



THE GLORIOUS WHITSUNDAYS

SEA AND REEF, NATURE AND INDIGENOUS CULTURE COMBINE WITH LUXURY STAYS, FABULOUS CUISINE AND GOLF TO ENSURE AN UNFORGETTABLE ISLANDS ESCAPE. WORDS: PAUL PRENDERGAST.

No matter how many times you may have visited the Whitsundays, just 90 minutes' flight from Brisbane, you never fail to be taken aback by the majestic beauty of the landforms, rainforests, the emerald hues of her deeper waterways and, on her doorstep, the World Heritage-listed Great Barrier Reef.

The name 'Whitsunday' is attributed to James Cook, who sailed through the area in the 18th century on a date of religious significance for many Christian faiths: the seventh Sunday after Easter, or Whit Sunday.

Several islands retain the names given to them during Cook's voyage, but it's the indigenous Ngaro, Gia and Juru peoples who deserve most recognition as the traditional custodians of these glorious lands and seas, back to a time when many of the now 74 Whitsunday islands formed part of the mainland.

In a separate bare-boat catamaran adventure last year, my family and I were able to share in this history at the extreme end of the Nara Inlet, on Hook Island, making the steep climb to the fringe of the forest canopy to caves holding clear evidence of Ngaro dwellings and rock paintings thousands of years old.

The stirring 'Welcome to Country' and smoking ceremony local elder Peter Prior greeted us with a few days earlier at the gorgeous Coral Sea Resort – perched above the gleaming mainland gateway to the Whitsundays on the promontory between the Airlie Beach township and sprawling Coral Sea Marina –

reflected his passion for this region and the preservation of fauna such as dugong, turtles, fish, wallabies and eagles that make their home here.

The sharing of stories from his ancestors made for a fitting start to a trio of days jam-packed with the experiences of a lifetime.

INTERCONTINENTAL HAYMAN ISLAND RESORT

Hayman Island is awash with luxurious activities, fine dining and intimate brushes with nature, above and below the waterline.

The resort's stylishly appointed lagoon suites spill out to south-facing balconies from where you're able to dip into one of the vast resort pools, swim up to a bar for a cool drink or simply lay back and take in the sea breezes and southward views along the Whitsunday Passage.

“YOU NEVER FAIL TO BE TAKEN ABACK BY THE MAJESTIC BEAUTY OF THE LANDFORMS, RAINFORESTS, THE EMERALD HUES OF HER DEEPER WATERWAYS AND, ON HER DOORSTEP, THE WORLD HERITAGE-LISTED GREAT BARRIER REEF.”

– *THE WHITSUNDAYS*





A collection of world-class restaurants – including Amici, where the chef dazzled us with a series of exotic plates brilliantly showcasing local ingredients – bars and services are at your disposal within this sprawling complex.

For the adventurous, hiking trails to remote coves and distant beaches lie in wait, as does the tidal beach in front of the island resort that extends into a haven of coral reef that simply demands exploration with a mask and snorkel.



QUALIA

The Oatley family’s choice of name for this magnificent resort on a north-facing tip of Hamilton Island is remarkably on point. Qualia, Latin for ‘a collection of sensory experiences’, provides guests with experiences that are second to none.

Unrivalled views, framed by the imposing Whitsunday Island to the northeast, remind guests of what attracted entrepreneur Keith Williams to buy the then uninhabited Hamilton Island in the 1970s. The development of Hamilton as a destination and a southern gateway to the Whitsundays accelerated when acclaimed winemaker Bob Oatley bought the island in 2003.


The Oatley family established Qualia with a view to creating a uniquely Australian private retreat, carefully crafted to harmonise with the many gifts nature has bestowed upon its exquisite location.

Luxurious villas, many with their own plunge pools, all feature a private outlook over land and water. The villas are complemented by first-class staff and facilities and superb dining in the elevated Long Pavilion or down by the water’s edge at Pebble Beach, which blends seamlessly with the resort pool and private cabanas, gym and water sports hub.

Perhaps no greater example of a ‘qualia’ sensory experience would transpire that evening, with a most sublime degustation and wine-matched dinner at Pebble Beach, the sound of waves lapping softly nearby, followed by an equally sumptuous repast at the Long Pavilion the following night.

“THE OATLEY FAMILY ESTABLISHED QUALIA WITH A VIEW TO CREATING A UNIQUELY AUSTRALIAN PRIVATE RETREAT CRAFTED TO HARMONISE WITH ITS EXQUISITE LOCATION.”





“YOU’LL FIND EXHILARATING CARRIES,
TEE SHOTS THAT PLUNGE TO FAIRWAYS AND
GREENS IN VALLEYS OR CLING PRECARIOUSLY
TO CLIFF EDGES.” – *HAMILTON ISLAND GOLF CLUB*



HAMILTON ISLAND GOLF CLUB

Since it opened in 2009, the Peter Thomson/Ross Perrett-designed layout has earned the reputation as Australia's premier island golf course and, as part of the Great Golf Courses of Australia stable, is both a challenge and an enthralling experience for players of every level.

The course is actually on the uninhabited Dent Island, a short ferry ride from Hamilton Island marina. In its planning phase Thomson, Perrett and owner Bob Oatley patiently worked through dozens of environmental-impact statements to ensure construction and the ongoing management of the golf course would not adversely impact the pristine canvas at their disposal.

A 'resort' course – and all that implies in terms of being

relatively amenable to golfers – this is not. The routing soars and falls as it winds its way around the undulating Dent Island outcrop, daring you to take risks; tall native grasses await errant shots beyond the playing corridors.

As a five-time British Open champion, Peter Thomson knew a little about the challenge of playing golf 'in the draft', as the Scots might say, and the design takes into account the vagaries of the local elements. Here you'll find exhilarating carries, tee shots that plunge to fairways and greens in valleys or cling precariously to cliff edges.

Aerial views of the course emphasise the contrast between fairway contours and the deep ravines and rocky terrain of Dent Island.

There are few destinations in golf that provide so many opportunities to experience both the thrill of a shot well executed with an equivalent level of despair if you don't get it right.

JOURNEY TO THE HEART

Hamilton Island's boutique 'Journey to the Heart' tour provides a next-level experience from other reef flyover options and one that will certainly stay in your memory.

Flying by chopper from Hamilton for 30 minutes out into the blue yonder – having first circled the world-famous 7km stretch of Whitehaven Beach and Hill Inlet – the





whitecaps on the horizon provide the first indication that you're approaching one of the most gorgeous sections of the immense Great Barrier Reef.

It's not long before you're above spectacular web patterns of coral and turquoise waters that soon reveal the iconic Heart Reef formation, first discovered in the 1970s and elevated to national-treasure status ever since.

“IT’S NOT LONG BEFORE YOU’RE ABOVE SPECTACULAR WEB PATTERNS OF CORAL AND TURQUOISE WATERS THAT SOON REVEAL THE ICONIC HEART REEF FORMATION.”

After landing on a luxuriously appointed pontoon moored in one of these lagoon pools, you're whisked onto a glass-bottomed vessel that wouldn't be out of place in a James Bond movie.

Our expert pilot and boat operator (a dead ringer for Aussie golfer Cameron Smith) provided great insight into the history of the Heart Reef and its surrounds before we jumped overboard to snorkel among this amazing coral oasis.

An abundance of colourful marine fish and sea turtles thrive in this pristine environment and to be able to join them in their habitat for even a short time is such a privilege. And when you've had your snorkelling fill, it's time to relax on deck with a glass of champagne as the setting sun puts on another spectacular show over the distant islands.

www.tourismwhitsundays.com.au