



Rove the Earth with Rovia

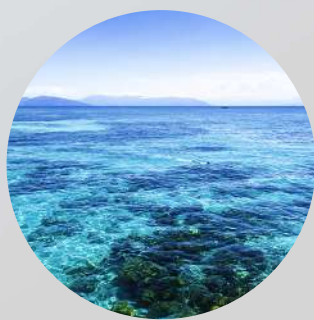
Great Barrier Reef: Nature's Finest is Calling

By Wendy Leth-Steensen

When you're floating on a boat in the middle of the Great Barrier Reef (GBR), you feel like a blip in the universe. The Reef's enormity is matched only by its antiquity – 1,300 miles (2,092 kilometers) in length and more than 25 million years in age. It's home to a vast variety of wildlife, from fish, turtles and dolphins to seabirds, that's preserved for future generations to enjoy.

So, here I am, a gal from Texas, about to slide into the warm waters of this barrier reef off the east coast of northern Australia. Am I nervous? Yes, but I'm no stranger to this type of ancient aquatic environment, having spent my teenage years on Kwajalein Atoll. Back in the day, we snorkeled amid coral forests, often spotting moray eels, sea cucumbers and stingrays, as we searched for triton shells and the illusive golden cowrie...

Back to present day. As we approached our destination, I had plenty of time to reflect on what would be a bucket-list experience – exploring the GBR. At first glance, my view from the boat seemed like any other view over an expanse of ocean that's choppy from high winds. Wow, was I wrong! It wasn't until I put on my snorkel gear and entered the water that the true magnificence of the Reef was revealed.



I was overcome by a landscape of coral beds that dropped into a dark abyss on the horizon. Thankfully, the current was carrying me the other direction as there's a sharp fall of approximately 1.2 miles (2,000 meters). From my vantage point near the surface, I looked down at colorful corals resembling all sort of shapes, including cylindrical branches, honeycombs, cauliflower, mushrooms and even brains and fans. This underwater world is so calm, pristine and quiet. A giant clam opened and closed its huge blue mouth like it had a secret to tell me. Orange and white clownfish darted among the swaying tentacles of an anemone, perhaps playing hide and seek, while bluish green parrotfish crunched and munched on the coral's algae with their beak-like mouth and teeth – and, yes, I could hear them! I even moved out of the way to let a gentle sea turtle glide by. So happy that it let me be a guest in its majestic world!



The Great Barrier Reef is such a complex place to experience for only a few hours, but it can be done. My biggest takeaway was newfound respect for this natural wonder, a living organism that can be seen from space. No wonder it's deemed a UNESCO World Heritage site – there's nothing on the planet that compares to its outstanding beauty and diversity.

Back on land, it's time to relax with a dip in my favorite pool, the lagoon on the Esplanade in downtown Cairns, with the harbor and mountains in the background. Later, I'll stroll to the quaint promenade to a restaurant for dinner and a glass of Australian wine as I contemplate what's next on my bucket list. Cheers!