

# Great Barrier Reef

The magnificent Great Barrier Reef is the largest coral reef system in the world and is considered one of the greatest natural living wonders on the planet. This reef begins just off the Queensland coast at Bundaberg, (380 kilometres north of the state capital Brisbane), and extends further north for an astonishing 2300 kilometres roughly following the coastline of Queensland, covering a massive area of approximately 344,400 kilometres<sup>2</sup> (kilometres square).

The Great Barrier Reef is composed of and built by billions of tiny organisms, known as coral polyps, and remarkably, as a whole is so large it can be seen from outer space. The 'Great Barrier' itself is not a single reef but comprises of over 2900 stunning individual reefs, 300 coral cays, and 600 islands in the beautiful turquoise waters of the Coral Sea. With its sparkling warm waters, biodiversity, vibrant coral, and tropical islands the Reef draws thousands of visitors every year.

The Great Barrier Reef was listed as a World Heritage protected site in 1981 and has since been managed by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Authority to ensure its pristine condition is maintained for future generations. Accommodation options available when visiting the Great Barrier Reef range from budget camping grounds and backpacker hostels, to luxurious resorts on the islands that are inhabited, or you can take a 'live aboard' boat or yacht trip. Alternatively stay on the mainland, town such as Cairns, Airlie Beach, Townsville, Bundaberg, Gladstone, Rockhampton, Mackay are well set up for travelers to visit the reef in a day trip or to start an extended cruise or boat trip.

## Sights & Attractions

The Great Barrier Reef supports a unique and diverse ecosystem of marine life, including many rare and endangered species. An amazing 400 species of corals, both hard corals and soft corals are found on the reef while more than 1,500 species of fish can also be found here, including the colourful coral trout, snapper, marlin, clownfish, red bass, and the red-throat emperor.

From June until late October each year, various species of whales use the warm waters of the Great Barrier Reef for courtship, mating, birthing and rearing their calves. In all there are 30 different species of whales, dolphins, and porpoises to be found in the region including the dwarf minke whale, Indo-Pacific humpback dolphin, dugongs, and the active humpback whale.

Around 125 species of shark, stingray, skates or chimera also live on the 'Great Barrier', while 6 different species of sea turtles come to the region to breed. 17 species of sea snakes roam these waters, while salt water crocodiles live in the mangroves and saltmarshes on the coast near the reef (although their numbers are small). Also attracted to the reef system are 215 species of birds (22 species of seabirds and 32

species of shorebirds).

The incredible Great Barrier Reef boasts lots of fantastic sights and fun activities for visitors to participate in. Activities include scuba diving, snorkelling, sailing, glass bottom boat cruises, semi-submersible tours, wildlife spotting cruises, whale watching in season (July to November), deep sea fishing, helicopter rides, hot air ballooning, or just relaxing in the sunshine and warm waters of this tropical paradise. The majority of trips can be organized out of Cairns. Cairns is the closest main land point to the reef and has numerous quality reef experiences on offer. Some options like Whale watching can only be done further south on the Queensland Coast at places like Hervey Bay.

The most popular of the activities, enabling visitors to see up close the colourful marine life and coral on the Great Barrier Reef, are snorkelling and scuba diving. The outer part of the Reef is favoured by tour operators for these activities, due to the better visibility. One of the best ways to gain an understanding of how truly large and breathtaking this natural wonder is to take a scenic flight (either by helicopter or plane) over the reef, especially at low tide where its breadth and diversity can be seen most clearly.

Although stretching more than 2300 kilometres along the coast of Queensland, it is only at Cape Tribulation, just north of Port Douglas that the reef meets the shoreline and World Heritage listed Rainforest. Visitors have the luxury of experiencing the scenery and adventures that both the magical Great Barrier Reef and lush rainforests offer. No other place in the world offers such spectacular diversity in such close proximity.

## Climate

The Great Barrier Reef has a tropical climate, with average above water temperatures in summer ranging between a warm 24°C (Degrees Celsius) and 33 °C, and in winter a cooler 14 °C to 26 °C. Located in a wet tropical climate, there are only 2 seasons, 'the wet' and 'the dry'. The 'wet' season stretches from the first of the monsoonal rains around November, and ends in May. The water is warm enough to swim in all year round (rarely below 22 °C), though keep in mind that dangerous box jellyfish inhabit the coastal waters from October through to May. In this period look for netted areas on the beaches to swim in, or ask a local about the conditions.

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