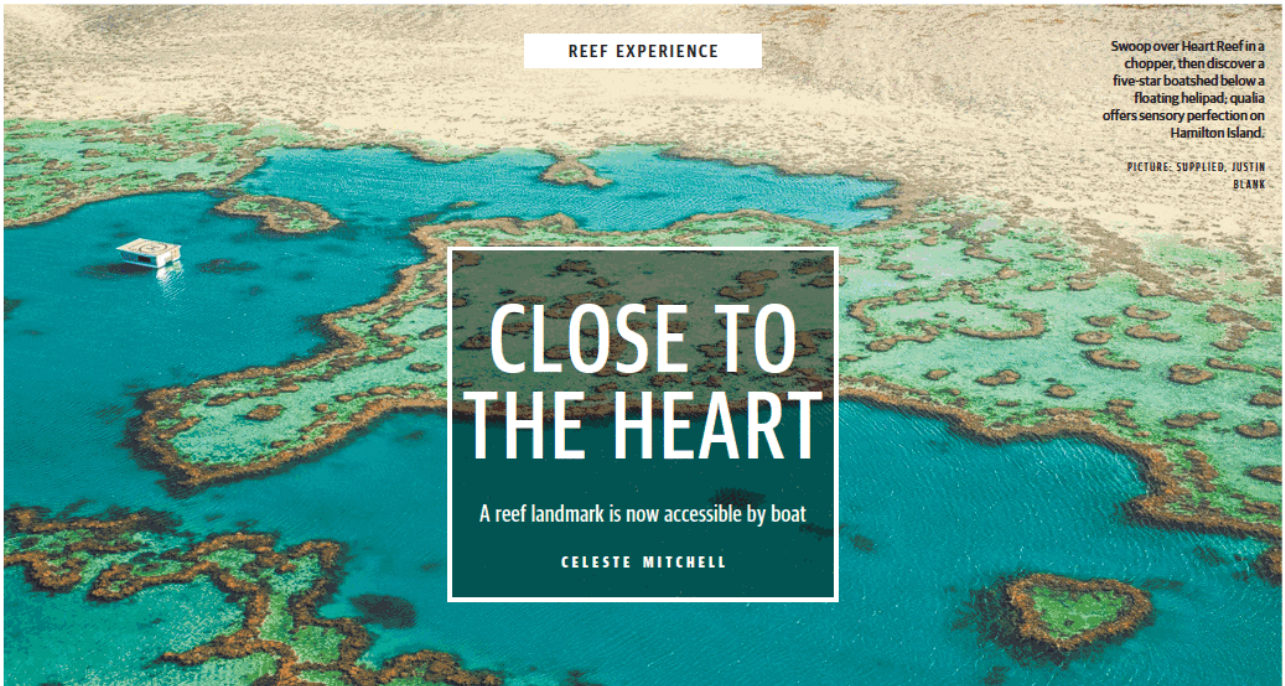


LUXURY ♦ QUEENSLAND



REEF EXPERIENCE

Swoop over Heart Reef in a chopper, then discover a five-star boatshed below a floating helipad; qualia offers sensory perfection on Hamilton Island.

PICTURE: SUPPLIED, JUSTIN BLANK

CLOSE TO THE HEART
A reef landmark is now accessible by boat
CELESTE MITCHELL

Even after eight years of dreaming, planning and painstaking approvals, and two years of actual building, Heart Island is still something of an apparition. Sixty kilometres northeast of Queensland's Hamilton Island, it shimmers like a mirage – the piercing waters of the Great Barrier Reef reflected in its chrome exterior. The only way to reach it is by helicopter. This "island" is actually a state-of-the-art pontoon, moored sensitively in a neighbouring lagoon of the Whitsundays' famed Heart Reef. "The name was born out of the phone calls we would get daily saying, 'I want to go to Heart Island'," says Brad Graves, chief executive at Hamilton Island Air (hamiltonislandair.com). "We'd have to say, it's not an island, it's a reef." But now, those wishes are Brad's command – the fantasy brought to life daily, with a level of exclusivity never seen before in these waters. After choppering from the helipad at Hamilton Island's luxury qualia resort, up and over the mountains and white-sand bays of Whitsunday Island and across an inky blue ocean, the Whitsundays' turquoise swirl of reefs and lagoons bleeds 180 degrees across my peripheral vision. We swoop over the infamous heart, water

THIS IS THE FIRST TIME THE PUBLIC WILL SEE THE HEART CLOSE-UP FROM A BOAT

lapping its edges on the low tide and then every James Bond fantasy becomes reality – for your eyes only. We hover downwards to land on a giant H that forms a private welcome mat at one of Australia's most iconic natural wonders. Today, just two of us are alongside Brad and pilot Jake Felice, stepping into the middle of this mesmerising landscape. I've been granted an exclusive preview of the project that has consumed Brad's life for the past decade; it's now on the cusp of an early June public opening. With the twist of his key, Brad lifts part of the platform to reveal a set of stairs and we descend into our private lair. Environmental necessity has directed the design of what is essentially a five-star – and extremely spacious – boatshed below a helipad. Its centrepiece is a custom-designed

glass-bottom boat, grey and sleeker than Bond's latest getaway vessel. The boat sits dry, above water so iridescent it glows through the cracks of the platform below. At the signal, it's lowered with hydraulics for six guests to step aboard. The wall behind it lifts to reveal your escape route; out into the magic of the reef. While other companies offer seaplane and helicopter flights over the Heart, this is the first time the public will see it close-up from a boat. If you find yourself in this fantasy lair, you'll circle the Heart, stopping to take photos, then anchor in a private lagoon to snorkel walls of coral with a marine biologist on hand to help you identify marine life. When Brad took his first trial-run guests snorkelling, he says, "The fish were surprised; they'd never seen a human before." Back on board, champagne and canapes are served while you take advantage of your floating oasis. "When the back's up and the boat's out,

it's a two-foot swimming pool in here," Brad explains. "I wanted something for people who are afraid; they can have a paddle. Confident swimmers can jump off the back... some people will just have a glass of champagne." For Brad, the fantasy comes with a \$2 million price tag and 10 years of meticulous planning and troubleshooting. Everything has been carefully considered, from the bird spikes covering the helipad that automatically retract via remote control, to the glinting chrome exterior. Specialised moorings ensure there is no impact on the surrounding reef while wind turbines power the lights, pumps and stereo, and solar panels help keep supplies topped up. "I wanted it to blend in with the environment," Brad says. "It looks like the water and the top is the colour of the sand." It's the type of fantasy "island" experience that pairs perfectly with the real island fantasy on offer for the past 12 years back at qualia. From our Windward Pavilion, the view of Whitsunday Island is now at eye-level and sophistication seeps from every grain of timber, garden bed and interaction with staff. What else to do, but pad into the bar, order a drink and toast a successful mission?


TO READ ABOUT THE FABULOUS NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN THE WHITSUNDAYS, VISIT ESCAPE.COM.AU

THE WRITER TRAVELLED AS A GUEST OF HAMILTON ISLAND AND TOURISM WHITSUNDAYS

ESCAPE ROUTE
HEART ISLAND

GETTING THERE
Virgin Australia flies direct to Hamilton Island from Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. virginaustralia.com

STAYING THERE
Qualia, set across a private 12ha sanctuary on the northern tip of Hamilton Island, offers five-star luxury with a quintessential Aussie edge: views of gum trees backed by blue waters, friendly cockatoos swooping in to say g'day and the championing of local producers and makers. Stay from \$1300 a night in a Leeward Pavilion or \$2000 a night in a Windward Pavilion (minimum night stay applies), including breakfast, golf buggy, daily yoga and beach activities. qualia.com.au

DOING THERE
Hamilton Island's Heart Island experience departs daily, including return scenic flight, exclusive use of the pontoon with a maximum of six guests, glass-bottom boat tour of Heart Reef lagoon, all snorkelling equipment, light catering and beverages. Three-hour experience costs \$999 a person aged 14 and over. A relaxation massage in refurbished spa qualia, uses bespoke Sodashi and LaGaia products blended especially for qualia. Follow it with a reinvigorating outdoor vichy shower. You have a choice when it comes to the signature degustation at qualia's Pebble Beach restaurant: break the wax seal and open the envelope to reveal your menu or dive in blindly and let each course be presented with sensory flourish. Either way, this is fine dining by chef Mark Jensen not to be missed.

MORE
hamiltonisland.com.au



PONTOON



QUALIA