

20 CANVAS TRAVEL

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SAIL AWAY

From civilisation one minute to dreamy isolation the next, island hopping is a great way to discover the jewels of the Whitsundays, writes **Briar Jensen**

The steel chain rattles from its locker between the twin hulls as we drift slowly backwards. When the anchor bites the engine is cut, and the silence is deafening.

Adjusting to the tranquillity, we become attuned to more subtle sounds – waves lapping against the hull, wind humming through the rigging and seabirds squawking in the distance.

Anchored in turquoise water off a deserted island, there's not another soul in sight, yet we are only two hours from Airlie Beach. Welcome to the Whitsundays, where you can be in civilisation one minute and totally isolated the next.

We've arrived at Armit Island, part of Gloucester Islands National Park aboard *Sea Change*, a Seawind 1250 catamaran, which accommodates eight people, though there are only three of us, along with our skipper, curly haired Frenchman Christophe Vanek, of Queensland Yacht Charters.

Sporting bare feet and a Hawaiian shirt, Vanek has navigated us through the choppy water to our sheltered anchorage. That's the beauty of a charter vessel – if you don't feel up to captaining it yourself, you can book a skipper with your boat.

With Vanek at the helm, I sit on the trampoline, spray splashing through the netting, scanning the water for turtles. But after recent rain all I see is occasional logs and lumps of seaweed.



After a lunch of Moreton Bay bugs and tiger prawns washed down with Wild Oats wine, we take the dinghy ashore and fossick in the shallows at low tide. Besides a skinny, crusty-looking sailor who has beached his yacht, we have the place to ourselves.

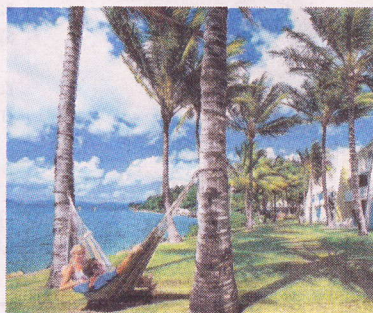
Back at *Sea Change*, there's time for a swim off the stern, before settling down to watch a spectacular orange sunset.

Following a dinner of steak and salads we adjourn to the bow, lying on the trampoline and sailing through the depths of the Milky Way.

LONG ISLAND

As we walk to the beachfront bar for our mixology class, a sulphur-crested cockatoo is strutting across the sand chasing a wallaby whose pouch is bulging with a teenager-sized joey. A bush turkey scratches under the palm trees and a couple of curlews attempt to join us at the bar.

Long Island Resort melds so com-



TRANQUIL: Long Island Resort offers activities including sailing aboard the yacht *Sea Change* (above left) and relaxing in hammocks (above).

fortably into its surroundings at Happy Bay, the fauna treat it as an extension of their national park home – you don't have to move from your hammock for wildlife encounters.

At 30 years of age, the resort is undergoing a timely nip and tuck. The rooms, all with patios or balconies, have renovated bathrooms and the public areas are getting a facelift.

What she lacks in cutting-edge style, she makes up for with casual, laid-back charm, embracing everyone from couples marrying on the beach to families. (Kids stay and play free, though conditions apply.)

With activities including bush walking, turtle safaris, spa treatments, snorkelling, kayaking and karaoke, it's hard to know where to start, but mix-

ing cocktails in the bar with the bartender seems as good a place as any.

We begin with a Jam Donut (Chambord and Baileys in a sugar-rimmed glass), progress through a Long Island Iced Tea and finish with Damien's tribute to the Whitsundays, Out of the Blue.

At the daily bird feeding, we are bombarded by birds – squawking rainbow lorikeets that perch on our heads, climb down our arms and eat out of our hands.

From a table on the beachfront, we watch the sun sink behind the palm trees and after dinner listen to local artist Kieran McCarthy on guitar.

DAYDREAM ISLAND

There's nothing like a smiling musician, gently placed shell necklace and cool mocktail to get you in the holiday mood and Daydream Island Resort and Spa has that down pat.

The island has had a few additions since I was here in the mid-90s; a humorous mini golf course, mermaids mooching on rocks at the waters' edge, and dolphins permanently leaping out of the lagoon.

While these colourful flourishes may not be to everyone's taste, the outdoor cinema, award-winning rejuvenation spa and the largest open-air aquarium in the southern hemisphere should appeal to all guests.

The Living Reef is the centrepiece of the resort, curving between the buildings like a giant ornamental pond, serving as a petting zoo and open-air classroom.

Marine biologist Jenita Comer has us holding a brown banded bamboo shark, patting stingrays Pancake and Pikelet and passing around a red rhinoceros sea star.

For people who can't make it out to the Great Barrier Reef, it's a chance to see living corals and reef species like clown fish and black-tipped sharks while learning about their ecosystem.

Rooms are airy and spacious but the cockatoos fancy them too, so I daren't leave my balcony doors open lest I come back to a cocky mess.

TRAVEL MATE

Getting there

Virgin Australia and Jetstar fly between Brisbane and Whitsunday Coast Airport (Proserpine). Tigerair provides the only direct flights between Sydney and Whitsunday Coast Airport.

tigerair.com

Staying there

Stay on-board your choice of yacht, catamaran or powerboat with Queensland Yacht Charters. yachtcharters.com.au
Daydream Island Resort and Spa has 296 rooms and suites. daydreamisland.com
Breakfree Long Island Resort offers room only, B&B or fully catered packages. longislandresort.com.au

More

tourismwhitsundays.com.au

Fast facts

The Whitsundays are the largest group of offshore islands in Australia.

Of the 74 islands in the Whitsundays, only eight have accommodation.

A chapel with a picture window framing the aqua view makes a lovely place to take one's vows, but I have my own romantic experience at a private dinner on the deck at tiny Lovers Cove, watching the sun set through a crystal-dripping candelabra.

Unfortunately, I don't have time to visit Rejuvenation Spa, which is a shame, as it is more a holistic wellness centre, thanks to owner Vaughn Bullivant. It offers naturopathic testing and treatment as well as aromatherapy, hydrotherapy and massage.

Relaxing in one of their hydrotherapy baths would have definitely had me daydreaming.

The writer was a guest of Tigerair and Tourism Whitsundays.