

The sea and its many creatures come in vibrant Technicolor hues, and dangerous thrills seem to lurk just around every corner. **Australia's Great Barrier Reef is home to a spectacular array of coral, fish, turtles, rays and sharks.** Sandra Carpenter dives down under to Heron Island to experience nature in all its glory and splendor.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT CORKERY

Nature up close

SWIMMING WITH SHARKS

... AND TURTLES, TOO

taring face-to-face at the big fish with the telltale fin, I screamed. Granted, the scream was not as effective as it could be given the snorkel that was fitted inside my mouth. But still.

With my breath coming in panicked bursts and my heart pumping wildly, I cautiously began propelling my flippers backward as I kept my eye on him, sure that my commotion was soon to attract even more shark friends my way.

The cold-eyed *Jaws* look-alike was huge, and I knew it was a faster swimmer than I am. I was soon to be shark lunch.

But instead, the shark swam right by me.

Popping my head up out of the water, breathing hard and with my heart pounding, I shouted to my husband: did you see that shark?

It was huge, I exclaimed while gulping for air.

Noticing the smile on Robert's face, I started to become just a bit annoyed that he was not also terrified. That was a shark, I yelled, putting particular emphasis on the last word to make sure he understood the danger of the situation.

Instead he laughed.

"It's just a lemon shark," explained Robert. "Nothing to worry about. He has plenty of food to eat all around him and is not interested in you."

Nothing to worry about, I muttered to myself. Not in my world. That was a SHARK. Sharks eat swimmers like me as an appetizer. I have seen *Jaws* and know the cinematic "reality" of the situation. Besides, this one was huge. At least the size of a small car, I conjectured. (Of course, the average size of a lemon shark is 220–300 centimeters. In my defense, things do look larger and closer in the water than what they are in reality.)

Before getting into the water, I had been assured that even though the area where we were snorkeling was called Shark Bay, we would not be swimming with sharks. Obviously that was wrong.

But of course, since you are reading this you know that I survived to tell the tale and did plenty more snorkeling as well. Because I was on Heron Island in Australia's Great Barrier Reef, one of the wonders of the natural world and a diving and snorkeling paradise. And every time I travel to this island on the Coral Sea, I realize again how spectacularly, jaw-droppingly beautiful this place is.

My first glimpse of this island on the Tropic of Capricorn is from a boat. As Heron appears on the horizon, crew members distribute glasses of champagne to me and my fellow passengers. It seems a fitting salute to paradise.

Heron Island is small – only 800 meters long and 300 wide at its largest – but it is a coral cay, meaning that it is composed of sand and coral fragments and is thus a part of the living reef organism. That means that you step off the sandy beach and can snorkel directly over the reef. On other islands

that I've stayed at, you must take a boat to get to the reef to snorkel and dive.

Heron was not inhabited until the early part of the 20th century when a turtle cannery was started. It did not last long, however, and the focus of the island became tourism in 1936. Currently, the island has three tenants: the Heron Island Resort, the Capricornia Cays National Park, and a scientific research station. In the 1950s, the University of Queensland's Heron Island Research Station was established on the island to do research on coral reef ecology. Although a fire devastated the its laboratories, library and more in March 2007, the station was quickly operational again.

IN SPITE OF THE ISLAND'S SIZE, I discover that it's easy to not run into people. Birds, you come across often. But people, no (unless you want to). White, sandy beaches surround the island. A rich forest of pisonia trees is in the center, and coastal she-oaks and pandanus palms line the fringes of the beach. The forest and dunes provide homes for thousands of nesting seabirds, including the wedge-tailed shearwater and noddy terns. Heron is also a nesting ground for both green and loggerhead turtles.

We see the result of the turtle nesting every day as we walk the beach. In the morning, hundreds of empty shells are scattered along the beach. And in the early evening, we watch as new hatchlings emerge. As the turtles break through their shells, they use what are called "light horizons," which are the lowest light horizons under natural light conditions, to orientate themselves to the sea.

The tiny hatchlings break out of their shells and clumsily make their way across the sand, scrambling to make it to the water. We quickly learn that you can easily spot the emerging turtles on the sand thanks to the seagulls that hover over them, ready to swoop down and devour the hatchlings. We watch dozens of turtles on their journey to the sea get snatched up by seagulls long before they make it to the water. The process is heartbreaking to watch, but as this is nature's way and we are in a national park, we are told not to interfere.

But after watching so many turtles get snatched before making it to the water, a resort guest named Marg decides it's OK to help if she does not touch the turtle but rather shoos away the hungry seagulls as he makes his trek to the sea. Marg follows him out until the water reaches her waist, flinging her beach wrap in the air to deter the angry gulls.

At last, she deems the turtle is in deep enough water to be safe and turns back to us on the beach with a smile on her face, pleased with her success. But almost immediately, a gull swoops into the water and snatches the turtle delicacy. Nature takes its course again and mentally I understand, but I somehow do feel the loss of the turtle.

Taking the dive boat out to the reef edge the next day, we snorkel through an area called "The Hole in the Wall." It has to be a movie set, I think as we smoothly propel our flippers through tunnels →

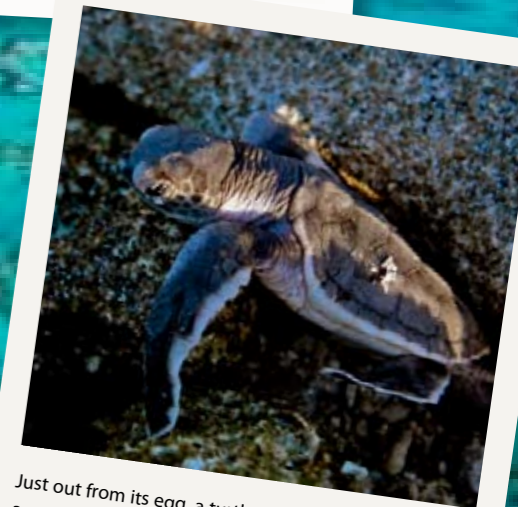


Aquatic creatures such as this rainbow fish come in an astonishing array of shapes, colors and stripes on the Barrier Reef.

It has to be a movie set, I think as we propel our flippers through tunnels of aquatic life.



Up to 100,000 black noddies will nest on the island during the peak breeding season of January. The noddie is a seabird from the tern family.



Just out from its egg, a turtle hatchling makes its way across the sand toward the sea while gulls noisily swoop overhead.

A helicopter ride off the island provides us with a stunning, big-picture view of the reef. →

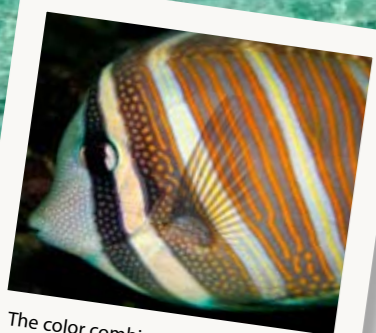
It feels like you are on your own private island, complete with pristine beaches and turquoise water.

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Snorkeling over the reef provides a fascinating glimpse into the underwater world of the sea.



The color combinations in the reef are eye-poppingly bright, with neon-striped fish.



And there are also psychedelic-colored clams brightening up the floor of the sea.

of aquatic life. A giant green turtle swims by and then coral trout, clown fish and surgeonfish. Fish in bright yellows and purples, zebra stripes, polka dots, neon blue, red and orange cruise by. We pass a gigantic, prehistoric-looking solitary fish, while colorful corals and giant clams lie below.

Suddenly, we are in the middle of thousands of tiny, blue fish flitting all around us. I circle around, realizing we are truly in the midst of the school, and I am dizzy and exhilarated all at once from the movement around us. I have to surface for a moment to catch my breath at the thrill of it all.

Paddling further, we float over a school of giant shovel-nosed rays. At first we don't notice them buried in the sand on the bottom of the sea, but then we start seeing fins jutting out of the sand and eyes looking at us as we float over them. The rays undulate gracefully through the water and are mesmerizing to watch – that is, until I remember that the barb of a stingray was what killed Australian crocodile hunter Steve Irwin. There seems to always be some sort of danger around the corner. Is that the price you pay for paradise, I wonder.

LOOKING FOR A LESS LIFE-THREATENING ACTIVITY the next morning, we take a walk directly on the reef

while the tide is out. Armed with clear, plastic bot-tomed tubes that look like megaphones, we carefully make our way around the coral, walking on the sand as much as possible so as to not disturb the living coral. Truly up close and personal, we use the tubes to look into tidal pools at blood red and cobalt blue starfish, wavy-edged clams with psychedelic color combinations of electric blue and purple and neon green, brain coral, hermit crabs, pincushions and nudibranches. Carefully, I pick up a slippery sea cucumber of about 30 centimeters in length, and the black sea creature promptly gives me a squirt.

Oh so quickly, we again learn that some sort of danger is never far away when we find a cone shell. It has a pretty spotted brown surface that makes it tempting to pick up. But it packs a deadly punch – it squirts out a neurotoxin that can cause death. And just as our reef guide explains this danger, a spotted epaulette shark swims by in the shallow water, two fins above the surface, reminding us that even in low tide, they are still on the prowl.

We are told by the marine center that the overall health of the reef in the area is OK at the moment. But climate change has taken its toll here in the form of coral bleaching. As water temperatures grow and stay warmer over a period of time, the coral is bleached. Corals begin to starve when they bleach, turning from a healthy brown to white. Major bleaching occurred on the reef in 1998 and

2002, as well as in the southern section in 2006. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority has developed a response plan for detecting and responding to coral bleaching so as to better preserve the ecosystem in the future.

THE RESORT ITSELF IS DOING ITS PART to be environmentally friendly as well. Alistair Cooray, resort general manager, works closely with the national park to ensure that such duties as island maintenance happen between May and September so as to not disturb turtle eggs.

“We have the highest ecotourism accreditation you can get in Australia,” says Cooray. “This means that each piece of rubbish is sorted by type and crushed, boxed and baled before being sent back to the mainland. We have a huge recycling program, generators that run the desalination plant, and drain water goes back into the garden beds.”

Getting a bit more personal, I ask Cooray if he ever gets bored as the island is so small. “Heron is unique,” he replies. “I’ve never been to another place like it, and I’ve worked in a lot of resorts here in Australia and overseas. The sunsets are to die for and truly magnificent. The colors of the water, the sand, the noddies ... they are all magical.”

Taking in all the natural beauty around us later, Robert and I walk the beach just before sunset. Waves are breaking along the reef, and the last of the sunlight is sparkling on the sea, turning the turquoise blue water to a deep cobalt. It's peaceful on the beach in the evening, and the only sounds are of gentle waves lapping at the shoreline and assorted bird calls. The sunset reaches its peak with vibrant pinks, red and oranges from the sky reflected into the water. Abruptly and astonishingly, the sun drops into the water. As the moon rises and the stars come out still later, we see the Southern Cross and the Milky Way. There are more stars in the sky than a Northern Hemisphere dweller like I can imagine.

As we are more than 15,000 kilometers from our home in Stockholm, our ears perk up when we

hear Swedish spoken the next morning at breakfast. Doctors Gunilla and Mats Cronqvist originally visited the island 20 years ago while backpacking. After telling their children for years how tropically beautiful the island was, they decided to all make the trip together.

There seems to always be some sort of danger around the corner. Is that the price you pay for paradise, I wonder.

“We were a bit worried to return in a way,” says Gunilla. “The island had become such a vision of paradise in our memories, we thought it could not live up to our expectations.”

But the trip far exceeded expectations, and even their teenage daughters were happy with diving and snorkeling on the reef.

“The weather was beautiful during our stay and the girls read a lot of books, played chess and just relaxed,” said Mats. “We were so happy that we could share this island and time with our daughters here.”

For Robert and me, this was also a return trip to paradise. As we make our departure from Heron via helicopter the next day, the pilot takes us on a loop around the island so that we can see it from the air. The outline of the reef is easily seen from this height. The day is beautiful once again, and our view is spectacular over the turquoise blue and green Coral Sea. Over the reef in the clear water, we can easily see turtles and rays, along with six dolphins. It's natural beauty at its finest. And what a glorious way it is to leave via helicopter. □

SANDRA CARPENTER is the editor in chief of *Scanorama*. After spending a week on the island, not even a helicopter departure was truly enough to entice her to want to leave paradise and return back to rainy and cold spring in Stockholm.

THE GREAT BARRIER REEF: HERON ISLAND

THE BIG PICTURE

The Great Barrier Reef is in the Coral Sea off the coast of eastern Australia. The UNESCO World Heritage site extends 2,600 kilometers and contains the world's largest collection of coral reefs, including over 3,000 individual reefs and 600 islands. There are 400 different types of coral and more than 1,500 fish species.

LOCATION

Heron Island is at the southern end of the reef and on the Tropic of Capricorn. It is 72 kilometers off the coast of Gladstone, Queensland. (It's about a two-hour boat ride from Gladstone or a 30-minute helicopter ride.)

BRAGGING RIGHTS

Heron Island is one of only four true coral cays and is formed entirely

from the reef on which it sits. When you stay on the island, you are directly on the reef.

WILDLIFE IN ACTION

Nature is active on this small island. From November to January, **female loggerheads and green turtles** lay eggs. Then from late January to May, the hatchlings emerge. Only one percent of the hatchlings live. January is the peak

breeding season for seabirds, including **black noddy terns, mutton birds and reef herons**. Up to 100,000 noddy terns nest on Heron. Mutton birds hatch in February. While nesting, their cry is often thought to be a baby crying. **Wedge-tailed shearwaters** lay eggs in December. **Humpback whales** can be seen migrating from June to September.

