)
4.

Get close to baby bamboo sharks and other creatures in a man-made coral reef lagoon on Daydream Island. [daydreamisland.com](http://daydreamisland.com)

Koala sightings are assured on Magnetic Island (above); snorkelling on Heron Island



## Best for teenagers

### Heron Island

Some people go on a holiday near the reef and others are lucky enough to spend their holiday on the reef. When you visit Heron Island, a perfect coral cay 89 kilometres off the coast on the Southern Great Barrier Reef, you can snorkel over vivid coral gardens directly in front of the main beach or choose from more than 20 dive sites. The 80-year-old Heron Island Resort (heronisland.com) has 109 guest rooms, including comfortable, family-friendly suites and the stand-alone Beach House on the sand’s edge. Hard-to-please teenagers will be occupied with diving and snorkelling or exploring the reef in glass-bottom kayaks or a semi-submersible boat. In the summer months they might spot newly hatched loggerhead and green turtles waddling along the beach, as well as migratory birds that have travelled from as far away as Siberia, China and Alaska to spend the warmer months on the island. The more inquisitive will also enjoy an hour-long tour of the University of Queensland marine research station on the south side of the eight-hectare island, only available to resort guests.



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