



Creature comforts

A boutique eco-resort on the Great Barrier Reef strikes the perfect balance between luxurious holiday living and loving the planet. Eva-Maria Bobbert finds her niche on Wilson Island, where the turtles outnumber the people.

through its celebrity spokespeople and high-profile National Tree Day, Jon Dee agrees the campaign has reached new heights in recent times.

"Green is the new black," says the veteran spin-master, who's now also publicising the DVD release of *An Inconvenient Truth*. Dee believes the film is the culmination of many years of campaigners battling on several fronts.

"For all the people who've been working on Clean up Australia and Planet Ark, and all the members of Greenpeace and the Australian Conservation



Ha comes to grips with a composting toilet on *Eco House*.

Foundation as soon as that mainstream tipping point happened with the film, and the media got on board ... suddenly they were free to speak their mind on the issue without being ridiculed or questioned due to the misinformation of the oil and coal industries and the power generators. We had an army of hundreds of thousands of ordinary Australians."

In an age where image is everything, Olivia Newton-John and Dannii Minogue smile from the screen on the Planet Ark website exhorting us to choose products carefully. The growth of National Tree Day, which has seen 12 million trees planted in Australia, exemplifies what Dee calls "populist environmentalism". Grassroots community events and smart, pretty greenies form a powerful combination; some would say a modern media push that's vital for the movement's survival.

In 2003, then executive director of the UN's Environment Program, Klaus Töpfer, lamented the fact that the environment movement's image was too dull for image-conscious consumers. "The image that environmentally friendly products

have is that they are not the most sexy, cool products," he said.

Dee believes the green machine stalled in the late '80s when products branded as environment friendly were often inferior and expensive. "Now many products are as good as those which are more damaging to the environment." In fact, Ha's next book, due mid-year, is a green consumer guide, allowing people to make choices about organic food, seafood in short supply, and cleaning products among others.

She's slightly rueful that the first edition of *Greenology* was "ahead of its time". It was launched just days before the US invaded Iraq, a story that dominated the media. An updated edition, published last year, sold much better, partly due to the Gore effect, she believes.

Given her television exposure, and the imprimatur of people like Helen Caldicott who wrote the forward to *Greenology*, she may well find herself at the epicentre of the green surge — certainly in Australia. Ha is a canny manager of her work and of her media image. She retains links with Planet Ark, and sits on the board of Sustainability Victoria, a government authority. She calls herself a "freelance greenie", open to all ideas.

Victoria's minister for water and the environment, John Thwaites finds her "dynamic", in keeping with his intention to give "talented young people an opportunity to influence policy and actions".

Says Ha: "The classic greenie thing is to berate the government, but I've really liked getting to know the people who develop recycling infrastructure, and the Renewable Energy Support Fund which encourages innovation in areas that don't easily attract corporate funding."

Ha describes herself as an advocate rather than an activist, focussing on the positive. "There will always be an element of protest that got the environment movement started, but I look at it as different fronts of the same battle. I don't like to make people feel bad about themselves."

So well-versed in PR is Ha that it's hard to imagine her getting snappy with anyone; expect for one testy moment some years ago when she thought she'd

Ha uses a device called a Power-Mate to measure the electricity usage and equivalent greenhouse gas emissions of common household appliances.



Got questions about living a green lifestyle?

Ask Tanya. From our next issue, Tanya Ha will be *G's* very own household sustainability coach. Send your queries to: tanya.ha@gmagazine.com.au.

dabble in acting. As it happens Ha, who is half-Chinese, auditioned for *Neighbours* and, in a candid moment, told the casting people: "Ramsay Street looks very bland, you could do with an Asian". She didn't get a call back.

After giving up on television "in disgust", she seems now to have forgiven it enough to take on the challenge of *Eco House*. With echoes of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *The 1900 House*, the show is designed to spark curiosity about how the average suburban family could cut its greenhouse gas emissions by up to 60 per cent.

On set, the drama builds as dad's television is shut down, and he's forced outside to listen to the footy on a car radio. Mum sinks back on the sofa with a glass of wine (not banned, fortunately) and predicts the power-starved kids are about to launch a mutiny. As Ha arrives on air to soothe the suffering of consumerist middle Australia, she may well have pulled off her most watchable media feat. **G**

SONIA HARFORD is a Melbourne-based journalist and author.

Wilson Island has earned a reputation as a world-class snorkelling spot — it's one of the places on the Great Barrier Reef that has stunning coral-scapes directly off the beach.

» (disconcerting but generally not big enough to taste-test human thighs), they'll eventually come back here as adults to lay their own eggs. Only one in a thousand makes it to adulthood so visitors are under a strict 'look, but don't touch' policy — 10 metres is the closest you're allowed. Flash photography and walking in front of turtles is banned. Even the red filtered torches you're given are restricted to three volts — not much brighter than moonlight.

Wilson Island was recently awarded Advanced Eco Accreditation from Ecotourism Australia, which means they go to great lengths not to impact adversely on the precious ecosystem you're admiring. As befits a National and Marine Park island, every effort is made to ensure you're lounging in ecologically-sound luxury. The lights run on solar power and the excess power also operates equipment like water pumps. Showers come courtesy of rainwater tanks on the island and absolutely everything is recycled (all material waste goes back to the mainland for processing and sewerage is stored in a deep septic system). While you won't be searched on leaving, guests are forbidden to take coral souvenirs with them to ensure it remains for future generations to enjoy. The island is closed in February to allow the birds to nest in peace.

Guest numbers are sensibly restricted — no more than twelve people can stay in the six permanent luxury tents at one time. If you're not a camping enthusiast, don't be alarmed — sure, the mozzies are ferocious, but king-size beds, fluffy duvets and a raised timber floor is hardly *Survivor*-style stuff. Two gracious twenty-something hosts act as guides, cooks and cleaners during your stay, coaxing creative dishes from the gas burner BBQ. Banquet-style meals are served at the open Longhouse, where barefoot guests dine by candlelight and

laze on the lounge with a book from the library during the midday heat.

There are two minor details (mutton birds aside) that may trouble guests who can't do without their mod-cons. No hairdryers are allowed (they suck the life out of the solar power) and amenities are shared (although even these are kept sparkling and stocked with luxury toiletries). They're grouped together in one block, away from the tents, making a night-time trip to the loo a trek by torchlight. Oh, and there's no TV or mobile



A wedge-tailed shearwater mutton bird.



This is camping, but not as you know it — guests are accommodated in well-appointed permanent tents.



The perfect spot to settle back with some holiday reading or simply enjoy the night air.

Banquet-style meals are served in the open-air Longhouse.



Every effort is made to ensure you're lounging in ecologically-sound luxury. The lights run on solar power, showers come courtesy of rainwater tanks and absolutely everything is recycled.

Turtle nesting season on Wilson Island extends from November to March.



It reads like a check-list of island clichés. Pristine aqua-blue water: tick. Colourful coral swarming with exotic fish: tick. Sun-kissed castor-sugar sand: tick. So what makes Wilson Island, a tiny coral cay on the Great Barrier Reef, stand out from every other atoll? Well, the wild 'natives' for starters. Loud and lacking self-control, and cursed with a disproportionately large wingspan, the wedge-tailed shearwater mutton bird is one of the island's main inhabitants. Chances are you'll find yourself up close and personal with the clumsy chicken-sized creatures as they crash-land home. But that's precisely the attraction here — intimate contact with an abundance of nature in lavish, eco-friendly surrounds.

Located around 80 km off the coast of Gladstone (an unremarkable industrial town in Queensland) and eight nautical miles from Heron Island, it takes a mere fifteen minutes to stroll around the entire five hectare half-sand, half-rubble cay. Size hardly matters though, as there's plenty of stunning spots and species to discover, both above and below the water.

Admittedly, there are certain times of year that are less than picture-perfect. Facing up to 14,000 malodorous mutton birds in January — the middle of their mating season — is akin to stepping into a Hitchcock movie for the feather-phobic. Even for bird lovers, the stench and woeful baby-like wailing takes some getting used to. Almost every other month of the year Wilson Island is more like a scene from

The Beach — green and serene. But the impressive array of bird life, from terns to buff banded rails and sea eagles, is a delightful, permanent part of the attraction.

Established as a tourist destination in 2002, Wilson Island has already earned an international reputation as a stunning snorkelling spot — it's one of the few islands on the Great Barrier Reef that has coral-scapes directly off the beach. It's also a popular breeding ground for green and rare loggerhead turtles; up to 100 adults lay their ping pong ball sized eggs in the sand from November to March. Watching the hatchlings scurry from the sand to the sea against all odds is the highlight of the after-dark activities from January to April. If they're not snapped up by a bird on the way or snacked on by waiting reef sharks >>

Wilson Island has earned a reputation as a world-class snorkelling spot — it's one of the places on the Great Barrier Reef that has stunning coral-scapes directly off the beach.

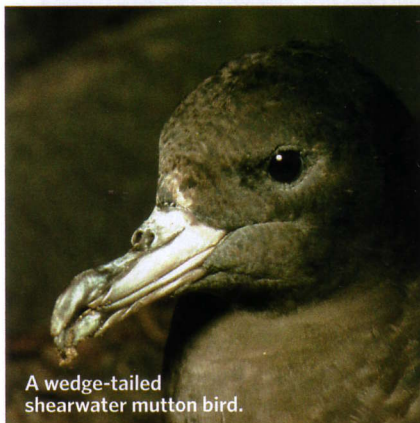
» (disconcerting but generally not big enough to taste-test human thighs), they'll eventually come back here as adults to lay their own eggs. Only one in a thousand makes it to adulthood so visitors are under a strict 'look, but don't touch' policy — 10 metres is the closest you're allowed. Flash photography and walking in front of turtles is banned. Even the red filtered torches you're given are restricted to three volts — not much brighter than moonlight.

Wilson Island was recently awarded Advanced Eco Accreditation from Ecotourism Australia, which means they go to great lengths not to impact adversely on the precious ecosystem you're admiring. As befits a National and Marine Park island, every effort is made to ensure you're lounging in ecologically-sound luxury. The lights run on solar power and the excess power also operates equipment like water pumps. Showers come courtesy of rainwater tanks on the island and absolutely everything is recycled (all material waste goes back to the mainland for processing and sewerage is stored in a deep septic system). While you won't be searched on leaving, guests are forbidden to take coral souvenirs with them to ensure it remains for future generations to enjoy. The island is closed in February to allow the birds to nest in peace.

Guest numbers are sensibly restricted — no more than twelve people can stay in the six permanent luxury tents at one time. If you're not a camping enthusiast, don't be alarmed — sure, the mozzies are ferocious, but king-size beds, fluffy duvets and a raised timber floor is hardly *Survivor*-style stuff. Two gracious twenty-something hosts act as guides, cooks and cleaners during your stay, coaxing creative dishes from the gas burner BBQ. Banquet-style meals are served at the open Longhouse, where barefoot guests dine by candlelight and

laze on the lounge with a book from the library during the midday heat.

There are two minor details (mutton birds aside) that may trouble guests who can't do without their mod-cons. No hairdryers are allowed (they suck the life out of the solar power) and amenities are shared (although even these are kept sparkling and stocked with luxury toiletries). They're grouped together in one block, away from the tents, making a night-time trip to the loo a trek by torchlight. Oh, and there's no TV or mobile



A wedge-tailed shearwater mutton bird.



This is camping, but not as you know it — guests are accommodated in well-appointed permanent tents.



The perfect spot to settle back with some holiday reading or simply enjoy the night air.



G-spot
 Ecotourism Australia
 is a non-profit organisation
 that runs an eco certification
 program for tours, attractions
 and accommodation.




The shared amenities are stocked with luxury toiletries.



FAST FACTS

For logistical reasons, a three-night Wilson Island Experience is part of a five-night package that involves one night on Heron Island on either side. Although Heron has a comparatively characterless resort-style feel, the university research station there is a great place to learn about marine wildlife. The diving trips from Heron are excellent.

THE COST

Voyages travel company offers a Wilson Island Experience package priced from \$1,915 per person twin share (up until 31 March 2007. From 1 April, the price is \$2,100). The package includes two nights' accommodation on Heron Island with all meals plus three nights on Wilson Island with all meals, and unlimited beer and wine (spirits are extra). Transfer to Wilson Island and snorkelling gear is also included. Children under 15 years are not catered for on Wilson Island.

GETTING THERE

An alternative view of the Great Barrier Reef (as opposed to through a snorkelling mask) can be gained from above in a 30-minute helicopter ride from Gladstone to Heron Island (30 minutes, \$291 per person one way/ \$495 return). But the less carbon-intensive way to get there is to cruise over on the Heron Island Launch service (two hours, \$100 per adult one way/\$200 return). Wilson Island is a further 40-minute boat trip from Heron Island (transfer, wet suits and snorkelling gear included in the Voyages Wilson Island Experience package). For more information, call 1300 134 044 or visit www.voyages.com.au

BEST TIME TO GO

October-March is coral spawning season. Mutton bird breeding season (October to March) can be an assault on the senses (it's like being marooned with thousands of wailing babies in desperate need of a nappy change), so June/July is the best time to visit if you prefer an utterly peaceful island escape. Winter temperatures are a blissful 24 degree tropical average. Wilson Island is closed in February for the bird-nesting season. Green turtle and rare loggerhead turtle nesting season is from November to March. You might even be lucky enough to catch sight of a migrating humpback whale between June and September.

reception, but you won't even miss them — if you tire of whiling away hours in the double hammocks or the communal tent, your hosts are always on hand to help you discover the best snorkelling spots, including a massive bommie (a huge deepwater coral outcrop), teeming with fish and marine life. They can also point out virtually any species of bird on rambles through the pandanus grove. Guided reef walks at low tide are a great way to see sea stars, sea slugs, clams and the 'terminator' — a slimy sea cucumber that can break itself into multiple parts if attacked, and then re-form again later.

Sunsets are particularly spectacular. As the crimson sky fades to black, thousands of chirping black noddy terns flock back

from feeding at sea and circle over the seashore in mesmerising unison. (Meanwhile, the guests head beach-ward to soak up the spectacle over oven-baked bruschetta and bubbly!).

After three blissful days of snorkelling, sun, and sumptuous meals on Wilson Island, it's tough to leave this tiny patch of paradise. As you hear the roar of the boat engine coming to collect you and your fellow castaways, you'll be hard pressed to hold back from joining in the mutton bird's sorrowful shriek in protest. It might feel like home but, at the end of the day, it's the natives who rightfully rule the roost. **G**

EVA-MARIA BOBBERT is a freelance journalist based in Sydney.