

Gillian Handley visits Queensland's charming little Lady Elliot Island

DIVERS know it, turtles visit it, manta rays play around it and visitors fall in love with it: Lady Elliot Island, the unpretentious dame of the Great Barrier Reef.

From the windows of the Twin Otter plane, Lady Elliot Island appears as a green full stop on a vast blue page. Our small plane has been flying for 40 minutes over empty sea and the sight of the island creates a stir.

"Look... a manta..."

"There's another one... two... three... six of them."

The huge manta rays are suspended in the clear water off the coral beach below. We crane our necks to follow the graceful creatures but lose them as we glide over exposed reef, bumping to a halt on the grassy airstrip.

Divers have long been aware of this jewel at the southern tip of the Great Barrier Reef. Ships' captains have known Lady Elliot too, to their cost. More than 120 ships have been wrecked on the surrounding reef, their coral-encrusted skeletons undergoing a veritable sea change and becoming part of the island.

In the 19th century, Lady Elliot Island was mined for its guano. During one decade, the vegetation was devastated and the seabirds disappeared. In 1909, pioneer aviator Don Adams fell in love with the island. He built an airstrip in 24 hours and revegetated the island, opening the resort in 1985.

The laid-back charm of this TV and radio-free resort works its magic. Away from the water, the heat licks at us. Sand crunches underfoot on the sunbaked veranda. From our door, coastal she-oaks and sword-like leaves of screw palms frame the shining lagoon.

Our days follow a natural pattern. We wake to the squabblings of black noddies. You can't escape the birds; there are an estimated 47,000, from resident noddies and gulls, rails, egrets and silvereyes to visiting boobies, frigate birds, breeding terns and shearwaters.

On the deck close to the lagoon, we plan our day. The tide is low, exposing the coral in the lagoon, so we head to the far side of the island to snorkel. It's a short swim to the drop-off and the weathered coral near the shore soon gives way to the intricate formations and rich colours of unspoilt reef. Triggerfish, angels, Moorish idols and parrotfish dart and flash. A white-tipped reef shark cruises past and a seething mass of silver fish bodies twine in and around each other at a cleaning station. We hang on to rest ropes anchored close to the drop-off, catching our breath.

Lunch is a light snack at the pool bistro. No money changes hands; everything is charged to guests' accounts. Things are kept simple — including the comfortable accommodation, with a choice of tent cabins (sleeping four in bunk-style

LADY ELLIOT ISLAND



island suites (apartment-style rooms with one or two bedrooms).

We've booked a dive for the afternoon. It's 10 years since I've strapped on scuba gear, so it's a quick refresher course in the pool for me. We load our gear on to a tractor headed for the beach and amble along behind it, cooking gently in half-on, half-off wetsuits. The dive boat is waiting and we gear up, staggering like drunken turtles on to the bobbing deck.

The dive site is close to shore and soon we're exploring coral outcrops teeming with busy fish. Reef colours glow in sunlight filtering through gin-clear water. It's turtle season and we disturb a few grazing on the sand.

Walking back to the resort, we pass a tiny cemetery. Two forlorn graves are neatly encircled by a white picket fence. The oldest of the graves belongs to Phoebe Jane Phillips who died at 30 in 1896 from pneumonia. The other belongs to Susannah McKee, wife of the lighthouse keeper. Lonely and depressed, one day in 1907, she dressed herself in her Sunday best and walked into the sea. From time to time a strange

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AT THE HIGH TIDE MARK, THE HATCHLINGS ARE TIPPED FROM THEIR BUCKET. INSTANTLY THEY HURTLE DOWN THE BEACH TOWARDS THE TORCHLIGHT AND INTO THE PEWTER