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WORLD TRAVEL



An aerial view of Hook Reef reveals hundreds of coral kingdoms. There are more than 900 islands strewn along the 1,200 miles of this coral rampart. Right: An exclusive beach on the hideaway island of Bedarra, off the town of Mission Beach in Queensland.



TRANSFORMATION

T H E G R I P O F O Z

BY CINDY SAWYER • PHOTOGRAPHS BY TY SAWYER



■ Captain Nick, who looks as if he could have been part of the crew during Captain Cook's 1770 voyage through the Whitsundays, checks the sails and rigging of the square-rigger Coral Trekker. Right: Strangler figs in the rain forest on Dunk Island.

T

he wind was like medicine. There were only two of us on deck. The captain, Nick, had the good sense to stay in the pilothouse of the square-rigger, the *Coral Trekker*. Every now and then he'd pop his head out the door to check the sails and rigging. When he did, the squall would

whip his hair into a frenzy that looked like a hundred coiled snakes battling for space on his head. He'd look at me as if I were crazy, rub his hands over his mutton chops as if considering my rescue, then shake his head, shiver off the chill and slide the door shut.

I stood beneath a jungle of halyards and sheets that whistled and rippled with the gusts. Massive ochre-colored sails, whose square shapes seemed more appropriate for a ship at Captain Cook's command, filled taut with an unseasonable gale, a "bit of a blow," Nick had said with grinning understatement. But he'd laid out canvas from the topgallant to the mains with the wild relish of a sailor ready to outpace the wind, and now the 75-foot Norwegian-built vessel was jumping and skipping through sea, well on its way to victory. My own hair danced around my head and my jacket flapped angrily. Salt spray stung my eyes and dripped from my cheeks, and I could feel the pulse of the ocean as the ship sliced a deep path into it. But I felt alive. I felt cold and wet and gloriously alive.

I'd only been in Australia for three days. Three days re-



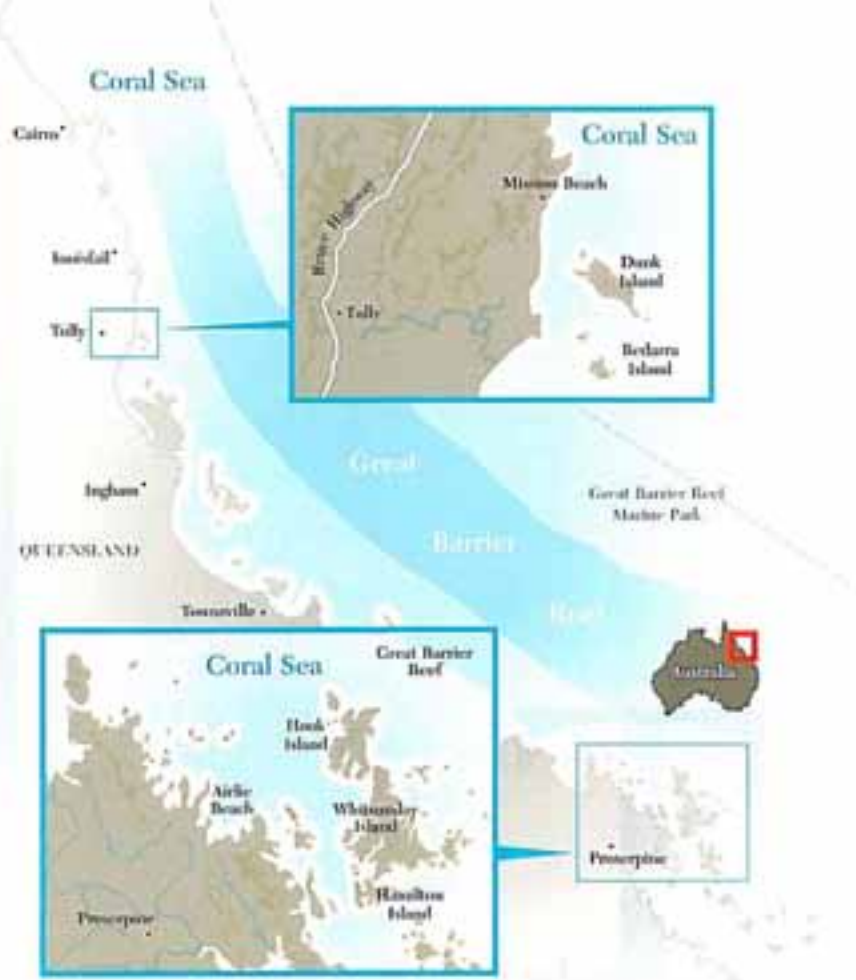
moved from the nonstop swirl of motherhood and Palm Pilots and play dates. Three days removed from the chaos of schedules and meetings. And I was just beginning to submit to the grip of Oz.

IN 1770, CAPT. JAMES COOK MADE HIS EPIC VOYAGE THROUGH these same waters discovering what had been known to the Aboriginal people for thousands upon thousands of years: The eastern coast of Australia and the continental islands bordering it are about as close to heaven as it is possible to be while still on this Earth. I, however, live in Florida, and spend a good deal of my life in minivans.

Then came the day my husband, Ty, arrived home from work and informed me with a silly grin that I was no fun anymore and I needed to get away. My balm would be "a few hours" to the southeast of our Orlando home.

"Just you and me on this trip," he said.

"Just you and me?" It was a concept I had almost forgotten. Right up there with peace and tranquility.



The Great Barrier Reef spreads out across the horizon in a kaleidoscope of greens and blues, in water so clear you can't imagine ...

A FEW WEEKS LATER WE WERE BOUND FOR OZ. NOW, I DON'T know exactly how Australia got the nickname "Oz." But when we arrived on Hamilton Island, in the Whitsundays just off the coast of Airlie Beach, Queensland, there was something immediately intoxicating. Something authentic, romantic, perhaps feral and, though I didn't know it at the time, transforming. As I stood on the balcony of our room at The Beach Club hotel, the sea danced in the early morning light as if it were alive with tiny, delighted pixies celebrating the dawn. A couple walked contentedly along the shore.

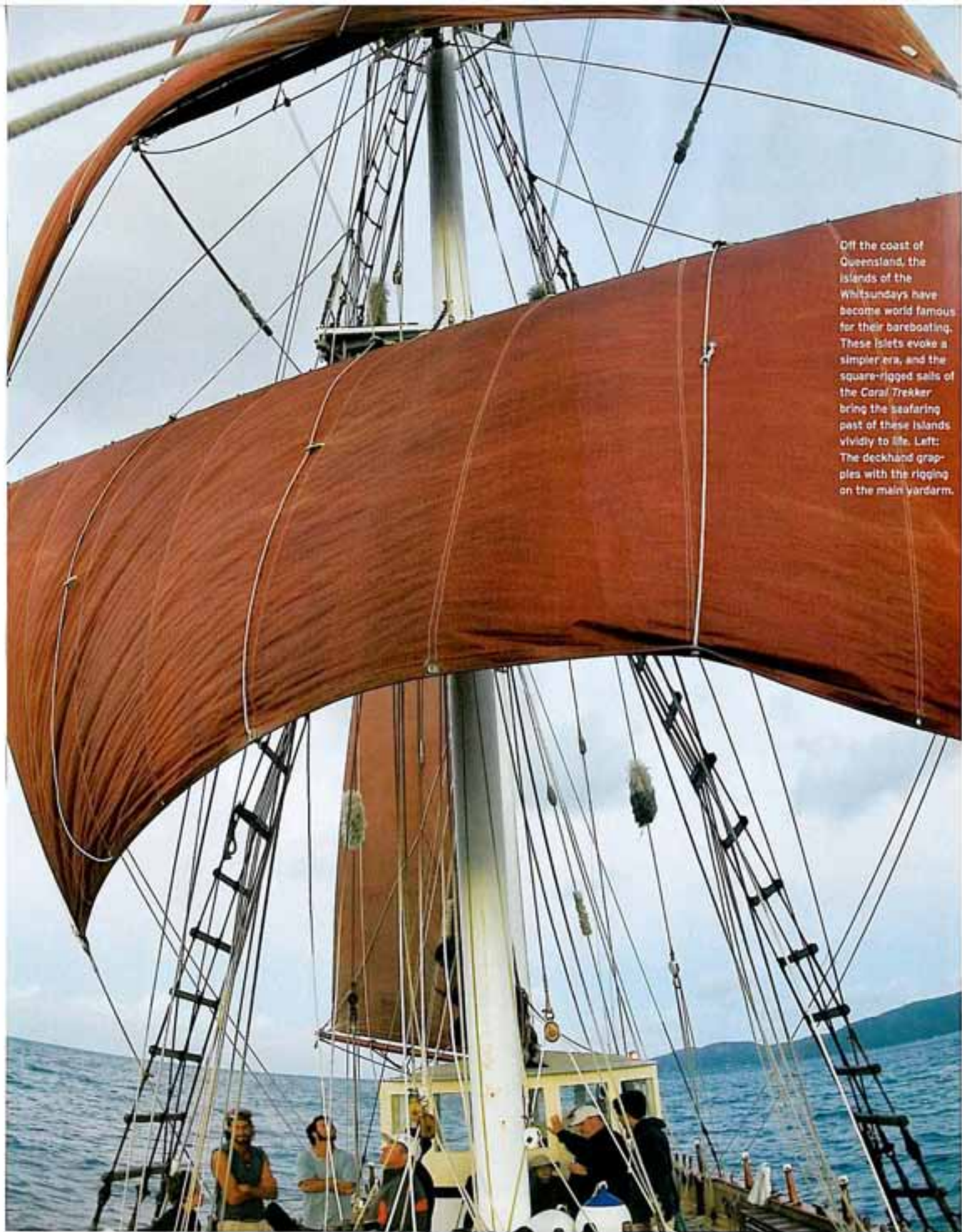
Before we set sail like Cook on his epic voyage, we boarded a helicopter to see the 74 Whitsunday Islands spread out on the horizon and the Great Barrier Reef. Cook named the passage between the reef and the mainland "Whitsunday Passage" because, as he said in his log of June 3, 1770, "This passage was discovered on Whitsunday." (Whitsunday is the British name for Pentecost.) Ironically, Cook had unknowingly crossed what would later be called the International

Date Line and it really wasn't Whitsunday at all, but the name stuck nonetheless. The Reef spreads out across the horizon in a kaleidoscope of greens and blues, in water so clear you cannot imagine that it is actually over 120 feet deep in places. Several fascinating formations can be seen from the air, the most famous of which is Heart Reef. But I was drawn to the islands, which erupted from the sea like emeralds.

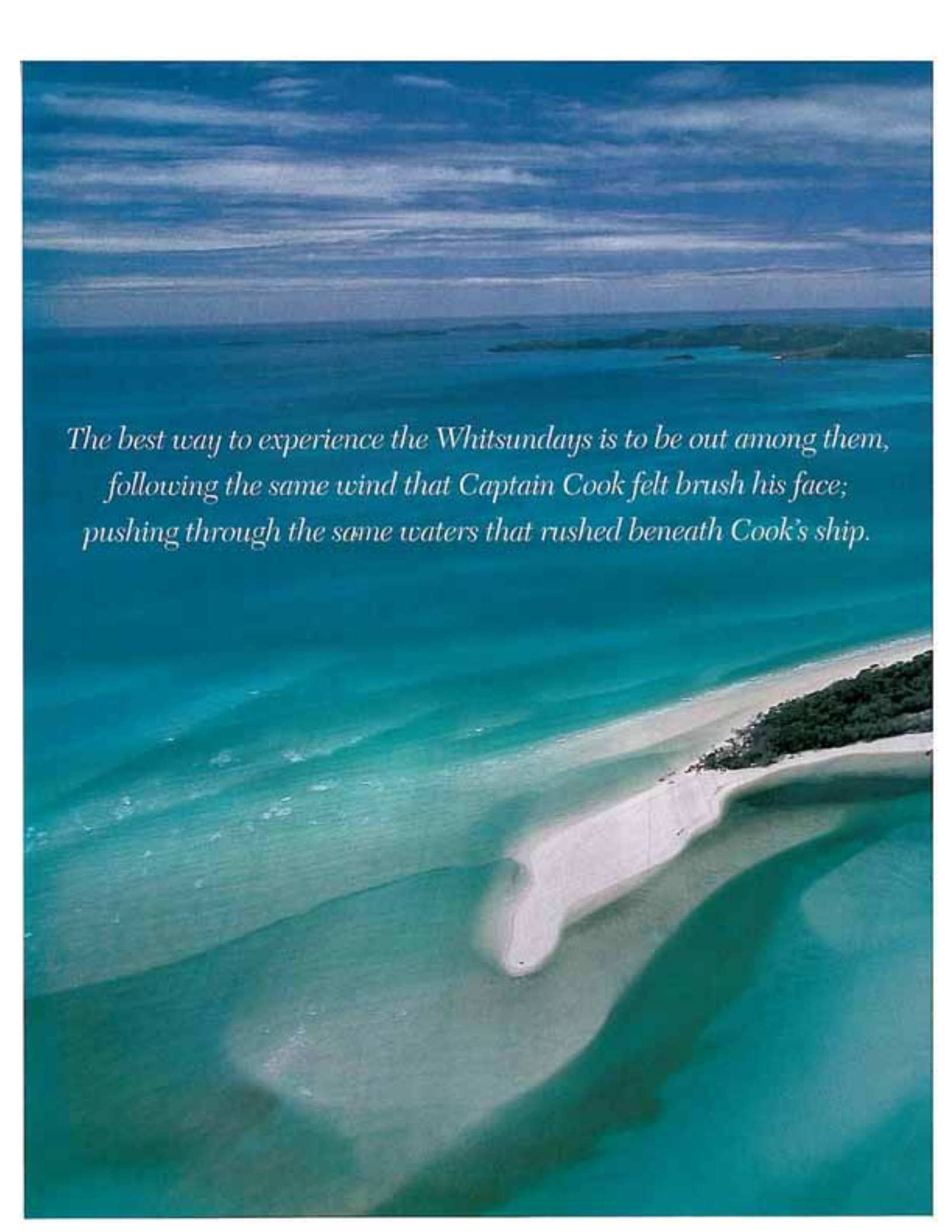
"They're so green," I shouted through my headset. It was a dimwitted thing to say, but my brain had not yet recovered from the shock of relaxation. What I really wanted to say was that they looked so completely unspoiled. The land looked as untouched and serene as it must have thousands of years ago.

"Almost all the islands are designated a national park," our pilot answered. "Only nine are inhabited."

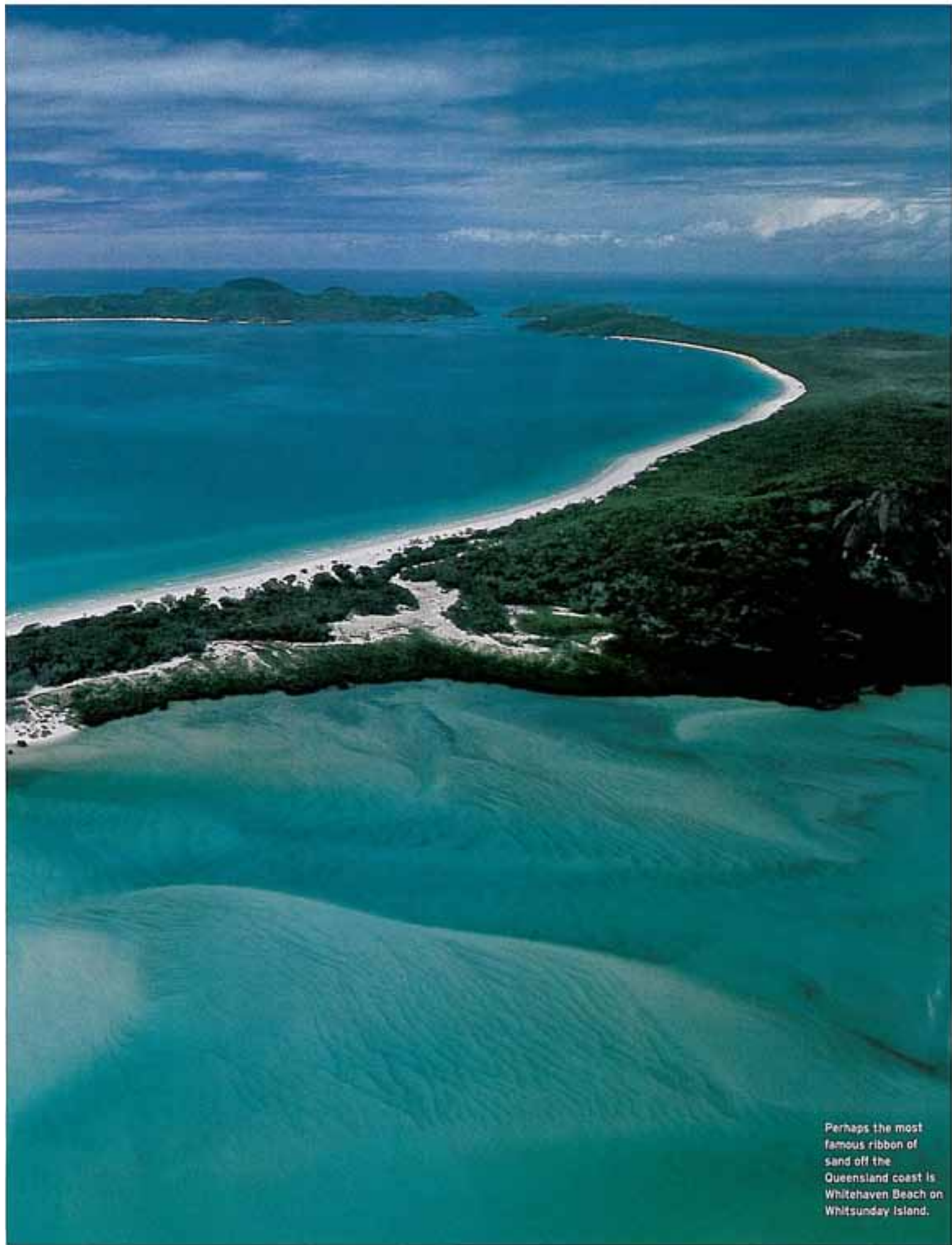
"It's pretty," I said, still shouting, still temporarily mindless. What I meant to say was that it was probably the most lovely thing I'd ever laid eyes on, but I just said, "It's pretty," and followed up with an illuminating "Really pretty."



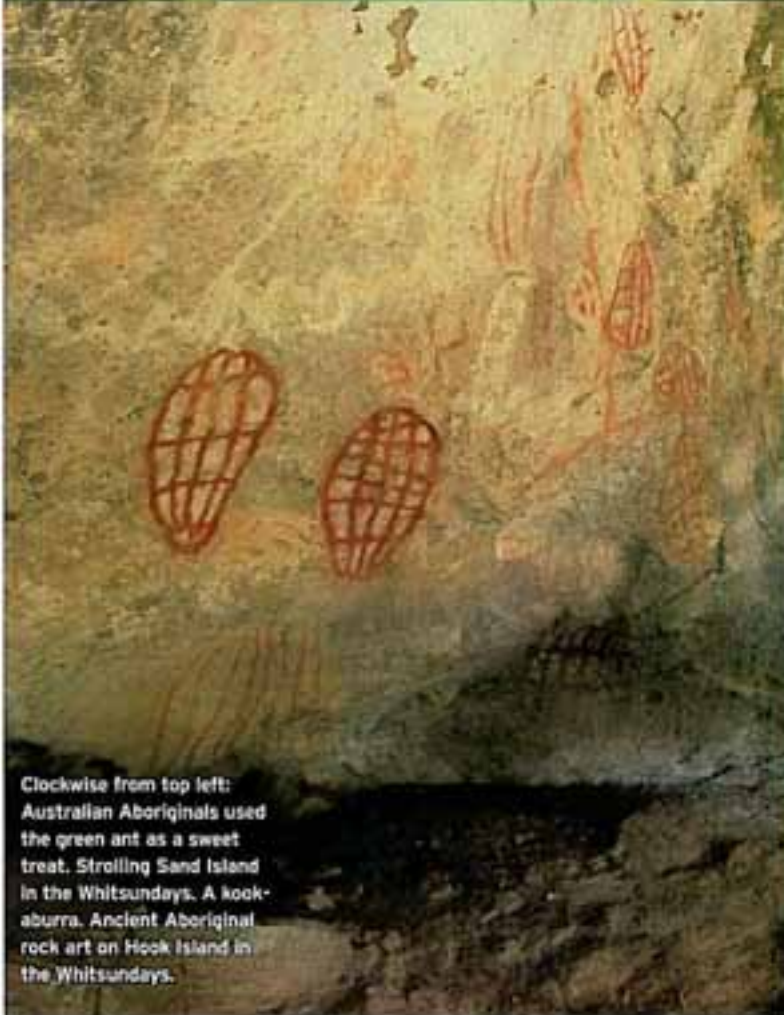
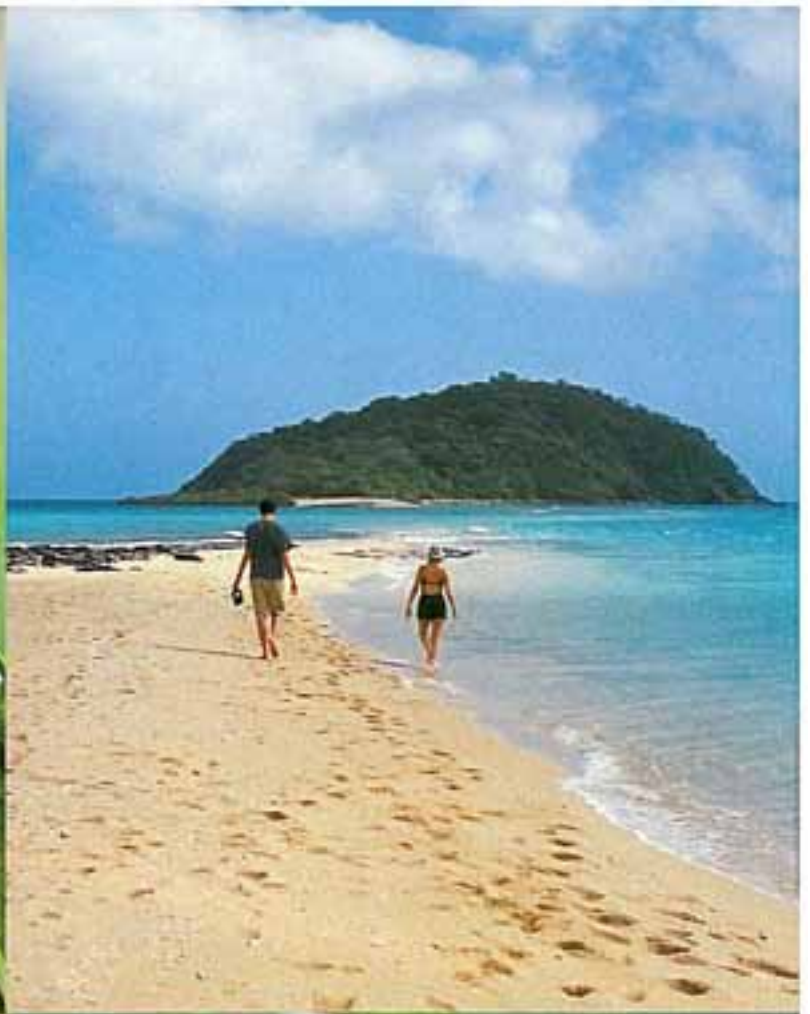
Off the coast of Queensland, the islands of the Whitsundays have become world famous for their bareboating. These islets evoke a simpler era, and the square-rigged sails of the Coral Trekker bring the seafaring past of these Islands vividly to life. Left: The deckhand grapples with the rigging on the main yardarm.

An aerial photograph of a tropical coastline. The water is a vibrant turquoise, transitioning to a deeper blue further out. A narrow, white sandy beach runs along the edge of the water, with a small peninsula extending into the sea. The sky is a deep blue with wispy white clouds. The overall scene is serene and idyllic.

*The best way to experience the Whitsundays is to be out among them,
following the same wind that Captain Cook felt brush his face;
pushing through the same waters that rushed beneath Cook's ship.*



Perhaps the most famous ribbon of sand off the Queensland coast is Whitehaven Beach on Whitsunday Island.



Clockwise from top left:
Australian Aboriginals used
the green ant as a sweet
treat. Strolling Sand Island
in the Whitsundays. A kook-
aburra. Ancient Aboriginal
rock art on Hook Island in
the Whitsundays.



A cable bridge stretches across the primitive folds of rain forest on Dunk Island.

Birds were calling to each other through the dense foliage, haunting, otherworldly calls, and wild turkeys roamed across our path.

THE NEXT DAY, TY AND I TRANSFERRED TO ABEL POINT MARINA, in Airlie Beach on the mainland, and climbed aboard the *Coral Trekker* to set sail. As much as I had enjoyed the relaxed luxury of the Beach Club, the best way to experience the Whitsundays is to be out among them, following the same wind that Cook felt brush his face; pushing through the same waters that rushed beneath Cook's ship.

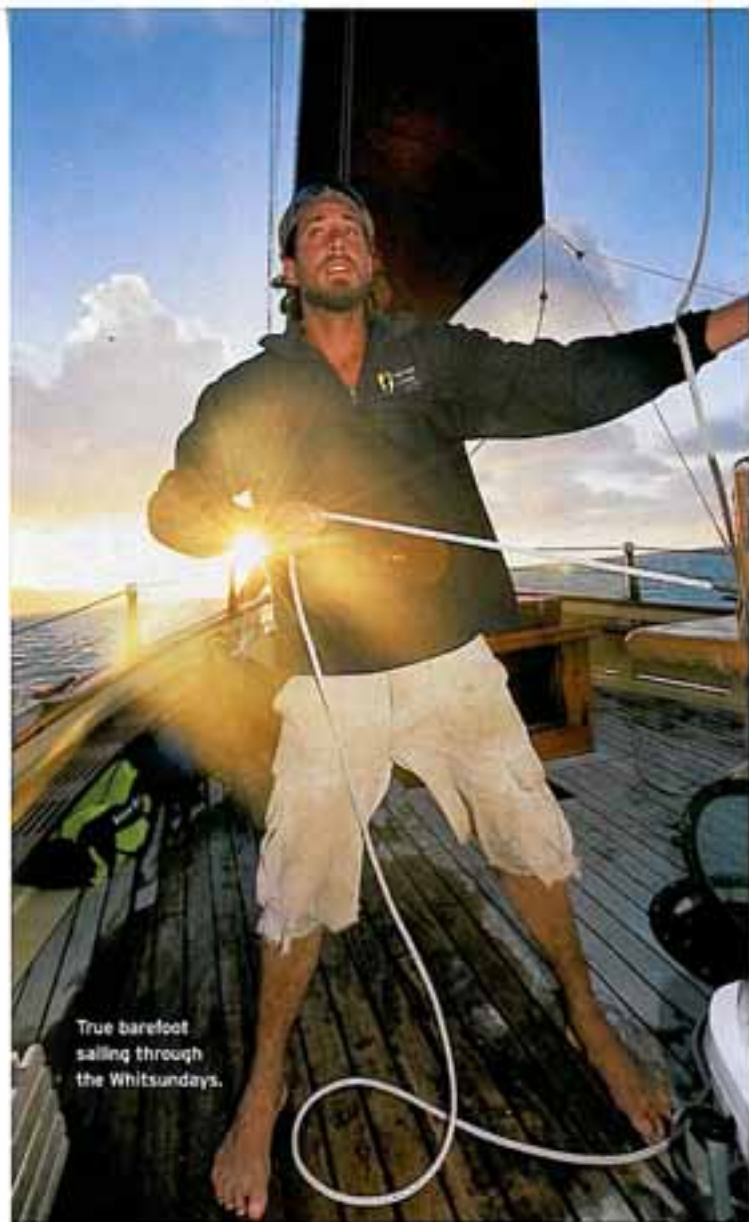
Ten minutes out of Airlie Beach harbor, the ship was riding at full tilt, with nine passengers aboard and four crew. I leaned over the rail and watched the ship slice into the waves.

Over the next few days, we found ourselves exploring, diving and even playing "footie" (Australian for rugby) on and around many of the Whitsundays. Because of their national park status, the islands, even those that are inhabited, remain pristine. Every day aboard the *Coral Trekker* was like standing on the edge of a faultless, undefiled world, soaking up the nuances of the planet as it was meant to be. Every night the stars came out in astonishing array, sprays of light so numer-

ous I felt I had traveled to a different planet. Each island stop was its own adventure. We dove and snorkeled many of the quiet coves sheltered off Hayman and Hook islands, encountering an unbelievable array of fish life and lush hard corals; octopus and rays and tiny purple anthias.

Then there was life on board, which is where I met Mac. Mac was 12. He had a wealth of knowledge, not all of it accurate and most of it learned from TV. He was traveling with his parents, his older sister Ani and a family friend named Ben. Mac was funny, spontaneous and told terrible jokes. At one point I looked up and met my husband's delighted gaze and realized I was actually laughing. I think I'd stopped laughing some time ago. Thus the reason for this trip. I felt a bit like a small girl who'd been looking at a roomful of new toys, and now, suddenly, I was being allowed to play.

When the weather turned rough, I could not help but stand on deck with the wind blowing through my hair and the sea surging up while those with more sense went below. It was



True barefoot sailing through the Whitsundays.

dawning on me that there was more to life than just running around like a maniac. On that same day we were treated to the spectacle of humpback whales breaching not far from the ship. If you have never seen a whale breach, it is impossible for me to describe the thrill of seeing such an enormous creature effortlessly launch itself out of the ocean. My heart stopped for a moment each time. On the deck of the *Coral Trekker*, where there were no phones, no TVs, no BlackBerries, nothing to distract me from the inexorable pulse of life all around me, I began to believe that I could live my life differently, more grateful and graceful and less hurried. The spell of Oz was beginning to swirl about me.

WE SPENT OUR LAST DAY ON BOARD IN THE PROTECTED COVE of Nara Inlet off Hook Island. Taking a tender to shore, we hiked up a well-worn path to see Aboriginal cave paintings and a waterfall that flowed out of the rain forest and down the side of one of the cliffs overlooking the inlet. Throughout the islands, there is a casual excess of beauty. Standing on the edge of almost any path, you can look out and see 15 different shades of blue rising up from the sea to the sky. At one point along our hike, we all stopped and stared down into the inlet. No one spoke for a few minutes — we didn't have to. As we walked farther, the waterfall formed pools that glittered in the sunlight, inviting anyone spirited enough to jump in and swim. The water was icy cold, and Nigel, the *Coral Trekker's* divemaster from New Zealand, was the first to brave it. Mac and Ani joined him. About the time Mac began to turn blue, we decided to continue on our hike. Just up the path from the pools, we discovered thousands of butterflies crowding the trees. Light filtered through the leaves, and everywhere we looked butterflies were dancing. (Continued on page 92)

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Nearby Dunk Island offers suites, beachfront rooms, garden cabanas and has plenty of activities for families and couples looking for an adventurous escape. Rates from \$250 to \$520. www.voyages.com.au. No kids are allowed at the intimate, couples-only Beach Club, which overlooks Catseye Beach on Hamilton Island. Rooms: \$546-\$782. www.hamiltonisland.com.au.

Take to the Sky Fly over the world-famous Heart Reef, snorkel through the coral kingdoms of the Great Barrier Reef at Reefworld on Bail and Hardy Reefs; then top it off with a romantic champagne picnic for two on iconic Whitehaven Beach. Aviation Tourism Whitsunday Helireef tours take off from Hayman Island. Discovery Tours cost \$329 to \$699. www.avta.com.au.

In the wake of Cook Ride the same winds and explore the Whitsundays named by Captain Cook aboard the *Coral Trekker*, a 75-foot square-rigged sailing ship that plies these waters the same way Cook did. You can even join the crew in the rigging. Scuba diving, snorkeling, beach barbecues, "footie" on the beach, and rainforest treks are included. Barefoot Cruises are \$750 to \$1,710, depending on length of stay and your needs. www.barefootcruises.com.au.



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OZ (Continued from page 78)

ing from branch to branch.

On the way back down the path, Ty, who'd been to Australia before, stopped the group and pointed to a green ants' nest attached to some bushes. These half-inch ants were immersed in slicing and "gluing" leaves for their arboreal enclave. "You should lick their bums," he said. "It's tasty."

"You what?" the rest of us responded.

Nigel looked slightly uncomfortable but nodded. "You can lick their bums."

Mac, who according to his mother never ate anything, was the first to step up. He plucked an ant from the shrub and took a few cautionary licks. Once he got the hang of it, no ant was safe. The rest of us figured if Mac could do it why couldn't we, and an ant-licking fest was begun. Nigel commented later that he had never been able to get anyone to sample the ants, much less a whole crowd of people. Mob mentality, I suppose. Later that evening, Mac confessed that his tongue had gone a bit numb. He'd overdone it on the ant smorgasbord. Lesson learned: One bum licking is probably enough.

It was difficult to say goodbye to the Whitsundays, but our journey had two more stops before we headed home. We were on our way to Dunk and Bedarra, in the Family Islands.

JUST NORTH OF THE WHITSUNDAYS AND two miles off the coastal town of Mission Beach, Dunk Island was called *Coonanglebah* by the Aboriginal people, it was renamed Dunk Island by Captain Cook in honor of the Earl of Halifax, George Montagu Dunk. There is one resort on the island, a small artists' colony, campgrounds and miles of walking trails; most of Dunk is designated a national park.

While on Dunk, we learned of its former famous resident, E.J. Banfield. I immediately felt a kinship with him. In the late 1800s, Banfield had been a newspaper reporter and editor for the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* of

Queensland, and as the demands of his job became more and more taxing, his health began to fail. In 1897, his doctor told him he had only months to live, so a weak and ailing Banfield, with his wife, Bertha, made the dramatic decision to quit everything and move to uninhabited Dunk Island. It is reported that he was so frail when he arrived he literally had to crawl up the beach into the shade while others unloaded his boat. On Dunk, he grew strong and lived for 26 more years, championing wildlife preservation, conservationism and simplicity. Having just begun to emerge from my own state of hyper-stress, I was struck by a quote from Banfield's book *The Confessions of a Beachcomber*:

"Better this isolation and moderation in all things than, racked with worries, to moan and fret because of non-success in the ceaseless struggle for riches, or the increase thereof. ... These writings are

guests from Dunk to Bedarra. The night before our departure, the normally placid weather in this part of Australia took a turn. It poured rain and the winds began to blow. By the next day, the Family Islands were covered in thick, drenching mist. By the time we reached the jetty, 15 minutes later, we were exhilarated. We were finally on Bedarra.

Huge boulders line much of the shoreline. White sand beaches, like those of most of the islands here, are abundant, and the rain forest is thick with possibility. There is only one resort on Bedarra and a few residences on the far side of the island. Accommodations are luxurious, private and unbelievably romantic. We were shown to a villa, one of only 16, with a view to our own beach and the sea beyond. Outside, the mist had turned back into rain, giving us the perfect excuse to do nothing.

Many years ago, when I was in college, I would finish my exams, fly home and sleep for about a week. My mother cooked for me, I'd stay up late watching movies, and no one complained that I wasn't doing anything. Bedarra made me feel that way again. There was no agenda; just a library filled with books,

for those who see something in life beyond the mere 'getting on in the world,' or making a din in it."

I had lost sight of what was beyond "making a din in" the world. On Dunk, I began to feel the pulse of the Earth.

Later that day, Ty and I hiked through the rain forest. I will never grow tired of places where you can walk out the door and step into a world uninhabited. Birds were calling to each other through the dense foliage — haunting, otherworldly calls — and wild turkeys roamed across our path. The roots of buttress trees rose up around us, twisting and twining through each other in spontaneous sculptures superior to human artistic endeavor. After walking across a suspension bridge, we came across Banfield's grave, a fitting resting place for the wisest of souls. E.J. Banfield had been a lucky man. He could have died defeated and miserable, but instead he chose to

games and DVDs, remarkable food, excellent wines and an atmosphere so conducive to rest that after an exquisite dinner, we fell into a blissfully sound sleep and didn't wake up until the first rays of sun filtered gently through the palms outside.

After breakfast we took out a "tinnie" (Australian for a small craft) and lunched to circumnavigate the island. Without stopping, a small motorboat can make its way around Bedarra in about 45 minutes. We, however, had another plan. We were headed to an abandoned resort on the far side of the island. It had been damaged in a cyclone about 13 years before, and the owner had chosen not to rebuild. We'd been told it was interesting, but when we arrived, "interesting" was an understatement.

We had stepped into Jurassic Park. A few bungalows peeked out of the jungle. We made our way to one and carefully entered. It was easy to see that the structure had once been a splendid hideaway. Striking wood floors and intricate architectural details remained, along with a few chair cushions and other small traces of human habitation, but the rain forest had begun to take



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live simply and died, full of years, in a place he dearly loved.

I thought there could be nothing better, but Ty had saved the best for last. We were headed to Bedarra.

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hold. Vines had found their way in along one of the walls, and parts of the ceiling were beginning to give way to the inevitable takeover by nature. Outside, overgrown pathways led us to an ancient-looking pool, empty and disintegrating. We wandered the resort for hours, expecting at any minute to see a T-rex emerge from the undergrowth.

Suddenly, standing there among the ruins of man's ambition, I understood the indefinable quality of "Oz" that permeated Australia, the thing Banfield had figured out over 100 years ago. Here in this crumbling oasis, I realized that all the energy and money and time that had been put into building it and running it and making it matter were now just meaningless, abandoned to nature. Life was not about my doing, my succeeding, "the ceaseless struggle for riches." At last I recognized that it was time to stop worrying so much. Time to stop and watch a sunset and laugh with my children and lie outside on the ground with my husband staring up at the stars. I felt a freedom I had not known for many years. I was, at last, wholeheartedly in the grip of Oz. ♦