



Haven on Heron

Located on the Barrier Reef itself, this luxury island resort is about quiet relaxation rather than raging night life. It's also about watching nature up close and personal. Story by Briar Jensen.

We stood on the beach in the darkness, listening. Scrrrunch. Scrrrunch. Then an exasperatingly long pause before, scrrrunch... scrrrunch... again. Further back in the dunes a laborious swishhh... swishhh... swishhh... was followed by an equally long pause. We'd found them.

It was just after 3am and although the moon highlighted their tracks up the beach, we couldn't see them under the trees, where the closest one was digging a body pit and the second one covering her eggs. The ranger had shown us how to identify them from their tracks, so we knew we were looking for two Green turtles, but we didn't want to stumble into their nesting area before locating them.

I'd hankered to come to Heron Island for ages, enticed by a travel poster I saw years ago showing a tiny coral cay, with lush green forest, encompassed by pristine white sand and surrounded by translucent turquoise waters. It depicted my ideal tropical island, but I had no idea it was also a nesting ground for sea turtles.

Located in the Capricorn Group of islands, 72 km off the Central Queensland coast between Gladstone and Rockhampton, Heron Island is part of the Great Barrier Reef. At only 18 hectares, with a circumference of 1.8 kilometres, it might be tiny but it's packed with natural attractions.







As a National Park, surrounded by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, it offers an unique opportunity to interact with nature within the comfort of a resort.

Due to a remarkable spirit of co-operation between Voyages Heron Island, the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Ranger Station and University of Queensland Research Station, who all share the island, opportunities abound for learning about the local environment and its inhabitants.

There are guided reef walks, island walks, turtle viewing and star gazing, while an extremely popular junior ranger program operates for 7 to 12-year-olds.

If you prefer to learn at your own pace there's a huge range of free booklets and brochures at the information centre. Identification sheets are available for sharks and rays through to birds and plants, and the twitchers lists and nature guides are great for self guided walks. But you don't even have to be that active; it's possible to absorb some of nature's sights and sounds from the comfort of a beach towel or deckchair.

Because Heron is located right on the reef snorkelling is a breeze, regardless of age. As soon as you are in water deep enough to float, literally two steps from the beach, the aquatic show begins. On the sandy bottom of Shark Bay we floated above giant shovel-nosed rays, cowtail stingrays and pink whip rays. Off North Beach kaleidoscopic fish darted between the coral while black tipped reef sharks cruised swiftly in pursuit. On the reef edge, a 10-minute boat ride away, were numerous species of parrotfish, butterfly fish, damsels and wrasse.

You don't need to snorkel or dive to appreciate the diversity of the reef though.



Pandanus Lounge

During daily reef walks at low tide we watched tiny jewel coloured fish flash past our viewing scopes while a marine biologist explained the reef ecosystem between pointing out sea cucumbers, clams and sea stars. There're also reef tours available in a semi-submersible and glass bottom boat.

But not all the action is in the water. Large colonies of Mutton Birds and Black Noddy Terns – about 150,000 of them during the breeding season between September and March – call Heron home. The smell of their guano was a bit overpowering at first, but we soon got used to it and grew to love watching the antics of nesting turns and their fluffy black chicks in the tree overhanging our balcony.

The unexpected highlight of our stay though was turtle watching, despite the 3am start. (Nesting turtles can often be seen at dusk and dawn, but due to the tide times during our short stay most of the action was at night.) Guided by a Queensland Turtle Research Program ranger we learnt to identify Green and Loggerhead turtles, heard about their extraordinary life cycles and witnessed them nesting, which involves digging a body pit and egg chamber, laying, covering, then concealing the eggs. This process takes up to three hours so being able to



Shark Bay

move cautiously between 20 or more turtles at different stages of nesting proved an advantage.

Watching these magnificent creatures lumber up the beach, knowing they had travelled from as far as Indonesia or New Caledonia and would not eat again until they returned to those feeding grounds, made my appreciation of their efforts so much greater.



Observing them shuffling exhausted down the sand a few hours later in the warm glow of dawn was a humbling, but inspiring way to start the day.

Voyages Heron Island strikes just the right balance of casual sophistication. The resort is very relaxed and informal, while still offering a high level of service. Friendly courteous staff soon had us relaxing in their keyless, cashless environment, which assistant resort manager Andrew Leith says, “Makes guests drop away their worries about the real world and concentrate on relaxing. No worries, no wallet, no cash – it’s pretty liberating.” And he was right.

The low-rise resort buildings are located around the harbour, leaving the rest of the island to the *Pisonia* forest. The timber floor and expansive glass doors of the lounge and bar make an unpretentious location for a pre-lunch mock-tail in swimwear and early evening cocktail in dinner-wear, which is only smart-casual.

As with all good resorts nowadays there’s a spa too. Aqua Soul Spa, set amongst the trees,



exudes calm. My one-hour massage was utter bliss; the nourishment of fragrant oil on my sun-parched skin seemed more than just physical. I was plied, kneaded and stroked with what felt



North Beach

like more than two hands and left wishing I could do this every evening before dinner.

Meals are included in the tariff and apart from the weekly barbeque are served in the Shearwater Restaurant.

And let's not forget to mention the dining. Breakfast and lunch are buffet style, though it's possible to order a lunch hamper for a private beach picnic. Dinner is a choice of three courses from an innovative, modern Australian menu that changes daily and there's a seafood buffet on Saturday nights.

If I had to nominate a drawback of the restaurant it's that if you order anything other than wine, the staff had to fetch it from the bar. This delay often saw my husband's cheese platter arrive long before his accompanying drink.

We headed back to the bar for a nightcap each evening to relax in the plump sofas and listen to the band. However, most guests retired early, presumably because they were exhausted after communing with nature all day or because they had to get up to watch the turtles.

While the island is relatively small, the beaches provide ample private space for the average 260 guests that the resort holds. This meant that even around the small pool we could always score a deck chair, though not necessarily in the shade.

Generally there seemed to be more staff than guests, in fact, we kept wondering where everybody was a lot of the time. So as you can see you don't go to Heron for the raging nightlife. At the same time you don't go for motorised water sports, because there isn't any. You go to unwind, to marvel at or interact with nature, to be spoilt in the spa or relax at the bar. And if you're timing's right, to see the turtles too.

Briar Jensen was a guest of Voyages Heron Island and travelled courtesy of Tourism Queensland and Australian Helicopters.

For reservations at Voyages Heron Island phone 61 2 8296 8010
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or visit www.voyages.com.au