

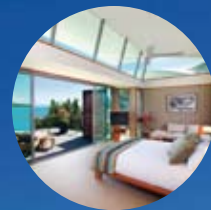


EDITED BY Nigel Bowen

TRAVEL

WHERE TO STAY WHEN YOU VISIT THE BEST PLACES ON EARTH.

From top: the view from Qualia's Long Pavilion; one of Qualia's boats; the master bedroom in a Yacht Club Villa; Hamilton Island Yacht Club.



WHERE THE BLOODY HELL HAVE YOU BEEN?

If you think of cheap and cheerful family holidays whenever the Whitsundays are mentioned, it's high time you check out the spectacular accommodation the region now has on offer.



Clockwise from top left: Hamilton Island; Oprah and Curtis Stone at Whitehaven Beach; one of Qualia's beaches; Whitehaven Beach; the Beach House at Qualia Oprah stayed at; Hamilton Island's golf course.



QUEENSLAND



HAMILTON ISLAND

The plutocrats' playground

The best way to arrive at 'Hamo' is to pull into its 251-berth marina behind the wheel of your super-maxi after having just taken line honours during Audi Hamilton Island Race Week.

Alternatively, you can just fly in on Jetstar, Virgin or Qantas. Not the least of the region's attractions is that — if you're flying in from Sydney, Melbourne



GQ INFO

STAY

Hamilton Island
Great Barrier Reef,
Queensland,
13 7333,
hamiltonisland.com.au.
Yacht Club Villas
range from \$1350-
\$1600 per night,
Qualia Pavilions range
from \$950-\$1500 per
night (though you'll be
up for \$3500 a night
to stay in the Beach
House, which Oprah
bunked down in).



or Brisbane — you can leave home after breakfast and be in your villa by lunch, without any of the customs and security hassles involved in flying international.

Upon arrival, you'll be greeted by a solicitous concierge who will ferry you in an Audi to one of the 60 pavilions in Qualia or — if you're travelling with children or just prefer plenty of room — one of the 35 four-storey, four-bedroom Yacht Club Villas.

Hamilton Island is the handiwork of two visionary business titans: colourful Queensland property developer Keith Williams, who created it in the early '80s, and Rosemount Estate wine tsar Bob Oatley, who took it over seven years ago and immediately started pumping hundreds of millions into the place, creating the kind of accommodation fit for a billionaire talk-show queen.

Possibly as a result of the lingering influence of the blokey Williams, Hamilton offers plenty for the action

WHEN OPRAH GRACED THIS NATION WITH HER PRESENCE, WHERE DID SHE HEAD FIRST? THE WHITSUNDAYS.

man who wants a bit of high-octane recreation along with his relaxation. Along with all the expected attractions of a top-notch resort — luxuriously appointed pavilions, lavish spa facilities, a five-star restaurant, a ridiculously large infinity-edge pool and your own golf buggy to tootle about in — Qualia's guests can also partake of a plethora of boys' own adventure activities — jet-ski tours, fishing trips, go-karting, quad biking and target shooting (with a .44 Magnum, no less). And if all that wasn't mancationatastic enough, Oatley's just poured \$45 million into creating one of the world's most ruggedly magnificent golf courses on a nearby island.

REEFSLEEP

The water park for grown-ups

If you've always fantasised about sexual congress with a Nordic nymphette, then you'll find Airlie Beach a happy hunting ground. On the other hand, if your tastes run to something more sophisticated than necking jugs of Bundy and coke with 19-year-old Swedish backpackers in a cheesy pub, there's not a lot on offer. GQ overnights in the best hotel in town, Peppers Coral

OK, perhaps it's not all your fault. Your head was turned by the exotic delights of Bali, Fiji and Thailand. You harbour traumatic memories of holidays spent playing endless games of ping pong while your parents got hammered on Blue Lagoon cocktails by the pool. You never got the memo about the place now being sexy.

Well we're sorry, but post The Visit those excuses just won't cut it anymore. When Oprah deigned to grace this hysterically grateful nation with her Christ-like presence last December, where did she head first? The Whitsundays. And it's not like the Big O was Robinson Crusoe. A cavalcade of A-listers — Fernando Alonso, Jeremy Clarkson, Sir Ian Botham — have also headed to Hamilton Island of late.

These foreign high-flyers have twigged to something many Aussies still seem oblivious to: the Whitsundays offer a range of accommodation that ranges from the luxurious to the eco-friendly to the just plain extraordinary.



Clockwise from top left: Reefworld; Paradise Bay Eco Escape; guests bond at Paradise Bay Eco Escape; Reefworld at dusk; a Paradise Bay Eco Escape bungalow; Reefworld's resident grouper.



Coast Resort, which offers fully serviced apartment accommodation, along with access to a reasonable quality restaurant, pool and spa.

Forty nautical miles offshore of Airlie Beach lies Fantasea Reefworld, the largest pontoon facility in Australia, which serves as a base from which you can snorkel and scuba dive on the Great Barrier Reef — or observe it from the comfort of a helicopter or glass-bottomed boat. Taking a day trip there is worthwhile in itself, but if you really want to experience something magical, book in for the Reefsleap option. Then, at 2.30pm, when the 200-odd people you travelled out with get back on the boat to depart, you'll stay on and have a stretch of the Great Barrier Reef all to yourself (well, yourself and a maximum of five other guests, plus an unobtrusive handful of live-on staff) until the next boat arrives at 10.30am the following morning. It's up to you to determine your schedule, but you'll probably want to spend as much time in the water as possible before sitting down to a hearty dinner, eaten al fresco against the backdrop of an endless expanse of water capped with a night sky full of blazing stars. After dining, make sure you pay a visit to the pontoon's underwater viewing chamber where you'll come eyeball to fish eye with a whole new collection of marine life including, most likely, Reefworld's redoubtable mascot 'George', a 3m-long Queensland grouper that looks like something from the prehistoric deep.

PARADISE BAY ECO ESCAPE

It can be easy being green

On paper, it seems ridiculous that even the most self-flagellating tree-hugger would pay top dollar to holiday at Paradise Bay. Sure, the place runs on

GQ INFO

STAY

Peppers Coral Coast Resort, Mount Whitsunday Drive, Airlie Beach, Queensland, 07 4962 5100, peppers.com.au/coral-coast. Rooms range from \$240-\$515 per night.

STAY

Reefsleap, 1800 650 851, fantasea.com.au. \$480 for a standard room, \$650 for a king room.

STAY

Paradise Bay Eco Escape, South Long Island, Queensland, 07 4946 9777, paradisebay.com.au. \$498 per night, plus \$290 for return helicopter transfer from Hamilton Island's airport.



solar power and recycled rainwater, but there's no TV, radio, internet or mobile phone reception. No spa, gym or pool. No air-conditioning — or even glass in the windows of the unassuming bungalow you'll be staying in. Hell, there's not even a proper beach, just a rocky shoreline.

Nonetheless, there's a word-of-mouth buzz about the place that's attracting tourists from around the world.

So what is everyone raving about? "You can bail out of your busy life and totally switch off," suggests Rosie George, the convivial Kiwi who manages the place along with her equally ebullient husband, Steve.

Paradise Bay might not offer much of what people have come to expect from an upmarket resort, but what it does focus on (gourmet food, friendly service, eco-friendly fun), it does incredibly well.


Upon arriving at Paradise Bay (after a 10-minute helicopter ride from Hamilton Island's airport), you're liable to feel as if you've found yourself at the beachside estate of a rich distant relative, along with an eclectic collection of people you've never met before but with whom you'll be spending the weekend.

GQ arrived just in time for pre-dinner drinks and canapés, after which everyone sat down at a communal dinner table for a three-course meal that would have put what is on offer



at many of the mainland's fanciest restaurants to shame. Lubricated by free-flowing fine wine, the conversation continued long into the night as 12 strangers from America, Canada, South Africa and Australia bonded over stories of their travels, work and families. "The groups we have always gel," Rosie later assured me. "People are relaxed, so they talk to strangers, enjoy the camaraderie and form friendships."

After an impressive breakfast during which goannas, wallabies and various forms of bird life stopped by, GQ and its 11 new best buddies boarded the resort's capacious catamaran and headed out for a day's sailing. Even those nursing a hangover from one mango daiquiri too many the night before had to agree that life didn't get much better than this, as they stretched out in the sun and glided over an emerald green sea through an archipelago of pristine tropical islands.

After a stop at Whitehaven Beach and a picnic lunch at a secluded bay, it was back to Paradise Bay for a couple of hours of bushwalking, kayaking or reading before the festivities kicked off for another night. 

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