

Nature

This Great Barrier Reef idyll is some of Australia's best work



Lizard Island, Queensland

By Rachel Lees
Photography by Lean Timms

As I open the curtains on the inky pre-dawn, a shimmer of neon-blue ripples along the water's edge. Bioluminescence gleams on the beach beyond my bedroom window, flickering along the fine white sand like ancient magic. It's my second day on Lizard Island, a 1000-hectare expanse of pink-grey granite hills encircled by tranquil beaches on the northern tip of the Great Barrier Reef, and "awestruck" is already my default setting.

The spell is cast even before touchdown when, almost an hour into the flight from Cairns, cotton-wool clouds part to reveal a dazzling jewellery box: a handful of peridot-green landmasses rising from a sea of sapphire and topaz.

A flash of gold, green and chestnut plumage flutters ahead of the chauffeur-driven car as we leave the airstrip. It's a rainbow bee-eater, seemingly guiding us to The House (thehouseatlizard.com), a private three-bedroom sanctuary built on a headland in the national park.

A quick tour of the two-storey copper-and-concrete hideaway and it's tempting to write off the afternoon. I consider lolling in the pool overlooking one of three beaches and the Coral Sea; think about selecting an award-winning beaujolais from the cellar to sip by the rooftop jacuzzi; and am taken by the three outdoor baths. But Emma-Lee Whyte, one of two attendants at The House, has a better idea: "Find a turtle."



It's a curious suggestion, given the island's namesake. After Lieutenant James Cook's ship *HMS Endeavour* fell prey to the area's labyrinth of reefs in 1770, he named the island for the yellow-spotted monitors and other lizards he encountered here. But it already had a name. To the Dinggaal people, it's Jiigurru, which means "stingray", a sacred place where boys were brought for initiation, Elders met and the ocean provided bountiful harvest.

Still, Whyte's logic is sound. "Swimming with turtles instantly aligns you to the pace of the island," she says. "They're such gentle creatures and the way they move is how we encourage you to move while you're here." At Watsons Bay on the west of the island, the water is barely calf-deep when I spy my first green turtle. By the time I pull on my snorkel, five more have arrived.

I swim a few metres from shore to Clam Gardens, where massive blue-lipped clams stand sentinel as feather stars and tropical fish flit around the coral. But it's only a teaser. After a guided yoga session on the deck the next morning, plans to make use of the twin-outboard boat included

in the stay are thwarted by inclement weather. Instead, we take the 56-foot motor yacht *Pisces* for a 40-minute run to North Direction. "It's some of the best snorkelling around," says captain Harry.

The return trip is spent animatedly describing underwater wonders, from electric-blue sea cucumbers to rainbow-hued parrotfish. But the show isn't over. Giant trevally and tawny nurse sharks dart around the stern of the yacht as it pulls into Anchor Bay, in front of the luxurious 40-room Lizard Island Resort and its superlative day spa (where a one-hour treatment is included for each guest of The House).

As I watch a pastel-pink-and-purple sunset next to a bonfire on the beach, The House manager, Paul Steinfort, appears with a bottle of Barons de Rothschild champagne to talk through the three-course menu created by the property's chef, Kyle Dixon. Grilled tiger prawns with yuzu, sesame and Sichuan pepper to start, eye fillet and crayfish with café de Paris butter for main and pavlova with roast plum, crème fraîche and spiced berries for dessert. Magical in every way. ●