

Humpbacks, coral, crystal water, beaches, rainforest and a whale

Islands at stream of



The view approaching Keswick Island with Whale Cottage on the foreshore and St Bee's Island to the left gives an impression of the quality of the attractions so close to Mackay. LEE CONSTABLE 020910/505

By TOM WILLIAMS
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A WORLD away from the traffic of Shakespeare Street or the noise of a Paget workshop, paradise lies just 40km from Mackay, in the form of some beautiful almost untouched islands.

Living in Mackay for two years, I must admit I was one of the people who's laziness got in the way of visiting the beautiful Whitsundays - that and I didn't want to travel to Airlie Beach in order to head to the islands when we have some beautiful examples directly off Mackay.

When I was given the opportunity to jump aboard '2001', a giant catamaran out of Mackay Harbour, I saw this as a great chance to check out what The Great Barrier Reef, one of the seven wonders of the natural world has to offer. Barely 20 minutes from

the harbour the boat began to slow, why? A small family of humpback whales was playing on the starboard side. This was not a one-off sighting, over the course of the day, the whales came to play and the passengers of '2001' were treated to the sight of more than ten giant humpbacks, with the playful creatures breaching less than a kilometre from the boat.

As we motored through the passage between Keswick and St Bees Islands, the water was calm as the boat passed through an area protected from the wind, where the turquoise blue waters have to be seen to be believed and I hear the fishing is pretty good also.

Whale Cottage, a small contractor accommodation on Keswick Island holds a tale of how close the humpbacks can actually be to the islands.

Rumour has it a contractor worker on the island

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Refuge Bay at Scawfell Island is one of many beautiful spots off Mackay. LEE CONSTABLE 020910/364



Visitors to Scawfell Island check out Refuge Bay, just off Mackay. LEE CONSTABLE 020910/433

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of a cottage-naming tale await Mackay people 40km from home edge of region's consciousness

was enjoying a cold ale in the afternoon on the veranda of Whale Cottage just a few metres from the waters edge. The worker felt water spray on his back, thinking it may be a sprinkle of rain; the man was surprised to smell a strong sent of anchovies and turned around to see a humpback whale only metres away.

It was water from the whale's blow hole which had sprinkled the contractor's back.

One of the islands where a beautiful beach can be accessed on all tides, Scawfell Island can only be described as magic.

There is a gap in the fringing reef so boats don't damage the natural environment as they access the sand, which crunches under foot from the thousands of year's worth of broken coral and shell deposits.

Walking along the beach it is hard not to notice the lack of footprints in the

white sand.

"You are probably the only one who will leave footprints on this beach today," the tour operator tells me.

I cannot help but be amazed that my office is only 50km away, though it is the last thing on my mind as I venture through the dense rainforest which dwarfs the small cove, surrounded by one of the most scenic reefs in the Whitsundays.

"As locals we can become blind to exactly what is in our backyard," said Paul O'Connor, Chairman of Mackay Tourism limited.

"We need locals to be tourists for a day, with 80,000 people in our area we shouldn't even need an external tourism industry," Mr O'Connor said.

David Phillips is the General Manager of Mackay Tourism limited.

"This is our version of the Whitsunday experience; we can offer a more authentic

island experience where people can get in touch with nature," he said.

"Let the masses go to the islands up north, we are so fortunate to have such an untouched group of islands here," Mr Phillips said.

"We have an imbalance which we are trying to counteract. Mackay is not just about the coal, and we have such beauty right on our doorstep."

As we slowly motored back to Mackay, stopping to view more playful whales on the way, I couldn't help think every person should experience the tranquillity which lies just of our coast.

People from all over the world travel thousands of kilometres specifically to visit the crystal clear waters and untouched reef systems of the Great Barrier Reef, and we, the lucky people of Mackay and surrounding areas have this natural wonderland almost a stones throw from our homes.



Mackay Tourism's David Phillips, Reef Star Cruises Ross Courtenay and Scott Munro, managing director of Keswick Developments P/L discuss eco-tourism. LEE CONSTABLE 020910/426



A humpback whale plays off in the tropical waters off Mackay. LEE CONSTABLE 020910/672



Tenders deliver guests of Keswick Developments P/L and Mackay Tourism's to Refuge Bay on Scawfell Island. LEE CONSTABLE 020910/415



One of many scenic views from Refuge Bay, Scawfell Island. LEE CONSTABLE 020910/434

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