

Travel + LUXURY

In the Great Barrier Reef's north, and fusing raw angularity and refined sensitivity, a striking new private hideaway on Lizard Island may be the most spectacular and sought-after holiday rental in the country.






HOME

AND

By GEORGE EPAMINONDAS *Photographed by* PETER BENNETT'S

AWAY





THESE PAGES in the kitchen and dining area, custom quartzite island; Jens chairs and stools by Antonio Citterio from B&B Italia from Space Furniture; *Story of the Spirit-Cannibal Hunting the Nyoniiraje Clan-Man* (2014) artwork by Ilma Savari. Details, last pages.

Untethered from the mainland, adrift in the Coral Sea, Lizard Island is breathtakingly remote. This unspoiled place, an hour's flight on a puddle jumper from Cairns, is moored in opalescent water, encircled by iridescent reef and lulled by breezes that act like an antidepressant for twitchy travellers. Until recently, the island's namesake resort — beloved by nature fanatics and wayward romantics alike — was the only bolthole on this splendid patch of the Great Barrier Reef. But earlier this year, a holiday home was unveiled on the island's west coast. Rising from a granite bluff and graced with an expansive outlook, the house is a bold study in Modernist design. There may not be another high-end beach bungalow like this one anywhere in the world.

At first blush, this aesthetic marvel projects an air of tropical brutalism. It's all concrete surfaces and daring contours, garlanded in acacia, eucalypt and pandanus. On closer inspection, the austerity of this concrete citadel dissolves. Windows slice through the brawny structure, suffusing it with sunshine. Another softening aspect is the judicious deployment of New Guinea rosewood, whose exquisite honey colour and swirling grain fills in doorways, cabinets and beds.

The whole enterprise feels quintessentially Australian: airy, fluid and in conversation with nature. Helping you settle in is Paul Steinfort, an indefatigable majordomo who was waiting earlier at the airport with refreshments and is now explaining the workings of the joint. "The glasses are here," he says, releasing a drawer with a touch. "And, more importantly, the cellar is here."

The abode meshes privacy and proximity; it's close enough to the resort for access to spa treatments and diving excursions, but removed enough to feel utterly secluded. The next morning, Hibiscus Beach was calling me. Hibiscus is the perfect crescent shape, with powdery sand, driftwood sculptures and piles of smooth boulders plonked at each end. Snorkelling out from the shore revealed a wondrous underwater world. Miraculously, the island's fringing reef has escaped the calamitous bleaching of further south.

It was these coral reefs that bedevilled Captain James Cook in 1770. You can hike to Cook's Look today for soul-stirring vistas, or you could take one of the inland walking tracks to encounter shell middens shaped over thousands of years, evidence of ancient feasts and ceremonial rites, along with stone artefacts. "Lizard Island has a long Indigenous history stretching back 6500 years and a beautiful calmness," Leon Pink, the resort's general manager, told me. The Dinggaal traditional owners, who consider the location a sacred place, reserved it for the initiation of young males and for the harvesting of shellfish, turtles, dugongs and fish.

The bucolic island was declared a national park in 1937 and a marine park along with its satellites in 1974. The antecedents of the resort, and by extension the house, date back to 1967, when the state government called for expressions of interest to transform this utopian spot into a tourist facility. Developer John Wilson, aligned with a consortium, had an ambitious plan. "He wanted to build a rugged nature lodge in a new Australian design vernacular," says his son, Steve Wilson. "He built it, ran it, expanded it, and sold it in 1982." (Andrew "Twiggy" Forrest bought the island for \$42 million last year, and it's managed by resort operator Delaware North.) Shrewdly, the senior Wilson carved off a sub-lease for a coastal cabana. The younger Wilson kickstarted the process in 1990 and contended with 32 years of red tape, seesawing approvals and litigation to bring it to triumphant fruition.

"It's the best block of land on the reef — the Bennelong Point of the Great Barrier Reef," he says. The project is a deeply personal one: Wilson, an entrepreneur with an extensive background in the investment industry, spent pivotal moments of his childhood here. Lesser mortals might have quit, given the seemingly insuperable obstacles, but he is nothing if not tenacious — along with his wife, Jane, he is also restoring a heritage-listed mansion in Brisbane. On Lizard Island, Wilson was abetted by an architect who shared his vision for a robust hideaway, one that could harmonise with nature and also withstand it. James Davidson is the intrepid principle of JDA Co, a Brisbane practice known for designing smart, climate-resistant buildings. "It's a beautiful site, but it's on a peninsula battered by strong winds, rain and sun," Davidson says. »

THESE PAGES, FROM LEFT in another view of the kitchen overlooking the balcony, Tobi-Ishi **outdoor table** by Edward Barber and Jay Osgerby for B&B Italia from Space Furniture; **SEAX armchairs** by Jean-Marie Massaud for Dedon from Cosh Living; **fruit bowl** from Dinosaur Designs. In an outdoor area, the infinity pool overlooks a private beach.



« First came the self-contained timber cottage, adjacent to the main house, five years ago. Initially, with no approval for an access track, its construction posed a riddle. The canny pair barged materials to the main beach, transferred them on a raft to Hibiscus, then hauled them up onto the site. For the main dwelling, they set up a concrete batching plant to minimise truck movements. Perforated copper louvres, which shield parts of the exterior from debris, will patinate over time, melding with the vegetation. Cantilevered elements create shade and mimic the prow of a boat. And the rooftop, with its metal handrails and sleek jacuzzi, evokes a superyacht. Up here, the biblical sunsets are polychromatic stunners.

“Nature has blessed us, so we said let’s build this strong, sculptural form and use that as a frame of endless views — you can get lost in them,” says Wilson. I was perpetually transfixed by both panoramic vistas and architectural gestures. An oculus above the spiriferous staircase functions like a clock by recording the passing of the day. Another marvellous scene came from my outdoor tub — each room has one — when a soft precipitation descended and pheasant coucals uttered their eccentric oop-oo sound, like backup singers in The Supremes. “The key part is its total privacy,” says Wilson. “No one can see you and you can be as free as you want.” His favourite vantage point is looking in “from a small dinghy off the beach”. Glimpsed from the water, the house recalls a Bondian lair, a slick convergence of concrete, copper and glass. »





THIS PAGE, FROM TOP LEFT the concrete staircase. In an outdoor area, Bay chairs and footstool from Gloster; Ida armchairs from Eco Outdoor; custom concrete table; North Queensland Shield (2008) artwork (in bedroom) by Jennifer Herd; White Messenger (2018) artwork (in living area) by Michael Eather. In the living area, On the Rocks and Grande Soffice sofas both by Francesco Binfare for Edra from Space Furniture; custom rug from Tibet Sydney; coffee table and side tables from Join. Harbour (2010) artwork by Dennis Nona.



THIS PAGE, FROM TOP a view of the property from above. In the main bedroom, *Koul'a Tchuchiniou Atapa* (2008) artwork by Susie Pascoe; Gogan armchair by Patricia Urquiola for Moroso from Mobilia; Tribù Drops side table from Cosh Living; pendant light from Join. Details, last pages.



« Lounge lizards take note: comfortable perches abound. The playful furniture selected by interior designer Sophie Hart includes Edra sofas, B&B Italia tables, Dedon folding chairs and Moroso armchairs. Echoing the island's spiritual presence are galvanising Indigenous artworks that animate the house. In the main bedroom, a monumental painting by Susie Pascoe floats above the bed. The home is superbly accoutred with a smart system for adjusting lighting, music and embedded screens. Guests can summon a Riviera motor yacht for snorkelling at nearby Clam Garden, Cod Hole and the Ribbon Reefs, where you can work up an appetite.

Over the course of my stay, chef Kyle Dixon served a flurry of exceptional meals. The resourceful cook poaches flawless eggs for breakfast, makes pasta from scratch, and serves his own shallot and garlic relish that deserves to be bottled. Guests are encouraged to share their preferences before arrival. One standout dinner involved barbecued painted crayfish infused with fermented chilli, butter and garlic. Dixon served it alongside grilled eggplant with harissa and radicchio salad topped with gouda. On our last night, Steinfort set up a table on the beach. When a squall arrived, he bolted into the darkness to fetch a striped gazebo. "If you're comfortable, I'm happy," he says, pouring Chablis.

Visiting the Lizard Island house left me speechless in more ways than one. There was the metaphorical kind of being floored by the sublime setting, inventive design and top-notch service. And the medical variety. The night before arrival I contracted laryngitis. Luckily, a voluble friend had joined me and acted as my interpreter. Bereft of my voice, I was an antic version of Tilda Swinton in *A Bigger Splash*, but without her drop-dead stylish Dior get-ups. Faced with a guest who relied on mime, charades and chicken scratches on a notebook to communicate, the team were unfailingly sweet and empathetic. You never know, though. Maybe it was psychosomatic. The house might leave you speechless, too. **VL** *The writer travelled as a guest of The House at Lizard Island; thehouseatlizard.com*

