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WINTER ESCAPES

Some five-star resorts now offer more than mere luxury, writes Andrea Black.

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Frequent visitors to the Whitsundays know that qualia is the ultimate fly-and-flop destination. In as little as 10 minutes after landing at Hamilton Island Airport you can slink into your private plunge pool in one of the 60 pavilions, looking out across the eucalypts to the Coral Sea.

Yet here I am slaving over a hot stove shakily pouring aromatic hot wax into an heirloom keepsake, and tomorrow I'll be hoisting crabnets out of mangroves before wildly arranging flowers to make a centrepiece for a gala dinner.

It's all part of the plan of course - qualia has just introduced Weekends of Wonderment. The idea, according to corporate communications director Sophie Baker, is to bring bespoke experiences that embody the essence of qualia -

Latin for "a collection of deeper sensory experiences".

They're part of a series of events and concepts qualia runs, including Pas de Deux in Paradise, where dancers from the Australian Ballet perform on a beach stage, and Great Barrier Feast, where Australia's best chefs showcase their skills. Given that qualia has some fierce competition, with the new One&Only Hayman Island resort just opened a couple of islands away, these immersive experience aim to set the resort apart.

"Travellers aren't surprised any more," general manager Matthew Taverner tells me. "They read the reviews on TripAdvisor and know what to expect."

He's talking about qualia's welcoming Long Pavilion - an open-fronted structure looking out across an infinity pool and the Coral Sea to Whitsunday Island. Review after review favourably describes the immediate feeling of relaxation as guests check-in over a flute of Charles Heidsieck champagne on a sofa affording this view. Around them, the architecture is unmistakably Australian.

These Weekends of Wonderment are a way, Matthew says, of surprising the luxury market.

Five-star resorts cannot rely solely on exceptional service, architecture and cuisine any more. Guests want a unique "money-can't-buy" adventure.

Along for this journey is Elise Pioch, a candlemaker originally from the south of France. We are instructed to bring a personal heirloom to her candlemaking class. I've surveyed my china cabinet and decided on a mid-century modern teacup bought in Germany.

Impossibly beautiful and effortlessly stylish - she wore a Marni dress and bare feet while crabbing - Elise was schooled by the fashion house Hermes where she was taught to do everything thoroughly.

Elise's perfectionism is evident in her pursuit to get the right scents for her candles. Her words evoke those of Patrick Susskind, the writer of the novel *Perfume*.

"The persuasive power of an odour cannot be fended off, It ... imbues us totally. There is no remedy for it," she purrs.

As she tells us her stories on how she came up with each of her signature scents of her **company** Maison Balzac from memories of her idyllic childhood, her passion is palpable. Soon we are all exchanging our favourite scents.

"The inside of a horse's ear," a class member confesses. "Freshly cut grass," someone interjects. "Petrol," another confides.

I'm filling my makeshift heirloom with a scent evoking that of an old movie theatre, blending cigar smoke with worn leather. It's a scent Elise has been working on for a while. When it burns I am transported to Le Grand Rex in Paris watching Truffaut's *Jules and Jim*. Afterwards, enjoying another flute of champagne on the helipad while waiting for the soy candle to set, all female attendees agree we have a lady crush on Elise.

It was here on the helipad, a scenic grass patch on the water, that days before Hamilton **Island** owner Bob Oatley celebrated his 86th birthday with his close-knit family and friends. Indeed, the Oatley family set out to build qualia in 2007 as somewhere they would be proud to entertain their friends.

Looking up toward the "leeward" side - they are yachties after all - of the resort, the pavilions of stone, timber and glass are camouflaged by the lush tropical Australian gardens. The brief was that the spacing between each pavilion **site** be set to ensure every guest feels like they are in a private home.

You could swim or take an outdoor shower nude with only the birdlife taking a sticky beak. My favourite was a soak in the giant bathtub filled with Aesop bath gel and Linden Leaves green tea and lime bath bags. Of course, if I wanted to be more social I could have a dip on one of the two pools at the resort. Recently a famous boy band, a boxing champion and a former prime minister all sat around the same pool at Pebble Beach.

The next day, aboard the resort's vessel *The Atomic* for a day of crabbing with award-winning chef Mark Best and his wife Valerie from *Marque* restaurant, we power past the **hotel** on the northern ridge of Hamilton **Island** and towards the mangroves. We jump in a dinghy with expert crabber and marine biologist Matt Vickers. He shows us how to tell if the meat is going to be tender and how to hold these giant mudcrabs so you don't get nipped. We've pulled up more than enough for dinner.

It's raining and the gourmet picnic planned on the shores of Whitsunday **Island** doesn't go entirely to plan, but no one seems to mind. It could be that the champagne is flowing again.

Besides, we have more skills to attempt to master. We make our way back to the Long Pavilion to arrange flowers with Australia's best, Saskia Havekes from *Grandiflora*. Saskia grew up around the flower fields of Dural and her background as a designer for a New York magazine put her in good stead to work on her talents for arranging flowers for high society weddings and celebrity events. Saskia still braves the 3.30am commute and handpicks her flowers at the Sydney flower markets.

We find ourselves taming small shrubs of wildflowers, billy buttons, gumnuts and orchids and arranging them poking out of a foam brick. These installations will adorn the dinner table at Pebble Beach tonight. It becomes apparent that some have an innate talent and others, like me, don't. But that didn't stop me conjuring up what I could whip up from the resort's heliconias and gardenias on my golf buggy drive back.

We're about to sample our bounty from the sea at the Pebble Beach dining room. Mark Best has paired the mud crab with macadamia and Yamba prawns with cucumber. It could be the finest seafood I have ever sampled. Along the table Elise's candles are adding light and aroma to the occasion and the flower arrangements play a starring role.

Our **group** of 20 agrees, this mix of like-minded artisans, all without pretension and willing to share their passion, has been perfectly orchestrated. Everyone in the line at the airport has a carefully packed bag stuffed with their flower arrangement and candle. We have dabbled, learnt new skills and shared experiences that would not have happened if we were all lolling poolside for the weekend. And we have proof for those back home.

The writer was a guest of Hamilton **Island**.

Travel with the experts

For golfers

Tee off with PGA professional Michael Mosher for the Ryder Cup this September. You'll play six rounds of golf in Scotland and then spend four days watching the the Ryder Cup, one of the most prestigious world golf events held every two years. See teedupgolftours.com.

For budding astronomers

The skies of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National **Park** offer perfect viewing opportunities for stargazers. Astronomy enthusiasts should head to the Uluru Astronomy Weekend in August. Hosted by Dr Karl Kruszelnicki, along with some of the world's leading experts, the weekend will include discussions on astro-statistics and the structure of the cosmos, and a Galaxy Star Ball. See ayersrockresort.com.au

[/astronomy-weekend](#).

Travel for the Mind

Get true insight as you journey from Venezuela to Cuba from veteran foreign correspondent George Negus. The tour with World Expeditions includes a visit to Angel Falls, the indigenous tribes of Canaima, Caracas to the old city of Havana, the Vinales Valley and historic Trinidad. The 18-day trip departs November 3, 2014. See worldexpeditions.com or phone 1300 720 000 for details.

Travel with a marine biologist

Anyone embarking on a North Star Cruise that visits tropical reef environments can learn the secrets of underwater life from biologist Dr Andy Lewis. His specialist marine ecology expertise is on offer on the Coral Atoll Cruise to the Rowley Shoals, the Adventures in Paradise cruise to Eastern Papua New Guinea and the Archipelago Adventure to the Louisiades Islands. See northstarcruises.com.au.

For photographers

Budding photographers have the opportunity to join expert photographer Richard I'Anson, author of the Lonely Planet guide Travel Photography on a tour of the Flinders Ranges, staying at Australian Arkaba Station from October 3 to 7. You'll discover the key aspects of travel photography from Richard in a very picturesque setting. See wildbushluxury.com/journeys.

TRIP NOTES

GETTING THERE

Flights from Melbourne and Sydney land at the Great Barrier Reef Airport on Hamilton **Island**. Jetstar and Virgin operate services and Qantas recently resumed direct flights from Sydney.

STAYING THERE

Accommodation at qualia is priced from \$995 per night, based on twin share. Rate includes breakfast for two, VIP chauffeur service, VIP return Hamilton **Island** Airport/Marina transfers, use of non-motorised watercraft and the hire of a golf buggy for your stay. Phone 1300 780 959, see qualia.com.au. The next Weekends of Wonderment event will be held at qualia November 28-30. See qualia.com.au/wonderment.

MORE INFORMATION

ttnq.org.au.

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