

NATURE'S SILENT WORLD

Jo Stewart explores the wild wonder of the Great Barrier Reef
and the tranquil beauty of the Whitsunday Islands
from on board the aptly named *Silentworld*



Clockwise from top:
a magnificent riflebird;
Whitsunday Island;
Chili Beach on Cape York



PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES; ALAMY; SHUTTERSTOCK



Left: Bait Reef. Top:
Whitehaven Beach.
Above: All Saints
Chapel, Hamilton
Island. Right: a turtle on
the Great Barrier Reef



As I glide my way across Cid Harbour's crystalline waters I feel as if I am being treated to a personal underwater show: schools of tiny silver fish dance beneath the transparent bottom of the kayak and pearlesque shells gleam in the sand, like treasures. The perfectly still bay is fringed by evergreen bushland and it's not hard to see why the 74 Whitsunday Islands, scattered over the heart of the Great Barrier Reef, attract nature lovers from around the world. Sheltered from the elements, the Allied navy anchored here before the Battle of the Coral Sea, but I am at the start of a far calmer adventure.

As I dip my paddle in and out of the water, I look back at 39.6 metre *Silentworld*, sitting

as quietly in the water as her name suggests. However, I get the feeling that she can switch gears from sophisticated entertainer to action hero at any moment. Her owners run the Silentworld Foundation, which supports marine archaeology in Australia, and the yacht is used for all of its expeditions. In just a few weeks she will lead an exploration of reefs off Bundaberg in southern Queensland, including Cato Reef and Kenn Reef, where a number of wrecks have been reported. She isn't just a yacht for relaxation; there's a purpose.

Silentworld's captain, Michael Gooding, is equally enamoured with her adventurous capabilities, which mean she can consider charters in exotic destinations such as the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. "When the owner and I started looking for the next yacht, *Silentworld* made great sense. Large enough to accommodate 12 guests comfortably, the design of the steel hull and engineering makes for a vessel that is extremely comfortable in varied conditions. We can go

off exploring in remote locations and still be able to find a spot to anchor in comfort thanks to the zero-speed stabilisation system."

As remote locations go it is hard to imagine one much more spectacular than the Whitsundays. Stick your head underwater and you are thrown into a world that mimics a David Attenborough documentary. You are spoilt for choice in terms of where to dive or snorkel but Captain Gooding guides us to Bait Reef. Right on the edge of the Coral Sea, it is a popular spot for those in the know. Featuring underwater caves and swim-throughs for divers, and shallow coral gardens for snorkellers, this sheltered spot provides the best of both worlds. On the day we arrive there are a few small yachts about but I don't encounter any wayward flippers to the face while snorkelling.

What I do encounter is a reminder of why the reef is so special. As soon as I enter the water I am greeted by bright yellow butterfly fish. Known to mate for life, they flutter in pairs between thin passages of coral. Neon

parrotfish dart towards me with curious smiles, pelagic fish crowd the sides of the reef looking for a feed and a whitetip reef shark skulks about in caves below me.

As Murphy's Law dictates, as soon as I tear myself away from the watery delights, climb back on to the tender and take off my gear, a sea turtle appears just metres away. Popping its head up out of the water like a periscope, it's in full view for a second, then disappears into the abyss. "I'm dying to get in there," admits first officer David Gafa, who has been dutifully sitting in the unforgiving sun to keep an eye on me as I snorkel.

It's hard not to feel guilty at being the one who gets to experience the reef in all its glory. It's also difficult to comprehend losing the reef entirely, a growing concern after parts of the Great Barrier Reef experienced the worst coral bleaching on record earlier this year. The predominant damage was in the north, with an estimated 85 per cent of coral impacted on a 600 kilometre stretch between Cape York and Lizard Island. Fortunately, ▶



The famed 7km Whitehaven Beach on Whitsunday Island. Above: Palm Bay on Long Island



Clockwise from above: a local palm cockatoo; photographers at work; kayakers in Lawn Hill Gorge; *Silentworld* off Lindeman Island



PHOTOGRAPHS: ALAMY; GETTY IMAGES; JO STEWART

Six places to see Great Barrier Reef wildlife
boatinternational.com/gbr-wildlife



Above: Aboriginal rock art in Quinkan country. Below: the great view from Whitsunday Peak

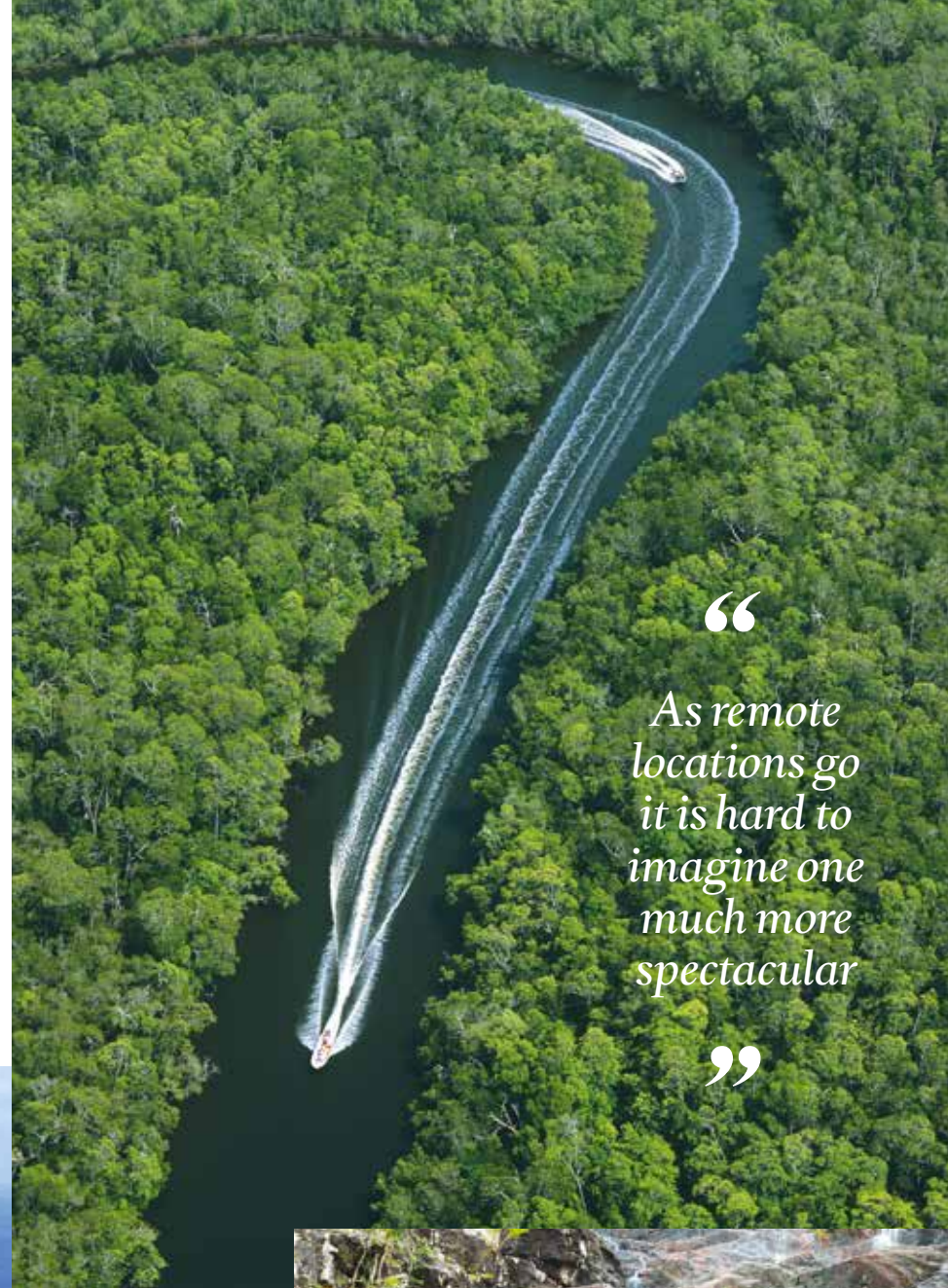
the middle and southern parts sustained far less damage (scientists have estimated that one per cent of the reef is bleached south of Mackay). Those involved in the industry are keen to reassure visitors. “Charter clients should not be concerned by the extent of the coral bleaching,” says Jo Howard, director of Ocean Alliance. “The Great Barrier Reef still offers an incredible charter experience, with many areas untouched by the bleaching event.”

The opportunity to dive, swim and snorkel in this precious marine wonderland is a major draw for visitors, but the islands offer plenty of other adventures for those able to drag themselves out of the balmy waters. The Ngaro cultural site is just a short walk up a steep path from the bottom of the Nara Inlet on Hook Island. Featuring ancient rock wall paintings, it is a reminder of the people who called the Whitsunday Islands home for 9,000 years before being forced off their land by European settlers in the 1800s. The cave itself is cool, dark and a little eerie – it’s not hard to imagine groups gathered here centuries before.

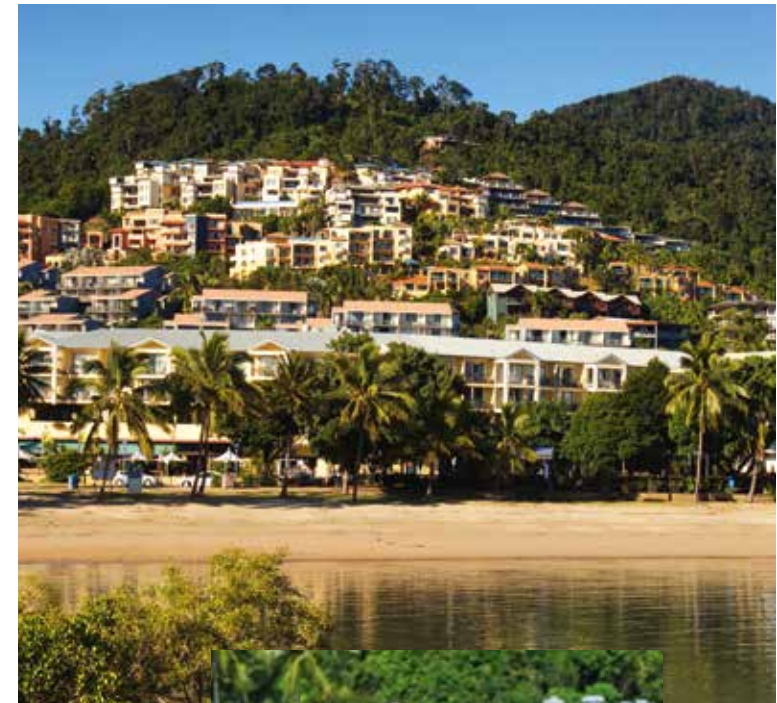
For those seeking higher octane activities there’s parasailing and off-road adventure tours, while golf and bushwalking are also

available. One hike on offer, to the top of Whitsunday Peak, isn’t for the faint-hearted – to use an Australian turn of phrase, it’s hard yakka. The climb takes us through rainforest gullies and windblown heaths, with kookaburras cackling in the trees, and forces me to sweat an unladylike amount. Despite a particularly cruel incline for the last quarter of the climb, the 360 degree views of the milky white sands and cobalt waters from the summit make the exertion worthwhile. Seeing *Silentworld* sitting in the distance patiently waiting for us amid the lush islands, my quaking legs come back to life to deliver me back down the track to where one of her tenders waits for me. Further rewards come in the form of a glass of chilled Chardonnay served up on deck.

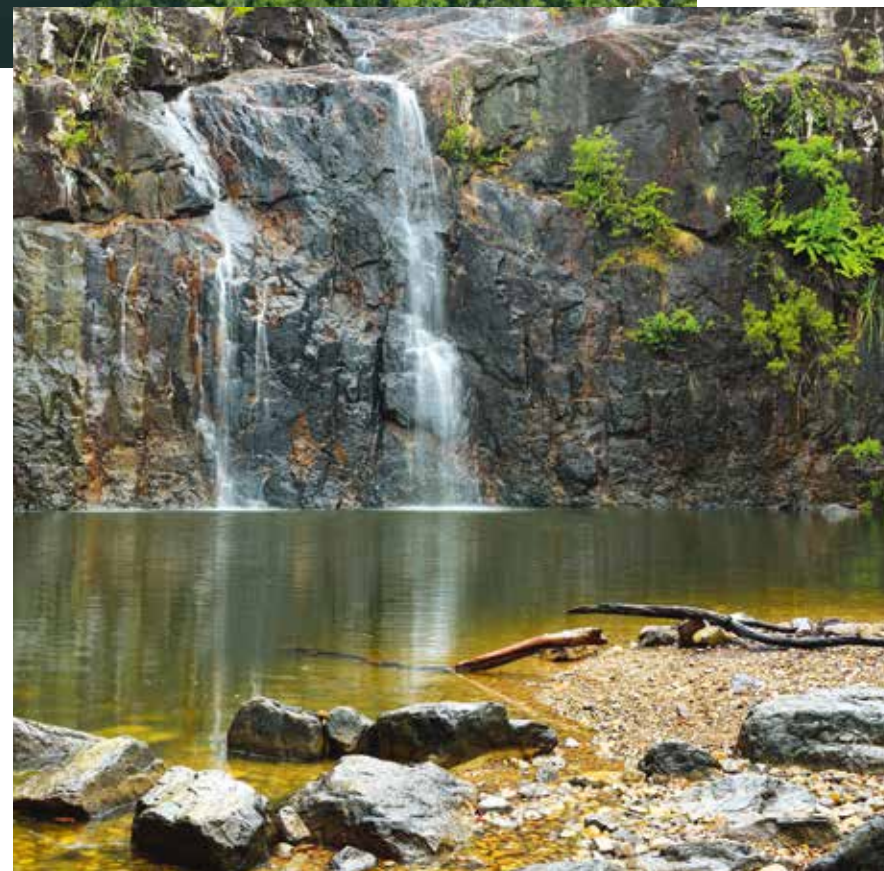
Offering polished service, the crew are attentive but not obtrusive. The food on board is superb and wide-ranging, and perfectly suits the activities on offer: light meals that fill you up without weighing you down. For breakfast there are fruit smoothies, pastries, yoghurt and freshly baked bread. Buffet-style lunches see everyone gather around the table for goat’s cheese and leek tarts, pumpkin and chickpea salads, and Japanese-style karaage chicken. By night, ▶



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PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES; PHOTOSHOP; JO STEWART



Clockwise from top left: Kennedy Inlet in northern Queensland; Airlie Bay; a sulphur-crested cockatoo; Cedar Creek Falls near Airlie Beach

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multicourse dinners showcase Australia's greatest culinary hits. There is crocodile green curry, barramundi with lemon myrtle and grilled local tiger prawns. Matching wines from near and far seal the deal after a big day out discovering the Whitsundays. Desserts don't disappoint either, with the dark chocolate and lime soufflé eliciting the best response from a group of chatty guests: silence.

While plenty of nutrition is required for most of the adventure activities that the Whitsundays have to offer, you can, if you prefer, experience their beauty sitting down. Heading up into the heavens on a helicopter is easily the best way to comprehend the scale of the reef; from below you get the micro view, but from above you get the whole picture. As a helicopter from Airlie Beach lands on a sandbank near by, we're transported to the chopper by one of *Silentworld's* tenders. In no time we're up in the air and heading



Silentworld's
 captain, Michael
 Gooding

over the reef to the rhythmic thwack of the blades. After experiencing the wonder of the reef from below, it's difficult to believe it could look better from any other angle – but it does: nothing but blue as far as the eye can see, in all directions. We're up there for about half an hour, yet it feels like only a few minutes and too soon we are back on the sandbank where Captain Gooding waits with canapés, mojitos and his ever-present thousand-watt smile.

Sitting on a beach chair, my feet buried in the diamond white sand, I ask the skipper what makes this corner of the earth so special. “There is so much to explore, with 74 islands, endless activities and superb cruising grounds under all conditions,” says Gooding. “And you have the world's most spectacular backdrop – the Great Barrier Reef.”

It seems that, like *Silentworld*, the islands' charms lie in their multifaceted nature, for relaxation as well as for adventure. ▣

Silentworld is available for charter with Ocean Alliance from US\$125,000 per week, oceanalliance.com.au

