



The Great Barrier Reef
A few facts & figures: The Great Barrier Reef is the largest of the 552 World Heritage Areas; and covers 347,000 kilometers; is over 2,300 kilometers long stretching from Papua New Guinea to Fraser Island in the south-east of Queensland; and is home to over 2,900 coral reefs and 1,500 species of fish.

The Beauty and the Beasts

Our own Steve Irwin, Australian wildlife expert Captain Greg Letondeur of Daintree Air Services, took us on the biggest adventure of our lives: the utterly spectacular daytrip from Cairns to Lizard Island (a deserted island apart from the lizards), located on Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

Advertised as "Lizard Island Day Tour, the Ultimate Reef Experience", the Daintree Air Services tour promised a scenic flight from Cairns to Lizard Island, which is fairly close to the northern tip of Australia, a day of exploring the island's pristine beaches and snorkeling in the world's largest ecosystem of coral reefs, the Great Barrier Reef.

For once, the advertising did not exaggerate. If there is one ultimate tour to Lizard Island and the Great Barrier Reef, this is it. From the minute we arrived at the Daintree Air Services terminal, until we were dropped off at our hotel the day was one awe-inspiring, fun-filled and action-packed adventure – an amazing trip that provides you with a memorable experience and some great stories to tell your friends and folks back home.

The moment we arrived at the terminal, we realized this wasn't going to be your run-of-the-mill tour. With slight trepidation I eyed the tiny aircraft which we were about to board (a Piper Chieftain PA-31). Being only a 10-seater, it was also clear that there would be no arguing over window seats.

The pre-trip preparations consisted of being fitted with life vests, diving fins and stinger suits. Equipped and briefed on safety regulations, we climbed aboard the plane and were soon soaring

over beautiful rugged landscapes, Islands reefs and rainforests on our way to the Great Barrier Reef.

A few clouds float by like puffs of cotton as we cruise comfortably along at an altitude of about 2,500 feet. Far below, Daintree River and Daintree Rainforest (hence the name of Greg's Air Service) are visible.

"Wanna see some great waterfalls?" Greg yells above the engines. Without waiting for an answer, the air craft descends to award us with a bird's eye view. "I'm showing you guys parts of Australia most Australians will not ever see!"

Our intrepid guide Captain Greg, dressed in a white pilot's short-sleeved shirt, blue shorts and hiking boots, shares stories about the area below, conjuring up images of Crocodile Dundee country, and impressing us with his intimate knowledge of one of the last real wilderness areas left on Earth.

"I once had a Frenchman on tour who wanted to see crocodiles." Greg told me that they went and found a croc 'thiss's' big (spreading his arms as wide as they could go), laughingly recounting what the Frenchman said after he swam a little close to one of the creatures. "You told us we would see zee crocodile, you did not tell us we would have to swim wis sem!"



Lizard Island
Situated 270 kilometers north-west of Cairns Queensland, and 26 kilometers from the mainland, the island covers an area of 1,013 hectares and is surrounded by some of the most beautiful and pristine reefs in the world. These reefs are teeming with marine life – several species of clown fish, green turtles, giant clams, rays, amazing coral formations and hundreds of species of colorful tropical fish.

Lizard Island is considered one of Australia's most exclusive destinations, consistently ranked among the top 10 Asia Pacific destinations by the international media. The island boasts 23 pure white beaches. The magnificent Blue Lagoon beach on the southern side of the island was voted the world's best remote beach by New York's Details Magazine in 1999.

The island has attracted it's fair share of Hollywood celebrities, many of whom vacation at the island's one and only exclusive resort, and its pristine beaches recently formed the backdrop for the film production 'Fool's Gold', starring Kate Hudson and Matthew McConaughey.



One of the many flawless beaches on Lizard Island

The 55-minute flight takes us over Port Douglas, Daintree, Cape Tribulation, Bloomfield, Cooktown, Cape Flattery and 320 kilometers of the Great Barrier Reef. During the flight Greg shares with us a wealth of information about each of these places of great historic and cultural interest. He also points out the importance of the World Heritage Rainforests and Wet Lands as you fly low level across the tree tops.

When he speaks of his encounters with remote Aboriginal communities (as he explains; "places where very few white men have ever set foot"), or trips further inland where he has only taken a few privileged visitors to acquire unique artworks; the revered but feared Black Mountains, the Dingo's of Pungalina, or event about canoeing up remote gorges and rivers in the outback, you are caught up by the excitement, the passion and just the unique adventure of it all.

We then descend to Lizard Island, landing on a hot and sticky ribbon of tarmac that seems to run off the edge of the island. Although we were in the safe and extremely capable hands of our pilot, I felt that if we hadn't braked so quickly, we would've skidded straight off the runway. Greg is an old school pilot who wouldn't dream of trading in his 1982 twin propeller Piper Chieftain for a newer model ("they don't make them like this anymore").

As we're taxiing to park, he asks excitedly, "Did you see that big fella there on the runway as we landed? He was about two meters long!" Apparently I've just

missed a large specimen of one of Lizard Island's inhabitants.

Before we embark on a short hike to Watson's Bay, Greg urges us to be very alert and look carefully around, lest we miss a precious piece of nature. The walk leads us through a beautiful mangrove swamp (I stick close to our guide in case of another impromptu encounter of the local kind), and we soon reach the beach and the famous Great Barrier Reef.

No better guide to this unfamiliar world could be asked for as Greg demonstrates his ability to identify each bird sound, foot print, track or piece of vegetation along the way.

We soon reach the type of beach that the Great Barrier Reef is famous for, as virgin white sand, unmarked by humans, stretches out before us. Greg spots a track and we eagerly follow its trail. Half-way down the beach we see two flattened mounds of sand, as if someone had dug a couple of shallow graves and hastily covered them over. We had stumbled onto a giant turtle's nest. The turtle had come ashore the night before and laid her eggs. "An extremely rare occurrence for this side of the island", Greg excitedly explained.

Standing haughtily on the turtle's nest was a lizard, staring at us with an unperturbed, Machiavellian grin on its face. We've caught the "bastard" – as Greg phrased it – red-handed, seconds away from

raiding the nest and devouring the treasure hidden within.

Our next adventure was exploring the reef itself. While we don our snorkeling gear, Greg tells us about the ecosystem down below, a coral reef known as 'Clam Garden'. There are literally hundreds of huge mollusks here, which grow to over five feet in diameter and may live to be 50 years old.

"Each creature is performing a task, so you have to look closely," Greg explains. "Be quiet and don't move around too much. Act like hunters!"

As the sun shimmers across the bay, we dive into the crystal-clear water following our Aussie guide, who is committed, passionate, and full of youthful enthusiasm about the amazing world that he is leading us into. (But has cautioned us to never touch or scare the wildlife.)

Greg dives down many times, pointing out different creatures such as giant clams, huge bright blue starfish, giant wrasse, snub nose parrot fish, blue ring rays, creatures who look like they belong in outer space, even the happy familiar face of Nemo swimming by (sadly the only fish I was able to name), surgeon fish, Napoleon fish, Queen Fish and the list goes on... all thrown together in an underwater Technicolor explosion.

"There's so much biodiversity. Every time I come here I see something different," he enthuses. Greg has been escorting some of the world's biggest businessmen, movie stars, politicians and just

ordinary folk like today's group to special places in Australia for over 25 years, some of whom fly especially to Cairns to take the Lizard Island Day trip.

Back in Cairns I tell Greg I'm hooked. Pointing to the northern part of Australia on a map he says, "See this piece of land? It's two-and-a-half times the size of England and virtually unexplored territory. When you come back next time, I'll show you the real stuff!"



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Climate Change and Coral Reefs

Warming temperatures are damaging coral reefs around the world. Increases in ocean temperature due to climate change, which the UN IPCC recently declared is "very likely" caused by human activity, contribute to coral bleaching and can limit coral growth. Continued global warming over the next century will cause further degradation of the coral reef communities however Greg told me he has been swimming at Lizard for over twenty five years and thinks the reef quality now is as good as ever if not a little better.

PATT (Plant-a-Tree-Today) Foundation founder Andrew Steel, of the UK registered Charity based in Bangkok, is on a mission to slow global warming by planting trees. Forests are carbon sinks that absorb and store CO2, a key greenhouse gas. As a father he laments that his children will pay the price for the activities of previous generations. "The effects of climate change will have little impact on me, but I've got children, and it's their future I'm worried about", Steel says.

For more info visit www.plant-a-tree-today.org