

There's much more to see and do beyond your daybed on this island treasure of the Great Barrier Reef

LOUNGING ON LIZARD

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Stretching its tentacles in an attitude of prayer, the octopus with a rugby ball-size body glides down a hole in the coral.

Spotting me snorkelling above it, the charcoal creature welds itself onto a piece of pink and beige sponge and quickly transforms its skin into exactly the same shape and texture as its background. It even appears to grow tiny dark projections on its skin. Soon, all I can see of the octopus is its breathing hole and then it disappears.

I snorkel on over pastel parrot fish, golden butterfly fish and giant clams, some more than a metre wide. One massive clam with chocolate-brown flesh covered with emerald-

green spots allows me to gently touch its slippery lips.

These sensuous delights are just 100 metres from our suite on the shores of Lizard Island, the ultimate Great Barrier Reef destination, 270km north of Cairns. The island has the northernmost resort on the reef and is a haven for divers, snorkellers, honeymooners and those who simply want to turn their backs on the world outside.

Lizard is not a stereotypical tropical isle. Capped by the 359-metre-high hill, Cooks Look, the rugged seven-square-kilometre island is frequently beset by trade winds and is covered with vegetation that looks almost Mediterranean: grassland, scrubby

acacia woodland and heath. Together with the surrounding islands, Lizard is a protected national park, while its waters form part of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

It is inaccessible to most people, not only because of its remoteness but because of the cost. Aimed at the luxury end of the market, the Voyages Lizard Island Resort has four times been voted the top hotel in Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific by the readers of United States *Travel + Leisure* magazine.

It is the island's proximity to the outer rim of the Great Barrier Reef and its marine attractions that lure many visitors. Some travel halfway around the planet

Clockwise: The Blue Lagoon stretches between the beaches of Lizard Island (left) and deserted Palfrey Island. Beyond the Lizard Island Resort gardens, skeins of coral beckon snorkellers. A Gould's sand monitor scents for prey in the lawn. Golden native kapok flowers brighten the dry interior.



to use Lizard as a base for exploring the world-famous Cod Hole, where divers can encounter enormous, docile potato cod.

Flying over in a small plane from Cairns, we zoom down towards a large granite-domed island surrounded by smaller islands, all clustered around the coral-rimmed Blue Lagoon. Even on this cloudy day, Lizard looks like paradise, with its 24 white beaches and bush untouched except for the small resort and research station.

Over welcome cocktails, rooms division manager Simon Della-Santa tells the new arrivals that all food and almost all drinks are included in the cost. "If you don't like lizards and sharks, then you have come to

the wrong place," he jokes. He says that, when swimming off the main beach, guests should not be alarmed if they spot the giant, resident Queensland groupers — Simon and Sist — or large tawny nurse sharks. The groupers usually ignore swimmers while the tawnies have tiny teeth and floppy fins and are regarded as harmless unless provoked.

We find the service superb with a mini-United Nations of friendly staff members offering assistance, advice and excellent food and drinks. Eating lunch in the open-air Osprey's Restaurant overlooking the turquoise bay, we watch a yellow-breasted sunbird starting to weave her nest from spider webs and bits of dried leaf on the handle of the blind.

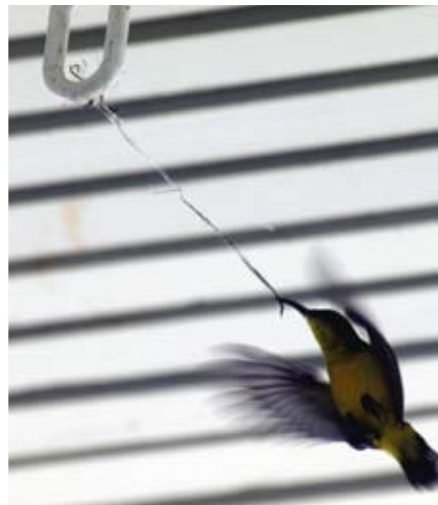
Then guests leap up to photograph a monitor lizard digging up the lawn, its grey tongue flicking out to scent the air. It was these Gould's sand monitors that gave the island its name, bestowed by explorer Lieutenant James Cook in 1770.

We are allocated one of the most secluded suites, surrounded by lime-green bushes over which we catch a glimpse of ocean. The airy suite is decorated in low-key, classic modern style and comes complete with a great sound system.

Lazing on the daybed on the balcony, we listen to doves coo and watch pheasant coucals and bee eaters dart through the undergrowth. Black flying foxes with inquisitive faces clamber eagerly through the flowering bushes, lapping nectar. At night, green tree frogs ambush insects under the porch lamps.

We discover a private beach path and within 10 minutes are gliding through crystalline waters above spectacular coral formations. These are not tiny remnant corals, but great formations of living coral covered with waving polyps like animated flowers and populated by a parade of brilliant fish.

Early the next morning, we walk down a



Clockwise from top: Sea-sculpted driftwood frames a view across the Blue Lagoon. Comb-toothed tawny nurse sharks and a giant Queensland Grouper wait to be fed from a dive boat. Threading spider web and grass, a yellow-breasted sunbird constructs a nest support through a blind handle. Oblivious of a passing green ant, a glistening green tree frog waits for prey.

IT IS ITS PROXIMITY TO THE REEF'S OUTER RIM AND ITS MARINE ATTRACTIONS THAT MAKE LIZARD ISLAND MOST SPECIAL.

sandy path to the deserted beaches around Blue Lagoon, where sculpted-looking driftwood lines the shore. With no one in sight, my husband strips off for a swim. As we depart, a small turtle surfaces in the glassy waves.

Back at the resort, the staff load a dinghy with two coolers full of food and drink, including large, fresh prawns almost the size of crayfish. After a steering lesson, we putter off between the reefs to nearby Watsons Bay for a picnic and a reconnoitre of the nearby giant clam garden.

Next day, we set off with some trepidation to snorkel at the Cod Hole. After days of wind, the swells reach three metres on the windward side of the island. The sea is so choppy, the captain decides to wait for low tide before approaching the Cod Hole.

In the interim, we moor at a buoy at an

unnamed reef where our personal snorkel guide leads us through gin-clear water where we see large fish hovering around pristine bommies.

We return to the Cod Hole when the seas have subsided and I watch three guests and a dive master descend to meet several giant, pewter-coloured potato cod. Marked with distinctive brown blotches, the enormous fish swivel their chameleon eyes and approach the divers for food. There is a kind of slow dance going on between one of these benign beasts and the divers, but it's hard to see exactly what is happening through the ascending rings of bubbles.

Later, exploring the reef, I see a huge cod following the divers around like a tame labrador. After nearly an hour, Brazilian honeymooner Marcos Wettreich emerges from the depths exclaiming: "I kissed him.

I kissed him on the lips." He explains that one of the cod came so close he could not resist planting a kiss on its bulbous lips. Wettreich, CEO of a video company in Rio de Janeiro, says he has been all over the world, diving with sharks in the Bahamas and in places such as Fiji. He and his new wife came to Lizard specifically to experience diving with the potato cod. "This is the best diving experience I have had — all the coral formations, the beauty and the abundance of life."

As our boat moors at Lizard, three tawny nurse sharks swim up. Two giant Queensland groupers hover below. The captain takes out a large dead fish and commands everyone to stand back as he jiggles it in the sea. Suddenly there is an explosion of spray as the 270kg Simon strikes, snatching the bait from his hand. The performance is a memorable grand finale to our stay on this enchanting island ♦ Visit www.lizardisland.com.au for information. The writer travelled as a guest of *Voyages*.