



# Luxury not just a reef encounter

There's plenty to see and do from the only five-star waterfront hotel in Cairns, says **MIKE SMITH**

**N**ATURE certainly knows how to paint a masterpiece. When the canvas is the Far North Queensland coast and the subject is the Great Barrier Reef, you sense she put a lot more loving care into creating the panorama.

From the air, we sit in awe as the helicopter whisks us over the reefs and shallow sandy lagoons.

The turquoise waters glisten in the afternoon sun and we get a glimpse of stingrays swimming gracefully along.

"Sadly, it's around here that Steve Irwin lost his life," says the pilot as we look across to yet another coral-ringed lagoon.

For a few moments we reflect on the life of the world-famous crocodile hunter, marvelling at, rather than cursing, the sea creature responsible for taking his life.

The flight across the

reef to Cairns Marina – and the Shangri-La Hotel that dominates it – provides the final splashes of colour to a day that had already displayed plenty of spectacular blues, greens and reds.

The day began on the Mirage Marina in Port Douglas with a Quick-silver cruise to the outer reef.

The journey is swift on the catamaran but there is time to research the marine life and study the pros and cons of preserving the reef, amply illustrated by a marine biologist's presentation on the TV monitors.

Our dive base is a large two-storey pontoon permanently anchored near Agincourt Reef.

With columns of sun piercing the water, the coral becomes as brightly decorated as the parrot fish – and the buffet of prawns, mussels, chicken and

salad served for lunch on the pontoon.

It's three or four hours of snorkelling that soon slip away. And if you don't want to get wet, there's a semi-submersible craft that takes sightseers along the reef.

Back on land, a 10-minute drive from Cairns, is the terminal for the Skyrail cableway, a multi award-winning ride that takes us above the trees of the Barron Gorge National Park rainforest in enclosed, glassed six-seater gondolas towards the quaint village of Kuranda.

Like the reef, the forest is pristine. Its canopy and the wildlife that call the scrub below home are protected by a World Heritage listing.

The cable car journey stretches nearly 8km of the 2820ha national park, stopping at 545m-high Red Peak for a guided or self-guided

walk along an elevated timber boardwalk that loops around a couple of lookouts.

At the end of the walk is a state-of-the-art rainforest interpretation centre that is a child's delight.

As a home-away-from-home, the luxurious Shangri-La Hotel is a good choice for a stay, especially after the \$35 million upgrade.

It's billed as the only waterfront five-star hotel in Cairns, a contemporary retreat that is tastefully decorated and luxuriously furnished.

To relax in the evening after a day of snorkelling or venturing through the rainforest adds yet another splash of colour to a tropical part of the northern coast that has so many natural masterpieces.

*The writer was a guest of Shangri-La, flying Virgin Blue.*



**WATERCOLOURS: Cairns Esplanade. Picture: Tourism Queensland**

## DESTINATION

### CAIRNS

**GETTING THERE:** Virgin Blue flies to Cairns via Brisbane ([www.virginblue.com.au](http://www.virginblue.com.au))

**STAY:** Shangri-La, The Marina, Cairns. One night from \$265 a couple, including sparkling wine and \$60 credit towards lunch in Tides. Phone 07 4031 1411 or [www.shangri-la.com](http://www.shangri-la.com)

**DETAILS:** Cairns Tourism 07 4051 3588 or visit [www.tropicalaustralia.com.au](http://www.tropicalaustralia.com.au)

