

If you've ever questioned the veracity of aerial photos of the Great Barrier Reef showing blinding white sand atolls dotted across Tiffany-blue sea, flying north from Cairns to Lizard Island will set you straight. It's overcast on our one-hour, 240km flight, but when our Cessna 402 thrums free of the clouds, one of the world's seven natural wonders is laid out gloriously beneath us, ready to go from iPhone to ad campaign in one easy shot.

The view from the plane is just a taster. Once on Lizard Island, it feels like I'm walking through a 3D postcard, with the distinctive calls of bar-shouldered doves and pheasant coucal as the soundtrack. The scenery and its accompaniments are divine, including flutes of champagne on arrival at the island's only accommodation.

Since opening in 1975, Lizard Island Resort has attained almost mythical status in the minds of reef lovers. Its privacy and luxury attracts high-flyers and celebrities, and its sublime natural beauty draws those who may have to dig a little deeper to check in here.

I have less than 48 hours to lap it up and I'm not going to waste a second. We're due on the beach in 30 minutes for a twilight cruise, but I can't bear to head out on the water without first plunging into it. My ocean-view villa, one of 40 lodging options ranging from garden view rooms to the top-tier Villa, overlooks Sunset Beach, so I do a quick change, grab my goggles and head down.

It's May but the water is warm and I'm instantly in a wonderland of brightly coloured fish and corals. Aquatic desires temporarily sated, I find the MV Nemo ready to depart with captain George, a sunny sailor who has a husband and two young sons at home in Cairns. From the beach to the bar, all the staff are delightful, which is perhaps no surprise, given where they live and work. Australia's closed borders have made it challenging to service the resort at normal levels, which means they are all working their hearts out to look after us.

Guests who were strangers chat like old friends as we make short work of a magnum of Arras sparkling and lavish nibbles while George expertly nudges Nemo out from Anchor Bay. The rocky wildness of the island looms above us, its imposing granite cliffs wrapped in golden-hour shadows, as we bob gently to Watson's Bay. There are 24 beaches around the 10sq km island, which punches above its weight in the history stakes.

To the Dingoal people of Northern Australia, this is Jigurrurru, a sacred place. The Dingoal have occupied the area since sea levels were so low grassy plains connected it to the mainland. It is part of an important Dreamtime creation story, in which Jigurrurru is the body of a stingray and its outlying islands the tail.

Captain James Cook named the island after the plentiful monitor lizards he saw when he came ashore in August 1770; the reptiles are still abundant. Its highest point, Cook's Look, enabled the explorer to plot a passage through the treacherous reef.

Watson's Bay is named after Robert and Mary Watson, who started a beche-de-mer fishing operation in 1879, exporting dried sea cucumbers to Asia. There are several versions of the story of Mary's death in 1881 following an Indigenous attack. An easy walk from the resort across Chinaman's Ridge takes you to the ruins of their stone cottage, a memorial to the sorry tale.

The next morning, George is at the helm again when we head out on a snorkelling tour, mooring first at Mermaid Cove. Snorkel guide Kobie keeps a close eye on us, popping up above his life ring like an aquatic meerkat to count heads. Below, I'm trying to keep a tally of the multitude of fish species. A marine biologist among us points out a juvenile harlequin sweetlips doing a mad dance. She explains that it's mimicking toxic and unpalatable aquatic creatures to escape being chomped by predators. It's mesmerising watching it swirl its chocolate and white "skirts" like a submarine flamenco dancer.

There are parrotfish, neons, triggerfish, angel fish, white- and black-tipped reef sharks and clams galore; giant ones with thick skin



Dinghy excursion on Lizard Island, main; island from the air, above; Anchor Bay Suite, above right; taking a hike, top right; Salt Water restaurant, centre right; turtle, right



The rocky wildness of the island looms above us, its imposing granite cliffs wrapped in golden-hour shadows

tiny burrowing ones peeking out from their coral homes. There's so much colour and movement I don't know where to look next.

It's well known climate change is a critical threat to the Great Barrier Reef. Lizard Island has suffered four coral bleaching events in just six years, a distressing statistic. The heartening news is the reef is still a vibrant wonderland. This World Heritage Area, protected by UNESCO for its unique value, including 400 types of coral, 1500 species of fish and 4000 types of mollusc, plus dugongs and turtles, deserves our guardianship.

That said, I almost smash into it the next day. On a turtle tour to Casuarina Beach, we're swimming in the shallows in a fast-running tide, taking care not to let our fins touch the delicate seagrass bed, when a large green sea turtle suddenly appears beneath me, less

than a second later, it's gone. The superior swimmer deftly dodges me, chomping on seagrass and unperturbed by the shockwaves my thumping heart rate is surely sending through the water.

Back on dry land, time flies by. My villa warrants more lounging time than I give it, with its padded nook, comfy armchairs and an inviting beanbag on the porch, looking out to the Coral Sea. There's a well-stocked minibar and a basket of snacks, just in case.

But how to fit it all in? There are kayaks, paddle boards, walks with naturalists, maps for self-guided hikes, a splendidly equipped gym, tennis court, pool and the five-star Essentia day spa. The treatment potions are from iKOU in the NSW Blue Mountains, another World Heritage-listed wonder. Bringing the mountains to the sea, I muse as sleep

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MORE TO THE STORY

To venture farther afield than permitted in the motorised dinghy, the magnificent MV Duyken is available for private charter from the resort for up to eight people. Equipped for fishing, snorkelling and diving excursions in comfort, the gleaming 51ft Riviera cruises at 20 knots, with a 28-knot maximum. It takes guests to numerous world-famous dive sites, such as the Cod Hole, where giant potato cod delight visitors. On fishing trips expect to catch tuna and sailfish on the outer reef, or mackerel and trevally on the inner reaches. If you snag an unprotected species, the chef can prepare it to your taste. An all-day charter is \$4200 for up to eight hours; guides for each water activity are \$675 a day.



IN THE KNOW

Flights to Lizard Island from Cairns with East Air are \$770, including transport to and from Cairns Airport. Resort accommodation from \$1969 for two in a garden-view villa, including all meals and drinks (apart from "private cellar" wines and selected spirits) and in-room minibar, access to motorised dinghy and equipment such as snorkelling gear, paddle boards and kayaks. Tours are extra. There is (blessedly) no Wi-Fi in the accommodation and only slow-mo service in the reception area, but wider coverage is coming (guests will be able to request limiting it in their villa). Lizard Island Research Station has an excellent, free field-guide app. Download it to help with identifying flora and marine and terrestrial life.

lizardisland.com.au

Befitting Lizard Island Resort's place among the Luxury Lodges of Australia portfolio, the dining and wining at Salt Water restaurant is superb. The menu is inventive and delicious; the wine pairings generous in pours and quality. A private cellar room, tantalisingly behind glass next to the Driftwood bar, is stocked with rare tip-les.

Overhead fans move the air gently around as I gaze from the dining area across the lush lawn to Anchor Bay.



boatie instruction from George)? Or perhaps a private degustation dinner on the sand? There's time for one more snorkel before the flight back to reality. A honeymoon couple is having a paddleboard lesson on the calm waters of Anchor Bay. I pull on my fins and dive below. Snorkelling past the moored charter vessels, I spy a pair of bright orange and white clownfish in the succulent fingers of a pink anemone waving in the current. It's time to leave them in peace.

THE FAB
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Places in the sun

The overseas isles we're longing for

KENDALL HILL

BALI As our No.1 overseas destination, many Australians are desperate to return to the sunshine of Bali. The island has been closed to foreigners for about 15 months but the Indonesian government has optimistic plans to reopen it to tourists next month, which of course is academic for locked-in Aussies. Still, good to know it's there waiting. The island's trademark villas are perfect for those seeking post-Covid space and privacy. There are hundreds to choose from but few capture the romance of the Island of the Gods like Villa Asli (pictured). Set among rice paddies at Batu Belig, not far from the W Bali resort, its five suites occupy antique buildings from Java, Sumatra and Bali, their interiors rich in local textiles and Indonesian artefacts. The vibe is tranquil but, with a full staff of 14, plus a cinema and 25m pool with bar, Villa Asli's the ultimate party pad too.

baliwoodvilla.com
bali.com



PHUKET From tattoo parlours and tourist touts in the backpacker hub of Patong, to pristine beaches, jungle trails and some of Asia's most exclusive resorts, Phuket is an island for all reasons. Few lodgings are more discreet, with decadent villas, infinity pools and fantastic food, than Sri Panwa (pictured). Perched on the southeast tip, its rooftop bar captures views across the Andaman Sea, home to the Phi Phi islands, Phang Nga Bay and the "James Bond" island of Ko Khao Phing Kan. Phuket's most underrated virtue is its cuisine, especially in the Old Town. There you'll find Raya, a shop-house restaurant serving traditional Thai food, the 24-hour Cantonese restaurant Hong Kong, renowned for the quality and diversity of its seafood, and Mor Mu Dong beside the Rawai fish markets, where diners feast on local seafood.

sripanwa.com
tourismthailand.org



THE MALDIVES No beach destination is as mesmerising as The Maldives. This charmed island chain in the Arabian Sea is the world's honeymoon capital for good reason. Reopened since last July, the archipelago's most coveted islands are those in the Baa Atoll, designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve for its marine biodiversity. Choose from homestays as well as private island resorts and nine-bedroom residences with adult waterslides into the sea (hello Soneva Jani), dive magnets (try the pioneering Baros with its excellent house reef), surf meccas (such as the Yin Yang break, just offshore from Six Senses Laamu, pictured) and snorkelling (at the famous Blue Hole, near Amilla Fushi resort). Despite its elite reputation, The Maldives cater to all classes of island lover.

visitmaldives.com



SINGAPORE The pleasure of Singapore is in its many possibilities, whether shopping on Orchard Road, wandering through the Botanic Gardens (pictured) or the fantastical Gardens by the Bay, hawker breakfasts at Tiong Bahru Market, browsing Southeast Asian art at the National Gallery, bar-hopping around Club Street, catching a classic film at arthouse cinema The Projector ... there's never enough time to fit everything in. Known for its high-end hotels, from Raffles to Marina Bay Sands, my favourite



Is that the sea calling me to head out with a private picnic, packed and ready for a dinghy adventure to a deserted beach (after expert

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Jane Nicholls was a guest of Tourism Australia and Lizard Island Resort.
australia.com

is the Fullerton Bay Hotel, on the water in the historic Clifford Pier precinct. The restaurant dishes up the Lion City's best rickshaw noodles.
fullertonhotels.com
visitsingapore.com