



CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

ON LADY ELLIOT ISLAND, A SCENIC SPECK IN THE OCEAN OFF BUNDABERG, THE GREAT BARRIER REEF IS CLOSER THAN YOU THINK

WORDS: CHANTAY LOGAN

How far can you get from the Gold Coast in 100 minutes? At 6am on a Saturday, I'm lining up for my usual morning coffee at Burleigh; by breakfast I'm slipping through an underwater world in the shadow of a manta ray.

Direct flights to Lady Elliot Island put the Great Barrier Reef in reach in about the same time it can take to battle the MI to Brissie.

A light plane from Seair's base at Coolangatta ferries wonder-seekers to the remote speck off Bundaberg. There's no Customs to contend with and you won't have to subject your stomach to lengthy boat-trips.

My scenic flight arrows low along the coastline, with hills and high-rises soon replaced by a street of cotton-ball clouds.

The azure-fringing reef of our destination looms from endless indigo ocean, a landing strip slicing through the middle of the coral cay.

Hundreds of squawking seabirds grudgingly making way for their metal colleague as we touch down, before settling back into their sunbaking with a shrug of ruffled feathers.

Wide-eyed arrivals are treated to a guided tour of the coral cay, once callously stripped to fuel a guano mine.

Attitudes today are a world away. Native trees have been reintroduced to coax nesting seabirds, banks of solar panels keep the water in guests' showers almost as warm as a 28-degree ocean and the team's genuine passion for their slice of paradise is contagious, fostering a drive to protect the reef that lingers long after the holiday's over.

My island home is a reef unit, with a casuarina-fringed view that couldn't get any closer to the sand. Sitting on the veranda, my row of pegged bikinis flapping in the gentle breeze on the string clothesline and not a soul in sight, it feels very Robinson Crusoe ... and there's no mobile reception to interrupt the fantasy. I don't have to forage any further than the breakfast buffet and some of the best snorkelling is 5m from my front door.

Slip into the shallow lagoon and postcard views come to life. It's a fantastic introduction for first-timers or littlies, who can get up-close-and-personal with the reef's friendliest inhabitants without worrying about tricky currents or larger predators.

Perhaps the most popular of the lagoon's laid-back residents, the turtles are almost puppy-like in their attentions. While touching is generally a no-no, these guys can have their own ideas and a shell scratch is often high on the agenda. Immersed so thoroughly in their world, time is suspended as you cruise eyeball-to-eyeball, watching as they poke at a likely piece of coral or ascend for a gulp of air.

While green and loggerhead turtles nest on the island every November to March, you can catch up with these locals year-round, along with sprawling blue starfish, creeping cowry shells and enough fish to furnish a dozen Finding Nemo franchises. A short walk to the

other side of the island will take you to the Coral Gardens, where magnificent walls and arches of coral drop off to deeper water where you can find many of the 1200 species of marine life enjoying the protection of this Marine National Park Green Zone.

Manta rays, dolphins and sharks share quarters with alien squid and schools of fish, easily accessible on a clearly marked circuit that lets you drift gently with the current. From June to October, whale songs fill the water, with snorkellers and divers regularly spotting the mammoth migrants as they sail past Lady Elliot Island. It's also an exceptional time for water clarity, although the island boasts an average visibility of 20-plus metres year-round.

Crystal waters and healthy coral is one of the bonuses of being miles away from inshore rivers and rain run-off.

If you prefer to dive into a good book, deserted strips of sand and strategically hung hammocks are in plentiful supply. There's also ample animal action above the surface, from the second highest diversity of bird species on the Great Barrier Reef to the weirdly wonderful, tree-climbing red hermit crabs that pop up at sunset. You won't have to go looking for natural wonders here – they'll find you.

GO. STAY. PLAY.

GO

Lady Elliot Island is on the Southern Great Barrier Reef, about 80km northeast of Bundaberg, between Fraser and Lady Musgrave islands. The only access is by aircraft, with Seair Pacific providing scenic transfers from the Gold Coast, Brisbane, Hervey Bay and Bundaberg.

STAY

Day trips may be on the menu, but sleepovers are spectacular. Lady Elliot Island Eco Resort offers comfortable, low-impact accommodation, from eco cabins to reef units and two-bedroom absolute beachfront island suites. There's currently a two-night escape package from \$625 per person including accommodation in an Eco Cabin, flights, buffet breakfast and dinner and a glass bottom boat guided snorkelling tour (conditions apply). For details, go to queensland.com/southerngreatbarrierreef or ladyelliottisland.com

PLAY

Choose from 20 dive sites around the island and PADI certified dive courses. Snorkelling is straight off the beach with mask, snorkel and fin hire included in the overnight tariff or join a snorkel safari. You can also explore the reef from a glass bottom boat, take a guided reef walk or another nature-based tour, or simply stroll along a deserted beach. The resort offers beach volleyball, soccer, table tennis and a pool table.

