



**CAIRNS AUSTRALIA TRAVEL GUIDE**

# Snorkeling with your life at stake

**CAIRNS, QUEENSLAND, AUSTRALIA.** It is not much of a city – but the ocean has the more to offer. With water so blue that photos seem artificial afterwards, Cairns in northeast Queensland, Australia, attracts divers from all over the world to experience the most magnificent maritime environment nature has to offer.

Swordfishing and a goldrush built Cairns, looking much as an American small-sized city, but that era is long gone. 50 kilometers from the city's seafront promenade, the *Great Barrier Reef* runs northwest to southeast off the Australian coast, and it is from this natural wonder that the town collects its income these



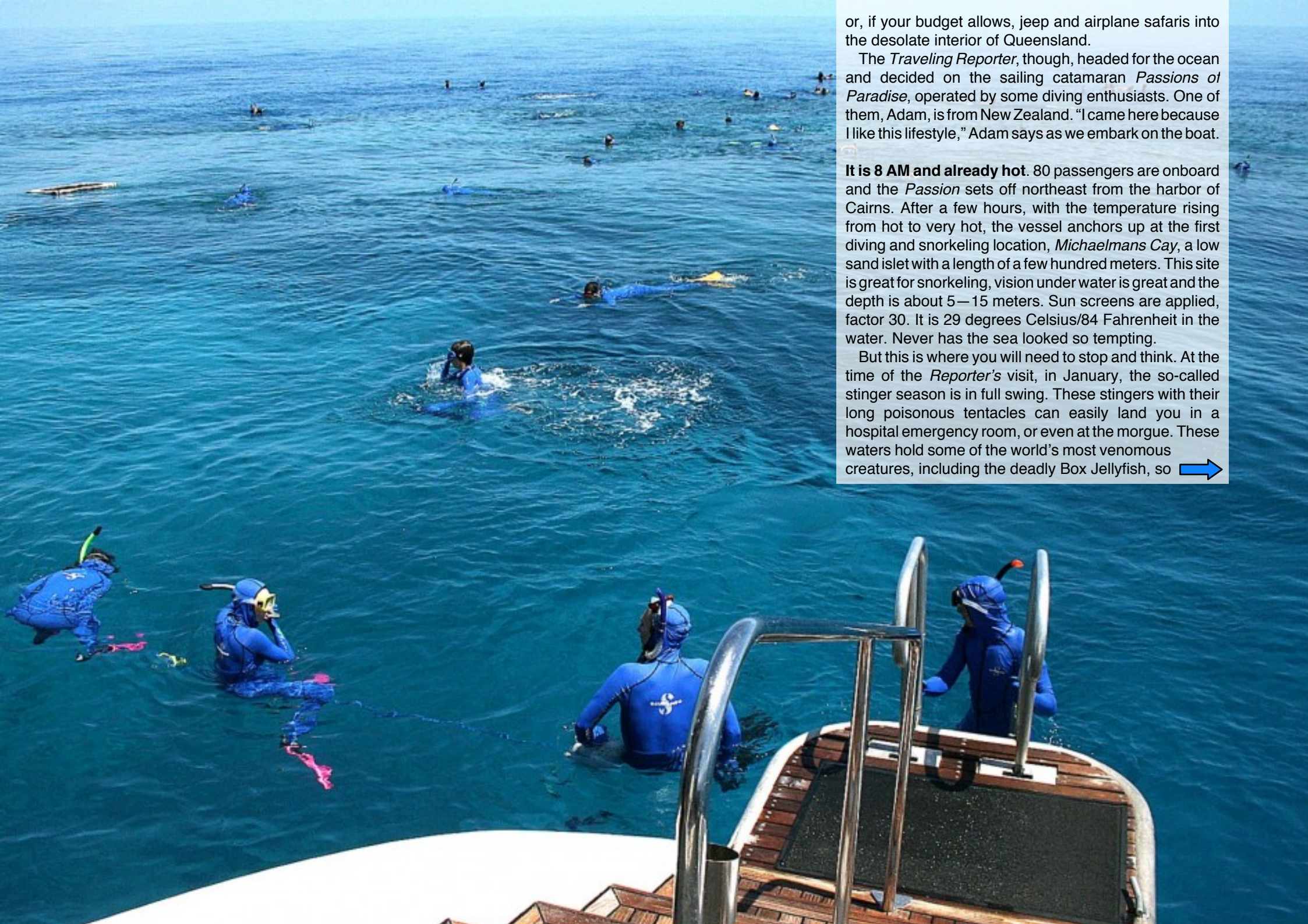
**SMURF ISLAND** Tourists gear up on a sand islet to dive and snorkel on the Great Barrier Reef. Photo: Traveling Reporter

days. The city itself, with low buildings and wide, often empty streets, a gigantic shopping mall and a few restaurants make for no more than one or two days' idle pleasures if the weather turns bad. There is also a train station and a large parking garage.

**And then, to the northeast:** The coast. But those looking for a family-friendly beach to not bother – this is another kind of tourism. Instead of fine sand, visitors who venture down to the city's shoreline by foot are met by a muddy shoreline and warning signs about poisonous stingers and alligators. Swimmers are referred to a

central pool area, indeed well-built and clean, including a man-made lagoon and a guard overlooking the scene. The place is filled with people on weekends, but if you keep your nose just above the waterlevel in the pool and squint towards the sea, you might almost get the same sense as if you are on a swim in the ocean. Barely.

**So it is not** for the fine buildings, rich culture and arts offerings, or the good restaurants that you would come to Cairns. But for nature. Both out on the reef, but also inland, where tour buses can bring you to farms that will take you on a horse through the rain forest, →



or, if your budget allows, jeep and airplane safaris into the desolate interior of Queensland.

The *Traveling Reporter*, though, headed for the ocean and decided on the sailing catamaran *Passions of Paradise*, operated by some diving enthusiasts. One of them, Adam, is from New Zealand. "I came here because I like this lifestyle," Adam says as we embark on the boat.

**It is 8 AM and already hot.** 80 passengers are onboard and the *Passion* sets off northeast from the harbor of Cairns. After a few hours, with the temperature rising from hot to very hot, the vessel anchors up at the first diving and snorkeling location, *Michaelmans Cay*, a low sand islet with a length of a few hundred meters. This site is great for snorkeling, vision under water is great and the depth is about 5—15 meters. Sun screens are applied, factor 30. It is 29 degrees Celsius/84 Fahrenheit in the water. Never has the sea looked so tempting.

But this is where you will need to stop and think. At the time of the *Reporter's* visit, in January, the so-called stinger season is in full swing. These stingers with their long poisonous tentacles can easily land you in a hospital emergency room, or even at the morgue. These waters hold some of the world's most venomous creatures, including the deadly Box Jellyfish, so →

a protective “stinger suit” is advised. We rent those on board the boat, and, the suits being blue, soon all 80 passengers look like smurfs. All but a few Italian tourists who can't stand having their self respect hurt by getting into the funny-looking safety dress.



Because of the dangers, you will have to sign a waiver before getting into the water, putting responsible on yourself.

**When you think** it can not possibly get any hotter out on the calm sea, it does anyway. Lunch is served onboard the *Passions of Paradise*, and meanwhile the vessel moves on ten minutes to the next location. Here, the sea is deeper. Just aft of where the boat has anchored up, a cliff on the bottom turns downwards in a breathtaking drop 80—100 meters or so into the blue deep. The divers on the tour applaud this dive especially much, but those who go snorkeling are having a great time too.

**The boat's sails** are set as we begin the journey back. The wind often blows from the north here, but today it is so weak that the ship's both diesels have to work during to whole trip.

We are back in Cairns about 5 PM, sweaty and happy. On the jetty, the crew lines up and shakes hands with all passengers: “Cheers, mates”, “See ya later boss!”. Of course, this is mass-tourism and tomorrow they will stand there and say goodbye to another bunch of tourists. But the act of the crew seems genuine and makes the diving tour the more personal. Extra points.

**These diving events** are not the cheapest of tours, though. The ground price for a day on this catamaran is AU\$139, including transport, lunch, coffee and diving/snorkeling gear. The actual dives cost money, too, and rent of stinger suit, underwater camera and drinks in the bar will set you back another 20-30 dollars.



**LEISURE CRUISE** *Adam, one of the crew members, is from New Zealand originally. To the right: A dive boat has anchored up at one of the sind islands at the Great Barrier Reef. Photo: Traveling Reporter*

