



# Corals by candlelight

Waving the crowds goodbye, **Rob McFarland** stays for dinner and a sleepover on the Great Barrier Reef.

**T**here's a feeling you get when you say goodbye to family or friends after a long night of entertaining: a mixture of sadness because they're going and relief because you can finally relax and put your feet up. That's exactly how I feel now as I watch Fantasea Wonder retreat towards the horizon.

Six hours ago I was one of 120 passengers who boarded the high-speed catamaran at Hamilton Island and made the two-hour cruise to Reefworld – a floating pontoon permanently moored over the Great Barrier Reef. All day we've enjoyed snorkeling and diving, made use of the pontoon's underwater viewing chamber and taken trips on its semi-submersible to gaze at the amazing variety of coral and fish.

There's been the option to take a helicopter joy-flight over the reef and we've feasted on a barbecue lunch under the warm Queensland winter sun.

But while 120 people made the trip out, only 119 are going back. Sadly, someone's been eaten. I'm kidding. I'll be staying here overnight. The pontoon has two cabins – one with a king-size bed and another with four bunks – so it's popular with couples or families with children.

After a day filled with laughter and chatter, it's eerily quiet once everyone departs. There are three crew staying on board but they're hidden away in the bowels of the pontoon, so I pretty much have the place to myself.

Thankfully, never far away is my trusty host, Eva. She's here to cook me dinner and ensure

I have everything I need.

She also has an uncanny knack of appearing at the exact moment I need her. By the end of my stay I wonder how I've ever managed to survive without her.

I find a sun-lounger on the top deck and spend the afternoon basking in the sunshine. When I wake at 4pm, I discover Eva has left a glass of white wine and an enormous platter of fresh fruit and cheese by my side. I think I'm falling in love.

After an action-packed afternoon of doing precisely nothing, my next appointment is sunset – and a rare opportunity to watch one over the ocean on this side of Australia.

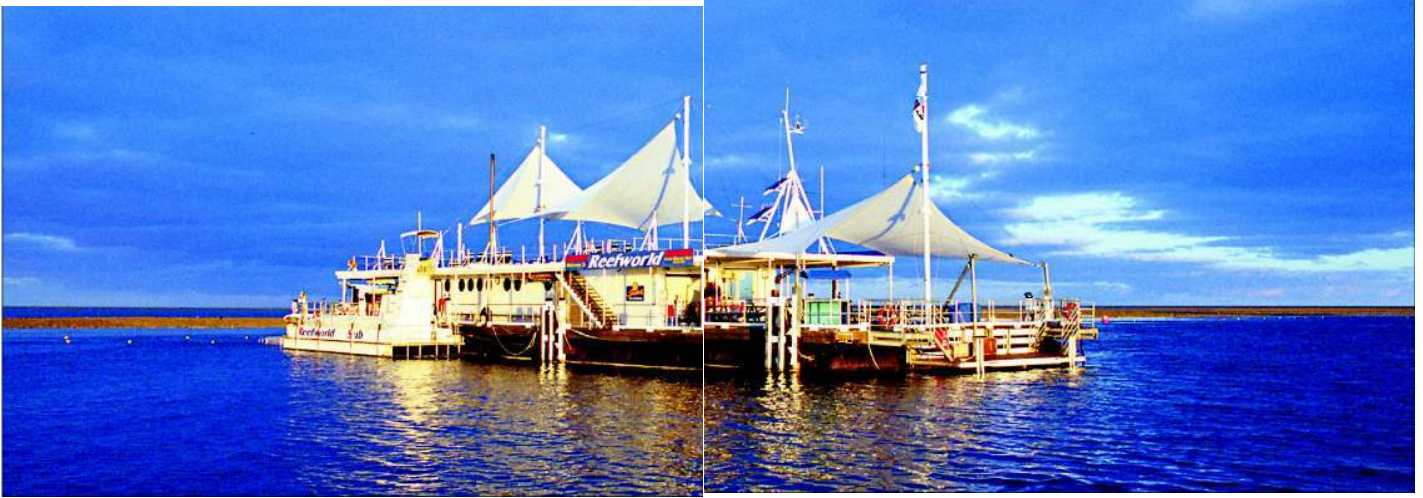
Eva and I stand at the back of the pontoon in silence and watch as the sky is flooded with a spectacular palette of pinks, oranges and violets. I've come on my own which, on reflection, was a mistake.

Unless you're a tortured poet who craves this kind of solitude, this is something you should do with a friend or partner.

One honeymooning couple from Britain described it in the guestbook as "an unforgettable moment in our new life together".

Dinner is served outside, where a bench has been transformed into a romantic dinner setting with a red-and-white checked tablecloth and a pair of electric candles.

I opt for the lamb starter and salmon main and try to reign in my expectations.



Let's face it, I'm on a floating pontoon 80 kilometres from the mainland – it's not exactly Chef's Hat territory.

But I'm pleasantly surprised. The chops are delicious and the baked salmon comes on a bed of pea mash and couscous. The portions are enormous and everything is washed down with a very drinkable 2001 Coonawarra cab sav.

Before retiring to my cabin, I spend half an hour on a lounge gazing at a sky dusted with stars. It's a reminder of just how busy the night sky is when you can escape the ambient light of towns and cities.

I'm lulled to sleep by the sound of the water lapping at the side of the pontoon and wake refreshed and ready to explore more of the reef.

Two scuba dives are included in the package and while the one yesterday was enjoyable, there were six of us and a fair proportion of the time was spent on the necessary training and safety exercises.

This morning it's just me and dive instructor

Mark. We descend into the aquamarine waters and are immediately engulfed by a school of curious yellowtail fusiliers. We glide along the side of the reef and marvel at an incredible range of fish, including giant trevally, spangled emperors and colourful sergeant major damselfish.

On our way back we swim up under the pontoon and watch two huge Queensland gropers slowly circle in the gloom. This is only my third introductory dive and, finally, I can see what all the fuss is about.

At 10.45am I spot the dot on the horizon that will be my lift back to Hamilton Island this afternoon. In a few minutes the pontoon will again be filled with people and activity. I look out to sea and revel in these last few moments of tranquillity – just me and one of the seven natural wonders of the world.

*The writer was a guest of Virgin Blue, Reef View Hotel and Reefworld.*



## > TRIP NOTES

- **GETTING THERE** Virgin Blue's new daily service flies direct from Sydney to Hamilton Island. See [virginblue.com.au](http://virginblue.com.au).
- **STAYING THERE** Flight times mean you need to stay a night before and after Reefsleeper on Hamilton Island. The recently refurbished Reef View Hotel has rooms starting at \$340 per night. See [www.hamiltonisland.com.au](http://www.hamiltonisland.com.au). The Reefsleeper package costs \$630 a person for a king room, \$460 for a quad room. Price includes transfers from Hamilton Island, all food and drink, unlimited snorkelling and two guided scuba dives. See [fantasea.com.au](http://fantasea.com.au).

The big blue ... (clockwise from main)  
Reefworld, moored over the Great Barrier Reef;  
a couple enjoy breakfast on the pontoon;  
snorkelling on the nearby reef; looking out from  
the underwater viewing gallery.