



Lizard's luxe comeback

Thanks to reopened borders and air deals, Australia's luxury island retreats are booming – with Aussies replacing Americans and Europeans. *Peter Lynch* joined them.

Our luxe adventure begins in Cairns, where we board a Caravan 208B 12-seater East Air plane for the one-hour flight to Lizard Island.

We are carried over the amazing blue and turquoise Coral Sea. Our pilot, Andrew, is happy to spin round from the controls and regale us with tales of what's been happening a few thousand feet below us.

There's Batt Reef, where Steve Irwin

was stabbed in the chest by a short-tailed stingray. There's the shipwreck which marks the spot where a couple's dream of sailing around the world literally ran aground. And all the while, sandy islands float beneath us like giant jellyfish.

It's not hard to see why Queensland and the Whitsundays topped the list of favoured destinations when the government's half-price

tickets went on sale earlier this year. With perfect temperatures and brilliant blue seas, the state is doing good business now we are all confined to holidaying at home for another year. The south-east's winter will make it even busier.

Luxury resorts are



especially favoured as

we pamper ourselves to make up for all the damage COVID-19 and lockdowns have wreaked on our psyche. Money, at least for now, appears to be no object.

Lizard Island, operated by American airport caterer and hotel owner Delaware North, is a five-star hideaway that regularly features on wish lists for the top luxury island retreats.

It costs \$2000 to \$6400 a night to stay in one of its spacious rooms, almost all of which front the ocean. And while that's expensive, running an island resort is not easy.

Lizard was devastated by Cyclone Yasi in 2011 and two more cyclones hit, one in 2014 and the other in 2015, just days before the resort's reopening after a \$45 million rebuild.

Last year, the island hit the headlines again when its Chinese owners demanded Delaware North open the resort and pay its \$2 million per year rent

despite COVID shutdown orders from the Australian government.

The Whitsundays lost \$10 million a day during Queensland's border shutdowns, and Lizard's many competitors, from Hamilton and Hayman to Bedarra and Orpheus, were all hurting equally.

Now, things are getting back to normal

- except Aussies are occupying the sun beds instead of Americans and Europeans. And your waiter or receptionist is more likely to be an Aussie, too.

What does that mean? Well, there's a cheery, more laid-back atmosphere among the

clientele. And, as staff get used to their new normal, a slightly different level of service.

Lizard has all the accoutrements of a luxury resort: inclusive food, wine and beer, 24 beautiful beaches, 10 square kilometres of national parkland, brilliant diving in clear waters to see coral, fish and turtles.

It's one of David Attenborough's favourites - he is a regular at the research station which monitors the 1500 fish species and 300 different hard corals making up the spectacular coral gardens. Greg Norman and Russell Crowe have both frequented the island, while Prince Charles holidayed there as a young bachelor.

Lizard is truly beautiful. Go beyond the resort and it is unspoilt. Watsons Bay is a fabulous mix of golden sand and gorgeous dives on a reef which seems to be in blooming good health. We take a nature walk there with guide Matt from Pennsylvania. You'd be surprised how interesting the green ant is, along with the rainbow bee-eater bird.

And there is a moment of excitement when we come across a couple training their camera over the mangrove swamp. It seems they have seen a crocodile. And while Matt laughs it off - he has heard of sightings many times but never seen the animal himself - a man was bitten by a crocodile while snorkelling off the island last year.

While the all-inclusive tag does mean you won't need to reach for your credit card to pay for food and drinks, many island excursions are not included. A twilight cruise is \$125 per person, turtle diving is \$85 and fishing off a Riviera motor yacht is an eye-watering \$2750 for four hours. Let's hope the fish are biting.

But the good news is a little runabout is free, and anchoring off Watsons Bay and putting to use your included snorkelling gear and stinger suit will give you the best memories. It's what Lizard is really all about.

And more good news: the food in the single restaurant is outstanding and while there is an enormous wine list, we saw no reason to stray from the beverages that came with our meals. Australian sparkling wine is included; French champagne is extra.

Our big treat was dinner in a cabana on



the beach. A bottle of French champagne awaited, candles lit the sand and our meal was made all the more memorable by the fine service of Maddy from Minnesota and her stories of working on a macadamia farm (who knew how hard it was to crack that iconic nut!).

Sadly, we didn't get to try the spa treatments (they use iKou products from the Blue Mountains) at the Essentia Day Spa, which range from \$175 to \$480.

Maybe next time. 🕒

Take me there



Fly: Qantas flies from Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra to Cairns and the city is on the government's half-price air tickets list. Then, East Air flies the 60 minutes to Lizard's private airstrip at \$770 per person return. Transfers from Cairns main terminal to East Air are \$25 per person.



Stay: A garden-view room costs \$1696 per night; ocean-view villas \$2799; beachfront suites \$3259; The Pavilion \$5399; and The Villa, which sleeps five and has its own plunge pool and balcony, is \$6488 per night.



Children: Lizard Island is planning to relax its "no kids" rule on children under 10 years old for the school holidays.

Tech: If you like to stay connected to wi-fi and the phone, we don't recommend Lizard as an option.



Explore more: lizardisland.com.au or phone 1800 837 204.





From top: Exploring Lizard Island by runabout; lounge area of The Pavilion room; stand-up paddleboarding; island dining; beachside massage.

