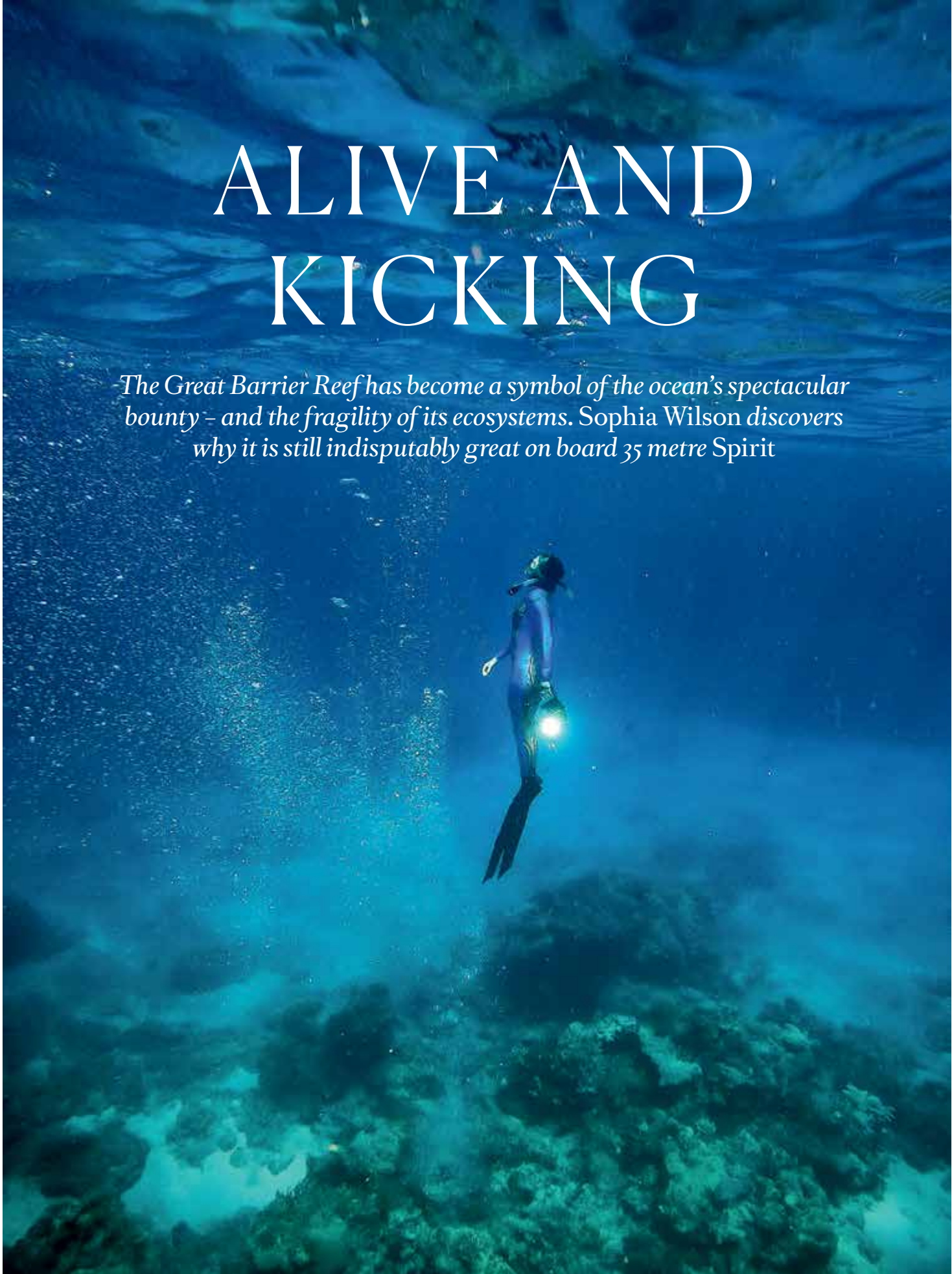


The Great Barrier Reef offers a treasure trove of activities such as scuba diving and encounters with nature. Below: 35m wavepiercer Spirit. Bottom: Lizard Island



# ALIVE AND KICKING

The Great Barrier Reef has become a symbol of the ocean's spectacular bounty - and the fragility of its ecosystems. Sophia Wilson discovers why it is still indisputably great on board 35 metre Spirit



PHOTOGRAPHY: ADOBE STOCK; COLYN HUBER/LOVEGREEN PHOTOGRAPHY

“We will often be having dinner on the aft deck and there will be lemon sharks, giant grouper and all sorts of fish life just hanging out”



Despite concern about its demise through global warming, the tropical region is still a natural wonderland



Rumours of the Great Barrier Reef's death have been greatly exaggerated. It certainly took a hit from coral bleaching in 2015 and 2017, caused by heat stress from global warming and El Niño, but local experts dismiss rumours that this natural wonderland has lost its magic.



**Cuddle a koala**

Head to the Cairns Wildlife Dome at the Pullman Reef Hotel Casino, where a koala is always on hand for the perfect photo opportunity (they smell like eucalyptus cough drops). The hotel is also home to a casino, rooftop pool and the award-winning fine dining restaurant Tamarind. pullmanhotels.com

"Yes, we have had coral bleaching in places, yes, we have had cyclone damage but the reef is huge," says Captain Martin Debanks of 35 metre Australian-flagged *Spirit*, which is my base during my time in the region. "I could take you out for two weeks and you wouldn't see any bleaching or any dead reef. All you would see is vibrant colours and wonderful fish life."

He says he is spoilt for choice in terms of destinations to take guests from Cairns. "Just outside the port, 16 miles away, we have Fitzroy Island, which is just stunning, and then five hours away you have got Opal Reef, which has amazing diving and snorkelling," he says. "If we leave here early evening then the next morning we are at Lizard Island, which is one of the

best anchorages in the world."

Lizard Island, a sacred site for the Dinggaal aboriginal people, was named by Captain Cook when he visited the island in 1770, climbing to its peak to work out how to navigate out through the reef. Today, as well as being a picturesque anchorage, it is

also home to the exclusive Lizard Island Resort, which offers 40 rooms and villas with 24 private beaches. The resort was devastated by Cyclone Ita in 2014 and then hit by Cyclone Nathan in 2015 just days before it was due to reopen, but has now been rebuilt again, this time with minimalist, Scandinavian style interiors.

Beyond the scampering monitor lizards, a daily changing menu of local seafood and a spa that offers La Biosthétique skin treatments, the real lure of this resort is its abundant marine life. "It's a green zone so you can't fish there and the fish know that," says Captain Debanks. "We will often be having dinner on the aft deck and there will be lemon sharks, giant grouper and all sorts of fish life just hanging out in the underwater lights."

True to the captain's words, before I jump into the water in the island's Watson's Bay I spot a couple of blacktip sharks and a huge grouper. Being a "pommy", throwing myself into the water with sharks - albeit ones less than a metre long - doesn't come naturally. However, after a bit of cajoling I am persuaded and the underwater scene is worth the jeopardy. There is no sign of cyclone damage and hundreds of multicoloured fish zigzag in and out of the mosaic of hard and soft corals. But the real spectacles are the giant clams, *Tridacna gigas*, which look as if they have gorged on Alice in Wonderland's "eat me" cakes, measuring up to two metres wide.

This snorkelling is a fraction of the underwater adventure on offer: the island also enjoys access to the Ribbon Reefs, including the famous Cod Hole dive site, home to a group of friendly potato cod that weigh up to 100kg each. ▶



Hundreds of multicoloured fish zigzag in and out of the mosaic of hard and soft corals

PHOTOGRAPHY: ADOBE STOCK; COLYN HUBER/LOVEGREEN PHOTOGRAPHY



**Lunch with a view**

Thala Beach Nature Reserve Resort, on the stunning coastal road between Cairns and Port Douglas, offers lunch in the treetops at its Osprey's restaurant with dishes such as seared yellowfin tuna with romesco sauce and seafood laksa made with tiger prawns, mussels and reef fish. thalabeach.com.au



**Catch of the day**

For a relaxed experience dine at Prawn Star, two eat-in trawlers that are berthed next to each other at Cairns's Marlin Marina and serve up fresh platters of prawns, oysters and bugs (a species of slipper lobster). prawnstar.cafeleader.com

PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRISTIAN MILLER; JASON LOUCAS; COLYN HUBER / LOVEGREEN PHOTOGRAPHY; ADOBE STOCK



## The 74 Whitsunday Islands are a treasure trove of bottle green forests, white sands and coral-filled waters

Back on the mainland, Cairns may be known as the "Gateway to the Great Barrier Reef" but the excitement in this corner of Australia is not just in the water. Cascading down to meet the cerulean waters of the reef is the Daintree rainforest, thought to be 60 million years older than the Amazon rainforest. A section of Daintree was opened to the public just over 20 years ago with the introduction of a 7.5 kilometre cable car ride that gives visitors a bird's eye view of the lush canopy below.

After watching water plunge over the 125 metre Barron Falls in the middle of the forest, we head to Barron Falls Estate for the further thrill of a quad bike tour. Owner Perry Marshall leads us around his "backyard" and shows off some of the tallest and most distinctive rainforest trees - including a yellow penda tree that is thought to be more than 1,000 years old and a crow's ash with spectacular roots that burst from the tree in giant ribbons.

We pull to a stop in the middle of the forest by a brook and are greeted with a barbecue lunch and a selection of tropical fruit, including dragon fruit, custard apple and mamey sapote. There's more excitement after lunch when Marshall announces that one of his specially positioned cameras has spotted



A kangaroo greets the sunrise on the beach at Cape Hillsborough



Endangered and potentially dangerous, the cassowary bird can be found in the Daintree rainforest



a cassowary, the large flightless bird. We set off down twisting dirt tracks crisscrossing streams and, once there, Marshall manages to lure the cassowary out from the bushes with a handful of bananas. Despite its fearsome reputation, which comes from its potentially fatal clawed kick, I feel fortunate to be so close to this shy and endangered creature.

With so much to offer both on land and in the sea, it is easy to see why so many superyachts, including 126 metre *Octopus*, 50 metre *Legacy* and 74 metre *Phvs Vltra*, have all spent time in Cairns in recent months. I, however, am heading approximately 300 nautical miles south to take in the Whitsundays - another jewel in the Great Barrier Reef's crown. The 74 islands, which are mostly uninhabited, are a treasure trove of bottle green forests, white sands and coral-filled waters.

The most famous of these hallowed sailing grounds is Hamilton Island. It was bought in 2003 by the late Robert Oatley, the owner of eight-time Sydney to Hobart winning yacht *Wild Oats XI*. He invested hundreds of millions of dollars to transform the island into one >



**Star investment**

Dubai-based Syrian entrepreneur Ghassan Aboud, owner of Port Douglas marina, which can accommodate yachts up to 50 metres, is set to open three new five-star hotels in Cairns over the next 12 months as part of the Crystalbrook Collection crystalbrookcollection.com



“You can scuba dive with platypus or watch kangaroos on the beach at sunrise”



**Sweet tooth**

*The Chocolate Lovers Indulgence treatment at Spa Qualia offers couples a full body aromatic chocolate oil massage, hair and scalp treatment and private use of a Roman bubble bath with a chocolate platter and a glass of champagne. qualia.com.au*

Above: swimming with turtles at Lizard Island. Right: the pure white sand of Whitehaven Beach



**Bottoms up**

*Mt Uncle Distillery is North Queensland's first and only distillery - try its Botanic Australls Bushfire Smoked Gin, which uses 14 native botanicals and has a highly distinctive flavour. mtuncle.com*

of the most sought-after luxury holiday destinations in the world. We head by helicopter for lunch at Qualia, the island's most exclusive property. Located on the northernmost point of the island, its 60 pavilions, with floor-to-ceiling windows and private decks with panoramic views of the Coral Sea, have been frequented by celebrities including Oprah Winfrey, Miranda Kerr and Leonardo DiCaprio. Drinking a glass of chilled Charles Heidsieck in the Long Pavilion before dining on fresh seafood in the beachfront restaurant, it's easy to see why it's a popular superyacht stop-off. Visiting guests who don't mind getting their feet wet can tender in to the beach or make use of the island's marina, before being whisked up to Qualia in a golf cart for lunch or spa services.

Superyachts wanting to spend more time in the Whitsundays can use Abell Point Marina on the

mainland at Airlie Beach as a base. Able to accommodate yachts up to 60 metres, it is also a great location for enjoying activities on the mainland. “We encourage guests to also explore what is on shore,” says the marina's marketing manager Joscelyn O'Keefe. “You can scuba dive with platypus in their natural environment in the Broken River or see the kangaroos on the beach at sunrise at Cape Hillsborough.”

The marina is also a great starting point for a helicopter tour of the Hardy Reef, 50 kilometres offshore. As we fly in it is humbling to see the seemingly never-ending reef stretching away below us - it's the real-life version of pictures I remember from school textbooks. “It's nice around the islands but out here is something else,” says our pilot. I don't disagree. This area of reef is famous for its aptly named Heart Reef. The perfect heart shape is just 17 metres in diameter and our pilot kindly hovers back and forth so that we can get our envy-inducing Instagram snaps. From there the ▶

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES; ADOBE STOCK



Main image: Spirit in the Whitsundays. The islands are just some of many jewels in the Great Barrier Reef's crown



**Share and share alike**

*Hemingway's restaurant at Abell Point Marina has opened a new Garden Bar, serving sunset cocktails and tapas style plates. [hemingwaysairliebeach.com.au](http://hemingwaysairliebeach.com.au)*

flight takes us on to Whitehaven Beach, seven kilometres of white sands that are the most photographed in Australia. Local legend has it that its sand is so pure that it was used to make the glass for the Hubble Space Telescope in the 1970s.

It's hard to comprehend that two such beautiful spots can exist mere kilometres from each other but this part of the world never stops surprising me. To maintain these magical locations, says David Good, CEO of Superyachts Australia, "we need advocates for the reef. People need to come here to experience it so that they can help protect its future." This is a mindset shared by the superyacht community of North Queensland. John Rumney, of Great Barrier Reef Legacy, says of the global warming that led to coral bleaching: "It's a global issue, not just a Great Barrier Reef issue." The organisation wants vessels to visit to experience its natural beauty and to help join the global fight against climate change.

It is safe to say I am an advocate for the Great Barrier Reef and you should be too. But don't go there because you think the reef is going to disappear, go there because it is a region full of wonders both above and below the surface. ▣

*Spirit is available for charter with Ocean Independence from \$90,000 per week, [oceanindependence.com](http://oceanindependence.com) and [spiritluxurycharters.com.au](http://spiritluxurycharters.com.au)*

Go there because it is a region full of wonders both above and below the surface