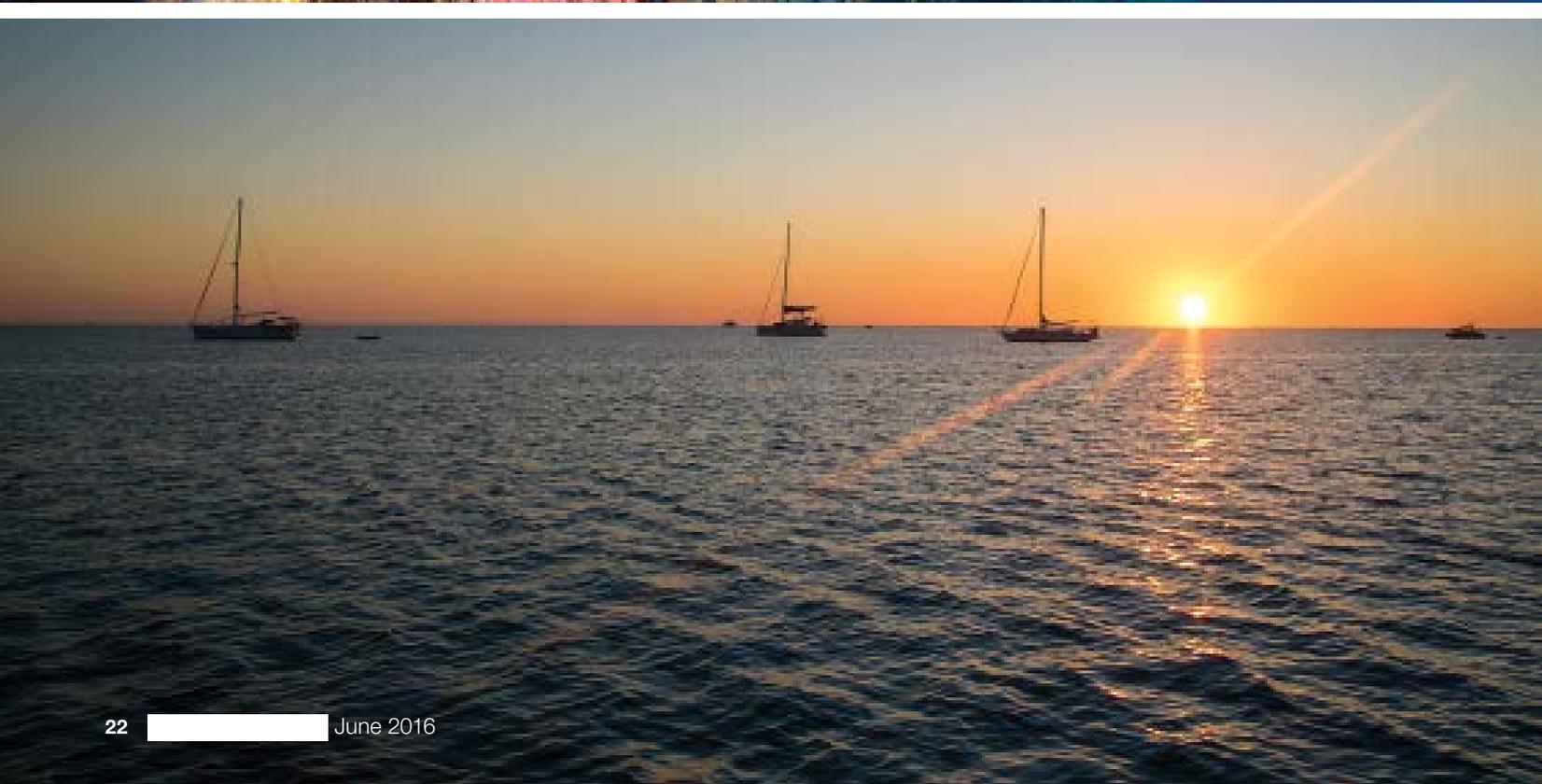


destination: Queensland



# Lure of the reef

Cruising coral reefs is unforgettable and **Christine Danger** takes us to the southern tip of the Great Barrier Reef.



We have been lucky enough to spend some time around the southern Great Barrier Reef over two cruises, one in winter the other in summer.

We stopped at five different spots: Lady Elliott, Lady Musgrave, Masthead Island, Fitzroy Reef and North West Island. Each had their special appeal, each was very different. But before telling you a bit about each island reef, we would like to share some general observations.

### The approach

When you sail to a coral cay, all you see, some nine or ten miles out, is a strip of land, a low lying island covered in greenery (pisonia trees). There is a change of colour in the water around the island showing the marked change of depth. The sea goes from ultramarine to aqua and you see a white line of breaking waves on the fringing reef. As you come close, especially on a sunny day, the graduation of colours is stunning.

The islands are generally quite small and sit on the edge of a large lagoon. Some lagoons can be entered and will have markers to show you the way in; as at Lady Musgrave or Fitzroy Reef. The entrance channel is generally very narrow but in daylight it is very obvious.

Other cays will be totally enclosed as at North West, Masthead or Lady Elliott Islands and you therefore anchor on the leeward side of the island, but a runabout can enter at high tide.

### Anchoring at the reef

If anchoring on the lee side of a coral cay, do not expect a totally calm anchorage. You will most probably have some swell. If you can enter a lagoon, you have the advantage of being well protected in winds up to 20 or 25 knots in flat waters. It is quite an experience to be in a beautiful turquoise lagoon, right in the middle of the ocean.

Typically the reef will have marine park buoys which show the protected areas where anchoring is prohibited to protect fragile corals and sea life.

Some areas might be a few metres deep at low tide, but you need to be prepared to anchor in greater depths, say ten metres.

One of the warnings about anchoring near a reef or in a lagoon is that dragging anchor in stronger winds can be disastrous. You want to ensure your anchor is well and truly set in broad daylight. Once the sun is low or at night, moving safely is impossible. Navigating around bommies demands bright sunlight. If strong winds are forecast, use two anchors in tandem or a buddy: a lead weight that lowers the angle of your anchor chain and makes it harder to dislodge.

### Five destinations

Now that you are set, here is some information about five very special destinations. These are listed from south to north.

Lady Elliot Island is a coral cay, made entirely from crushed coral. It is situated at the southern tip of the Great Barrier Reef and nestled in between Fraser Island and Lady Musgrave Island. It forms part of Australia's World Heritage listed area on the Great Barrier Reef.

The waters surrounding this island are exceptionally clear all year around with an average visibility of 20+ metres. As the island is located on the outer edge of the continental shelf and not close to the inshore rivers and runoff that comes after rain, it enjoys clean and clear waters and healthy coral.

A small eco-resort operates on the island with its own airstrip. So you can get to the island by plane if you are a resort guest.

**“Fitzroy is the ultimate snorkelling and reef fishing destination on the Great Barrier Reef and our absolute favourite.”**

Access ashore by yachties is not encouraged. Nothing, however, stops you from anchoring along the reef if you have sailed there and going for a snorkel. This is regarded as one of the best snorkelling and diving destinations on the Great Barrier Reef. A haven for marine life including manta rays, turtles, whales, dolphins, sharks and the entire cast of 'Finding Nemo'. Over 1,200 different species of marine life can be found around the Island. We sighted a pod of Humpback whales in winter, right next to the island and a small school of sharks.

Lady Musgrave Island is the second coral cay we visited. From a boating perspective the great thing about this island is that you can enter the lagoon via a deep water channel. There has been some conjecture whether the channel into the lagoon is a naturally occurring phenomenon, or was cut by Japanese or Taiwanese fishermen, or as legend has it was widened by guano miners many years ago.

The other advantage of Lady Musgrave is that you can get ashore for walks and birdwatching. There are an enormous number of birds on the island. White-capped noddies, cousins of the terns, nest in abundance in the Pisonia trees, buff-banded rails, white and grey phases of the eastern reef egret, pied and sooty oystercatchers and Capricorn silvereyes are resident on the island year-round.

Green and leatherback turtles can be spotted resting on coral bommies and the coral lagoon is a haven for a multitude of fish and coral species and a spectacular destination for anyone interested in snorkelling.

Some commercial operators service the island daily from Bundaberg and 1770. You are allowed to camp on the cay with a permit.

MAIN: Snorkelling at Fitzroy Reef.

LEFT: Yachts anchored at Lady Musgrave.

Lady Musgrave is often the first lagoon experience for yachties and you can see why. It has a lot to offer. But do not expect to have the lagoon to yourself. Of all the island reefs we saw, it was the most frequented.

Masthead Island is an elongated platform reef, with a coral cay and is located 32 nautical miles northeast of Gladstone. The island is a protected area and forms part of Capricornia Cays National Park. It is one of the most undisturbed cays in the national park because human and feral animal impacts have been rare. The cay covers an area of 0.45 square kilometres and is surrounded by a coral reef that is partially exposed at low-tide.

The island has been declared an important bird area supporting a diverse seabird population, including the black noddy, wedge-tailed shearwater, back-naped tern, bridled tern and many others. So for birdwatchers, it is heaven!

The island is closed to the public from mid-October to Easter to protect nesting seabirds and turtle hatchlings. At other times the island is open for camping, however there are no facilities provided. We were there in winter and had the island to ourselves which made the experience even more special.

Fitzroy Reef is the largest reef in the Bunker Group and is located 32 nautical miles from the coastal township of 1770. There is no cay. It is a closed ring reef with a large, deep (6m to 10m) lagoon that can be entered through a narrow, natural channel. The lagoon is a safe and reliable anchorage.

Fitzroy Reef has the largest, navigable lagoon on the entire Great Barrier Reef, covering an area of 12km<sup>2</sup>. It features world class dive sites with coral gardens on the northern side and a drop off on the southern side.

The reef has a spectacular variety of corals of different shapes such as wrinkled brains, cabbages, table tops, antlers, wire strands and pillars. You can expect to see nearly one million individual fish while snorkelling the bombies of Fitzroy! Sharks (white and black tip reef sharks) majestically cruise through the Lagoon totally uninterested in people.

A wreck is visible on the reef, flat on the southwest corner of the reef, it is thought to be that of the steamer S.S. Pacific (1903). The wreckage consists of some wooden remains, rusted spars and boilers.

Fitzroy is the ultimate snorkelling and reef fishing destination on the Great Barrier Reef and our absolute favourite. We were incredibly lucky to have it to ourselves for several days. We also experienced it in all weather conditions: from brilliant sunshine on calm days to 30 knots wind and storm.

TOP: Approaching Masthead Island.

CENTRE LEFT: Arrival at Fitzroy Reef.

CENTRE RIGHT: *Take It Easy* anchored at North West Island.

BELOW: Snorkelling at Lady Musgrave.





North West Island is the second largest coral cay in the Great Barrier Reef at 1.05km<sup>2</sup>. It is the largest in the southern part of the reef and also the closest to the Keppels. As such, it is frequented by boaters who come to camp on the island and go fishing. Some commercial operators also service the island.

This island is an important nesting ground for seabirds and turtles. During a walk right around the island we saw many turtle tracks in the sand leading to nesting sites when we were there in December. The green sea turtle and the endangered loggerhead sea turtle nest on the island between November and February.

“You do not necessarily need dive gear to enjoy all this. All you need is a mask and snorkel and if you have a waterproof camera, all the better.”

But what was also amazing was the huge quantity of sea birds. As many as 500,000 sea birds inhabit the island at any one time. Seventy per cent of the total breeding population of wedge-tailed shearwaters on Australia’s east coast nest on the island.

In the shallows around the island you will find small whitetip reef sharks and leopard sharks hunting. These species are not dangerous to humans and are fascinating to watch.

The reef around the island, with its interesting shelves and canyons, is really appealing and harbours a vast variety of fishes.

Snorkelling at low tide amongst coral reef and tropical fish would have to be one of the most amazing experiences of cruising. The diversity of shapes and colours are an absolute wonder.

You do not necessarily need dive gear to enjoy all this. All you need is a mask and snorkel and if you have a waterproof camera, all the better for recording this underwater wonderland. In winter you will need a wetsuit, in summer you will last longer in the water with one, but at 26° the temperature of the water is balmy enough to go without. As for birdwatching, all you need is a pair of binoculars, or just a keen eye.

So, what are you waiting for?

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**cruisinghelmsman** Christine Danger



Chris and her partner Wade Bishop are Melbourne based. They have been sailing on catamarans of various sizes for the last 15 years. Their favourite cruising grounds include Bass Strait Islands, Tasmanian waters and Australia’s east coast. They live for the day when they can give up work, cruise full-time on *Take It Easy*, and explore further afield. Follow their adventures on [www.sv-takeiteasy.com](http://www.sv-takeiteasy.com).