

# CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

*of the natural kind*

SPEND A FEW TROPICAL DAYS AMID NODDY TERNS AND NESTING TURTLES ON TWO JEWELS OF THE SOUTHERN GREAT BARRIER REEF: HERON AND WILSON ISLANDS. BY LOUISE SOUTHERDEN

**The half-hour helicopter flight from Gladstone to Heron Island, at the southern end of the Great Barrier Reef, is a sneak preview of coming attractions, all shallow reefs and uninhabited atolls, like turquoise and green patches on an indigo quilt that is the Coral Sea. Then you land on this tiny forested island at the edge of an 11km-long reef and it hits you: this isn't just another tropical resort. Nature isn't neatly fenced off from Heron Island's lowkey eco-lodge — it's all around you.**

There are, for instance, birds everywhere. The island's name is a giveaway, although the "herons" seen by the crew of the *HMAS Fly* as it sailed past in 1843 are, in fact, eastern reef egrets and there are plenty of other species making the most of Heron

being part of Capricornia Cays National Park: bridled, crested and roseate terns, migrating muttonbirds (wedge-tailed shearwaters), buff-banded rails and, most conspicuous of all, black noddy terns.

There are about 80,000 black noddy terns on Heron Island at any one time. That's a lot of noddies for a coral cay just 800 metres long and 300 metres wide, so it's not surprising to see them all over the island: nesting in the branches of leafy pisonia trees, sunbathing (actually warming their preening glands) on the resort's sandy paths, flying into every photo and occasionally dropping pennies from heaven (a good reason not to wear anything too precious here, at least during the day). Even the open-air restaurant is an aviary of sorts, with resort guests dining inside the netting while Heron's birds fly free outside.

Then there are the underwater wonders. More than half of Heron's 60,000 visitors a year are scuba divers, lured by the coral spawning in November, the island's location right on the Great Barrier Reef (not an extended boat ride from it) and more than 20 world-class dive sites within cooe of the resort — but the snorkelling is just as good, as my two friends and I discover on our first afternoon.

Exhibit A: we snorkel just off the main jetty at Heron Bommie, one of the late Jacques Cousteau's top 10 dive spots, and see leopard-print sweetlips, parrotfish, butterfly fish and a manta ray that glides beneath us like a flying carpet. Exhibit B is the harmless black-and-white-tipped reef sharks, lemon sharks, eagle rays and green turtles we see every time we put our faces in the water, especially on Heron's sister island, Wilson.

For this is a story of two coral cays.

Wilson Island is about 20 minutes by boat (15km) north of Heron and also in Capricornia Cays National Park but offers a more exclusive island experience. While Heron Island Resort has 109 rooms and suites, Wilson has just six designer tents for 12 guests at a time (no daytrippers are allowed on the island). But the two go together well and it's a good idea to visit both.

This is because you can only get to Wilson from Heron and because Wilson offers something of castaway experience with none of Heron's guided activities, naturalist guides, bird talks or reef walks. So spending at least one night on Heron before heading to Wilson not only eases you into a tropical frame of mind, it helps you understand and appreciate the islands' natural environment.

That's how my friends and I find ourselves staggering out of bed in the dark on our first Heron Island morning, in preparation for a pre-dawn turtle-watching session with marine biologist guide Jason Killen. This is one of the best places in Australia to see marine turtles — of the six species found in Australian waters, two nest on Heron and Wilson's beaches between November and April: loggerheads and, more commonly, green turtles. As many as 1700 green turtles each lay about 600 eggs a year and 90–95 per cent of them manage to hatch (because they have few predators here). That means almost a million turtle hatchlings emerging from the sand "like spiders coming out of a wall", as Jason puts it, between January and May every year.

We're here in November, prime turtle-nesting time. The first turtle we see, not three



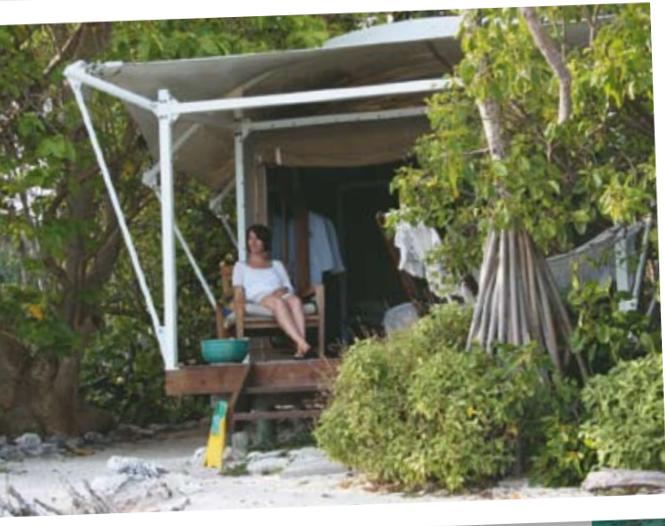
Main: Snorkelling with a green turtle on Wilson Island; reef walkers on Heron Island; a green turtle on land; your correspondent after snorkelling on Wilson Island; terns on coral beach, Wilson Island.



steps from the resort, would have been a hatchling herself, on this very beach, 40–45 years ago. If this is her first breeding season, it's the first time she has been on dry sand since then, making her the lucky one in 1000 hatchlings that survived; and she could be returning from as far away as the Solomon Islands, New Caledonia or the northern tip of Cape York. (Male turtles, by contrast, spend their entire lives at sea.)

As we watch her, Jason teaches us some "turtle etiquette". Mother turtles run almost completely on instinct when they come ashore, he says, but they can still be spooked — and return to the sea without laying their eggs, which means 100 turtle lives lost (green turtles are vulnerable and loggerheads are endangered but both need all the help they can get to survive as a species). So it's important to stay out of a nesting turtle's line of sight, at least until she starts laying, and to keep still; turtles can't hear but they can feel vibrations in the sand.

The whole egg-laying process takes about three hours and usually happens at night, around the high tide, but there are so many turtles on Heron (and Wilson) coming and going between dusk and dawn, there's a good chance you'll see all the various stages without trying too hard: turtles hauling themselves up the beach to a random spot above the high-tide mark (no easy feat when you weigh up to 200kg), digging body pits and egg chambers, laying their 100–120 eggs, burying them, →



Left: The "luxury cubby houses for grownups"; Reef viewing from the helicopter en route to Heron Island from Gladstone.



digging a false body pit (to throw off potential predators) and, finally, returning to the sea.

We hang out with five turtles before breakfast; it's all in a morning's work for Jason, who has lived on Heron for more than five years. "I love it out here," he says. "You see stuff like this all the time. It's one of the most beautiful places on Earth."

After breakfast we take a guided nature walk without even leaving the resort, then walk through a forest of pisonia trees alive with noddie terns to Heron Island Research Station on the other side of the island. It's run by the University of Queensland and resort guests can visit (with a guide) to learn about research in progress and explore the touch-tank of marine organisms such as giant clams, New Caledonian sea stars and turtle weed. But its real purpose is as a coral reef research facility, the largest and longest-running on the Great Barrier Reef, having been set up in the 1950s.

I came here in 1985 as an undergraduate zoology student on a University of Sydney field trip; the island remains pretty much as it was back then, but the wooden, single-storey research station I stayed in was ravaged by fire in 2007. The new, eco-friendly research station opened in February 2009 and now accommodates everyone from high-school

biology students to the likes of Professor Ove Hoegh-Guldberg, director of the University of Queensland's Global Change Institute and a regular at Heron. He's conducting the world's first in-situ coral reef research on a two-square-metre plot just off the beach, to study the effects of climate change and ocean acidification on living coral reef.

Later that afternoon, after another snorkelling session and massages at the resort's Aqua Soul Spa that leave us all as peaceful as noddies, we drift to the jetty for our transfer to Wilson Island and part two of our island odyssey. Crossing the Tropic of Capricorn, we speed across glassy greens and blues to one of the most pristine tropical islands I've ever seen. Much smaller than Heron, Wilson has no jetty, just a dazzling white beach — its crushed-coral sand is between our toes as soon as we step ashore and meet our two hosts, Erin and Andrew (also our chef), who show us to our tents.

It's not fair to call them tents, really. They're more like luxury cubbyhouses for grownups. Each one is a canvas room on a timber platform with a view of the sea and a fringed hammock built for two. Inside, there's a king-sized bed, a pair of white cotton bath robes, battery-operated reading lights, a turtle-patterned bowl to wash the sand off your feet, bird poo on your pillow ... "Sorry

about that," says Erin, before changing my pillow slip, though it's an apt introduction to Wilson. On Heron you're surrounded by birds; here you're in their world.

That first night, we're walking back from sunset champagne and canapés on the beach along a sandy path leading to the communal "longhouse" for dinner, when a muttonbird flies straight into my chest (they're clumsy aviators, despite migrating 15,000km to and from the north Pacific every year). It's not unpleasant, more softness and feathers than claws and beak, and we're both unharmed, but it's a wake-up to how delightfully different Wilson is from most other luxury resorts.

Later, as we dine on coral trout by candlelight, our conversation attracts "oohs" and "aahs" from under the floorboards: muttonbirds in their burrows calling to their mates. It's quite comical, a little Monty Python mixed with an air-raid siren that can't summon the courage to wail.

The turtles are the real stars on Wilson, though. Before returning to our tents, one of my friends and I stroll to the beach by moonlight, where we almost trip over half a dozen nesting green turtles. Remembering what Jason had taught us the previous day about minimal-impact turtle-viewing, we sit quietly behind one and watch her slowly,

methodically, digging an egg chamber with her leathery hind flippers. She breathes heavily and pauses often; it's hard work for an animal that spends most of its life weightless in the sea. Then the egg-laying begins and we use the tiny key-ring torch Erin has lent us to watch the glutinous white eggs falling one, two or three at a time into their sandy nest.

It's incredible to be so close to this wild and ancient animal — sea turtles have been around for 100 million years, since before dinosaurs — with no guide or park ranger ensuring we keep our distance. We do, anyway, out of respect, humbled by the privilege of such an intimate encounter.

That night, it's warm enough to leave the front flap of my tent open, which is the entire sea-facing wall of my tent. Ear plugs are provided but I like the island's lullaby: the swoosh of waves, muttonbird mutterings (some of them must have burrows right under my bed), the cooing of noddie terns. Surprisingly, there are no mosquitoes or other biting insects and the island has no poisonous snakes or spiders, either. It's island heaven.

On the morning of our second day, I wake at first light — to sand, sea and sky — and follow a sandy path to the beach, which is striped with what look like quad-bike tracks, dozens of them, leading in and out of the water. Above the high-tide mark, it's a war zone of craters,

just from last night's activities, and it's not over yet, as a few latecomers finish their digging and egg-laying.

As the sun rises over the tops of the trees, I sit down to watch one turtle haul herself back to the sea, over sand then chunks of sun-bleached coral. She changes direction and starts inching towards me, so I sit down and keep still until she slides past close enough for me to see saltwater streaming from her large black eyes — not tears but water from her salt glands. At the water's edge she pauses, a wave washes the sand off her shell, then she lunges again and is gone.

Back at the longhouse, I find my friends perusing the blackboard menu. "Ideas for breakfast," it begins. "French toast with rhubarb puree and mascarpone, poached eggs with asparagus and hollandaise, banana pancakes with mango and coconut, Gruyere, bacon and tomato omelette ..." Indulgence goes hand in hand with nature's delights.

And I haven't even mentioned the snorkelling yet. Every time we step off the beach, we see several turtles (much more agile than on land), Nemo-like anemone fish and coral outcrops alive with more tropical creatures than I can remember when I come ashore; there are about 900 species of fish in these waters and 72 per cent of the corals found on the Great Barrier Reef. "People think

that the further north you go, the better the Great Barrier Reef is," Jason had said on Heron, "but that's not the case."

It's quite possible to come here for the romance of sleeping in a real bed in a tent by the beach, the sunset drinks on the beach, the candlelit dinners prepared by your own personal chef, the spacious freedom of what feels like your own tropical island. But nature will sweep you up in its arms sooner or later, relegating the island's creature comforts, wonderful as they are, to the icing on this island cake.

Guests often return to Heron and Wilson to witness different stages in the life cycles of the islands' inhabitants: to see hatchlings after watching nesting turtles laying their eggs, to see noddie tern chicks after seeing their courtship dances. I can understand why. Spending time on these two islands makes you feel part of the natural world again. As we become a more urban species, more enamoured of technology and less connected with nature, on a daily basis at least, it's good to know places like this exist as a ready means of recalibrating ourselves when we forget our true place on this beautiful blue planet. ☺

Louise Southerden travelled to Heron and Wilson islands courtesy of Delaware North Australia Parks & Resorts.

## FACTS TO GO

**Getting there:** Heron and Wilson Islands are in Capricornia Cays National Park 72km east of Gladstone, which is 550km north of Brisbane. Launch transfers from Gladstone to Heron Island take two hours and cost \$199 per person return; helicopter transfers from Gladstone to Heron take 30 minutes and cost \$740 per person return. Wilson Island

is accessible to overnight guests only; the 30-minute boat trip from Heron is included in the Wilson Island rates. Call Delaware North Australia Parks & Resorts on 1300 863 248. **Staying there:** Heron Island Resort has rooms from \$398 twin share per night including all meals. There is also an "islands package" combining stays on both Heron and

Wilson, from \$1936 per couple. See [heronisland.com](http://heronisland.com). Wilson Island has six deluxe safari tents from \$1080 per tent per night (minimum stay two nights), including return boat transfers from Heron Island, all meals and drinks (alcoholic and non-alcoholic). See [wilsonisland.com](http://wilsonisland.com). **When to go:** Green turtles nest on the islands between November and March;

the best time to see turtle hatchlings is January to May. Humpback whales cruise past June to October. Coral spawning usually happens a week either side of the full moon in late November. January is peak seabird breeding season; Wilson Island is closed between January 26 and March 2, 2012, to allow resident birds to nest in peace.



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