

An aerial photograph of a tropical island. The foreground shows a white sandy beach curving along the edge of a shallow, turquoise lagoon. The water transitions from light green near the shore to a deeper blue further out. In the background, there are more islands and a clear blue sky with scattered white clouds. The overall scene is bright and vibrant, capturing the beauty of a tropical coastline.

# A N A U S T R A L I A N T A L E

A journey through Queensland and its islands uncovers  
the bittersweet history behind its pristine exterior

**WORDS:** Nicci Perides

Australia's history can be as heart-breaking as it is colourful. Queensland is synonymous with days of uninterrupted sunshine, the rainbow-hued Great Barrier Reef and the beautiful Whitsundays, as well as its cosmopolitan cities. Being sent to Australia for an assignment is of course no bad gig, but the history of this ancient land often goes unnoticed, as people prefer to hear about the picture-perfect resorts and diving opportunities. But what if you could do both, I asked myself as I set out to get under Queensland's skin.

In the past decade, many hotels and resorts have popped up all over the Great Barrier Reef, stretching from the Whitsundays in the south to the Great Palm Islands in northern Queensland, where a mixture of human tragedy and natural disasters make up much of the region's timeline. Here are three must-see destinations famed for their true Australian character.

#### THE HIGH LIFE

Hamilton Island is the largest and the most inhabited island in the Whitsundays. Its history is centred on the yachting industry, from the late 1700s, when Captain Cook's *HMS Endeavour* first encountered the 150 tropical islands, to the mid-1970s, when Queensland tourism entrepreneur Keith Williams noticed an island that he'd not seen before as he was enjoying a cruise through the Whitsundays on his motor yacht. It was Hamilton Island.

Williams purchased it with business associate Bryan Byrt and made plans to turn the island into a grazing ground. In 1978, Byrt died and Williams changed his plans. A new airstrip was built as well as a harbour and a resort. The seeds of tourism had been planted and Hamilton Island was well on its way to becoming Australia's premier tourist destination.

Around the same time as development started on the island, Bob Oatley, owner of Australia's celebrated Oatley Wine, sailed

**Coast to coast**  
You'll always be close to nature at qualia, on Hamilton Island





past the island and recognised its potential. In 2003, the lease changed hands and the Oatley family took over the island, transforming it into an award-winning destination.

Today, Hamilton Island is almost entirely dedicated to tourism and has an island resort feel to it, with a range of accommodation to suit a high-end budget. There are no cars allowed on the island, only golf carts, and the small white-washed high street is reminiscent of one of the old fishing ports of New South Wales, looking out onto a marina filled with some of the world's finest sailing vessels. At the top of the accommodation options is the ultra-luxurious qualia.

qualia (the "q" is deliberately not capitalised in order to show off its understated elegance) is a sectioned-off area of the island, only accessible via a James Bond-style gate. As you drive up in a private golf-cart, the gate slowly slides open to reveal a series of quiet, tree-lined streets and villas tucked away in the vegetation.

Everything about qualia is discreet; the resort seemed empty but this is part of its charm. Guests can enjoy the private pool and deck area of the villas or the private Pebble Beach, and dine in one of the exclusive restaurants or leave the resort and visit one of the many other restaurants nearby.

## WHITSUNDAY ISLANDS

**Stay:** qualia, Hamilton Island

**Rates:** from US\$1,016 per night

**Visit:** Nearby Whitehaven beach for its crystal clear waters and perfect white sand beach

The island becomes a haven for yacht owners during the Hamilton Island Race Week, when superyachts and enthusiasts come from all over the world to enjoy the first-class hospitality and witness one of the most exciting events in the season – Australia's largest keelboat regatta. It seems the perfect place to hold such an event given that three times over, Hamilton Island was discovered by men on sailing vessels.

### BRISBANE: GATEWAY CITY

Brisbane is often used as a jumping-off point to explore the islands of the Whitsundays and the Great Barrier Reef. Its close proximity means that you can be out of the city and in paradise in just under two hours, but while you are there, Brisbane is well worth exploring.

In 2011, the city was devastated by floods when the Brisbane River burst its banks, taking out the majority of the city's attractions. Since life in Brisbane is centred on the river, it seemed that the heart of the city had turned against its people.

### Yachting heritage

(above) Hamilton Island Race Week draws teams and yacht enthusiasts from around the world

### On island time

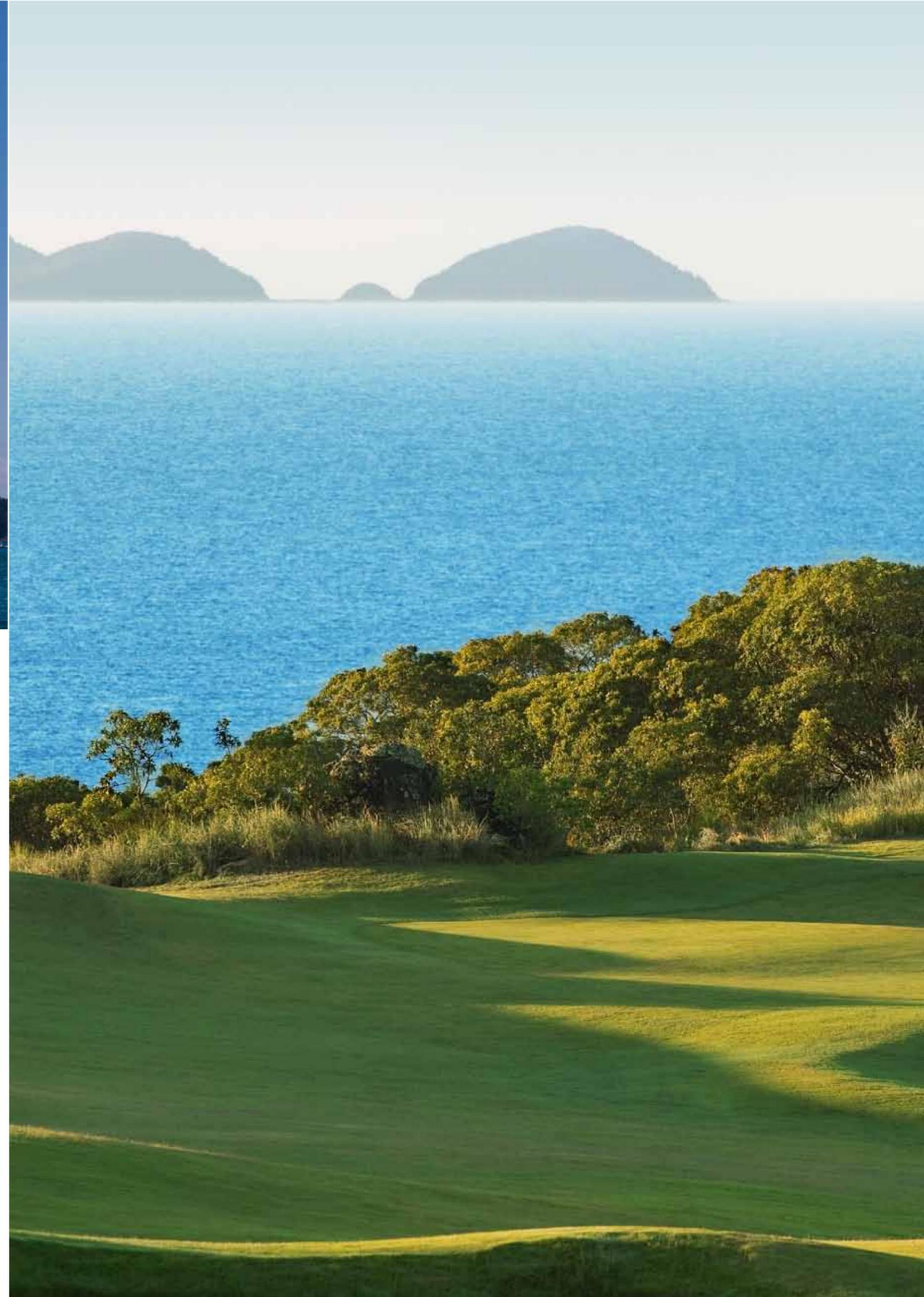
(right) Enjoy 18 holes with flawless ocean views at Hamilton Island Golf Club

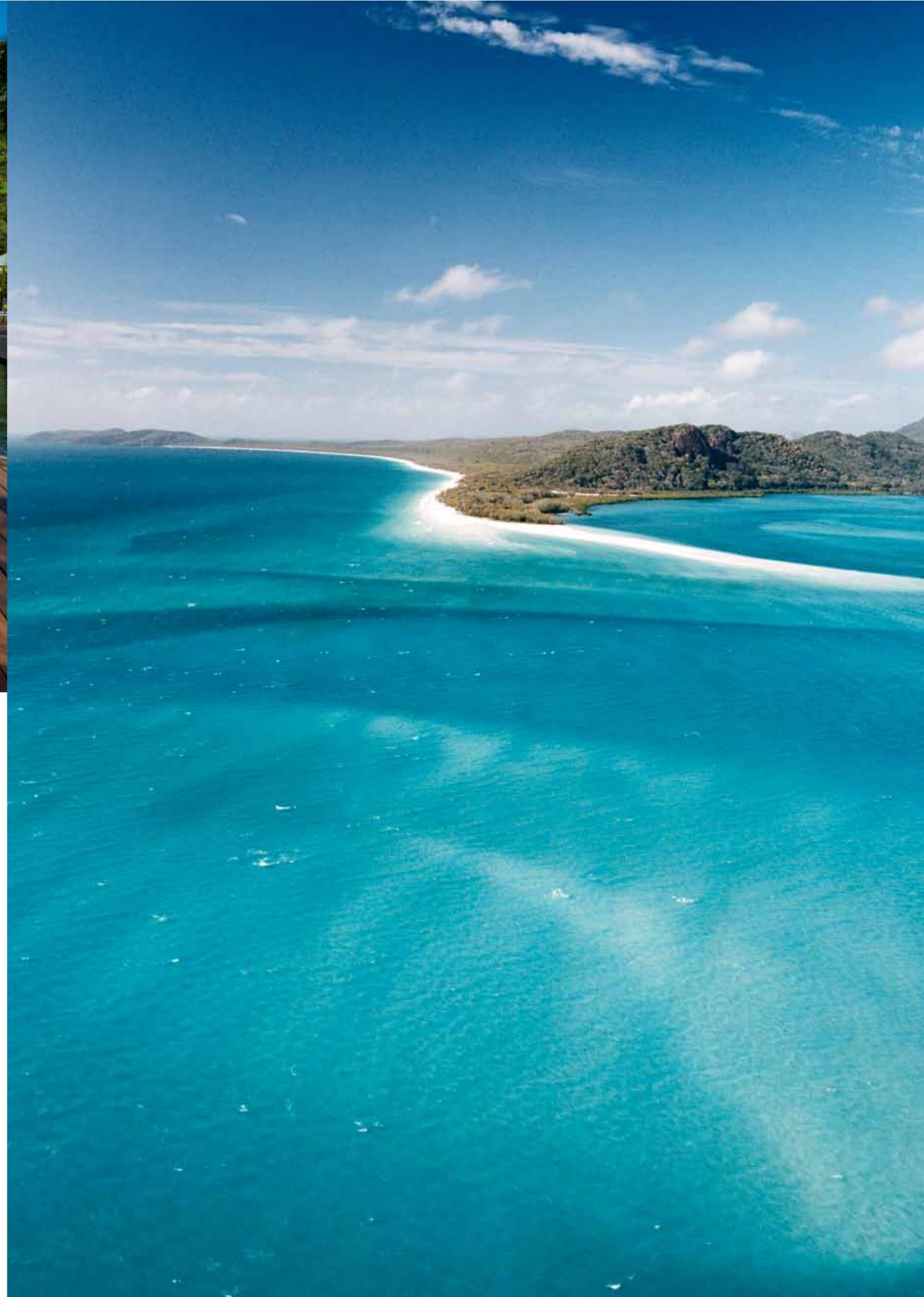
Today the city has picked itself up, dusted itself off and turned the place around. Friends who visited before the flooding described it as a tacky town, but now it is a vibrant cultural hub.

From Brisbane airport, the best way into town is via the Airtrain, which takes you from the airport to the city centre in 20 minutes. Sofitel Brisbane Hotel is located on top of Central railway station and then shoots up into the sky, offering unrivalled views of the city and Anzac Square (a memorial to servicemen and women from the Australia and New Zealand Army Corps) below.

The best way to discover Brisbane is via the river. On January 12, 2011 the Queensland floods reached Brisbane's Central Business District (CBD). More than 20,000 houses were evacuated and the mayor declared a state of emergency as the river peaked at 14.6 feet. All major tourist attractions suffered extensive damage, including the popular Brisbane River Walk, and a number of suburbs were completely cut off. It wasn't until January 14 that the Australian army could get in with supplies to help those stranded.

The true spirit of the Brisbaners shone through in the subsequent months as they turned out in their droves to help with the heartbreaking clean-up mission.





As a result of the restoration and regeneration, the city went from a forgotten Australian stop-off point to a major tourist hub. The South Bank has been given a huge revamp, the riverside homes and apartments have been restored to rival any millionaires strip of Sydney or Melbourne, and the thriving arts scene is one of the best in Asia Pacific.

#### AROUND BRISBANE

Make sure you find time to visit Ipswich, 40 minutes' drive from Brisbane, to see the flood marker. Built in January 2012, the poignant marker is made from steel girders and resembles brightly coloured Lego blocks. Standing at 10 metres high, it identifies seven major floods in the suburb of Goodna over the past 119 years, the last one being in 2011.

#### NORTHERN QUEENSLAND

In the early to mid-1900s, the Queensland government had an apartheid-like racial segregation policy, in which few rights were granted to the indigenous people, who were known as aborigines. In 1927, the Great Palm Islands were used as an offshore human dumping ground for anyone (mainly the indigenous population) with venereal disease and then, later, leprosy.

In particular, an island called Fantome was chosen as a leper colony for its remoteness, since medical thinking of the era was that keeping those afflicted with the disease at a safe distance from healthy people was the best ways of dealing with them. A hospital on the island was built and run by nuns from the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary.

Indigenous people with leprosy, and sometimes the perfectly healthy, were taken under police escort from their homes and forced to live on the island indefinitely.

Today, Fantome is an eerie reminder of what life must have been like for the people who were sent to the island. It has never been built up

**Exclusive escape**  
(top) Gaze out at the world from the infinity pool at Orpheus Island Resort

**Orpheus Island**  
(right) Rolling countryside meets endless aquatic adventure in the Great Barrier Reef

and therefore the only way to visit is by taking a day-trip from one of the other islands, many of which have been transformed into holiday resorts.

Nearby, on Orpheus Island, the super-exclusive Orpheus Island Resort has taken it upon itself to educate its residents and guests on the history of the area.

Orpheus is a working island and therefore when guests arrive – limited to a maximum of 34 people at a time – the emphasis is on working with the natural surroundings. Guests are transported via helicopter from Townsville to the island, which is located 80 kilometres to the north in the middle of the Great Barrier Reef, a scenic 25-minute flight away.

The resort's luxurious lodges are dotted along one strip of the island, metres away from a white sand beach. There is a restaurant lodge at one end of the strip where meals are served, an infinity pool, a bar area and a watersports and dive centre – everything else is as it has always been. A jungle with hiking and biking trails backs onto the resort, coral reef frames the island and a plethora of aqua life swim in its waters.



Guests are treated to surreal sunsets at Orpheus Island

The island's emphasis is on working with nature, so daily fishing trips are available, as well as snorkelling and nature walks around the accessible areas of the island. A protected giant clam farm is located at the other end of the beach, where daily walks are taken with head chef Arie Prabowo to collect oysters and smaller clams, plus anything else he and the guests can find, to cook up for that night's gourmet dinner.

The feeling of exclusivity is apparent throughout your stay. Although you can help catch your own food, it is served later as a five-course degustation menu in the evening. And though you are taught how to live off the land, the vast infinity pool that offers what could be one of the most mesmerising sunset views in the world offsets any sense of fatigue that thoughts of hard labour may have brought on.

Indigenous people play a huge role in keeping the resort running; after all, the Aborigines have inhabited this area for a long time. Many are employed to help with the maintenance of the island. The cultural experience where guests are taken with Tom, an Aborigine whose family was relocated to Fantome Island, is one of the highlights of a stay here.

Fantome Island is a 20-minute boat ride away from Orpheus. Tom leads the group around the island, pointing out the old infirmary, abandoned hospital beds and the graves of 200 souls who perished on the island. It is a truly humbling experience that is made all the more real when Tom tells us about his own personal history of the island.

Orpheus Island is a truly once-in-a-lifetime experience that combines a luxurious stay with the feeling of true intrepid travel, as well as a cultural connection with both the island and its inhabitants. ■

## ORPHEUS ISLAND

**Accommodation:** luxury lodges complete with living room, kitchenette, bedroom and large bathroom. A maximum of 34 guests are allowed on the island at any time.

**Arrival:** private 25-minute helicopter transfer from Townsville costs \$572 per adult and \$291 for children under 11.

**Signature dining:** for special occasions, Dining with the Tides is a private dinner in a romantic setting at the end of a fire-lit pier.

**Rates:** from \$1,456 per night. Cost includes use of all watersports equipment (excluding diving), all meals and house beverages, and daytrips.

[www.orpheus.com.au](http://www.orpheus.com.au)



Private bathing at Hazard Bay