

# ON THE OUTER



During the 2019 cruising season Chris and Wade on *Anui* had their first opportunity to sail to Far North Queensland since retiring on board. They had one objective: to explore the Great Barrier Reef as much as they could. **CHRISTINE DANGER** writes about their experience 'on the outer' – out on the reef and mostly on their own!

Getting ready for a dive off the boat!

We have always thought that being at the Reef in strong conditions is not something we want to do: uncomfortable, a little scary, and you don't get rewarded for your bravery with the crystal clear, calm waters you need for beautiful snorkelling and underwater photography. But 2019 was not a calm season, so much so that we did not see many other boats out there! We are not sure whether it was the stronger winds than usual keeping cruisers close to the coast, the Shaggers' Rendezvous on Gloucester Island attracting over 200 cruisers, but we spent a lot of time on the outer – on our own away from everybody, as well as at the Outer Reef off the beaten track.

From May 1 to October 30, 2019, we spent 43 days at the Middle to Outer Reefs. It may not sound like a lot: 43 out of a possible 184 days, but the rest of the time we were still floating or sailing along the Great Barrier

Reef, just closer inshore! We are keen snorkellers and underwater photographers, and have the best time engaging in our passion in the crystal clear waters of the Reef.

But the two big challenges with spending time at the Reef are picking the right weather and finding a safe spot to stop at. We did lots of exploring during the 2019 season and found that a combination of settings worked for us.

### THE RIGHT COMBINATION FOR US

Everyone will tell you that at over 15kts of breeze, it gets uncomfortable out at the Reef: you get tossed around and there is little protection, especially at high tide when several metres of water cover the reef flat. In trade wind season the south-easterlies blow fairly

relentlessly, which also happens to be the time when most cruising yachts head to the tropics. What we found in 2019 was that the calm days below 10kts were few and far between. So much so that if we wanted to see the Reef, we had to put up with less than ideal weather conditions. When we look back at our cruising notes and tally up the days they show that between the beginning of May and the end of October, we had 16 days of calm conditions with less than 10kts of breeze. The rest of the time it was blowing at 15-20, with peaks at 25-30. Our notes also show that most of the time we spent at the Reef was in 15-18kts. Bear in mind we are on a 52ft cat. It moves in the chop, but not as much as smaller cats or monohulls. So we became adept at looking for spots offering the best protection possible for those prevailing conditions. We found that the middle to outer reefs, with a sand cay, a public mooring, and within 30-40 miles of the mainland for easy returns to shelter, offered us the best combination.

If you look at a map of the Great Barrier Reef, particularly as you head further north of Townsville, the GBR gets closer to the coast. Off Cairns and Port Douglas for instance, the furthest offshore you have to travel to be at the outer reef is 30 miles, whereas down south, you may have to travel 90 miles – to the Swains for example.

The very inner reefs and fringing reefs around islands close to shore are badly affected by coastal run off, often covered with filamentous algae, with hardly any coral left even if there is still

some fish life. The water is turbid and clarity poor.

The very outer reefs offer the best water clarity and therefore visibility underwater, show no detrimental effect from coastal runoff, and there is limited rubble from cyclone damage. Corals might not be as dense as they used to be, but they are healthy or recovering and you still have the option of a relatively quick return to shelter if the weather turns. Add a green zone, where no fishing or take is allowed, and you find more fish life which is also less nervous about human presence.

Another aspect we noted was that the more central reefs have the advantage of offering slightly more protection because of the layering effect of a reef within a reef. For instance Michaelmas Reef sits in the shelter of Arlington Reef.

Then add a sand cay and although these islets are only two or three meters above sea level, 10 or 12 if they are vegetated, they provide an extra break from swell and chop.

### ANCHORING VS MOORING

Once you find the spot, should you anchor or do you pick up a mooring buoy? There is a bit of debate among cruisers as to what is the best when at the reef. Some would rather use their own ground tackle, knowing exactly the state it is in. But as far as we are concerned, the enemy at the reef is getting your anchor chain caught on isolated coral heads. You might be able to manoeuvre the boat around to get the chain free, but you might not, and if this happens in really



**TOP:** The clarity of the water and variety of corals at the outer reef is extraordinary.

**ABOVE LEFT:** Steephead parrotfish produce much of the sand at the beach!

**ABOVE RIGHT:** Beautiful gorgonian fans, adorning the reef.



**TOP:** What lurks under our hulls!

**ABOVE:** Found another public mooring!

deep water, you need diving gear to get freed up, unless you can free dive – which we can't!

If we can find a large enough patch of sand, free of coral heads and not too deep, we anchor. We tend to look for a location in 6-10m of aqua water over sand at high tide, crystal clear so we can see the bottom, and put out 30-60m of chain, and then we dig in the anchor by reversing hard and we set our anchor alarm. You don't want to drag at the reef! When we do find a spot, we mark it on our GPS for future reference. And to be sure to be sure, we dive down to the anchor to check the bottom.

But on the whole, give us a public mooring buoy any time! The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority have installed quite a number of public mooring buoys, colour coded to show their class (maximum length of vessel and maximum wind speed limits). We use the green or blue moorings, which are also the most numerous. They are regularly maintained, they are often close to the best dive spots and close to the reef wall. They are generally worry free and are there to protect the coral from anchor chain damage. I say generally,

because we have had one instance when a poorly spliced loop gave way in the night at Norman Reef. We realized fairly quickly as our anchor alarm on our AIS sounded when we started to drift out of our safe circle. Here is a hint: even on a mooring, use your anchor alarm. It might save you from serious trouble, as it did for us. But despite this incident, we always favour the public mooring buoys over anchoring. We don't hook on blindly; we systematically dive on the mooring to check its condition. To find out about public buoys locations, go to the GBR Marine Parks website <http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/access-and-use/moorings> and download the PDF for the region you are interested in.

### HOW WE SEARCH FOR GOOD SPOTS!

There is not really a guide to refer to about the Reef. To search for good spots to explore we rely on:

- The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park charts
- The Public Mooring Access PDFs for different regions
- Google Earth for Satellite images

- MotionX-GPS phone App for Satellite images, routing and waypoints
- Navionics Charting Software for charts, routing and waypoints.

### WORD OF MOUTH FROM OTHER REEF EXPLORERS

Because typically you don't have much internet at the Reef, it takes some preparation ahead of leaving the coast. We scout around, get on the internet and search for information on various reefs, download aerial pictures or take screen dumps of satellite images for areas we are interesting in exploring, mark spots on the apps. If we find there is a public mooring there, there is no holding us back. But for more remote spots or less frequented ones where you will have to anchor, the satellite images help you work out the layout of the reef, the look of the sea floor, whether there are patches of sand big enough to drop the pick in away from bommies and at what rough depth.

Whenever we meet cruisers at the Reef, we tend to exchange information. We rarely ask or give precise GPS anchoring coordinates. But the few people you meet out there are keen reef hoppers like us. We readily share general information about the attractiveness of certain reefs, their accessibility and ease of anchoring at. And that is sufficient to put in the planning mix.

And then it is a matter of going there!

### FIVE REEFS WORTH VISITING

Now that we have revealed all our secrets for staying 'on the outer', you can scout the charts and go exploring. We will even share with you our top five locations in North Queensland, listed from the southernmost to northernmost. So let the reef hopping begin!

#### WHEELER CAY AND REEF

Easily accessed from Townsville and Magnetic Island, Wheeler is a small oval reef with deep water all around and a patch of clear sand in the centre, which turns out to be a shy little cay appearing at low tide. There is one public mooring in about 13m of water and only about 20m away from the reef wall, so perfect for snorkelling right off the boat.

Although less colourful than Keeper, at Wheeler Reef it is the isolated coral pinnacles and the deep gutters patrolled by some big fish that held our interest. Trevallies, giant sweetlips, Maori wrasses and mackerels were there, reminding us we were well offshore.

#### KEEPER REEF

Located offshore of the Palm Islands, North East of Townsville, Keeper Reef is very aptly named. We loved it and declared it a real keeper! A few small boats were



Not a bommie in sight, anchored in 6m of crystal clear water.

there fishing, but did not stay the night, however the one and only public mooring was vacant, so we hooked onto it. We arrived at mid tide and laid a track through to the buoy to make it easier to leave early the next day. There is a maze of bommies and when you move before the sun is high in the sky, it is hard to see where the safe passage is.

Keeper is an interesting reef with an elongated shape and multiple long bommies and trenches along the reef flat. It is easy to get lost literally and metaphorically as it is divided by gutters and ledges which create an underwater labyrinth with incredibly beautiful, healthy coral gardens. The water colour was particularly blue and crystal clear, probably because of the bright sun as well as the very light breeze for several days. These were dream like conditions. If you explore at mid tide it allows you to drift atop vibrant coral gardens, whereas at low tide you might choose to meander around different sets of bommies. You could easily spend a few days at Keeper, exploring along the length of the reef. What was most striking there was the clarity of the water – 30m plus of visibility – the brightness and intensity of colours.

#### TAYLOR CAY AND REEF

Some 30 miles east of Dunk Island, Taylor reef is a stunning spot. We were lucky to be there on one of those rare calm days and the graduation of colours from ultramarine to turquoise was to die for! It is one of those 'pinch ourselves, we are really here' spots. Anchoring at Taylor Reef is stress free in 7m of aqua water over sand at high tide, with a large area totally clear of bommies. There is a sizable cay which attracts a lot of sea birds such as black-napped terns, brown boobies and noddies. With the reef being in a green zone, you can see the effect on the marine life: abundant fish species and not too worried about people. But what is most striking at Taylor Reef is the



TOP: Our favourite at a Reef: a mooring buoy, a cay and crystal clear water.

ABOVE LEFT: Taylor Cay – a great spot for snorkelling off the beach and playing castaway.

ABOVE RIGHT: Crystal clear waters and vibrant corals at Wheeler Reef

attractive coral gardens. More than at any other reef, you will see many odd dwellers such as the tunicates and the crinoids as well as the beautiful red gorgonian fans. An interesting fact shared with us by locals from Mission Beach is that Taylor Cay exchanges sand with nearby Beaver Cay from year to year. At times Taylor

pretty, others like the green humphead parrotfish only a mother could love! There is a maze of trenches where a multitude of big and small fish patrol. It is great fun to swim along these gutters; sometimes you get through to different areas, other times you reach a dead end and have to turn around. The seascapes are stunning.

And all this in the middle of a huge expanse of hard and soft corals. What a treat! And no rubble, no bleaching, no crown of thorn starfish.

#### FLYNN REEF

One of the outer most reefs on the edge of the continental shelf and the Coral Sea Trench, Flynn Reef is one of our favourites. We spent several days there. Because of its location, it feels remote, wild; it feels deep, immense; it feels different from every reef we have been to with its great visibility and dramatic underwater seascapes. It is the sheer size of what you are navigating through that seems most striking here: huge boulder corals, terraces of coral plates, deep trenches, big drops, and all surrounded by deeper water. You do have to dive down further, but it is so worth the effort. And the water is so blue and so clear. There is one public mooring and several tour operator moorings. Anchoring is in deep water – 18m – so it is best to pick up a buoy.

With hundreds of individual reefs along the Great Barrier Reef, there is much to discover. We are totally hooked and hope we will have many years of exploration. We hope too that this article will inspire you to spend time there, even if the

conditions are not ideal. It is so worth the effort and it might not be there forever.

As Jacques Cousteau once said: *“The sea once it casts its spell, holds one in its net of wonder for ever”*. One last thing: we think it should be compulsory for every single politician and policy maker to go snorkelling on the Great Barrier Reef because it is hard to imagine not wanting to do everything you can to protect and preserve it once you have spent time there.

Chris and her partner Wade Bishop have been sailing on catamarans of various sizes for about 20 years, cruising Bass Strait, Tasmanian waters and Australia’s east coast. In July 2017, they finally retired, and are now sea wanderers, living on board their ‘last’ catamaran, *Anui*, a 52ft Crowther. Follow their adventures on [www.sv-anui.com](http://www.sv-anui.com)



**TOP:** Bliss: a rare calm day, anchored at the outer reef.

**ABOVE:** Wheeler Cay, another great spot for playing castaway.

Cay disappears all together at high tide, while Beaver Cay expands ... When we were there it was Beaver Cay which played shy and only poked its sandy head out at low tide.

#### MILLN REEF

About 30 miles east of Cairns, on the outer reef, is the absolute splendour of Milln Reef. The colours at low tide are just mesmerising. If you are lucky there is a free mooring when you get there, or you can squat on one of the tour operators’ buoys. We went to Milln Reef several times and were generally on our own, apart from the occasional dive boat visit. Anchoring is in deep water: 18m plus, too deep for our liking. But tour operators have several moorings, which can be used if they are vacant.

What we found there were lots of BIG fish: some colourful and