

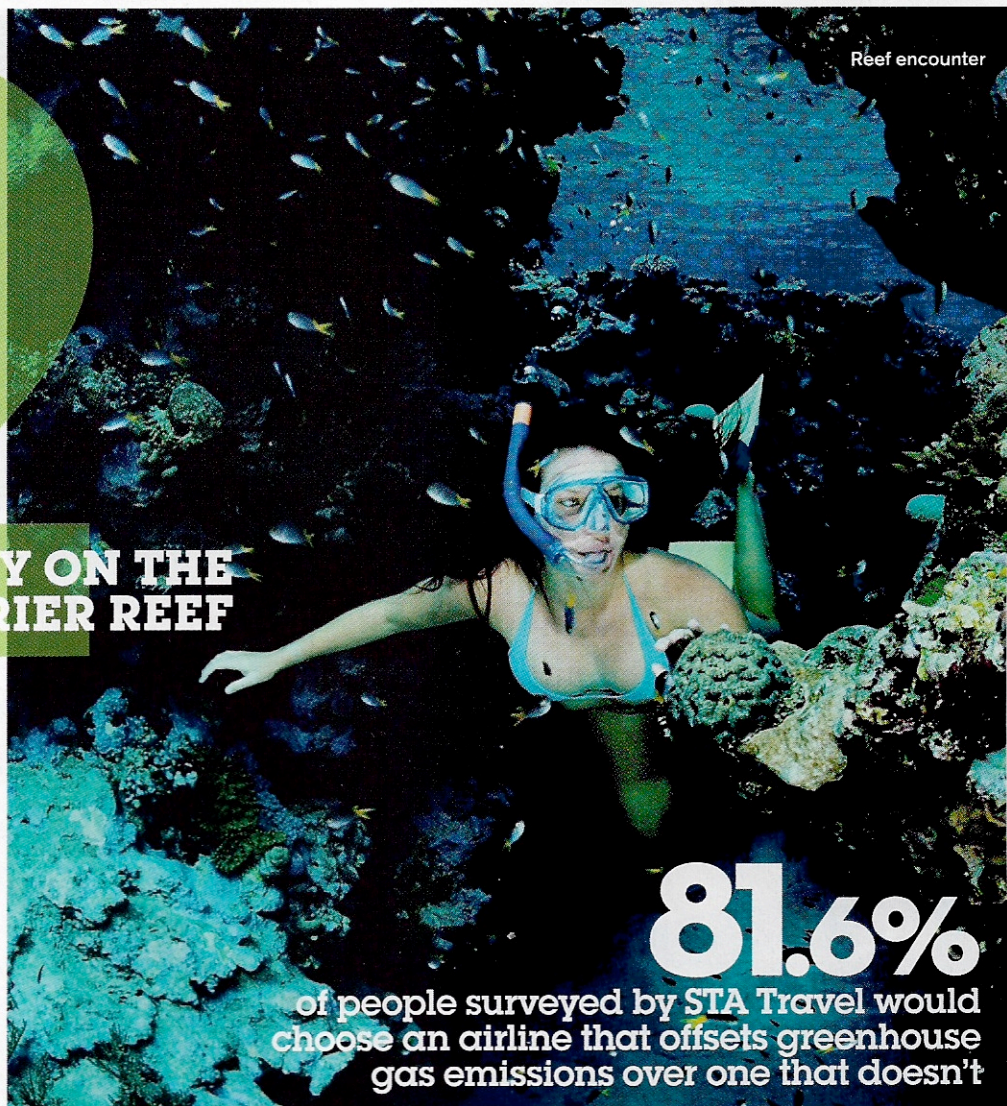
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ECO LUXURY ON THE GREAT BARRIER REEF



The happy camper's quarters

Paradise found



Reef encounter

81.6%

of people surveyed by STA Travel would choose an airline that offsets greenhouse gas emissions over one that doesn't

WHO WENT:

Eva-Maria Bobbert, 30, NSW
Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined camping could be like this. Once upon a time, camping meant dining on half-baked damper and tinned rations, fruitlessly fighting off armies of blood-sucking insects, and doing number twos in don't-look-down pits.

Had I known an eco escape meant raised timber-floor tents with king-size beds, fluffy duvets, full-frontal ocean views, a generous supply of bubbly, and a chef to whip up three lip-smackingly luscious meals a day, I'd have become a camping convert years ago. I've just been "abandoned" on Voyages Wilson Island,

a tiny 6-hectare coral cay on the Great Barrier Reef. Surrounded by sparkling waters, caster-sugar sand and acres of coral teeming with colourful fish just metres from the beckoning shoreline, there's little left to be desired. Gourmet meals are served at the open Longhouse, where guests dine by candlelight after hours of snorkelling and lazing around with books. We spend nights watching tiny turtle hatchlings race to aquatic freedom.

CARBON KARMA

Jumping on a plane to Italy is fun for us; less so for the environment. Enter carbon-neutral flights, which promise to offset your carbon emissions - and your frequent-flyer guilt.

How does it work?

There are around 15 carbon offset providers in Australia, and travel companies and airlines are starting to offer their own offset schemes too. They work by calculating the tonnes of CO2 emissions your seat

on the plane has caused, and how much it will cost to balance them out - usually by planting trees or investing in renewable energy schemes.

Where do I sign up?

Prices vary widely, so shop around. Look for the Greenhouse

Friendly logo, which means the service has been accredited by the Australian Greenhouse Office.

Carbon offset providers:
Easybeinggreen.com.au
Greenfleet.com.au
Climatefriendly.com
Travel companies:
Intrepidtravel.com
Statravel.com.au
Virginblue.com.au

Green venue

Our two gracious hosts serve as chefs, cleaners, guides, baggage handlers and entertainers. They skilfully juggle the needs of my fellow "survivors" with the strict eco guidelines that have brought

the National and Marine Park Island its most recent reward – Advanced Eco Accreditation from Ecotourism Australia. Voyages Resorts have gone to great lengths not to impact adversely on the eco system here: guest numbers are restricted to a maximum of 12; lights and water pumps run on solar power; showers come courtesy of rainwater tanks; absolutely everything is recycled; all material waste goes back to the mainland for processing, and sewerage is stored in a septic system. Meals are made from seasonal produce and cooked up on the gas burner barbecue and supplies are stored in an LPG gas-run fridge. And we're not within cooee of energy-guzzling mod cons like hairdryers and TVs.

Island life

To avoid cross-contamination from closest civilisation – the family resort of Heron Island – guests are required to thoroughly clean their footwear. While you won't be strip searched on departure, visitors are asked to leave behind the coral for future generations to enjoy.

The island is closed in February to allow threatened species, such as the roseate tern (a seabird), to nest in peace – every other month of the year, guests are advised to use common sense to avoid disturbing this pristine environment. February is also the height of mutton bird season – around 14,000 wedge-tailed shearwaters squat here and, even if you can cope with their woeful baby-like wail, their pongy scent in these numbers may warrant visiting outside of the December to February peak breeding season.

After three blissful days of exploring the coral reefs, learning about the weird marine life on guided walks, soaking up some rays (and my fair share of vino), I feel like setting up camp here permanently. >>

Snorkelling tips

1. Look, don't touch.
2. Never feed marine life.
3. Don't stand on the seabed, or kick the coral.
4. Choose a responsible operator – Ecotourism Australia have a certification scheme for marine tourism operators (see ecotourism.org.au).

TRIP NOTES

Getting there

Fly to Gladstone, then take a 30-minute helicopter ride from Gladstone to Voyages Heron Island (\$556 per person return), or cruise over on the Heron Island Launch service (\$200 per adult return). Wilson Island is a 40-minute boat trip from Heron Island. Call 1300 134 044 or visit wilsonisland.com.

Tariff Voyages offer a four-night stay on Wilson Island from \$1,680 or \$495 per night per person, twin share (minimum two nights), incl. accommodation, all meals and drinks (spirits extra), snorkelling and transfer from Voyages Heron Island.

When to go

October to March is reef spawning season and mutton bird breeding season. There are less birds on the island in June and July when winter temperatures are a 24-degree average. Turtle nesting season is from November to March and humpback whales migrate past between June and September.

