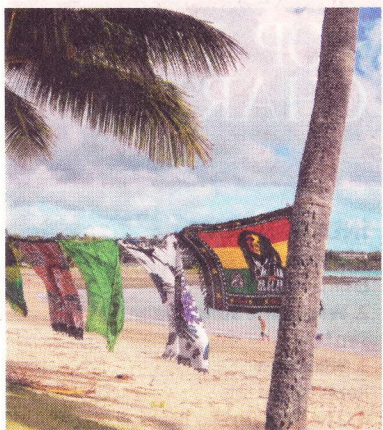


TRAVEL



Blue on blue ..." goes the song in my head as a cerulean sky, tufted with fluffy white clouds, melds into the marbled blues of Whitsunday Passage beneath our aircraft.

"Green on green ..." continue the lyrics as the dark tropical foliage of Whitsunday Island comes into view, edged by the silica sweep of Whitehaven Beach and the sandy swirls of Hill Inlet.

Flying through a curtain of grey drizzle heightens our appreciation of the translucent turquoise tones of Hardy Reef, encircled by an indigo sash of deeper water. Blue on blue – again.

I'm on a scenic flight with GSL Aviation from Airlie Beach to the Great Barrier Reef and the soundtrack playing in my head, the theme song for the Airlie Beach Music Festival by local artist Kieran McCarthy, couldn't be more apt.

I've only been in Airlie a couple of days, and already the tune is tugging



TRAVEL MATE

GETTING THERE

Airlie Beach is 1118km by road north of Brisbane and will take just over 12 hours to drive.

Alternatively, regular rail and flights are available. TigerAir provides the only direct flights between Sydney and Whitsunday Coast Airport (Proserpine).

STAYING THERE

Accommodation ranges from backpackers to five-star, often at considerably cheaper rates than offered on nearby islands. Peppers Airlie Beach (peppers.com.au/airlie-beach). Peninsula Airlie Beach (peninsulaairliebeach.com). Coral Sea Resort (coralsearesort.com).

PLAYING THERE

Take a Robo Mini Segway tour with Fun Rentals (funrentals.com.au). Learn to Stand Up Paddle with Whitsunday SUP (whitsundaystanduppaddle.com.au). Travel to the Great Barrier Reef with Cruise Whitsundays

at my heartstrings, engendering an emotional connection to this “tropical retreat”. (Sounds corny, I know, but true).

Airlie Beach is looking all grown up, thanks to a main street facelift, paving the way, so to speak, for a raft of new eateries and activities in this laid-back setting known for its back-packers.

“Oh, this is cool,” grins 12-year-old Jai as he masters his Robo in the car-park training area. “I want a photo for bragging rights.”

Riding Robos, mini Segway-style personal transporters, is the latest activity in Airlie and I’ve joined a group of locals keen to try out the space-age devices.

Iyas Shaheen, of Fun Rentals, has spent months negotiating with the council for his six-month trial of the Robos so we are mindful of pedestrians as we sashay down the main street, turning heads.

Taking Bicentennial Walkway, we cruise beside the foreshore, swerve around the lagoon, bump over the boardwalk and slalom through the Botanic Garden to Cannonvale Beach.

After morning tea at funky new Fat Frog Cafe, we do it all in reverse, including shredding some moves in the skate park. As someone said, “Walking is so 20th century”.

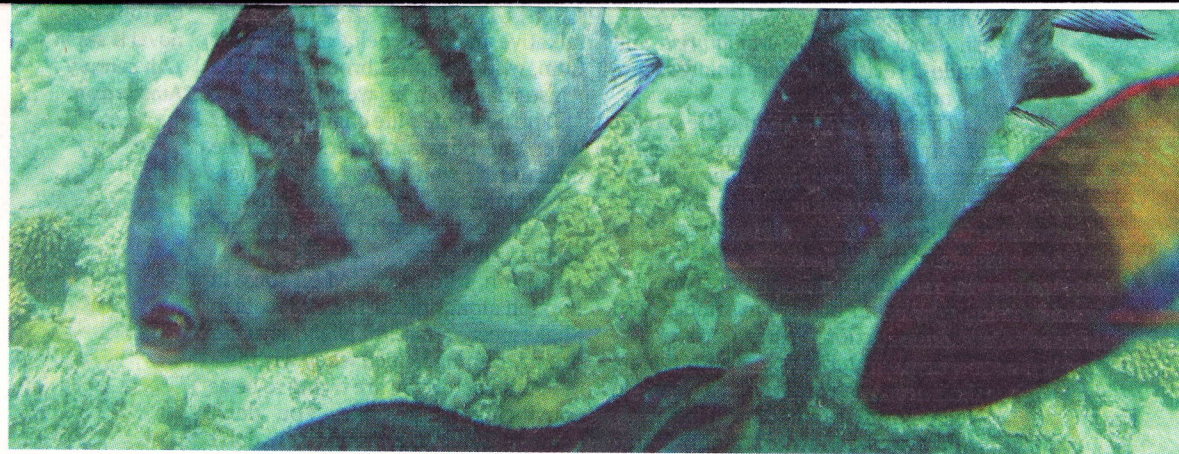
If Robos are like walking on air, then stand-up paddle-boarding is like walking on water.

Shingley Beach, protected by the breakwater of Abel Point Marina, is the perfect spot for lessons and Mark Pearson of Whitsunday Stand Up Paddle has me standing up in minutes.

Like young Jai on the Robo, I’m grinning from ear-to-ear (and later post an Instagram pic for my own bragging rights.)

With confidence up, I paddle around the marina admiring the boats, where a chap sitting on the back of his yacht shouts a friendly hello.

As I look to return the greeting I



EVERY DAY’S A WHIT-SUNDAY

Airlie Beach is the gateway to the Whitsundays but after its recent revamp there’s plenty to do without even leaving dry land, writes **Briar Jensen**

get the distinct impression he might be starkers, but daren’t do a double take lest I lose my balance. (I think he might be taking the term cockpit far too literally.)

Airlie is a gateway to the Great Barrier Reef and a day on Cruise Whitsundays’ pontoon offers multiple ways to see the Reef. The crew makes the three-hour journey as enjoyable as possible with comic safety demos and informative videos on the reef ecosystem.

In the pontoon’s underwater observatory enormous Maori wrasse

cruise slowly by, cleaner fish in tow. Non-swimmers can get up close to the coral in the semi-submersible that chugs along the reef wall.

I join a marine biologist for a guided snorkel, learning about the amazing creatures we observe, from territorial fish to the turtle that swims underneath me.

What the coral has lost in colour the fish make up for with neon brightness, Dali-esque designs, and psychedelic combinations that wouldn’t look out of place at Mardi Gras.

Reef-inspired colours decorate the

Saturday Airlie Beach Market, where sarongs swing between the palm trees, grown men wear Dr Seuss print shirts and the “best sausage rolls in the world” come with a free song.

Among the harem pants and home grown herbs are some handcrafted gems, like Australian cotton clothing by Sissi, cheeky sailing gear by Grotty Yachty and quality Hawaiian-style shirts for all ages by Lil’Britches in eye-catching prints – like Dr Seuss.

When it’s time to eat, there is no shortage of restaurants, cafes and bars, which brings to mind another

(cruisewhitsundays.com.au, The Airlie Beach Music Festival runs from November 7-9.

MORE:

tourismwhitsundays.com.au,
loveairliebeach.com.au

LIVING COLOUR: Airlie Beach Markets are a beachfront attraction; Briar Jensen snorkels at Hardy Reef; and Robos, a type of miniature Segway, are the latest attraction at Airlie Beach.

line in Kieran’s song, “I love the nights in Airlie, the young-at-heart at play”.

In the relaxed lagoon-side vibe of Mr Bones, I linger over pizza and prosecco beneath a towering banyan tree. The Chocolate Cafe and Gelato Bar are next door, but I don’t have room for dessert.

At Fish D’Vine and Rum Bar, my companions and I devour oysters, scallops, barramundi and crab, washed down with mojitos and flaming rum cocktails served in huge Tiki mugs. (Note to self, stick to the mojitos next time.)

The long lunch at Deja Vu is the perfect way to while away a Sunday afternoon. Shaded tables on the terrace next to the infinity pool catch the breeze and overlook yachts at anchor in the bay.

The eight-course lunch, or “gas-trotourism” event, is a bargain at \$44.50.

We cool our feet in the pool between courses while listening to live music – Kieran McCarthy of course.

Airlie is that sort of place, relaxed and friendly, where you’re likely to strike the same cabbie twice – and he’ll remember where you’re staying.

As Kieran’s song goes, “I’m glad I put my bag down, where every day’s a Whit-Sunday,” if only for a while.

The writer was a guest of TigerAir and Tourism Whitsundays.