



TRAVEL

Great and the Good

The joys of island hopping on the Great Barrier Reef, the famed coral archipelago off Australia's eastern coast.

by Britt Collins

On the edge of the reef, see giant green turtles munching on sea grass in pristine coral gardens.

FLYING OVER THE GREAT BARRIER REEF FOR A seabird's-eye view is as surreal as it is thrilling. As a green speck appears hazily along the aquamarine surf, I wonder out loud if it is Heron Island.

"I hope so," says our pilot with a wide smile, zooming towards it, "otherwise we're lost."

Few things compete with the glamour of travelling in a vintage seaplane and jumping out into the sea, Bond-style. The gem-coloured water, a shimmer of startling blues and greens, is so crystal clear it is possible to see shadows of manta rays in the shallows. Lying 45 miles off Queensland's Capricorn Coast at the southern end of the reef, Heron Island was once home to a turtle-soup factory. Now it serves as a wildlife sanctuary to nesting turtles and migrating birds, abuzz with terns, shearwaters, gulls and herons. At low tide, taking a reef walk with a marine biologist you



FRESH FLAVOURS
AT THE ONE&ONLY
HAYMAN ISLAND

One morning we charter a yacht to a beach on an uninhabited island and spend the entire day wandering the wilderness.

can walk directly from the beach to the edge of the reef and see giant green turtles munching on sea grasses amid some of the world's most pristine coral gardens.

The charm of this sliver of an island is its raw, rugged beauty. Everything about it is low key and simple, but the joy of it is an abundance of inventive activities: reef walking, stand-up paddle boarding, night diving among shipwrecks and super-size fish, and exploring the bottom of the ocean in a Jules Verne-style submarine vessel. As we floated through this dreamlike water world, our skipper Steve, who doubles as a dive instructor, points out the inhabitants teeming beneath the surface. Aside from a single payphone, there is no television or WiFi. It's precisely this isolation and wildness that makes Heron so special.

Hamilton Island, meanwhile, is the summer playground of Australia's well-heeled. The waterfront beside the marina is lined with quaint cafes, boutiques and pubs with mellow locals. Since Australian tycoon Robert Oatley bought the island in 2003, he has transformed it into a high-end escape, smack in the middle of the reef. Guests can stay in Qualia's super-luxurious villas strung along the sand or wooden beach shacks tucked beneath a canopy of palms. Some of the cliff-top private houses, tumbling down the hillside towards the sea, are holiday rentals too. As you'd expect, there's five-star dining, star-studded fashion parties and sailing regattas.

With few cars, it's easy to zip around in golf buggies along the curving roads. Everywhere you look there are sky-scraping palms and yellow-crested cockatoos, charming grifters who cheekily take food out of your hand. You can have breakfast with koalas at the island's wildlife rescue centre, where these cute marsupials hang out in the eucalyptus trees above the diners. Then there's a whole rainforest to explore, with sunrise bushwalks up Passage Peak through blue-gum forests where the wallabies and tree kangaroos venture out.

Hamilton Island is the perfect base for sailing or discovering the reef — you can travel to a pontoon moored on the outer reef and spend the night sleeping under the stars. One morning we charter a Sunsail yacht to a

beach on an uninhabited island and spend the entire day wandering the wilderness. Afterwards, the captain allows me to steer the boat back to Hamilton in time to catch the fabled orange sunset. We headed to One Tree Hill, the island's highest point named after the lonely old fig that clings to it, mingle with the islanders and watch the sun melt into the horizon. It's a perfect perch to see flocks of flying foxes and fruit bats the size of cats, swooping across the skies.

Next is a tropical idyll of coconut groves, sugar-white sands and turquoise waters; One&Only Hayman. Moments after arriving via the Sun Goddess, the resort's private yacht, we are whisked away by speedboat to Blue Pearl Bay for a sunset picnic in a deserted cove. With the sea breezes and Champagne flowing, it feels like a secret faraway kingdom. Much of the appeal of Hayman and its reputation as a hideaway for Hollywood A-listers lies in its exclusivity and extravagant indulgences — everything from private butlers and scenic helicopter rides to fire-lit feasts and cocktail parties on the shore or a desolate cliff.

The newly spruced-up retreat is a sleek modernist affair of creamy whiteness, with plush minimalist interiors and postcard views. For those keen on exploring the reef and nearby islands, Hayman offers around-the-clock deep-sea diving and sailing, and dolphin and whale spotting. With the reef practically in its backyard, you can snorkel straight off the beach. But you don't have to be adventurous. Drifting around the bay in a glass-bottomed boat across psychedelic coral or having massages on floating beds in the sea is enough to lull you into another world. ◇

Austravel is offering an 11-night Great Barrier Reef holiday from £2,379 per person, including return international flights, car hire and all transfers to the islands



LEFT: A SECRET COVE
ON HAYMAN ISLAND
BOTTOM: CHARTERING
A SEAPLANE

