

FULLY REVISED · 2026 EDITION

Whitsunday Islands

A Journey Through Paradise

BY NATH JOHNSTON

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A run through the islands from someone who lives here, built to be read front to back or raided for the one chapter you need.

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Before We Start

I moved to Airlie Beach in 2001 and never found a good enough reason to leave. In the twenty-five years since, I've sailed most of these islands, walked the tracks on the ones worth walking, and spent my working life building websites for the operators who run trips out here. So this isn't a guide knocked together from a desk in another city. It's closer to the rundown I'd give a mate flying in for the first time.


Here's the shape of the place. The Whitsundays are seventy-four islands sitting inside the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, about two-thirds of the way up the Queensland coast. Most of them are uninhabited national park. A handful carry resorts. One has a beach so white it turns up in glossy magazines on the other side of the world. You can do the Whitsundays on a backpacker's budget or you can spend a fortune, and both versions are good.

What I've tried to write is the honest version. Where something is overrated, I'll tell you. Where the brochures quietly skip the useful stuff, like when the stingers are in the water or why half the island resorts sat empty for two years, I've put it back. The scenery sells itself. It doesn't need me piling on adjectives.

Some chapters cover the big experiences everyone comes for: Whitehaven, the reef, a few days under sail. Others take the islands one at a time, so you can work out which one fits the trip you actually want. Read it front to back or skip to the bit you need. By the end you'll know enough to plan something good, and not waste a day of it.

Right. Let's go.

*The scenery sells itself.
It doesn't need me piling on adjectives.*



Chapter One

The Beginnings

A drowned mountain range, a feast day on the calendar, and the long road to the place you're about to visit.

THE WHITSUNDAYS, IN SHORT

ISLANDS 74, part of the Cumberland group

WHERE Inside the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, ~900 km north of Brisbane

STATUS Most are protected national park

MADE OF Granite and rock, not coral

The first thing to get straight is that these aren't coral islands. People fly in expecting flat sandy cays and instead find steep green peaks rising straight out of the water, and they wonder what they're looking at. They're looking at a mountain range. When the last ice age ended and the sea climbed roughly a hundred and twenty metres, it flooded the valleys of an old coastal range and left the high points standing. Every island you sail past is a hilltop. That single fact explains almost everything about the Whitsundays: why they're rocky and forested rather than sandy, why the water between them is deep and sheltered, and why a sailing holiday here is so easy even if you've never held a tiller.

People were here long before that drowning finished. The Ngaro, the saltwater people of this coast, have lived in and around these islands for at least nine thousand years,

back when Nara Inlet on Hook Island was still a valley you could walk into. They get their own chapter next, because they deserve more than a paragraph.

A NAME, AND A SMALL MISTAKE

The name is younger, and it arrived with an error. In June 1770 a thirty-one-year-old naval lieutenant named James Cook worked the *Endeavour* north through the channel between the islands and the mainland, and called it Whitsunday Passage after the Christian feast of Whitsunday. Trouble is, Cook had sailed halfway round the world without adjusting his calendar for the day he'd gained, so by the proper reckoning he named it a day early. Nobody bothered to fix it. He wasn't a captain yet, either. That promotion, and the fame, came later.

TIMBER, HARDSHIP AND A DARKER CHAPTER

European settlement proper got going in the 1860s, and it was hard, unglamorous work. The drawcard was timber. Loggers worked the hoop pine and red cedar off the islands and the mainland ranges and shipped it south. For the Ngaro this same stretch of years was a catastrophe: frontier violence, the Native Police and introduced disease tore through a society that had managed these islands for ninety centuries. By the 1930s only a small number of Ngaro remained on their own country. It's not a comfortable history, but it's the real one, and it's worth carrying with you when you visit.

FROM GRASS HUTS TO BRANDS


Tourism crept in between the wars. The early resorts were rough and charming in equal measure, grass huts and a generator, sold as a Robinson Crusoe escape to southerners who'd never seen a coconut. Lindeman, South Molle and Daydream were all taking guests by the 1930s. Over the decades the huts became resorts, the resorts became brands, and the islands turned into the holiday they are today.

THE STORM THAT EXPLAINS A LOT

One more piece of history matters, because you'll see its fingerprints everywhere. In March 2017 Cyclone Debbie, a category four, crossed the coast right here. It stripped the hillsides bare and flattened resorts. Daydream, Hayman and South Molle all closed for years, and some of what went down never reopened. The region rebuilt, and rebuilt well, but it's the reason one island is humming with a refurbished resort while the next one along sits quietly derelict. When you notice the difference, now you'll know why.

LOCAL TIP

If you only take one thing from this chapter, make it this: the islands are tall and the water between them is calm. That is the whole reason the Whitsundays are the easiest place in Australia to learn to sail.



Chapter Two

The Ngaro

Nine thousand years of saltwater people, and how to visit their country with some respect.

Long before Cook, before the loggers, before the first grass-hut resort, this was Ngaro country. The Ngaro are a saltwater people, and the old name for them along this coast is the Canoe People, which tells you most of what you need to know. The sea wasn't a barrier to them. It was the road.

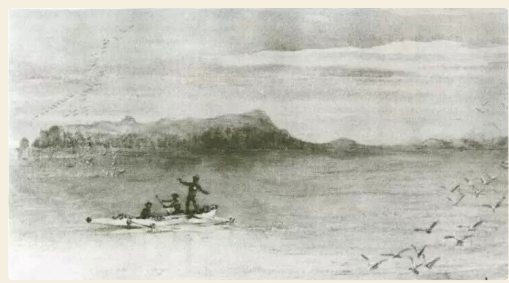
They built sewn canoes called *winta* from three pieces of ironbark, stitched together with fibrous root, and took them across open water that would make a modern kayaker think twice. In them they hunted dugong and turtle, worked the reefs and mangroves, and traded between the islands and the mainland.

On South Molle Island they ran one of the largest stone quarries in pre-European Australia, cutting a hard stone into a tool called a *juan* knife. Archaeologists have traced that stone as far north as Townsville. These weren't people scraping by. They were a maritime culture that had this coast worked out.

OLDER THAN ALMOST ANYTHING

The evidence goes back at least nine thousand years, which makes the sites here among the oldest on Australia's east coast. The best known is at Nara Inlet on Hook Island, where rock art and great middens of shell sit under an overhang in the cliff. Worth holding in your head while you stand there: nine thousand years ago that inlet wasn't an inlet at all. It was a valley on the mainland, and the rising sea turned it into

the sheltered anchorage that yachts tuck into today. Many older Ngaro sites are simply gone, drowned offshore when the water came up.



An early European sketch of a Ngaro outrigger. Their three-piece bark canoes carried them across open water between the islands, the reefs and the mainland.

STORIES THAT AREN'T MINE TO TELL

The islands hold Dreaming stories that explain how all of this came to be: the sea, the islands, the reefs. Those stories belong to the Ngaro to tell, not to me, and you'll get far more from hearing one from a Traditional Owner or a guide on country than from reading my version of it.

WHAT CAME NEXT

What followed was brutal. From the 1860s, settlement brought violence, forced removal and disease, and by the 1930s the Ngaro presence on the islands had been all but destroyed. Descendants are still here, still connected to this country, and still working to keep the culture and the sites alive.

HOW TO VISIT, PROPERLY

If you want to see it for yourself, the Ngaro Cultural Site at Nara Inlet is open to the public. It's a short walk, around twenty minutes on a boardwalk and steps up from the beach at the head of the inlet, and it's managed by Queensland Parks and Wildlife. Most overnight sailing trips can include it if you ask the skipper in advance. Go quietly, don't touch the art, take your rubbish with you, and give it the time it deserves. You're standing in one of the oldest continuously connected places in the country.

LOCAL TIP

Ask before you book. Not every sailing trip detours into Nara Inlet, and the cultural site is reason enough to choose one that does. A few operators now run dedicated Ngaro cultural tours led by Traditional Owners, which is the way to do it properly.



Chapter Three

Whitehaven Beach

Seven kilometres of silica, the most photographed sand in Australia, and how to see it without the crowd.

WHITEHAVEN AT A GLANCE

LENGTH	About 7 km
SAND	Roughly 98% pure silica
ISLAND	Whitsunday Island, the largest in the group
BEST VIEW	Hill Inlet lookout, above Tongue Bay
GETTING THERE	Day boat or sailing trip; there's no road

Everyone comes for this one, and for once the hype holds up. Whitehaven runs for seven kilometres down the eastern side of Whitsunday Island, the biggest island in the group, and the sand is the thing. It's about ninety-eight per cent pure silica, fine as icing sugar and bright white, and because silica reflects heat rather than holding it, you can stand on it barefoot at midday and not dance. It squeaks underfoot. It'll polish your jewellery, which is part of why you're asked to rinse your gear and leave the sand where it is. As beaches go, it's a genuine freak of nature.

THE SHOT EVERYONE WANTS ISN'T ON THE BEACH

That postcard image, sand and water swirling together like marbled paper, isn't taken on the beach at all. It's at Hill Inlet, the tidal mouth at the northern end, where the outgoing tide drags white sand across shallow turquoise water and rearranges the whole picture twice a day. You see it properly from the Hill Inlet lookout, a short uphill walk from Tongue Bay. Go on a falling tide if you can. The pattern is at its best when the sand is draining out.

*That early hour is the real luxury here,
not anything with a price tag.*

GETTING YOUR FEET ON IT

There's no road, no kiosk, no shade beyond the tree line, and that's the point. You get there by boat. Day boats run from Airlie Beach and Hamilton Island, fast ones that give you a few hours on the sand and a stop at the lookout, slower ones that make a proper day of it. If you've got the time, sail out and anchor off Tongue Bay overnight, and you'll have the beach close to empty first thing in the morning before the day fleet arrives. That early hour is the real luxury here, not anything with a price tag.

A FEW HONEST WORDS ON THE PRACTICAL SIDE

There are no facilities, so bring water and everything else you'll need. From around November to May the marine stingers are about, and a stinger suit isn't optional, it's the difference between a good day and a hospital story. The beach sits inside a national park, so there are no fires, drones are restricted, and the sand stays on the beach. And if Whitehaven itself feels busy, slip across to Chalkies Beach on Haslewood Island opposite. Same silica, a fraction of the people, and a tidy bit of reef to snorkel straight off the sand.

LOCAL TIP

Tide beats time of day. A midday low tide at Hill Inlet will out-photograph a sunrise high tide every time for that swirling-sand shot. Check the tide chart before you book your day trip, not after.

An underwater photograph of a vibrant coral reef. In the foreground, a large, brownish-orange sea anemone is prominent. To its left, a pair of clownfish with orange bodies and white stripes are visible. The background is filled with various colorful fish, including yellow and orange ones, swimming in clear blue water. Sunlight filters down from the surface, creating a bright, shimmering effect.

Chapter Four

Under the Surface

You don't need to reach the outer reef to get in the water with something wonderful. Most of it is right off the beach.

BEFORE YOU GET IN

WHEN	Stinger suit November to May, no exceptions
WATER	Warm year-round, roughly 24–28°C
CLOSE-IN SPOTS	Hook Island bays, Blue Pearl Bay, Langford, Chalkies
RULE	Don't touch or stand on coral; it cuts you and kills it

Here's something the day-trip brochures don't push hard enough: a lot of the best snorkelling in the Whitsundays is the fringing reef growing right off the island beaches, not the famous outer reef an hour further out. You can step off a boat into a sheltered bay and be over coral in waist-deep water. For most people, that's the reef they'll remember.

The fringing reefs hug the edges of the islands wherever the water's clear and the bottom's hard. Hook Island's northern bays are the headline act, and they get their own chapter, but there's good coral off Langford and Border Islands, at Blue Pearl Bay on Hayman, and along the Haslewood side near Chalkies. The coral is a mix: tough plate and staghorn in the shallows, soft corals waving where the tide runs.

WHAT YOU'LL ACTUALLY SEE

Fish that have long since stopped minding you, for a start. Years of snorkellers have left the wrasse, batfish and parrotfish at the popular bays completely unbothered, and a Maori wrasse the size of a labrador will swim up to have a look at you. Green turtles graze the seagrass and hang about cleaning stations, and over a week on the water you're all but guaranteed a few. Add clownfish backed into their anemones, giant clams with electric-blue lips, rays cruising the sand, and the occasional reef shark, which is harmless and far more wary of you than you are of it.

THE STINGER RULE, AGAIN

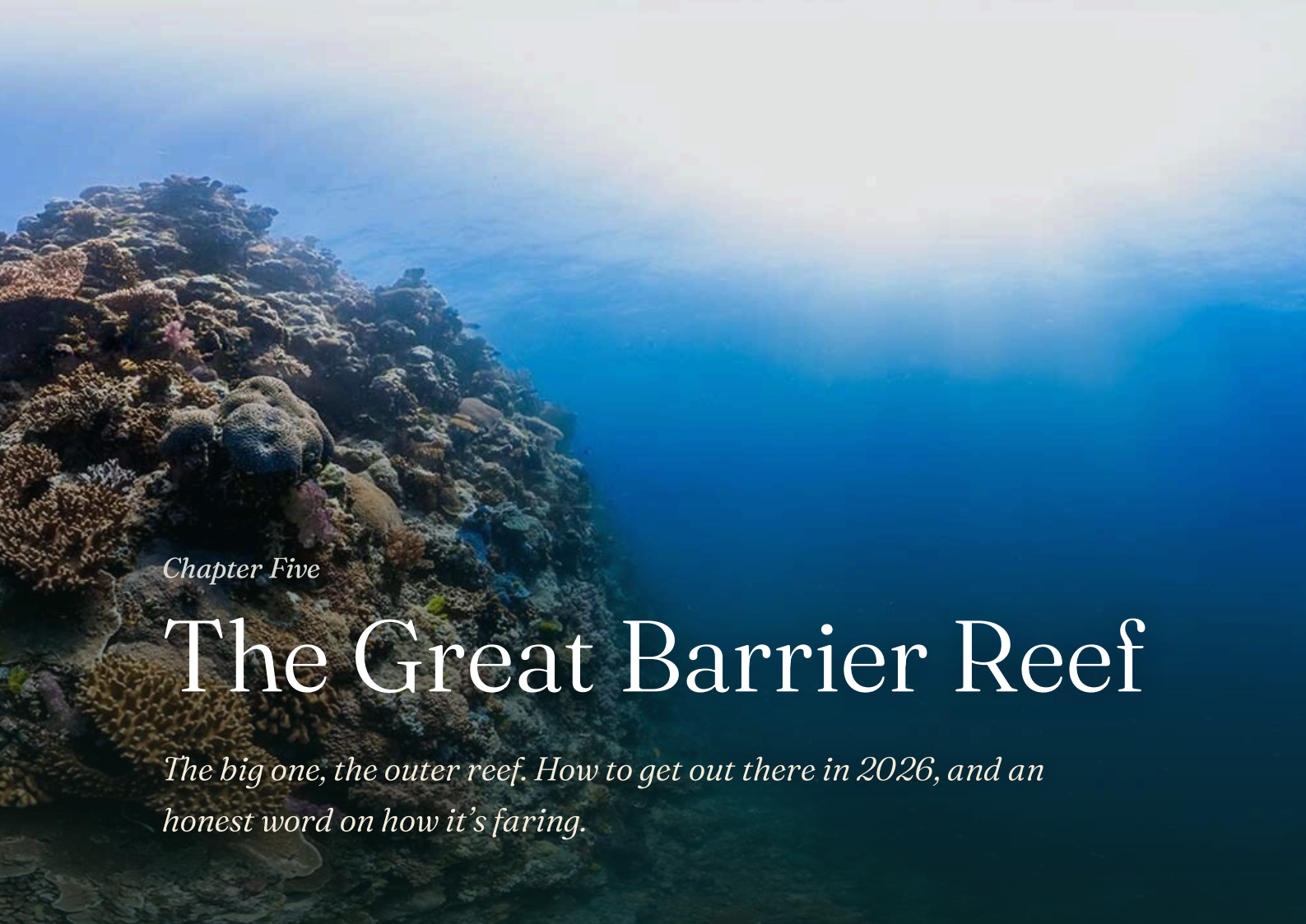
The water's warm and inviting, which is exactly the problem in the wet season. From about November to May, marine stingers including the box jellyfish and the small, nasty Irukandji are in the water. Wear a stinger suit, full stop. Tour boats carry them and carry vinegar; if you're on your own boat, carry both. Outside those months you can swim in bathers, though a thin suit still saves you from sunburn and the odd jellyfish year-round.

WHY THE GOOD SPOTS ARE THE PROTECTED ONES

The Whitsundays are carved into zones under the Marine Park. Green zones are no-take sanctuaries where nothing has been fished out for decades, and it's no accident that a lot of the best snorkelling sits inside them. Check the zoning map before you drop a line, and treat the green zones as the gift they are.

LOCAL TIP

Defog your mask properly before you get in, a smear of baby shampoo or even spit, lightly rinsed. Half the people bobbing about out there are missing the whole show because their mask has fogged and they assume that's just how it is.



Chapter Five

The Great Barrier Reef

The big one, the outer reef. How to get out there in 2026, and an honest word on how it's faring.

THE OUTER REEF

DISTANCE	About 60 km off Airlie Beach
WHERE	Hardy Reef, on the outer Great Barrier Reef
STAY OVER	Reefsuites & Reefsleap, overnight-only from July 2026
DAY BASE	The refurbished Heart Pontoon
DON'T MISS	A scenic flight over Heart Reef

The fringing reefs are the everyday pleasure. The outer Great Barrier Reef is the pilgrimage. It sits about sixty kilometres off Airlie, and it's a different beast: bigger coral, deeper drop-offs, water so clear it feels like flying. The reef as a whole runs more than two thousand kilometres up the Queensland coast, but the piece you visit from here is Hardy Reef, out on the outer edge.

GETTING OUT THERE, AND WHAT CHANGED IN 2026

For years the way out has been the pontoon at Hardy Reef, Reefworld, run by Cruise Whitsundays. You motor out by fast catamaran in around two hours, or fly by helicopter, and spend the day snorkelling and diving off a stable platform with an

underwater observatory and a semi-submersible for anyone who'd rather stay dry. The two underwater rooms moored there, the Reefsuites, were Australia's first underwater hotel.

Here's the 2026 update, and it's a good one. Cruise Whitsundays has put thirty million dollars into the operation. From the first of July 2026, Reefworld becomes overnight-only, just for Reefsleep and Reefsuites guests, so the people staying the night finally get the reef to themselves at dawn and dusk without the day crowd. Day-trippers now base at a separate, refurbished platform, the Heart Pontoon. If you did the old version and found the midday crush a bit much, this is the fix.

HEART REEF

The little heart-shaped tangle of coral that sells a thousand postcards sits near Hardy Reef. You can't snorkel it or land on it, it's protected, but every scenic flight banks around it, and it's worth the window seat.

THE HONEST PART

You'd be right to ask how the reef is actually doing. The answer is that it's under real pressure. The summer of 2024 brought the fifth mass bleaching in eight years, the largest in area ever recorded, and the monitoring that followed showed the steepest annual drop in coral cover in nearly forty years of records. That's not spin, it's the science. But two things are also true: bleached coral is not dead coral, and the reef is vast. Plenty of it, including the sites you'll visit from here, is still vivid and very much alive, and corals recover when the water gives them a break. So go and see it. Pick an eco-certified operator, keep your fins and hands off the coral, wear reef-safe sunscreen, and tread lightly. Seeing it for yourself is the best reason there is to care what happens to it next.

LOCAL TIP

If the budget stretches once, spend it on the helicopter leg out or back. The reef from a hundred metres up, all ribbons of blue with the Heart sitting in the middle, is a completely different memory to the one you get from the boat.

An aerial photograph of a white sailboat with a single mast and a large white sail, sailing on a vast, deep blue ocean. In the distance, a small white boat is visible on the horizon. The sky is clear and blue, with some distant landmasses visible on the horizon.

Chapter Six

Sailing the Whitsundays

Tall islands, calm water and no licence required. This is the best place in the country to skipper your own boat, even if you never have.

THE BASICS

LICENCE	None required to bareboat
THE BRIEF	3–4 hours before you head out
START FROM	Coral Sea Marina, Shute Harbour, or Hamilton Island
BOATS	Mostly catamarans, 2 to 10 berths
ANCHORAGES	Around 40, plus 100+ public moorings

If there's one thing you do in the Whitsundays, make it a few days on a boat. I said back in the first chapter that the islands are drowned mountains with deep, sheltered water between them, and that geography is the whole reason this is the easiest serious sailing ground in Australia: short hops between anchorages, somewhere to tuck out of almost any wind, and no big ocean swell once you're inside the islands.

There are three ways to do it. The cheapest is to join a tour boat, a day sail or a two or three-night trip with a crew and a bunch of other travellers, which is how most backpackers see the islands and a genuinely good time. The most comfortable is a

crewed charter, where someone else sails and cooks and you point at things. And the one people don't realise is on the table: bareboating, where you hire the boat and skipper it yourself.

THE BIT THAT SURPRISES EVERYONE

You don't need a licence to bareboat in the Whitsundays. No tickets, no qualifications. What you do is turn up, sit through a thorough briefing, three or four hours, with the two most capable people in your group required to do it, learn to work the boat and read the anchorages, and off you go, with help only a radio call away the whole time. Operators run out of Coral Sea Marina at Airlie, out of Shute Harbour (closer to the islands, which saves you a couple of hours of motoring each way), and from Hamilton. Most of the fleet now is catamarans, stable and roomy, sleeping anywhere from a couple to ten.

WHERE TO POINT IT

The classic loop takes in Nara Inlet for the rock art and a dead-still night's sleep, the northern Hook Island bays for snorkelling, a night at Tongue Bay so you can be first onto Whitehaven, and a sunset somewhere like Stonehaven. There are around forty anchorages and over a hundred public moorings, so you're never far from a spot to stop. Pick up a copy of the local cruising bible, *100 Magic Miles*, and you'll have every bay and hazard mapped.

A few honest words. Watch the tides and the wind, both matter more than your sailing ego. Provision before you leave or have a service deliver to the boat. And don't over-plan the route, half the point is changing your mind when a bay looks too good to leave.

LOCAL TIP

Take the boat from Shute Harbour rather than Airlie if the option's there. You're the better part of an hour closer to the islands at each end of the trip, which adds up to most of a day of cruising you get back.



Chapter Seven

Hook Island

The second-biggest island, and the one you'll spend the most time around. This is where the good snorkelling lives.

HOOK ISLAND AT A GLANCE

SIZE	58 km ² , second largest in the group
ANCHOR IN	Nara Inlet, calm in almost any weather
BEST SNORKEL	Manta Ray Bay, Luncheon Bay, The Pinnacles
BEST SUNSET	Stonehaven, on the western side
NOTE	Green zones; mostly moorings, not anchoring

If Whitsunday Island has the famous beach, Hook Island has the water. It's the second largest of the group at fifty-eight square kilometres, all steep ridges and deep inlets, almost entirely national park, and its northern bays hold the best inner-reef snorkelling in the Whitsundays. Nearly every sailing trip spends time here, and once you've been in the water you'll understand why.

NARA INLET

Nara Inlet, on the southern side, is the one to anchor in. It's a deep, hill-sheltered finger of water that stays calm in almost any weather, which made it a haven for the Ngāro and makes it one now for boats. The rock art and middens of the Ngāro

Cultural Site are a twenty-minute walk up from the beach at its head, covered back in chapter two. Keep an eye on the inlet itself, too: hammerhead sharks come in here to give birth to their pups in the shallows.

THE SNORKELLING BAYS

The northern end is where you get wet. Manta Ray Bay is the crowd-pleaser, a no-anchor green zone where the fish are so used to people that the batfish and a giant Maori wrasse will mug you for attention. Luncheon Bay next door has easy entry off the beach and a swim-through the dive crews call the tunnel of love. The Pinnacles, off the western side, is the serious one, near-solid staghorn coral and about the closest the inner reef comes to the quality of the outer. Butterfly Bay makes a good overnight anchorage, with wild goats picking along the ridgelines above it. And for the end of the day, Stonehaven on the west side does the best sunset on the island.

HOW TO DO IT RIGHT

Most of these bays are mooring-only or no-anchor to protect the coral, the moorings carry a two-hour limit and work first-in. Manta Ray Bay and the exposed northern spots aren't places to spend the night unless the weather's perfect, the currents run and the swell finds you. Snorkel the green zones gently: no touching, no standing on coral, and no feeding the fish however much they ask.

LOCAL TIP

Snorkel Manta Ray Bay early or late. At midday the day boats raft up and it's a circus; at first or last light you might have the wrasse to yourself.



Chapter Eight

Airlie Beach

Where every trip starts and ends. A working tourist town that's better than it needs to be.

THE GATEWAY

ROLE	The mainland base for the whole region
SWIM	The Lagoon, free and lifeguard-patrolled
BOATS LEAVE	Coral Sea Marina & Port of Airlie
BEHIND TOWN	Conway National Park
BIG EVENT	Hamilton Island Race Week, August

Almost everything in this book launches from Airlie Beach. It's the mainland town on the edge of the Whitsundays, a couple of streets of bars, tour desks and hostels stacked up a green hillside above the water, and after twenty-five years living here I'm allowed to say it's improved out of sight. It's where you'll sleep before and after the islands, book your trips and reprovision, and it's worth a day in its own right.

THE LAGOON

The centrepiece is the Lagoon, a big, free, lifeguard-patrolled swimming pool on the foreshore. It exists for a practical reason: the sea in close has stingers in summer and

isn't much chop for swimming, so the town built itself a lagoon instead. Grass, palms, barbecues, families everywhere. It's the heart of the place and it doesn't cost a cent.

WHERE THE BOATS GO FROM

Two spots. Coral Sea Marina, the old Abell Point, renamed and rebuilt into something genuinely flash, sits at the northern end with most of the charter and tour fleet and a string of waterfront bars and restaurants. Port of Airlie is the other terminal, closer to town, where a lot of the island ferries and reef boats leave. Both are a short walk or a cheap shuttle from the main street.

PAST THE STRIP

Get beyond the bars and there's good country around the town. Conway National Park backs straight onto Airlie with rainforest walks and lookouts over the islands. The Bicentennial boardwalk runs along the water between the marinas. Cedar Creek Falls, out toward Proserpine, is worth the drive after rain. And the foreshore markets on a Saturday make a decent morning. As for the nightlife the town's known for: the strip goes hard, especially in the dry season and around Race Week in August. If that's your thing, you'll have a big night. If it isn't, book a street or two back and you'll never hear it.

LOCAL TIP

Do your big supermarket shop in Cannonvale, the next suburb over, not in Airlie proper. Same chains, more choice, better prices, and you'll want the savings for the boat.



Chapter Nine

The Resort Islands

A handful of the seventy-four carry resorts. Here's the honest state of each, including the ones that never came back.

Most of the islands are empty national park. A small number carry resorts, and which ones are open, and any good, has changed a lot in the last decade, mostly thanks to the 2017 cyclone I mentioned earlier. Here's where things actually stand.

HAMILTON ISLAND

The big one. The most developed island in the group and the easiest to reach, with its own airport. The Oatley family has poured hundreds of millions into it since 2003, and there's something for every budget, from the affordable Palm Bungalows up to qualia, a six-star hideaway at the quiet end that pulls in the Hollywood crowd. Catseye Beach for the family stuff, a walk up One Tree Hill for the sunset, and, oddly, the championship golf course isn't on Hamilton at all but on neighbouring Dent Island, a short ferry across. It's the only island championship course in the country.

HAYMAN ISLAND

The northernmost, and the other luxury name, now run as an InterContinental after a full rebuild following the cyclone. Private, polished, reached by the resort's own launch or a helicopter. This is the splash-out, honeymoon end of the market.



Hayman reopened as an InterContinental. Several of the island resorts came back bigger after Cyclone Debbie tore through in 2017.

DAYDREAM ISLAND

The closest resort island to Airlie and the most family-friendly, rebuilt and reopened in 2019 with its signature Living Reef, a free-form lagoon full of rays and fish threaded right through the resort. Easy to reach for a day trip or a short stay.

LONG ISLAND

Just off the coast, Long Island carries two very different resorts: Palm Bay, a small adults-only place with Balinese-style villas and a famously good wood-fired pizza, and Elysian, an off-grid, solar-powered eco-retreat capped at twenty guests. Seventeen kilometres of rainforest walking track run between them.

THE ONES THAT DIDN'T COME BACK

Now the honest bit. Not every island bounced back. South Molle's resort, battered by Debbie, sits closed and waiting on redevelopment. Lindeman, once a Club Med, has been shut since 2012; a big redevelopment is underway with the first stage due around 2026, but you can't stay there yet. Brampton, down the southern end near Mackay, has a derelict resort and no working accommodation, whatever the dreamy old photos suggest. Worth knowing before you set your heart on one of them.



A southern island beach. Some of the smaller islands still carry the bones of resorts that closed years ago and never reopened.

LOCAL TIP

Match the island to the trip, not the brochure. Hamilton for activity and easy flights, Hayman or qualia to splash out, Daydream for kids, Long Island to disappear entirely. They're genuinely different holidays.



Chapter Ten

Planning Your Trip

When to come, how to get here, and how to spend your days so you don't waste any.

THE PRACTICAL SUMMARY

BEST TIME	May to October: dry, cooler, no stingers
WHALES	June to September on the trip out
AIRPORTS	Whitsunday Coast / Proserpine (PPP) & Hamilton Island (HTI)
MINIMUM STAY	5 days; a week or more is better
ALWAYS	Stinger suit Nov–May, reef-safe sunscreen

You've read the what. Here's the how, kept practical.

WHEN TO GO

The best stretch is the dry season, roughly May to October: warm days, cool nights, low humidity, calmer seas, and no stingers. June to September adds humpback whales on the trip out to the reef. The trade-off is that this is peak season, so book ahead and expect company. The wet season, December to March, is hot and humid with afternoon storms and stingers in the water, but the islands are at their greenest, the crowds thin, and the prices drop. The shoulder months either side are the quiet sweet spot.

GETTING HERE

Two airports. Whitsunday Coast Airport at Proserpine (code PPP) is about forty minutes inland from Airlie and takes the budget flights. Hamilton Island Airport (HTI) is on the island itself, handy if you're staying on Hamilton or heading straight out to it. From Proserpine it's a shuttle or a hire car into Airlie. Most people base in Airlie and day-trip from there.

HOW LONG

Give it five days at the very least, a week or more if you can. A rough recipe that works: a day or two settling in around Airlie, a full day out to the outer reef, a Whitehaven and Hill Inlet day, then either two or three nights sailing or a few nights on an island. Try not to cram it. The weather will rearrange your plans at least once, and the place rewards a bit of slack in the schedule.

STINGERS, SUN, MONEY

The repeats, because they matter: stinger suit from November to May, sun protection always (the UV here is brutal), and more cash than you think, because nearly everything happens on a boat and boats aren't cheap. Backpacker or five-star, the islands themselves cost the same to look at.

TREAD LIGHTLY

Last thing, and I mean it. This is a working reef under real strain. Pick operators with eco-certification, use reef-safe sunscreen, never touch or stand on coral, take your rubbish off the islands, and respect the green zones and the cultural sites. None of it costs you a thing, and it's the difference between a place your kids get to see and a story you end up telling them.

LOCAL TIP

Build a spare day into the middle of the trip with nothing booked. The one day the reef tour gets blown out by wind, you'll be glad you can just shuffle it along instead of losing it.

Resources Worth Keeping

No affiliate links, no booking spam. Just the handful of official sources I actually use and trust.

Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service parks.qld.gov.au

National park info, the Ngaro Cultural Site track, camping permits, and current park alerts and closures.

Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority gbrmpa.gov.au

The zoning maps that tell you what you can do where, plus reef health and the Eye on the Reef program.

Bureau of Meteorology bom.gov.au

Marine forecasts, warnings and tide times. Check the tides before you plan a Hill Inlet day.

Tourism Whitsundays tourismwhitsundays.com.au

The official regional visitor site, with an operator directory if you want to start from a trusted list.

100 Magic Miles [David Colfelt's cruising guide](#)

If you're taking a boat out, this is the local bible: every anchorage, hazard and bay, updated regularly.

A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

I moved here from Christchurch in 2001 for what I thought would be a season or two, and I never left. In the years since I've made my living online for the operators who run trips around these islands, and I've come to know them about as well as anyone can without owning a boat.

I wrote this because most of what's online about the Whitsundays is either trying to sell you something or was put together by someone who's never set foot here. This is my attempt at the straight version: accurate, current, and honest about the bits that aren't perfect. If it helps you have a better trip, and tread a little lighter while you're at it, it's done its job.

See you out on the water.

Nath Johnston, Airlie Beach