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Cover story - RESORTS

The world's largest coral reef is being reinvigorated, writes Sheriden Rhodes, with a range of new and upgraded multimillion-dollar resorts and hotels.

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As we fly over the Whitsunday Islands to the Great Barrier Reef, elongated trails of coral spawn dissect the impossibly blue water with its mosaic of jewel-like reefs, islands, coral cays and atolls. The glassy surface of the sea and horizon merge and for a surreal moment it's as if we're flying through the ocean itself.

Once the outer reef looms into sight, passengers fall reverently silent as we behold one of the seven wonders of the natural world. Our aerial outlook gives some perspective to the world's largest coral reef system - the only living organism visible from space - and one of Australia's biggest tourist drawcards.

Richard Fitzpatrick, Emmy Award-winning underwater cinematographer, marine biologist and producer of acclaimed BBC series Great Barrier Reef, says the recently flagged loss of the reef's world heritage status would be devastating. "No longer could we compete with the prestige of other world heritage sites. It would also highlight the failure of government in protecting this global icon."

Peter Gash, eco-warrior, pilot and owner of Lady Elliot **Island**, says while there are many other iconic places worldwide with unique beauty, Australians should visit the reef at least once in their lifetime.

"There is more marine life found per square inch on the Great Barrier Reef than anywhere else on the planet."

While considered one of the world's best-managed reefs, its fragile ecosystem faces threats from coastal development, water quality, cyclones, crown-of-thorns, ship groundings and climate change. Shipping and port development have recently emerged as issues - threatening not just the reef itself, but the \$5.7 billion tourism industry it supports.

Despite this, the Great Barrier Reef's islands, towns and resorts that stretch almost 2600 kilometres along the North Queensland coast are being reborn, not unlike the vast summer spawning of corals, fish and other marine life that recolonise its 2900-plus reefs, as this guide shows.

HAYMAN **ISLAND**

One of the Whitsundays' most iconic resorts will be relaunched as One&Only Hayman in April following a \$50 million makeover. If One&Only's other luxury resorts in the Maldives and Bahamas are anything to go by, the new-look Hayman should give six-star Qualia on nearby Hamilton **Island** a run for its money.

Hayman's rebirth, in partnership with DBI Design, will see the redevelopment of the resort's pool wing. Chic new rooms and suites with ocean and lagoon views will be on offer, some with direct pool access

from private terraces. Luxurious cabanas and day beds will be added to Hayman's famous pool, while a One&Only Health Spa with adjacent beauty salon will open. New guest experiences, culinary options and services will also be offered. "This will take Australian resorts to the next level," says Anna Guillan, executive general manager sales and marketing for Hayman and Mulpha Hotels.

Mulpha Australia will also continue the staged rollout of the ultra-luxury Hayman Private Residences and Hayman Marina Residences, offering private ownership for clients and guests.

In other Whitsunday **Island** news, approval has been granted for a \$600 million resort on Great Keppel including 750 resort villas, 300 apartments, a **hotel**, marina and 18-hole golf course. Lindeman **Island**, formerly Club Med's only Australian resort, **sold** to **Chinese** investors for \$12 million last year and is slated for a \$200 million makeover.

hayman.com.au.

HAMILTON **ISLAND**

Over on the Whitsundays' largest, most inhabited **island**, the billionaire winemaking Oatley family has received approval to develop a new 100-room **hotel** and 200-home **site** on Dent **Island**, home to the Hamilton **Island** Golf Club. Basic infrastructure has already been built, however the Oatleys are awaiting a more buoyant economic climate before embarking on construction. Individual houses will be **sold** to private owners and put into a real **estate** letting pool.

The Oatley family is also exploring the development of a world-class luxury resort on Hamilton **Island**. Unlike the existing 60-pavilion Qualia Resort, developed for \$120 million and opened in 2007, the new resort would allow families. Options being explored are a two or three-bedroom luxury **apartment** complex such as Qualia.

Qualia offers a beach house with a double room and larger pool, and the new resort might be developed along similar lines.

Hamilton **Island**'s boutique Beach Club Resort will meanwhile undergo a multimillion-dollar makeover this year. All 57 guest rooms and public areas will be overhauled by September, conceptualised by Australian interior designers Hare & Klein, responsible for the recent \$4 million makeover of the **island**'s 49 Palm bungalows.

hamiltonisland.com.au.

BEDARRA **ISLAND**

Located in the Family **Island Group** off the coastal town of Mission Beach, Bedarra has reopened following devastating Cyclone Yasi. Gone is the lavish excess synonymous with the old Bedarra in favour of a more ecologically sound model. The number of villas has been reduced from 16 to seven, the renovated resort has converted to solar power and water is sourced from a filtered natural spring and rainwater. The **property** will close over the wet season. The new owner, Brisbane hotelier Sam Charlton, said given the **island** was situated on the Great Barrier Reef it was worth protecting. Across from Bedarra, Dunk **Island** has reopened for day-trippers, with walking trails cleared and new boat moorings in place.

bedarra.com.au.

ORPHEUS **ISLAND**

This boutique five-star resort in the little known Palm **Island Group** off Townsville reopened last year after a \$5 million revamp, which included a new 26-metre infinity pool and the refurbished North Beachfront Villas, now decked out in neutral tones with blonde timbers. The resort's south wing is slated for refurbishment down the track, while a new day spa has just opened, offering a signature "massage with the tides" experience.

orpheus.com.au.

LADY ELLIOT AND HERON ISLANDS

North of Bundaberg, Lady Elliot **Island** continues to reduce its carbon footprint with the installation of additional solar panels, and new wind generators will be introduced. It often competes with Heron **Island**, for which Qantaslink introduced new direct flights last year from Sydney to Gladstone - the jump-off point to Heron. From Gladstone you could take the seaplane service (\$291 one way) to Heron at the southernmost tip of the reef, or the resort has helicopter transfers. Meanwhile at Agnes Water

Beach Caravan **Park**, on Queensland's northernmost surf beach, there are swish new safari-type tents, so plenty to choose from.

ladyelliott.com.au, heronisland.com, agneswaterfirstpoint.com.au

AIRLIE BEACH

Long known as the Whitsundays' party central, a \$20 million facelift has given Airlie Beach a new lease of life. Young backpackers from across the globe still gravitate to Airlie, but there are plenty of families and couples too, splashing about the man-made lagoon on the seafront and browsing the Airlie Beach Market.

A new and contemporary streetscape has just been unveiled, rejuvenating what had become an unloved and neglected main strip. Many restaurants, cafes and retailers have spruced themselves up, with al fresco dining options spilling out onto the street creating a tropical vibe. I stroll the main street with a Bowen mango sorbet to see the changes, later tucking into tapas of haloumi with rocket at the funky Mr Bones, looking out across the cerulean sea framed by coconut palms.

Peppers Coral Coast Resort has recently rebranded to Peppers Airlie Beach to better reflect its Whitsundays location. The 102-room, five-star **apartment** resort is sporting a fresh new look after relocating the resort's on-**site** endota spa, and adding a chic relaxation lounge and shaded deck.

In town, busy drinking hole Capers has had a revamp too, with an open-air dining option across the road from the beach. Nearby, work is under way on stage two of the Port of Airlie, where Hawaiian **property group** Outrigger opened the Boathouse Apartments in 2011. The port will include a second resort, a marina that can cater to super yachts, oceanfront homes, a public boardwalk, and a retail and dining precinct as well as an integrated ferry, cruise and bus terminal. Underneath the Boathouse Apartments, Denman Cellars, with its menu of 700 local and international beers and ciders, is a terrific spot to reflect on the changes to the town.

discoverairliebeach.com.au

LONG **ISLAND**

The 23-room beachfront Palm Bay Resort, previously under Peppers management, will relaunch as a boutique wellness, event and sole use retreat this month. Located on a pretty curved inlet on Long **island**, the closest **island** to Airlie's Shute Harbour, the resort will cater for up to 40 people.

"Its beautiful setting really lends itself to being a secluded, intimate resort," Palm Bay marketing manager Jessica Goozee tells me over a fresh seafood platter. The resort will work with wedding, catering, event and wellness specialists, as well as contracting local dive and tour operators.

"Palm Bay is essentially your quintessential Balinese-inspired wellness retreat, but in our own beautiful backyard," Goozee says.

Also on the **island**, the Mantra **Group** has added the popular Long **Island** Resort to its BreakFree brand portfolio - its first **island** location.

palmbayresort.com.au; peppersairliebeach.com.au.

The writer was a guest of Whitsundays Development and Marketing and GSL Aviation.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Sheridan Rhodes' love of travel was born on a black cab ride through the foggy streets of London as a wide-eyed 18-year-old on her first overseas trip. Despite criss-crossing the globe since, the Great Barrier Reef still floored her.

TRIP NOTES

GETTING THERE

You can access the Great Barrier Reef by flying from Sydney or Melbourne (via Brisbane) to Proserpine (Whitsunday Coast Airport) and Bundaberg. Direct flights are available to Hamilton **Island** as well as Cairns, Townsville and Mackay (all major departure points for the Reef). See qantas.com; jetstar.com and virginaustralia.com. Book at least a few months ahead of travel during peak season and up to six months for school holiday periods.

GOING THERE

The best time to visit the Great Barrier Reef is between May and October (the dry season), when the weather is pleasant, with less humidity, and visibility is generally good. Northern Queensland's wet season is from November to April, with oppressive heat, humidity and heavy rainfall. The marine stinger season falls between November and March and stinger suits need to be worn during this time, particularly when swimming off mainland beaches.

MORE INFORMATION

tourismwhitsundays.com.au

tq.com.au

whitsundayscenicflights.com.au

gbrmpa.gov.au.

NO BARRIERS

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

YOUNG REEF

Stay three nights at BreakFree Long **Island** Resort from \$295 a person, including twin-share accommodation in a beachfront room with views of Happy Bay, until March 31. studentflights.com.au.

ADVENTURE REEF

Australia's largest **island** national **park** with magnificent beaches and jungle-clad mountains, Hinchinbrook **Island** is for serious trekkers and intrepid sea explorers. nprsr.qld.gov.au.

FAMILY REEF

Watch hatchlings make their way to the water during the upcoming turtle season on Heron **Island**, which features its own junior ranger school holiday program, reef walks, stargazing and more. From \$329 a person including three nights' quad-share accommodation in a Turtle Family Room, all meals and resort activities between January 10 and March 8. escapetravel.com.au or heronisland.com.

ROMANTIC REEF

Experience the reef at its luxurious best in one of just 40 villas and suites at Lizard **Island**, famously referred to by actor Kate Hudson as "the most romantic place on earth". lizardisland.com.au.

ECO REEF

Famed for its diving and resident manta rays, the unpretentious Lady Elliot **Island**, one of only three **island** resorts on the Great Barrier Reef, continually strives for a carbon-neutral model. ladyelliott.com.au.

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