

Snap up a reef encounter

GETTING UP CLOSE WITH ALL SEA CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL

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Did you know that sex-changing parrot fish snooze in a sleeping bag of secreted snot, which they eat in the morning? It sounds like something from an Andy Griffiths novel and it's certainly got our teenage son's attention.

We're on our way to Fantasea Reefworld on its high-speed catamaran, listening to a marine biologist describe some of the amazing habits of the aquatic creatures we will see on Hardy Reef.

Hardy is one of 2900 individual reefs making up the Great Barrier Reef.

We've waited several days for this adventure, as high winds and rough seas have caused cancellations — although plenty of activities have kept us busy on Hamilton Island.

On the way to the reef we spot a couple of whales in the

glassy waters of Hook Passage and watch them play a slow game of peekaboo.

Reefworld is a floating pontoon decked out with change rooms, sunshades, kiosk and equipment required for swimming, snorkelling and diving.

"Come look at this! Quick, quick!" squeals a little boy as we step on to the pontoon.

He's peering into a viewing hole to the water below where a fish about three times the boy's size swims slowly around. It is George, as it turns out — a giant Queensland grouper about 3m long.

My husband and son signed up onboard for an introductory dive so I leave them to kit up while I find a wetsuit. The water might be 22C but with the sun still trapped behind a persistent haze it's a tad chilly.

There are noodles for flotation and ropes lead and support you along the reef edge.

I join a guided snorkel tour with the marine biologist who interprets what we see, including hard and soft corals, sea stars and urchins. He's also great at spotting things I might



A boat trip out to Fantasea's Reefworld offers an opportunity for sensational snorkelling.

otherwise have missed, such as the tiny clownfish hiding among the anemones.

Novice snorkellers in the group makes progress slow, so I strike out on my own. Previous rough weather and lack of direct sunlight means visibility is not as good as I remember from a previous visit.

But that doesn't detract from the joy of swimming with darting neon damselfish and striped butterfly fish millimetres

from my mask. Below, giant clams pout luscious, multi-hued lips that would make a drag queen jealous.

Back at the kiosk, my husband declares diving is not for him but our son loves it.

People afraid of the water and littlies can see plenty, too, from the underwater viewing room, the webcam, the glass-bottomed semi-submersible submarine and the helicopter.

Homeward bound we spot a

humpback do a full body breach about 100m from the boat. We all gasp.

We may not have experienced the blue skies and turquoise water of the brochures, but our reef trip is memorable, and educational.

Did you know parrotfish eat coral (for the polyp inside) and poop it out as sand?

The writer was a guest of Hamilton Island and Fantasea

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REEFWORLD, QUEENSLAND

GET THERE

Reefworld is the closest pontoon to the mainland and Fantasea operates daily trips on a high-speed air-conditioned catamaran from Shute Harbour, via Hamilton Island. A courtesy coach offers connections from accommodation in Airlie Beach and Hamilton Island. Adults \$240 ex-Hamilton Is, Children (aged 5-15) \$110, Family (2A+3C) \$630. Ex mainland special adult \$195. fantasea.com.au



STAY THERE

There are a variety of accommodation options on Hamilton Island, including the recently renovated Premium Palm Bungalows. See hamiltonisland.com.au

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