

THE AUSTRALIAN 

# TRAVEL+ LUXURY

FEBRUARY 14-15, 2026

10

WAYS TO PLAY  
YOUR PART  
FOR SCIENCE

## THE CRUISE EDITION



SPELLBOUND  
BY THE GREAT  
BARRIER REEF

INSURANCE  
COVER FOR  
SMOOTH SAILING

CULINARY  
ADVENTURES ON  
THE HIGH SEAS





# SECRETS OF THE REEF

Underwater fireworks and whale shark sightings are just the beginning on a luxury outing in Far North Queensland

DAMIAN HAARSMA





Exploring the reef  
with True North

**T**umbling backwards off the side of our tender, we plunge into an inky ocean. It's just past dusk and the orange sunset is quickly fading as we release air out of our buoyancy vests and sink into the warm, tropical blackness.

Scuba diving after twilight sharpens the senses, and we're taking a leap of faith that melds the excitement of entering an otherworldly nocturnal realm with trepidation at the strangeness of it all.

It's the end of the dry season in Far North Queensland and we've been bathed in heavenly sunshine since we left Cairns a few days ago. Our voyage is aboard True North II, a purpose-built 22-passenger expedition vessel that has carved out a reputation for taking adventurers to far-flung coasts and oceans. It's luxury exploration, with plenty of pampering, fine dining and a chocolate on the pillow at the end of the day.

By the time of our night dive, the sea is as placid as a lake in the remote stretches of Sandbanks National Park. We're closer to Port Moresby than to Brisbane, and not far from the edge of the continental shelf, where the magnificence of the Great Barrier Reef starts to fall away into an abyss.

As our posse descends, the eerie calmness is lit up by powerful torches strobing and flashing through the darkness like light sabres. The reef has been brimming with life during the day, but appears oddly quiet after sunset. A few small fish are spotted hiding in the coral, jellyfish float past, and a bright yellow nudibranch wriggles by.

Everything is low-key, until we encounter a school of baitfish drawn to the light. One of our team has a hefty underwater camera with a forceful beam and the shoals are drawn to its piercing ray, darting towards it in a sudden swarm. I perch nearby on a rock as the flickering silver mass thickens into a glittering maelstrom.

By the time we're back on the surface the adrenaline is flowing and spirits are high. We climb back into the tenders, buzzing like excited children from the undersea fireworks and glide back to the ship under a starry tropical sky and crescent moon. Chilled margaritas are handed out before we're beckoned upstairs for dinner.

It's another day of rollicking fun on the high seas, and another hearty meal – this time, herb-marinated chicken kiev with a Clare Valley riesling. On other occasions the menu features freshly caught fish and baharat-spiced lamb with a Margaret River cabernet sauvignon. It's all very five-star dining, right down to the coral trout congee served for lunch one day, a True North trademark dish.

The odyssey has so far taken us through a series of dive locations on the outer limits of the Great Barrier Reef, sites with expressive names such as Dynamite Passage, Shark City and Jewel Reef. At each, the coral is kaleidoscopic and the ocean teems with an impossible array of marine life. In just one dive, I see turtles, a school of barracuda, reef sharks gliding by in the distance, and a sizeable moray eel peeking out of a crevice to study our strange entourage. On another outing, a school of majestic giant Napoleon wrasse slide imperiously past, like resplendent generals on parade. At the magnificent Kingdom of Corals, a fabulously rich aquatic spot bursting with colour, dozens of snapper flip past and trevally school around us. One morning we try the aptly named Cod Hole, and the outing in relatively shallow water gets us up close and personal with a monstrous potato cod that seems to sniff around us like a friendly St Bernard.

For the non-divers there is fishing or snorkelling each day, and early in the trip we visit spectacular Lizard Island, the famous refuge of Captain James Cook, who climbed its peak to find a way for the Endeavour to snake its way out of the labyrinthine reef system. We anchor offshore in the late afternoon and climb into the tenders for sunset drinks on the beach before returning to the boat for supper. The next morning most of us hike to Cook's Look, while other passengers take it easy lounging on the idyllic shore of Watsons Bay. It's a serene horseshoe beach with sparkling turquoise water. The tranquillity belies the island's brutal history as the site where hapless fisherwife Mary Watson fled a native attack with her son and an aide. She survived by taking to sea in an iron boiler tub, but perished of thirst on a neighbouring isle.

There's no chance of hardship on our adventure, as we're soon back aboard True North for a frothy cappuccino and a mini lecture by one of our travelling companions, marine scientist Richard Fitzpatrick. A feature of the True North experience is rubbing shoulders with naturalists and underwater experts. Fitzpatrick has serious credentials as a James Cook University adjunct professor as well as an acclaimed underwater cinematographer, with his moniker appearing in credits for a host of big-name outfits such as the BBC and National Geographic. He's also something of a shark wrangler who tells ripping yarns from decades of research and filmwork.

Today's chat is about the crown-of-thorns starfish and its threat to the reef when nature's delicate balance is disturbed. Fitzpatrick regales us with statistics and science, and vividly describes the ruinous nature of the "COTS" breakout that takes place every few years, "moving across the coral like a slow burning firefront".

The voyage also introduces us to the work of the Great Barrier Reef Foundation, which joins forces with True North for the "Conservation Cruise". The group's communications chief, Sarah Ireland, outlines the disastrous effects of climate change and pollution on the world's coral reefs and explains the impressive toolkit being developed to help. She talks of underwater seedboxes, IVF programs, baby coral cradles and

Continued on Page 26



Continued from Page 25

strategic partnerships, such as efforts by F1 racing team McLaren to develop an automated device to help with regeneration at strategic reef locations.

It becomes evident during the journey that True North has forged a strong partnership with the Great Barrier Reef Foundation. Among a clutch of the most experienced divers is foundation board member and marine adventure specialist Hayley Baillie, co-founder of Baillie Lodges. She talks passionately about the foundation's work with True North, bringing tourists to rarely seen parts of the reef, where the public gaze boosts awareness of the ecosystem's fragility and its enormous role in Australian science and tourism, adding an estimated \$9bn to the economy annually.

"That citizen-science space is so incredibly important," Baillie says in between scuba sorties, "because of that word of mouth, for people to be able to explain to others that there is so much to fight for." She speaks of the next destination, a rare whale shark aggregation at Wreck Bay and a recently discovered marine treasure. "Most people don't know that there is an aggregation on the Great Barrier Reef on the east coast of Australia."

Day five dawns with another pink sky sneaking up over the Coral Sea. There's a gentle, warm breeze, the ocean is as calm as a lake and anticipation is building. It's whale shark day and the squadron of tenders are lined up off the transom like trusty steeds champing at the bit.

We squeeze in a morning dive at a site named Lagoon Reef, but then back on deck the fun starts with the chopper firing up



IN THE KNOW

True North will sail two seven-night Great Barrier Reef Conservation Cruise itineraries departing December 5 and 12 this year. There are three cabin classes, all with ensuite and satellite phone; from \$13,595 a person, twin-share, including all meals and some beverages. Snorkelling gear is provided; divers are advised to bring their own gear apart from cylinders and weight belts. Some equipment is available for hire.

**truenorth.com.au**



Turtles, whale sharks and coral all feature below the surface; True North II's sleek profile and luxurious interior, right and above

HAYLEY BAILLIE

for some aerial whale-shark reconnaissance. We take turns in the helicopter, soaring over the blue expanse. There are no doors on this compact little AS350, and I'm instinctively leaning back as it banks and twists. It's thoroughly exhilarating and within minutes we have the first of a handful of Omura whale sightings. Shortly afterwards, an enormous oceanic manta ray can be spotted cruising just below the surface, stretching metres across as though sunning itself in the twinkling morning light as it chases breakfast.

When the pilot spots our first whale shark a pattern is set for the day. The aerial chase spurs the tenders into action and snorkellers are dropped into the path of the creature. The hours are filled with glee as we kick furiously, trying to keep pace with the spotted behemoths for 50m-100m before they gracefully slip into the deep.

Time flies when you're enjoying the hunt, and a full day on the water leaves our party elated and weary. By late afternoon we're lounging around at the alfresco bar overlooking the stern. Conversation turns to the next day, our ultimate expedition being a rare visit to the waters around Raine Island, the world's largest green turtle nesting site. The tiny outcrop sits like a teardrop in the Coral Sea, barely 30ha, but a vital rookery for tens of thousands of turtles each year. The normally windy and treacherous waters are a ship graveyard, which is why in 1844 a team of convicts built a lonely stone beacon that stands out like a medieval turret.

Morning brings another flat, calm ocean, a scene seemingly carefully scripted. After breakfast the sports deck quickly comes alive with the happy bustle of scuba tanks and clips, rubber masks, wetsuits and fins, the excitement thick in the air. Adding to the elevated mood is the fact Raine Island is afforded the highest protection under state and federal conservation laws. The public are prohibited from stepping foot on the sand – we're told



even Bob Hawke was unceremoniously booted off when he made an unauthorised visit. This is a very special place, and True North's guests are able to dive and snorkel off the island's south.

When we drop into the emerald water, the turtles appear sparse at first, occasionally visible perched on rocks or hiding in coral. Then they arrive in pairs, suddenly three or four, then a dozen or more paddle into view. Within minutes the sea is alive with flapping, gliding shapes and the ocean feels crowded with scores of turtles, lazily drifting above and below and slowly wafting away on the current.

It's an astounding scene, then we're reminded by the guide to check our air and ascend. Reluctantly I rise slowly to the surface, still shocked by the underwater spectacle. Back in the tender we're jubilant, and I ask our dive master if this pinch-me experience surprised him. He smiles sagely as we glide back to the True North.

*Damian Haarsma was a guest of True North.*

MORE TO THE STORY

The Great Barrier Reef Foundation was set up after the first global mass coral bleaching event in 1998 devastated sections of the reef and killed an estimated one in 12 of the world's corals. The foundation now fosters connections between communities, scientists and organisations to develop solutions to protect the reef and help it adapt to threats such as climate change, pollution and the crown-of-thorns starfish. Communications chief Sarah Ireland says the foundation is all about getting the right people and strategies in place as quickly as possible. "That's the real superpower of the foundation, bringing together the right people and the right level of expertise to look at these huge challenges to make sure the reef exists for future generations," she says.

**barrierreef.org**



HAYLEY BAILLIE