

The Great Barrier Reef

Lunching with Nemo

WORDS: FRAZER PEARCE

I CAME face-to-face with a maori wrasse - and I liked it.

This big, beautiful fish almost kissed me before turning away.

I was snorkelling, 95km off the Whitsunday Coast, with my family at Knuckle Reef Lagoon - a spectacular part of the Great Barrier Reef.

Sounds good, doesn't it.

What made this Cruise Whitsundays adventure even better for us was the Knuckle Reef Marine Base - an impressive permanent pontoon complete with all the dive and snorkel gear, a semi-sub glass bottom boat and an awesome waterslide into the ocean.

We had arrived on the 37m Seaflight - a state of the art wave-piercing catamaran with a computerised stabilizer system which they say reduces seasickness by up to 70%.

But back into the water with about 50 other snorkellers and divers.

As well as getting to explore the wonders of the reef with my family, and our temporary maori wrasse pet, we decided to splash out an extra \$65 for a guided tour with Ash, a marine biologist.

This was Finding Nemo with expert commentary and we found a Clownfish too, in his sea anemone home.

Ash was a nice bloke. He even took us an underwater family photo.

In between swims and the slide, we found time to tuck into a tasty all-you-can-eat buffet lunch back on board the Seaflight - connected to the base by a walkway.

Cruise Whitsundays has been granted a permit by Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority to operate in the marine park.

Seaflight skipper Ian Kuhl said Cruise Whitsundays' relationship with GBRMPA's marine biologists was a great example of combining tourism with research.

CRUISE WHITSUNDAYS

- **What:** Great Barrier Reef cruise
- **Where:** Departs Airlie Beach, Abel Point Marina.
- **Destination:** Knuckle Reef Lagoon marine base, 95km one way. Snorkelling, diving, water slide, underwater viewing chambers and much more.
- **Cost:** Family pass (2 adults, 3 children) \$550 or adults \$199, children \$95. Includes three meals and all equipment.
- **For more information:** see www.cruisewhitsundays.com.



NICE FISHY: Noel (10) and Frazer Pearce make a new friend at Knuckle Reef.

PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

The author was a guest of Cruise Whitsunday.

Holiday resort

Bucketload of activities and fun at Airlie

WORDS: FRAZER PEARCE

WHAT do you get when you mix kids with a lagoon pool, waterslides and a heap of other fun stuff in one beautiful, tropical location?

Answer: Happy mums and dads.

There's no secret to the success of the four-and-a-half-star Big 4 Adventure Whitsunday resort at Airlie beach.

It combines excellent service, top-notch facilities, buckets of fun but still manages that small-village type atmosphere that only caravan parks can deliver.

Only, this is much more than a caravan park.

Its 32-metre resort-style pool (with two excellent slides and spars) is the main event with the other attractions close by.

When the kids are not wet they are either on the 18-hole mini golf course in a tropical rainforest setting, enjoying the huge adventure playground, jumping on the giant inflatable pillow, having a hit of tennis, volleyball or shooting baskets on a half court.

There are also pedal go-karts for the kids and families to hire out (one-person up to four-person vehicles) which make for a nice way to explore the park while mixing exercise and fun.

BIG 4 ADVENTURE WHITSUNDAY RESORT

- **Where:** Shute Harbour Road, Airlie Beach (five- to six-hour drive from Rocky)
- **Accommodation:** A range of options from camping, caravan and ensuite sites to cabins, villas and new luxury poolside condos with a heap of options in between.
- **Prices:** Range (off peak) from \$29 for powered sites, \$44 for ensuite powered sites, \$95 ensuite cabin, \$125 for a Villa (sleeps five) to luxury condo \$220 and poolview condo (\$250).
- **For more information:** www.adventurewhitsunday.com.au.

And there's the Kids Club and Toddlers Time which gives mums and dads a chance for a bit of "us time" while the children are cared for by supervisors who organize planned onsite activities (Glee Club, Santa's Work Shop, etc)

One thing I'll bring on the next trip is the kids' scooter as more than half the other children were darting around on two wheels most days.

Now before you think this all sounds a bit hectic, it's far from it.

This is a well-designed resort, and while it was fully booked (we were there mid December) it never seemed crowded thanks to its wide open areas and attractive rock garden buffer zones (rainforest trees, palms and tropical plants) between each site.

It's set amid 10ha of tropical gardens with

a large range of accommodation choices (wireless internet available) to suit most budgets.

We stayed in one of three new poolside villas which were roomy (three bedrooms, two bathrooms) and comfortable with high quality fittings.

This family owned-and-operated resort is a great place to base yourself while you explore the Whitsundays but the beauty of this park is it's so packed with activities you could spend a week there without being bored.

In fact, a family I spoke to had just been out to an island resort but couldn't wait to get back to Adventure Whitsunday.

"It's so relaxing here," the mum-of-three from the Gold Coast told me.

(The author was a guest of the resort)

TURTLE TOUR ON JETSKI IS ONE BIG THRILL



TURTLE TIME: Taking a break in the jetski tour to say hi to a few sea turtles. PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

IT was like taking a small but powerful, luxury convertible for a cruise - only this trip was on top of the water.

The three-seater Honda Jetski (powered by a 1500cc fuel-injected four-stroke engine) is one impressive machine and a thrilling way to explore Pioneer Bay off Airlie Beach.

I must admit to a few flutters of apprehension as I sat on the jetski with my son (10) and daughter (8) at Abel Point Marina, getting final safety and operating instructions from our excellent Whitsunday Jetski Tours guide Alistair. But as soon as we hit the water that concern blew away with the sea spray.

"This is living," my son yelled as my daughter gave a "yee ha!"

I can't tell you how fast we were going as we were having too much fun leaning into turns while trailing the wake from the other jet skis in our party.

The 90 minutes flew by as we covered 30km in and about the coastline, enjoying the spectacular scenery and having a few close encounters with a half dozen sea turtles (this trip is also known as the Turtle Tour).

The conditions varied greatly as we cruised around, ranging from smooth, in protected waters to 1.5 metre waves as we ripped across the bay.

The biggest thrill for me as I gained in confidence was when it felt like I was flying from wave top to wave top before plunging into a trough which caused a waterfall like effect.

The kids loved it.

Like all good things it was suddenly over and I couldn't help but wonder where the 90 minutes had gone and what the Whitsunday Jetski Tours' 50km four-hour trip to Daydream Island would be like?

Maybe next time.

JETSKI ADVENTURE

- **What:** Whitsunday Jetski Tours - Airlie Adventure trip
- **Where:** Abel Point Marina, Airlie Beach - exploring Pioneer Bay and waters off Airlie beach.
- **Craft:** Honda Aquatrax F15 1500cc fuel-injected four-stroke jet skis
- **How long:** 90 minutes, 30km.
- **How much:** \$200 per jet ski or \$100 per person twin share. All equipment provided.
- **Ages:** Minimum driver age 16. No experience or licence required.
- **Also:** Daydream Extreme: 4 hours, 50km, \$170 per person twin share.

The author was a guest of Whitsunday Jetski Tours