



# Whitsunday best

**Susan Gough Henly** finds a wilderness that comes with lashings of luxury.

**W**e are gliding over a sea of silver silk. The clouds arc from puce on the horizon to baby pink above us to mauve over the jungle-green hills. A white-breasted sea eagle rides the airwaves. The only sound is the twittering of tropical birds in the hoop pines and the gentle splash of water against the island's rocky shore. That and an occasional whoosh/plop as a speckled head breaks the surface and a large green turtle grabs a gulp of fresh air before swimming beneath our double kayak, its enormous carapace easily visible.

There are no resorts, no houses, no tour boats, no sailing boats, not even any fellow kayakers... just the two of us marvelling – in silence – at nature. A two-metre grey nurse shark meanders below us. Just the jolt we need to remind us this is no movie set.

Later that evening in the Paradise Bay Eco Escape's candle-lit gazebo we savour a boutique sauvignon blanc alongside king prawns with wasabi and ginger mayonnaise. And we regale our fellow guests, from England, Scotland, America and Australia, with tales tall and true. Our host, Mark Leslie, fresh from a luxury safari camp in Africa, explains that grey nurse sharks are relatively harmless – despite their ferocious features. So we get to have our adrenalin fix and feel safe to go back in the water.

Our surroundings for the afternoon would have not looked any different to when the Ngaro Aboriginal tribe lived here for thousands of years, moving from island to island in their outrigger canoes. Captain Cook saw them when he sailed through the Whitsunday Passage in 1770.

In the ensuing years settlers came and went on these 74 islands; drowned mountains from the ice age. Those settlers made their way felling some of the islands' precious timber, rearing sheep and cattle away from the mainland crocodiles, growing tropical fruit trees and eventually developing resorts.

With the building of Hamilton Island airport in 1984, the Whitsunday Islands were established as a popular destination for sun-starved southerners and the resorts of Hamilton, Dunk, South Moll, Hook, Daydream, Hayman, Brampton and Lindeman became household names.

So just how does Paradise Bay Eco Escape fit into this equation of resorts with a capital "R" and the undeveloped islands surrounded by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park?

In the mid 1990s, Sydney architect David McFarlane was looking for a pristine location in which to build a resort that offered privacy, peace, wilderness, exceptional adventures and fresh local cuisine in a convivial house-party atmosphere. He found the 1.2-hectare site on the southern end of Long Island, facing the heavily forested Conway National Park on the mainland, possibly the last such parcel available on the east coast of Australia. He built the bones of a fine eco resort with a central gazebo and 10 cabins supported with water tanks, solar power and a bio-waste management system.

The new owner, financial adviser Peter Spann, has injected masses of capital to totally upgrade the resort's cabins and gazebo, purchase a new catamaran for daily sailing trips and hire

exceptional chefs and management staff to provide a world-class wilderness and gourmet experience. And the maximum number of guests is still only 16.

His passion is to create the Australian equivalent of the luxury African safari camp experience where guests immerse themselves in the Australian wilderness on sea and land before relaxing with new friends over fine food and wine in sumptuous comfort in the bosom of nature.

We arrive by helicopter, the only way to gain access to Paradise Bay. A spectacular trip, it takes a mere 10 minutes from Hamilton Island's runway, high rises and golf course in the making. It feels as though we have pierced the very sky to

enter another world. Sweeping around Long Island's southern tip we get the full panorama of Paradise Bay Eco Escape: a few tiny specks surrounded by lush rain-forested hills, its wide tidal beach embraced by fringing coral reefs, cabins and gazebo shaded by coconut palms. Hosts Kelly and Ben are waiting to greet us with cool face cloths.

Over glasses of chilled champagne in the gazebo, we relax on what have to be the world's most comfortable overstuffed couches, one leather, the others in blue linens, with nautical themes and striped pillows. The look is so effortlessly fashionable only Ralph Lauren could manage it.

A short walk along the bay is our bungalow home made of plantation hardwood timbers. A



hammock is stretched out on the shaded deck with great views over the bay. Inside, under a wicker ceiling fan whirring from a cathedral ceiling, a king-sized bed with a cloud-like pillow top is draped in 400-thread count cotton sheets and, since it is the cool season, a duck down comforter with a cotton and silk quilt cover. Each bungalow has original furniture and Aboriginal artwork. In ours there's a driftwood mirror and bedside lamps, a Chinese chest and a remarkable acrylic painting in orange and ochre hues by Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra, a painter from Papunya whose work is featured in major Australian collections. An en suite bathroom has water-saving shower heads from which comes rainwater heated by solar power. What the

bungalow does not have is locks, a phone, television or glass windows. Just insect screens separate you from the lapping of the waves and the sounds of bird life.

The days go like this: we wander over to breakfast each sparkling morning and find a place in the sun to enjoy our tropical fruit and yogurt, fresh juice and coffee. Ben creates a breakfast sampling plate each day, which might include eggs Benedict, mushroom and spinach on toast, or buttermilk pancakes with all the trimmings. Edwina and Eddy, agile mother and joey wallabies, might be on the deck nibbling on sliced apple. A couple of poker-faced stone curlew birds are often mistaken as statues, until you find them a few paces closer to you each time you look.

About 10am Kyall, the skipper of the 34-foot catamaran, arrives and chats with everyone about the sailing adventure of the day, after carefully evaluating the wind, weather and tides. It might be a picnic on the fine, white powder of Whitehaven Beach followed by snorkelling at Chalkies Beach or zipping over to Cow and Calf

islands, where we kayak in sheltered lagoons to look for turtles and manta rays. Or it could be snorkelling off Cid Harbour, where the QE2 has deemed it worthy to berth, and looking for middens in the hills behind or sailing up to an inlet in Conway National Park to kayak with the dugongs among the sea grasses. Whatever the adventure, there is plenty of time to relax on the boat, feel the wind in your hair and even help winch the sails.

When the boat returns mid-afternoon, afternoon tea is served in the gazebo and we retire to our hammocks to read and doze to the serenade of rainbow lorikeets and sulphur crested cockatoos. Sundays are the only time the catamaran does not sail and we take an exhilarating heli-safari to the outer reef, which offers eagle-eye views of the islands, beaches and reef before landing at a pontoon for a private snorkel. Guests can go snorkelling right out front or take the kayaks along Long Island's shores as well as explore the hinterland on several low-impact trails in the rainforest, where you will be rewarded with hidden palm valleys and lookouts.

At the end of the day, all guests gather at a large table on the deck, wine glasses glinting in the soft light of dozens of candles flickering under a canopy of stars. The wine flows freely as we savour Peking duck salad with snow peas and roast pumpkin followed by crispy skinned salmon and Paris mash with a lemon grass beurre blanc. We all cluster around a roaring bonfire to enjoy apple and apricot crumble with macadamia nut brittle and share stories well into the night.

*The writer travelled courtesy of Tourism Queensland and Paradise Bay Eco Escape.*



A two-metre grey nurse shark  
meanders below us ...



Nature's own ... (clockwise from far left) there are no phones, TVs or glass windows in the cabins; guests can snorkel right in front of the resort; the day beds are a perfect place to unwind after encounters with the magnificent wildlife or kayaking around the island.



**> TRIP NOTES**

■ **Getting there** Paradise Bay Eco Escape is located on south Long Island, a ten-minute helicopter ride from Hamilton Island airport, which is serviced by Jetstar and Virgin Blue.

■ **Staying there** Five-night minimum stay is \$3,300 per person, which includes helicopter transfers, all meals, house wines and beers at dinner, sailing trips, use of all equipment. Helicopter trips to the reef cost \$600 per person.

■ **Further information** See [www.paradisebay.com.au](http://www.paradisebay.com.au).

