

Treading water among the stars

DENISE CULLEN

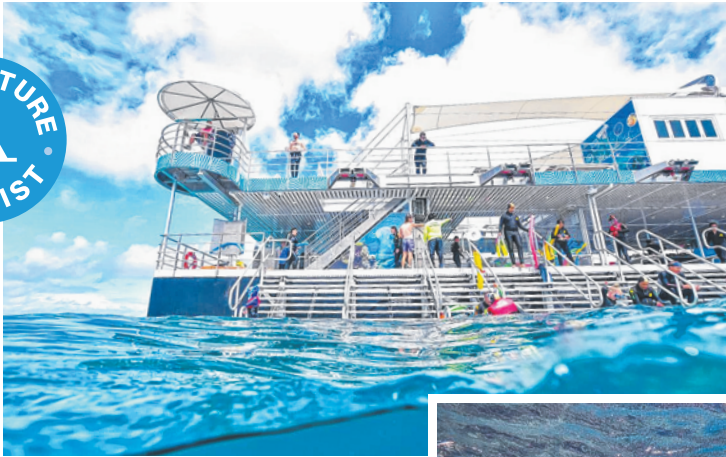
Master reef guide Eric Fisher is leading a group of snorkellers and pointing out the results of coral restoration work on Moore Reef when he's upstaged by a humphead Maori wrasse.

"Woah!" The bulky fish with bulbous lips seems to launch itself at him, circling his legs, nudging his chest, demanding attention. Fully grown, this species can reach more than 2m in length and while this one is just a juvenile, it's still big enough to cause a splash. "They're very curious," Fisher explains, after it finally swims away.

We're in the sparkling waters surrounding Experience Co's three-level Reef Magic pontoon, 45km, or a 90-minute high-speed catamaran ride, from Cairns. Launched in March, the Great Barrier Reef's newest pontoon offers a jumping-off point for snorkellers, divers, swimmers and sightseers, alongside an active research laboratory that seeks to better understand how Earth's largest living structure might survive a warming planet.

Like other participants in this snorkel safari, I tread water, riding the gentle ocean swell, as Fisher explains that the first 10m of the outer edge of nearby Moore Reef were "stripped bare" by Cyclone Yasi in 2011. "It went from 95 per cent coral cover to 10 per cent," he says. Extreme weather events like this are emerging as a key climate change-related threat to coral reefs and other habitats. Back-to-back coral bleaching events in 2016 and 2017 further highlighted the risks posed to this natural wonder.

Spread out beneath our gaudy fins is a



The new Reef Magic pontoon, left; master reef guide Eric Fisher, below

PICTURES: TEQ



growing constellation of "reef stars", hexagonal structures that provide a stable base for coral fragments to grow. "Reef stars only really work in a (coral) rubble-dominated environment," Fisher says. "The main thing you want to do is try to turn the rubble into a coral reef."

When we visit, 348 stars have been laid out in four separate tranches, representing 5200 coral fragments and 55 species from seven different families. We swim alongside Fisher to those placed in December 2021. The sand-coated steel structure is still visible beneath the surface, covered in fledgling fragments and shining with hope.

But as we duck-dive down to view the first reef stars placed in June 2020, which have had much longer to become established, reef fish dart among dense and diverse coral cover, with a mix of swirling rosettes, swaying

tendrils and the hard tips of staghorn corals glowing vibrant blue and indigo. The project is a collaboration between Mars Sustainable Solutions, Reef Magic Cruises, James Cook University and local Indigenous rangers.

Unlike other new pontoons such as the Lady Musgrave Experience off Bundaberg, there is no accommodation on the Reef Magic pontoon (unless you're a visiting scientist). Instead, visitors get about five hours to

IN THE KNOW

Day trips to Reef Magic Pontoon, include snorkelling gear and instruction, glass-bottom boat tour, access to the underwater observatory, marine biology presentation, buffet lunch, tea, coffee and drinking water; 8.15am-5pm with five hours on the reef; from \$279 an adult.
reefmagic.experienceoz.com.au

explore, making it an easy day trip from Cairns. Guided snorkel safaris are just one of the activities on offer. Helicopter rides, introductory and certified dives, and an air-conditioned underwater observatory with floor to ceiling windows are also available.

Then there's the glass-bottom boat, which glides over the coral. Our guide for this portion of the day is Dustin Maloney, a Kuku Yalanji man who has connections to all four clans in the Cairns region and is Australia's first Indigenous master reef guide. He strides up and down the boat, displaying the spears, or gulka, traditionally used to hunt fish and turtle, and shares the Dreamtime story of how the reef was created.

Maloney is not only adept at explaining contemporary reef science, but at shedding light on the cultural significance of this area to his people in terms of food resources and also as a place of spiritual healing.

"It's very important for us to maintain our connection to our country, not only for the land, but the sea," he says.

Denise Cullen was a guest of Tourism and Events Queensland.

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