



Nice work if you can get it

Everyone up here has the best job in the world, writes **Mike Smith**

FORGET Brit Ben Southall's prized landing of the "world's best job" on Hamilton Island. There are people in the Whitsundays who claim to already hold that position.

"How do you like my office?" asks helicopter pilot Thorbjorn "Torbs" Jans on the scenic flight from Hamilton Island to a helipad near Hardy Reef, on the Great Barrier Reef, more than 70km east of the mainland.

"Look down there and you'll see the pure sands of Whitehaven Beach on Whitsunday Island, one of the most beautiful in the world.

"How would you like to be greeted by that sight every day?"

On average, Jans flies three hours a day for Hamilton Island-based Aviation Tourism Australia, making between 10 and 20 landings. Among his most popular trips is the sightseeing flight over tiny Heart Reef, a ringed reef shaped like a heart near Hardy Reef.

Southall was among more than 34,000 people from around the globe to apply for Queensland Tourism's "best job in the world" this year.

The final 16 candidates travelled to Hamilton Island in early May for the final selection process, and while Southall begins his stint as island caretaker this month there is still competition for the title.

Waiting for us on Fantasea Adventure Cruising's Reefworld floating pontoon after the helicopter flight with Jans is Reefsleep host

Jess Lawrence and a team of marine lovers happy to provide information on the reef and the countless small and large fish that call it home.

Here from chilly Chicago on an extended working holiday in Australia, Lawrence, like Torbs, claims to have the world's best job.

"Then again, there's George," she says, pointing to the oversized groper which rarely leaves the waters around the pontoon. "He has an easy job of entertaining visitors . . . and he is fed well."

As the British winner of the Tourism Queensland initiative goes about his daily chores in his new paradise, Lawrence is already grinning ear-to-ear with her daily routines. Reefworld takes daily visits from snorkellers and scuba divers from Hamilton Island and mainland Shute Harbour, near Airlie Beach, the Fantasea catamaran arriving mid-morning, leaving mid-afternoon.

Guests are introduced to the reef (without getting wet) in a semi-submersible before donning the snorkelling or scuba gear and the lycra suits (for protection against stingers) or a wetsuit.

From the moment we take our first strokes, tiny fish swim up close for an inquisitive look, perhaps in hope of some food. The day among the friendly sealife flies past quickly, but it's after the catamaran leaves that Reefsleep guests, staying on the pontoon in either the king room or bunkroom, appreciate the experience.

Gone are the 100 or more day visitors, leaving couples with a few tranquil hours to snorkel on their own (accompanied by Lawrence, that is), sip bubbly, snack on cheese and olives and enjoy a sunset that can be as spectacular as the colours of the coral and the marine life along this special section of Queensland coast. Wake early the following day, and you also appreciate a sunrise that has the waters glistening.

Another grab of the goggles, snorkels and flippers for a refreshing morning's dip with Nemo and friends, and breakfast beckons: fresh fruit, juice, cereal and bacon and eggs included, before the next day's catamaran full of guests arrive.

At \$630 per guest for the king room, \$455 for the bunk room, the overnight Reefsleep isn't cheap.

But when you consider the number of inclusions and the fact you virtually have the pontoon to yourselves, such an outlay is irrelevant as many holidaying honeymooners will insist. Apart from the two days' snorkelling and overnight stay, couples receive two scuba dives or a guided snorkelling tour, alfresco dinner on the deck with wine and beer (prepared by Lawrence), two buffet lunches and full breakfast as well as the catamaran transfers. Reefworld accommodates six, to have it as a couple was a treat.

The writer was a guest of Tourism Queensland



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Getting there: Jetstar from Sydney to Hamilton Island, 131 538, jetstar.com

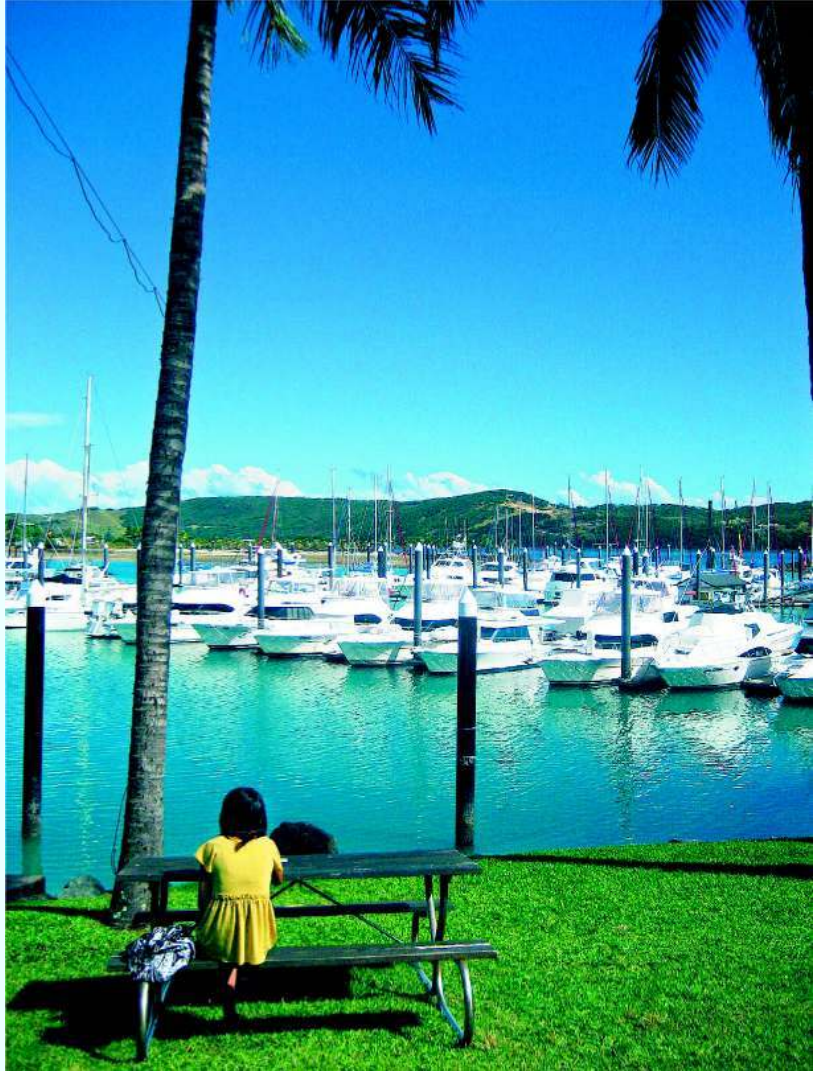
Scenic flights: Aviation Tourism Australia (Hamilton Island Aviation), Heart Reef joy flight from Reefworld \$99pp, Whitehaven scenic flight from \$269pp from Hamilton Island (third passenger \$99), 07 4946 8249, avta.com.au

Cruising: Fantasea Adventure Cruising catamaran, day outings from adult \$225, child (5-15 years) \$102.

Reefsleep: Overnight \$460pp in a four-share bunk room or \$630pp in the king room, inclusive of meals, with wine and beer at dinner, two scuba dives, snorkelling equipment and underwater viewing observatory.

Details: fantasea.com.au

More: Tourism Queensland, queenslandholidays.com.au



Doorstep paradise: (clockwise from above) Hamilton Island Reef; the Fantasea catamaran; and Reef View Hotel





Beware of whales

WHALE season is again upon us with a number of whales being spotted in the Coral Sea in the past week.

On Thursday afternoon, crew on board Cruise Whitsundays Seafight vessel saw two whales breaching about three miles south west of Bate Reef at about 4pm.

On Sunday, skipper John Dyson spotted two juvenile whales between Hardy Reef and Whitehaven Beach while on board Fantasea Wonder.

As the whale season builds up, boaties are being reminded to be alert and cautious for the next six months as humpback whales start to migrate along the Queensland coast to the Whitsundays and further north. State Government Climate Change and Sustainability Minister Kate Jones said while the annual whale migration was an awesome sight, it was important to act with care throughout the migration season.

"A number of boaties were given warnings last whale season and our marine rangers intend on ramping up

their monitoring efforts this year," she said.

"So boaties are warned; keep your distance or you could be fined."

During migration, boats cannot go any closer than 100 metres from a whale; however around the Whitsunday, Lindeman and Gloucester Island groups boats cannot go closer than 300 metres. Boats also cannot go any closer than 300 metres to a whale if moving in a similar direction to or behind a whale, moving at more than four knots.

"Penalties apply for breaching these regulations without reasonable excuse," Ms Jones said.

The maximum penalty for intentionally moving closer to a whale than permitted under the conservation plan is \$12,000.

On-the-spot fines ranging from \$300 to \$500 may also apply for various breaches of the conservation plan.

Every year whales head to the Whitsundays and further north to give birth and mate. They head south again from about August through to November.