

A photograph of a sailboat on a clear blue sea. In the background, there is a rocky coastline under a clear sky. The water in the foreground is shallow and clear, showing rocks and some green algae.

Easy like

Whitsunday

The Australian Whitsunday Islands are one of the world's most idyllic cruising grounds, Helen Fretter explored them on a bareboat charter.

Twice-daily skeds, wave surfing, and 30-plus knots – all in a day’s work for your average offshore racer, but not quite what you’d expect from a tranquil cruising trip. Sure, there was plenty of time spent chilling in the sunshine with a cold stubbie, but sailing the Whitsundays proved to be a whole lot of fun because, well, the sailing itself was fun too. Quite revolutionary.

A cruising yacht, for a racing sailor at least, is basically a preferable mode of holiday transport, and it’s the destination that’s usually the real fun. The sailing isn’t to be taken seriously – maybe indulge in a bit of motor sailing, or let the autopilot take over – because wallowing around in a big boat in light winds doesn’t tend to be very challenging. But the Whitsundays are home to Hamilton Island Race Week, and after five days spent cruising the area, that regatta is going straight to the top of my ‘must-do’ list. If Australia is God’s own country, then the Whitsundays are God’s own sailing country.

Radio star

We flew from Sydney into Hamilton Island, or ‘Hamo’ as those in the know refer to it. Hamilton Island is surely one of the 10 weirdest places in the world – a private island, it is essentially one giant resort. Everyone else on the incoming flights was destined for one of the many package holiday centres, and were merrily met by uniformed reps and ferried off in a convoy of complimentary golf carts. With precisely no clue as to where we were going, we eventually tracked down the island’s sole taxi and vaguely asked to be taken to the marina, where we spotted our Jeanneau parked on the end of a finger pontoon.

We had chartered with ‘Whitsunday Rent a Yacht’, who claim to be the biggest bareboat charter operators in the Whitsundays. Their base is actually on the mainland, at Shute Harbour – a fast ferry ride away. However, we’d flown 23 hours to get to Australia, so we wanted to get on with our sailing as soon as possible, and Rent a Yacht offer a delivery to Hamilton as an option.

First up was the briefing, as our delivery skipper showed us around ‘Amelie’. I’ve experienced briefings varying from the lackadaisical to the excessively scaremongering, and this was the best so far. Informative and thorough, the Rent a Yacht staff quickly sussed out the fact that we at least knew the basics and moved on to sharing some local knowledge, including answering important questions like whether the sharks or jellyfish were going to kill us first?

Our home for the week was a Jeanneau 37, one of Rent a Yacht’s luxury range. With three cabins, one heads, and a large saloon, she would have been fine for six, but was equally manageable for just myself and the Admiral. The yacht was well-equipped with all the basics, although not quite as immaculate as others I’ve chartered from big European operators. Although there are no electronic plotters onboard, there were a good collection of charts (AUS 252) and the essential pilotage guide *100 Magic Miles* by D Colfelt, with additional annotations – mostly no-go areas – marked in by Rent a Yacht.

One of the key elements of the briefing was the VHF – or more specifically the need to use it.



Above Early evening cruising – close to the Equator the sun sets rapidly, so boats must call in at 1600hrs each day to confirm their whereabouts.

Every charter yacht has to meet twice-daily radio schedules, at 0800 and 1600hrs, and report in with where they are and where they are going – and that they are safely anchored. If you miss too many in a row, they send someone out to check you haven’t sunk. Although initially it seems like a bit of a bind, our jetlag had us keeping ideal hours for cruising – fast asleep early and awake again by about 0600. The radio chats also proved a good source of weather forecasts, and local knowledge such as which anchorages were best in the prevailing conditions.

In the event we didn’t leave Hamilton Island until gone 1600hrs on our first day, but the delivery skipper was happy enough with our experience levels to let us go, and we just popped around the corner to the sheltered Cid Harbour. Fortunately his confidence wasn’t misplaced, and we anchored safely for the night – more by luck than judgement perhaps, as I was distracted mid-drop by a sea-eagle diving just a few feet away, then realised my co-skipper’s attention had been diverted by a pair of turtles sharing our spot.

In the tropics

The Whitsundays are about 40km west of the Great Barrier Reef, just off the coast of



Left There are plenty of opportunities to discover your own deserted beach – the Rent a Yacht tenders were very robust and coped well with being towed through some large waves!



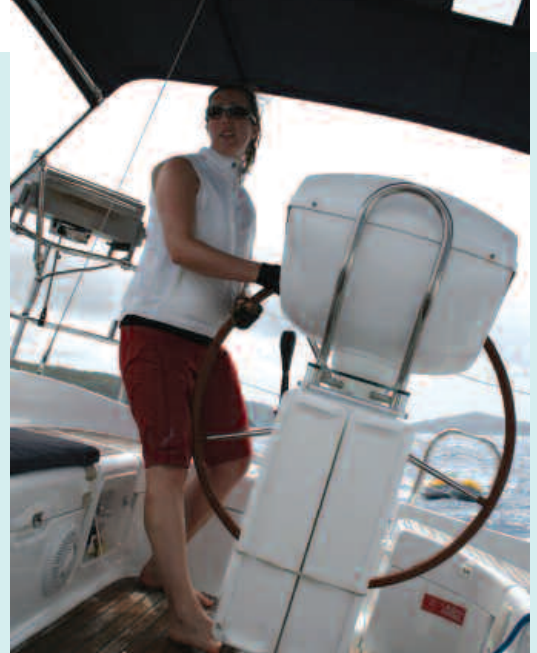
Above The sand spit at Langford Island and **(inset)** the infamous stinger suits.

Above right With strong south-easterlies, we got plenty of chances to test our Jeanneau 37 **(far right)** under sail.

Queensland. There are over 70 islands, in two main groups – the northern Whitsunday group and southern Lindeman Group – plus the Molle Islands closer to the

mainland. If you had a couple of weeks – and your charter agreement allows – you could pretty much explore the lot, but with just five days on the water, we stuck to the Whitsundays group. There are plenty of anchorages around 10 miles apart, and the area is pretty much all line of sight navigation, although there are sufficient hazards that some level of competence when it comes to reading charts is pretty much essential.

This close to the tropics (between 20-21 degrees latitude), the temperature rarely dips below the high 70s, but then again neither does the



humidity, and so we shouldn't really have been too surprised by the recurring rain. Mildly disappointed, perhaps – but it was at least a relief not to be constantly dodging the searing Australian sun.

The one thing the high temperatures do mean is that the fridge is on pretty much constantly – and not just to cool our 'tinnies' and 'stubbies' (Aussie beer in a can or short bottle). We'd opted for the Rent a Yacht provisioning service, which was extremely thorough, but not particularly cheap – one of several extras that really added up over the course of the booking. Whilst never ones to complain about having too much food – we opted for only 'partial' provisioning, yet still ate three meals a day on board for the duration of our trip – I'm not sure that two people were ever going to use an entire bottle of olive oil, or three different types of cleaning product, over a five-day stay, and therefore I didn't really appreciate paying for it. The flip side is that no matter what we might've needed, we had it on board.

Suits you sir

For our first sail we headed up the western coast, out of Cid Island then past Whitsunday and Hook Island, to Langford, a tiny dot in the sea just south of the famous Hayman Island – one of the world's most exclusive resorts. A popular stop off on the way is Nara Inlet, famous for its Aboriginal cave drawings, but we were enjoying a fabulous day on the water and pressed on north.

Dodging the sandbars in Stonehaven passage required a little concentration on our approach, but as the tide fell we were rewarded with a spectacular sand spit stretching out into the turquoise sea.

The Whitsundays are part of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and mooring buoys are laid to protect the coral, particularly in no-anchoring zones, so here we picked up a buoy (free of charge) alongside an eclectic selection of tour boats.

After taking our tender ashore for a spot of snorkelling it was time to don the dreaded 'stinger suits'. Head-to-toe one-piece Lycra monstrosities, these spectacularly unflattering outfits are designed to protect you from potentially fatal jellyfish stings. The two most dangerous jellies are the thumbnail-sized Irukandji and much larger Box jellyfish. Box jellyfish mostly hug Queensland's mainland shore and are rare in the Whitsundays, but the Irukandji can be found in the area,

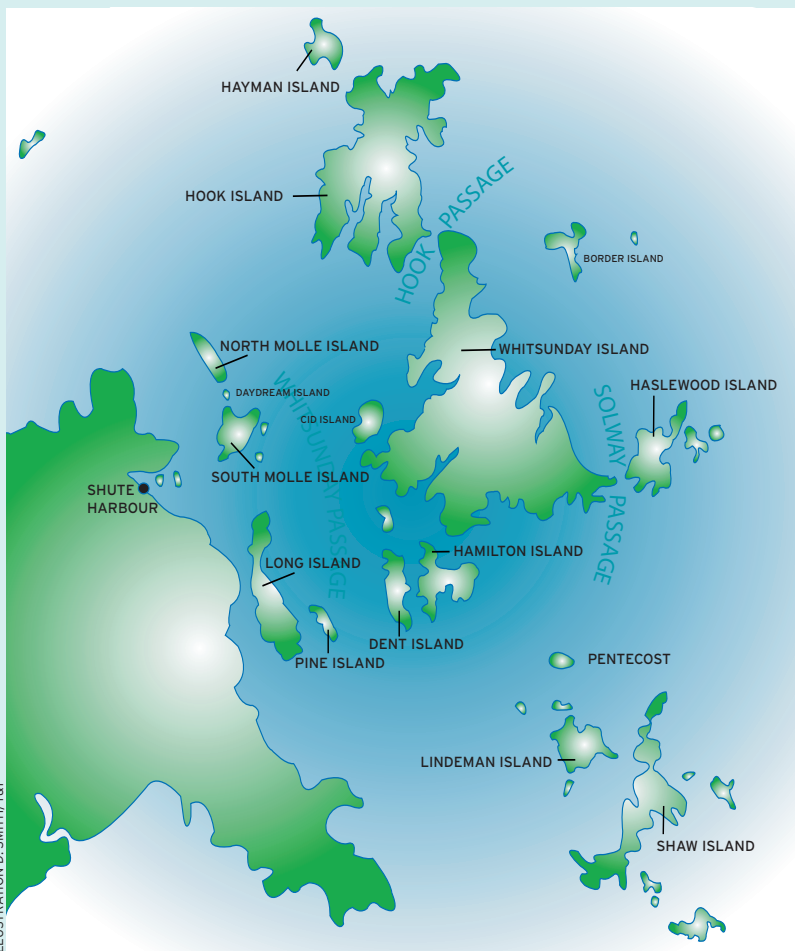


ILLUSTRATION D. SMITH/Y&Y*

particularly from November to April – and both stings are serious, potentially fatal. Whilst some of the young gappers braved the sea in their trunks, on our visit in November pretty much everyone had opted for a suit, so we didn't even feel too silly and found they also provide good protection against sunburn and scrapes.

After a laid-back lunch in the sun (the biminy stayed up all week, although it proved equally effective as a rain shield) we motored around the north of Hook Island. Well, truth be told we tried to sail the short hop, but after getting bored of the wind spinning 180 degrees through the narrow passage between Hook and Hayman, we gave up and let the donkey do the work.

Butterfly Bay, at the northern edge of Hook Island, is a popular anchorage, so we felt pretty lucky to pick up a mooring buoy close to the shore. Trying to make some sort of dent in the food stocks, we fired up the excellent gas barbeque on the back of the boat and grilled some rather delicious steaks from our supplies.

The Whitsundays effectively have one giant 'No feeding the animals' sign, and nothing should go overboard (the heads also have a holding tank, and there are designated zones for pumping out). Inevitably, however, a bit of dinner did find its way into the sea. We'd been assured that sharks are not a concern in the Whitsundays, but when a massive shadowy shape gulped down our scrap of bloodied steak I made a mental note never to set foot in the sea after dark. Sharks feed at night, apparently.

Bump in the night

Although Butterfly Bay is reasonably sheltered, as the breeze built overnight we realised that our mooring buoy was a double-edged blessing. We definitely weren't going anywhere in a hurry, but as the winds spun off the surrounding hills 'Amelie' danced around the mooring with both chain and ball clanging against the hull. Despite increasingly bad-tempered attempts to free it, it persisted it thumping loudly right through the night, sounding as if the bouy was about to join us whilst we attempted to sleep in the forepeak.

The next morning, we opted to shake off our doziness with a dip in Luncheon Bay. Still feeling a wee bit nervous about the many things that will apparently eat you if you step into Australian waters, we were relieved to find several dive boats with beginner scuba and snorkelling groups nearby. Although the bay had several unoccupied beaches, we opted for company and enjoyed some fantastic snorkelling over the coral, finding the occasional 'Nemo' clownfish hiding among the anemones.

Feeling braver, we hopped back in our 'flubber' (actually a particularly robust tender) and motored round to Manta Ray Bay, famous for, unsurprisingly, a giant Manta Ray. A group of swimmers in the water were shrieking with excitement, so I popped my mask on and dunked my head over the side to sea what all the fuss was about – and came face to face with a shoal of extremely curious zebra and parrot-painted fish, it honestly felt like I'd stuck my face in an aquarium! Swimming off the beach we were soon joined by something about 4ft long which we uncertainly identified as a Wrasse, and literally hundreds of jewel-coloured fish, although the ray was obviously busy elsewhere.



“ Snorkelling over coral, we found 'Nemo' hiding among the anemones ”

Watersports playground



Above left to right The busy Sydney waterfront; diving the Great Barrier Reef; flying over the Reef on our way from Hamilton Is to Cairns.

Australia is a dauntingly long way away, there's no getting around it. Even for a two-week trip, it is probably too far to go purely for a charter holiday. But there are loads of ways of making the trip worthwhile, particularly for watersports fans.

We flew into Sydney, a jaw-dropping waterfront city, where we went surfing on the famous Bondi and Manly beaches, or you could also watch the 18ft Skiffs racing in their natural habitat.

From the Whitsundays or Cairns areas you can take a trip out to the Great Barrier Reef. The highlight of our visit was a trip to the Reef with the

Poseidon dive boat from Port Douglas, with spectacular guided diving and snorkelling – and patient instructors for nervous divers like me more used to being on top of the water!



PHOTO OACK BEACH PRODUCTIONS*



Breeze on

Back on the yacht, we headed north-east towards the Pinnacles, a rock formation which marks the north-east edge of Hook Island. As we turned the corner a 30-knot wind from the south-east was kicking up a big swell through the overfalls, and despite popping a reef in we took plenty of green water over the bow. Nevertheless, we decided to press on down the eastern side of Hook Island, rewarded for an upwind slog by some dolphins playing in the waves alongside.

It was far too exposed to try and anchor on the eastern shore, so we ducked through Hook Passage and up into Macona Inlet, a very sheltered finger of water protected by a sandbar stretching across the entrance. There are a few more hidden lumps further up the inlet, as we discovered, but despite gusts in the high 20s we found a spacious area to drop anchor in the middle of the channel and enjoyed a comfortable night – the GPS proved invaluable for checking whether the anchor was dragging as we fired up the barbie for the evening. With turtles nesting and lush vegetation right down to the water's

edge, Macona is a particularly picturesque spot and a useful anchorage in most wind directions.

Heading back out through Hook Passage the following morning we dodged a 38-knot bullet bouncing off the hills (the biggest number we saw all week, mainly because after that we stopped looking) and soon found ourselves back into the breeze and relatively big seas, so motored south-east to Tongue Bay.

Tongue Bay lies just north-west of a headland, the other side of which is the famous Whitehaven Beach, a much-photographed stretch of about 6km of pure white sand. After picking up a buoy in Tongue Bay, we went ashore to walk the marked trail to Lookout Point, a viewing platform looking over the spectacular Whitehaven Beach, regularly voted one of the best in the world. Once the platform got a little crowded with students from Preston, we followed a second trail to Lookout Beach, a stunning beach made up of pristine white silica. The walk itself is well worth taking slowly, as we stumbled across a 3ft long multicoloured iguana.

Deciding to settle in for the night, we gave up our mooring buoy and moved further inshore to anchor in Tongue Bay on Rent a Yacht's advice after the radio sked – advice that turned out to be well worth heeding as we watched the teenage tourers on their packed ketches and old IOR maxis swinging around their moorings. Although the sailing tours carry a surprising number of guests, we were never disturbed by noisy party boats – one of the most appealing aspects of the Whitsundays is definitely the peace and quiet.

Below left to right Friendly cockatoos on Hamilton Island; the walk to Lookout Point is dotted with large iguanas; lush tropical vegetation reaches down to the waterfront; seaplanes land on Whitehaven Beach.



Surfing home

You can't really leave the Whitsundays without setting foot on Whitehaven itself, so on our final morning we motored round to Chalkeys Beach, a beautiful bay on Haslewood Island, directly opposite. Unfortunately, with some big gusts still bouncing along the water, and feeling less than confident in our depth sounder, we couldn't get close enough to anchor up, so headed across to Whitehaven itself. Despite looking unprotected, it turned out to be relatively simple to anchor just off the beach, and we took the tender ashore, sharing several miles of beach only with a seaplane and its four occupants. Although the snorkelling turned out to be unexciting – the sand theme continues underwater – Whitehaven is definitely a must-see. Unfortunately that means that it's a must-see for lots of other visitors as well, and by mid-morning it resembled a scene from the Normandy landings as large motor boats expelled their cargo of day-trippers onto the sand.

With just a few hours left to get back to Hamilton Island, we upped anchor and considered our options. The most direct route back was unquestionably through Solway Passage, an infamous stretch of water between Haslewood and Whitsunday Islands. We stuck our nose into the narrow gap but, following the advice of Rent a Yacht and concerned that our engine wouldn't be able to overcome the fierce currents or worrying whirlpools marked in our pilotage guide, decided that discretion was the better part of valour and turned on our heel.

This left the small matter of having to cover the same ground we'd covered in four days, in a few hours. With the wind behind us, and plenty of it, we popped the sails up and headed north, enjoying some high-speed surfing (and slightly incredulous looks as we overtook a few more leisurely vessels) up the eastern coast of Whitsunday.

Coming back down the western side, we passed packed anchorages in Cid Harbour, with charter yachts circling as they hunted for space on the sheltered side of the island. Our option may not have been the most relaxing, but at least it was more fun than hunting for a parking slot.

Rent a Yacht had kindly booked us both a mooring berth and table for dinner at Hamilton Island, and to make the whole experience even more hassle-free if you arrive when the marina office is still open their staff will come and help you tie up – ideal for anyone unaccustomed to big boat manoeuvring. We might have been a little late for that, but we certainly made it in time for dinner, enjoying a delicious final meal overlooking the breakers at The Beach House restaurant – although the waiting staff did feel the need to translate any foreign references on the menu, which had me struggling to keep a straight face. Fruits de mer, anyone?

The verdict

Personally, I can't wait to sail the Whitsundays again. If you're looking for a totally relaxing holiday spent lying in the sun with only a few hours motoring, then the Whitsundays might not be for you. The islands certainly get their fair share of balmy conditions – but then again you might get a windy week, and I'm not sure our conditions even qualified as unusual. If, however, you're happy doing



PHOTOS: H. FRETTER/ANSA

Left The spectacular Lookout Beach – the pure white silica sand makes the sea appear bright turquoise.

a spot of sunbathing and snorkelling but equally keen to get your teeth into some proper sailing, then they should definitely be top of your list.

Likewise, if you enjoy pulling into a different port with new bars and restaurants to try every night, the Whitsundays are not what that's all about. Whether you do your own shopping or go for a provisioned option, make sure you have enough food and water to survive on several days on board, as the Whitsundays are all about glorious isolation – swinging on your anchor, showering off the back of the boat, and spending the evenings watching the sun go down from the cockpit, with the barbie smoking gently in the background.

Chartering with a local operator such as Rent a Yacht certainly has its advantages, and our boat proved robust and seaworthy (apart from an unfortunate leak in the forepeak as a few of the more determined waves forced their way in to soak our bed). What's more, the Jeanneau had the distinct advantage of looking different from the front and the back – not always the case of purpose-built charter boats – which made it surprisingly rewarding to sail.

Rent a Yacht were very accommodating, and their handovers were particularly low-hassle. But their booking procedures proved exasperatingly high in hassle-factor, with umpteen repetitive forms to fill in, and annoying extra expenses (a non-refundable AU\$200 damage deposit for example, surely if you haven't damaged the boat you should get your deposit back?).

But overall, it's pretty hard to worry about the little things when you're either blasting along in a breeze or stretched out on a blissful beach with sand as far as the eye can see. And for me, that combination of relaxation and excitement makes for the ultimate sailing holiday. ■

Further information

"A five-day charter of a Jeanneau 37 in November with Whitsunday Rent A Yacht costs from AU\$3,425 (£1,539), excluding flights and transfers.

The non-refundable damage levy is \$200, Marine Park Fee is \$40, our Hamilton Island mooring cost \$80 (not including delivery), stinger suit hire costs \$50 for two people, snorkels are provided free of charge, but 'snorkel sanitising' cost \$10.

For more info contact rentayacht@bareboat.com.au or visit www.rentayacht.com.au