

MY FAIR LADY

Situated at the still-pristine southern end of the Great Barrier Reef, and home to a dazzling array of marine life, Lady Elliot Island is one of Australia's most intriguing natural destinations.

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SQUINT YOUR EYES and you can just see it — a tiny speck of green in the middle of the Coral Sea, just 85 kilometres northeast of Bundaberg off Queensland’s southern coast.

That speck is Lady Elliot Island — a 45-hectare dot at the southernmost tip of the sprawling Great Barrier Reef. But get closer and you’ll discover that what it lacks in size, this tiny coral cay more than makes up for in its exceptional natural environment and a groundbreaking approach to eco tourism.

A focus on the latter has seen visitors arrive from all over Australia — and across the world — to experience an environmentally conscious stay at the island’s 43-room Lady Elliot Island Eco Resort. Here the onus is on eco initiatives and renewable technologies, and, above all, protection of this pristine corner of the World Heritage-listed reef.

Snorkelling or diving will be the highest priorities on most visitors’ to-do lists, and for good reason: the warm, clear waters around the island are designated as a Green Zone within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park — meaning that fishing is strictly forbidden — and are filled with a huge variety of marine life. Hire equipment from the resort, where the staff will point you to a few of the island’s better entry points — then prepare to be dazzled.

Dive into the action from the lighthouse or Coral Gardens on the west of the island, or the flatter, easier lagoon on the east, to find yourself in the midst of one of Australia’s most remarkable marine ecosystems, where schools of fish dance around you, creating a kaleidoscope of colour as they feed from the ridges of coral that spread across the ocean floor. In this section of the reef, the coral has escaped the bleaching events that have so badly affected many areas further north, leaving an underwater wonderland that has to be seen to be believed.

Around the island, both in and out of the water, and in the deeps and shallows, you’re also likely to spot starfish, sea cucumbers, sea urchins, clams, manta rays and crabs — and you may even be lucky enough to find the odd green, hawksbill or loggerhead turtle swimming nearby.

These amazing creatures are one of the biggest drawcards for visitors to Lady Elliot Island, particularly around turtle nesting season (between November and March), when the green and loggerhead species lay thousands of eggs in the island’s sand dunes. From February through to April these eggs then begin to hatch, leading to a rare natural spectacle in which the tiny baby turtles slowly emerge.

The proximity of many of these nests to the island’s resort means visitors can often get a privileged view of this annual act of nature, while tours run after sunset at the beginning of the season to give a view of the turtles’ nocturnal behaviour, as they clamber up the beaches to lay their eggs in sand pits and scrubland; and towards the end, when you can witness the baby turtles begin to hatch and eventually make a sometimes perilous descent to the water.

FIRST RESORT

Lady Elliot’s story hasn’t always been one that’s focused on conservation and preservation — far from it. In fact, until 50 years ago, it was barren, with almost zero vegetation and a fraction of the wildlife that currently visits.

The devastation was the result of a decade of mining in the 19th century for the island’s highly prized guano (bird droppings), which was used as a fertiliser and explosive. By the time the mining had ceased, the island had been stripped of a metre of topsoil and guano, with almost every tree and bush ripped out. All that was left was literally a pile of dirt.

Its recovery began after aviator Don Adams took an interest. During the 1960s, he started an extensive island revegetation program, which continues to this day. Soon, the seabirds returned and, following the establishment of Lady Elliot Island Eco Resort in 1984, its reputation as an eco-paradise emerged.

Since then, the resort’s prominence in the field of conservancy has only grown, with current managing director Peter Gash at the forefront of its focus on sustainability and environmental protection. He has overseen a move to make the island as self-sustainable as possible, installing a hybrid solar power system to provide about 70 per cent of the island’s energy needs, and accelerating a revegetation program, with exotic plant species replaced by native trees and bushes. In a nook in the island’s heart lies the nursery, where more than 500 plants are being nurtured.

All the while the resort itself has undergone several improvements for visitors, offering a comfortable and ecologically responsible stay. There are several styles of accommodation on offer, including cabins and units, with most able to house up to four people. The Garden Units have polished floorboards and a sizable balcony, ideal for lounging in the afternoon as you enjoy views of the Great Barrier Reef, the beach just 30 metres away. This year, the resort also launched its glamping area, with tents featuring ensuite bathrooms and a floor-to-ceiling view of the coral cay. ➤➤

OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Garden Units and Eco Cabins at Lady Elliot Island Eco Resort; black noddie bird; witness turtles hatching on the sand; get up close to stunning aquatic life such as manta rays. **OPENER, FROM LEFT** Aerial view of Lady Elliot Island; bright convict tang fish along the Great Barrier Reef.



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Visitor numbers to the island are capped at 150 at any one time, giving the resort a friendly, community vibe, with staff encouraging guests to explore. Traversing the island only takes about 40 minutes, and while there are no native mammals or reptiles to spot, you will likely catch sight of abundant birdlife, including the Capricorn silveryeye, the brown booby and the black noddy.

Immersing yourself in the rhythms of island life isn’t hard, but if you’d prefer to learn about Lady Elliot in the company of an expert, guided tours run regularly, focusing on history, birdwatching and local flora. There’s also a reef walk at low tide — make sure you wear reef walkers to protect from the sharp coral — while the daily fish feeding, lasting about 15 minutes, is popular among families.

There are also guided visits to the solar panels and recycling centres, where guests can learn about Lady Elliot’s self-sustainability and recycling programs. This is a big draw for tourists — Gash says many guests arrive eager to learn about the island’s unique environment and the efforts that go into its protection.

“It’s a beautiful part of the world, and guests can enjoy the nature, but also learn about sustainable methods,” he says. “They love the idea they can minimise their carbon footprint. It inspires them.”

But even more inspirational is the setting and status of the island itself. “You’re actually on the reef here at Lady Elliot Island,” adds Gash. “You don’t need to get on a boat — the reef is part of the island. The opportunity to experience the wildlife here is extraordinary.”

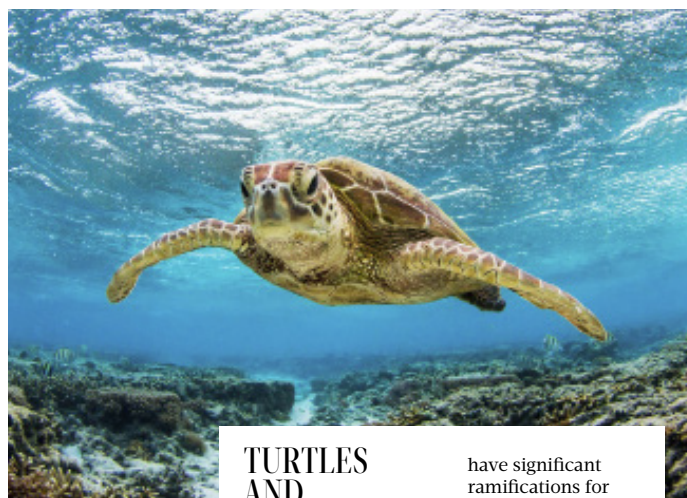
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FROM TOP
Lady Elliot Island Eco Resort; a turtle on the move through the waters around Lady Elliot Island; rows of pandanus seedlings in the plant nursery.

DETAILS

Lady Elliot Island Eco Resort Lady Elliot Island; www.ladyelliott.com.au.



TURTLES AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The impact that climate change has had on the Great Barrier Reef, especially in coral bleaching, has been heavily reported, but the change in temperatures is also having an effect on the region’s famous green turtles.

Research by California State University and the World Wide Fund for Nature Australia has revealed the gender of turtles hatched in the warmer northern Great Barrier Reef is almost exclusively female, due to the hotter conditions.

This skewed gender ratio could

have significant ramifications for turtle breeding in the future.

The research also reveals that extreme incubation temperatures also cause high mortality among developing clutches.

Even though thousands of turtles are hatched every year throughout the Great Barrier Reef’s islands, only about one in 1000 baby turtles actually makes it to adulthood, with the vast majority being preyed on by birds or by other forms of marine life.

This means that the turtles hatched in the southern reef, including on Lady Elliot Island, will play an increasingly important role in future years.



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