

The tide is right



*Winter doesn't mean putting a stop to water sports.
In fact, it's the perfect time to join a crew and tour the
Whitsundays during the Audi Hamilton Island Race Week.*

WORDS BRIAR JENSEN



We're heeled over on a starboard tack, doing 6.5 knots in 16 knots of wind, smugly catching up to the boats in front. It's day two of the Audi Hamilton Island Race Week and our novice crew — myself, husband, 15-year-old son and a chap from Western Australia — are feeling pretty chuffed with ourselves as we relax into the rhythm.

BANG! The explosion is ominous; heart-stopping. Time stands still, until our skipper yells: "I've got no steering." All hell breaks loose as we scramble to dump the sails, find the emergency tiller and scream at the yachts speeding down on us. Well, we'd been hoping for an authentic racing experience.

You don't have to be a millionaire boat-owner, or even know how to sail, in order to participate in the race week, hosted by the Hamilton Island Yacht Club in August every year. Charter-boat companies and sailing schools rent out boats by the cabin for people who want to learn the ropes while racing.

We've joined yacht-charter company Sunsail aboard *Defiance*, a brand-new Jeanneau 44 skippered by sailing-school principal Jon Croft, racing in the Cruising (read: less serious) Division.

Race eve, the marina is abuzz with last-minute preparations before the Team Sunsail welcome party cranks up. A keg is tapped, and we meet fellow sailors over prawns and sushi, before the sky explodes with fireworks and music from live bands reverberates through the marina.

The first race is a 23-nautical-mile jaunt around Lindeman Island, a gentle introduction to sailing. Sheets groan on winches, water rushes past our hull, sun warms our skin and a whale spouts nearby. But we launch the wrong spinnaker at the halfway mark and the fleet recedes into the distance. "Well, we don't want to peak too early," gibes our cheeky first mate.

Hopes for a better result on day two are dashed with our steering disaster (a pin ►



(clockwise from this image)
A boat charges ahead; fashion shows add glamour to the race week; the starting gun sends the vessels into action; post-race celebrations.



They're a formidable team, simultaneously grinding winches and flinging friendly insults.

popping out of the steering mechanism), but it's easily fixed, and on day three we battle 20-knot winds and two-metre swells. It's invigorating, and we finish a respectable 14th in our division of 39 boats.

Race week is not all about sailing, though. At the Henri Lloyd fashion parade, breakdancing troupe SKB Krew demonstrates acrobatic dance moves to thumping tunes. A few brave sailors take to the catwalk and are rewarded with more whistles and applause than the scantily clad female models. For those looking for a bigger shot of adrenaline, there's also a shooting range and a go-kart track.

Each night, we get to try a different restaurant and revel in the street-party atmosphere of the marina village, where video screens replay the day's racing highlights. We don glad rags for a special


dinner with Matt Moran at Qualia's stunning Long Pavilion, and dine on spanner crab, Moreton Bay bug, chicken ballotine and roast sirloin. Inspired, we take Moran's master class where he shows us how to prepare crab and squid ink mayo, while setting off the smoke alarm.

The lay day is spent mingling with the likes of surfer Layne Beachley and INXS member Kirk Pengilly at beach party. It's a head-swirling mix of champagne, pumping music and floating swans in the pool.

For the last race we jump ship — in the name of research — to Prosail's maxi, *Condor*. At 25 metres, *Condor* is almost twice as long as *Defiance* and is a veteran Sydney-to-Hobart winner. She's racing with three crew and 23 guests — singles, couples, sailors, non-sailors. Despite not knowing each another, they've gelled

into a formidable team, simultaneously grinding double-handled winches and flinging friendly insults, and are currently placed third in their race division.

But there's no wind today. All 195 boats float about the start line in an eerie sea mist, mainsails hanging limply. Is this really the Whitsundays? While race organisers decide our fate, *Condor's* skipper turns up the music and opens an esky as the vessel sidles up to fellow maxi, *Hammer*. Disappointingly, the race is cancelled. "Gone with the wind," someone quips. Flag signals spell out "sausage" — time to return to base for a barbecue.

We've been wind-battered, becalmed, sunburnt and soaked. We've raced competently and, well, maybe not so competitively. But boy, we've had fun. 

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