

## QUEENSLAND TRAVEL

# AQUATIC GARDEN OF EDEN

An expedition cruise of the Great Barrier Reef takes **Briar Jensen** from under the sea to the top of the mountain



EXPLORING THE REEF: A platform makes getting in and out of the water easy from Coral Expeditions II. Picture: Briar Jensen



I concentrate on breathing, trying hard to keep it slow and steady to quell my apprehension. Hand-under-hand we descend the rope as I equalise my ears again and again – one squelching indignantly.

When it comes time to leave the rope, I hesitate. But even underwater, Riccardo's Italian charm wins through and I let go my umbilical cord to the surface.

I try not to panic as I disconcertingly roll to the right. From somewhere above Riccardo's arm reaches down and hauls me right-way-up. I relax enough to look up. Shards of sunlight spear through tiered shelves of table coral illuminating an iridescent blue-green parrot fish pecking at boulder coral and spitting out specks of sand like a petulant toddler.

A black Bennett's feather star flutters seductively, reminiscent of a cabaret dancer's fan. Looking like a ferny plant, it's hard to believe it detaches itself and goes walkabout at night.

My heart skips a little faster at the long-awaited sighting of a gorgonian fan, its intricate fretwork-like outline resembling a slivered cross-section of an arching tree.

As introductory dives go, they don't get much more spectacular than this. Ribbon Reef Number Three is within Australia's UNESCO World Heritage

## TRAVEL MATE

### Getting there

Coral Expeditions II departs from Cairns offering a three-night round trip to Pelorus Island and a four-night round trip to Lizard Island, taking in rarely visited ribbon reefs. Combine the two for a seven-night cruise and receive a complimentary visit to Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park during your mid-cruise Cairns stopover.

### More info

Coral Expeditions recently underwent a name change (from Coral Princess Cruises) to better reflect the practicality of its vessels and expeditionary nature of its cruises. For booking: ph 1800 079 545 or visit [coralexpeditions.com](http://coralexpeditions.com)

Great Barrier Reef, the largest coral reef system in the world.

I'm here with *Coral Expeditions II*, which is anchored next to the ribbon reef and there's not another vessel on the turquoise horizon. Lowered into the water wearing our dive gear via a hydraulic metal platform on the stern we are at the edge of the coral wall.

Diving allows me to see the aquatic garden from a different perspective, but

I have seen just as much while snorkelling. Fish dressed in psychedelic colours and Pucci-esque combinations so brilliant they're barely believable; giant yellow and black liquorice allsorts with orange horns, apparently magnificent nudibranchs; sea squirts stained yellow and purple like fungal forest puffballs.

Coral Expeditions II was purpose-built for the waters of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. At 35m it can manoeuvre much closer to islands and reefs than larger vessels and ventures beyond the usual reef daytrip destinations.

Built in 1985 it had a complete refit in 1996 and a recent refurbishment has freshened up the interior without losing any of its old-world nautical charm, like warm wood panelling and polished brass fittings.

With three decks and a maximum of 44 guests it's intimate and personable. While the layout of the dining room can leave some diners feeling hemmed in by the odd pillar, the top deck lounge with panoramic wraparound windows is spacious and the adjoining sun deck ideal for relaxing in the fresh air.

The friendly, hardworking crew injects a sense of fun into the busy itinerary. Captain Josh, also a marine biologist, welcomes visitors to the bridge for a chat and to help scan for whales or spinner dolphins. Slide shows and lectures illustrating some of the

1600 species of fish and 450 species of coral have us mentally setting sighting goals and ticking off species after every snorkel, dive, glass bottom boat ride, touch tank and fish-feeding session.

Our four-night round trip from Cairns heads north (a three-night cruise travels south and they can be combined for a seven-night trip) and stops at Cooktown, where Captain James Cook beached the *Endeavour* for repairs after damaging the hull on a reef. The James Cook Museum recounts the story of the *Endeavour's* grounding and seven weeks of repair.

It's a good precursor to our stop at Lizard Island, where some of us get up before dawn to tackle the thigh-burning climb to Cooks Look. The 359m peak allowed Captain Cook to search for a safe passage through the outer barrier reefs.

For us the reward is 360-degree views, followed by breakfast on the beach and a snorkel over the giant clam garden. Thought to be over 120 years old, the metre-long clams wave fluted velvety lips in exquisite colour combinations.

At Escape Reef huge schools of fish surge back and forth in the water around me as the tide starts to come in. Riccardo might liken diving to flying over the coral, but I'm just as content floating above it.

**The writer was a guest of Coral Expeditions.**



## Coming up

### Bleach\* Festival March 4-20

Known for its whimsical venues and strong focus on creativity, culture and community participation, Bleach\* is the Gold Coast's signature annual multi-arts festival. The festival offers more than 50 events over 17 days and the program is set to unleash a feast of live music, pop-up art installations and exhibitions, outdoor films, street parties, theatre and ideas.

See [bleachfestival.com.au](http://bleachfestival.com.au).  
More Queensland events:  
[queensland.com/](http://queensland.com/)

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