

REEF HOPPING

The Stuff of Dreams



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For many yachties, one of the most appealing aspects of the cruising lifestyle is sitting at anchor in a very beautiful and secluded spot, with nothing but the ocean surrounding you. A coral reef anchorage is the stuff of dreams and **CHRISTINE DANGER** takes us to four of her favourites.

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MAIN PIC: Catamaran meeting at Fitzroy Reef.

INSET: Moorish Idols are so elegant!



We enjoy cruising to isolated reef areas of the Australian north-east coast. Just think: pristine turquoise waters, beautiful lagoons some with coral cays, snorkelling in a warm sea, a G&T at sunset and simple pleasures away from crowds. And to add to the dreamy feel, an extraordinary world opens up each time we look under the surface. Trips to the reef are like visiting sunken gardens.

Coral reefs are one of the oldest ecosystems on earth. Although they cover only 0.2% of the total area of oceans, they provide habitat for at least 25% of all marine life. To give you a sense of the spectacular beauty, vastness and incredible biodiversity, the Great Barrier Reef covers 344,400km² in 3000 coral reefs, 1500 species of tropical fish and more than 200 types of birds.

We hasten to admit that our reef experience is tiny. There is so much to discover it will occupy many winter cruising seasons to come. As we discover more, we will write more articles about it! The incredible thing is that every reef we go to is unique and this is part of the appeal of exploring not only different reefs but also several locations on the one reef. In this article, we take you to four of our favourites to date: Fitzroy, Wistari, Hook, and Bait Reefs.

FIRST THINGS FIRST ... IDEAL CONDITIONS FOR THE REEF

Before launching offshore, let us begin with a few general observations about weather conditions and anchoring at a reef. The best time to explore is during the calmest and most predictable time of year, and for North Queensland this means early spring, avoiding

the worst of the trade winds which bring 20-25 south easterlies – far too strong to be at the reef.

Ideally you want no more than 10kts of breeze. A period of light and variable conditions is what you are looking for to head out. Even in calm conditions, when anchoring along a coral reef, you have to be prepared for some chop and current which means some boat movement.

On a gentle day it is a really special experience to be out there in such a beautiful if a little exposed spot. What is not so special is when the night weather is 180° from what you had during the day, the breeze picks up over 15kts and you end up spending an

unnerving and uncomfortable night rock and rolling, with the water noisily slapping at your hulls and the boat is stern to the reef! Believe us, when it blows over 15kts it gets very uncomfortable, particularly at high tide when there is no shelter.

With the sun overhead, you should be able to make your approach to the reef wall or the lagoon entrance with the bottom clearly visible and avoid the coral bommies typical of every reef anchorage. Arriving when the sun is high in the sky is most important. Early mornings and late afternoons do not offer sufficient visibility, particularly if you have never been there and can't follow a snail trail.



TOP: About eight moorings within Bait Reef allow you to hook on for a couple of hours.

ABOVE L-R: Look at those bright lips – the mantle of the Giant Clam.

Anemonefish are very territorial and defend their host vigorously!

Spiral tube worm, also called Christmas Tree Worm!

ANCHORING AT THE REEF

One of the warnings about anchoring near a reef or in a lagoon is that dragging anchor in stronger winds can be disastrous. You want to ensure your anchor is well and truly set in broad daylight. Once the sun is low or at night, moving safely is impossible. Navigating around bommies demands bright sunlight. If a fresh breeze is expected, use two anchors in tandem or a buddy – a lead weight that lowers the angle of your anchor chain and makes it harder to dislodge. But as mentioned before, you should not be there if strong winds are forecast.

The anchor chain is not of much use in the locker. You will sleep better at night if you use it all! Generally you are anchoring on a sandy bottom with good holding. You need to allow a full 360° swing, free of bommies, and remember there is about 2.5m of tide between high and low water.

FOUR UNMISSABLE REEF DESTINATIONS

You have the right weather window, you know the drill with anchoring, now let's explore four reef anchorages we highly recommend.

FITZROY REEF

Thirty two nautical miles offshore of the little township of Seventeen Seventy, and 30 from Lady Musgrave Island, Fitzroy Reef is the only naturally formed, all tidal entrance lagoon on the Southern Great Barrier Reef. It is the largest reef in the Bunker Group and is a 3650ha drying, closed ring reef with a large, deep (6-10m) lagoon that can be entered through two narrow natural channels.

The approach to Fitzroy Reef in totally calm weather is something to behold: deep ultramarine offshore, stunning aqua as we come in to the glass like lagoon. With clouds reflected in the mirror of the lagoon, it is hard to see where the water ends and the sky begins. At high tide the reef is totally covered and you would not know it is there.



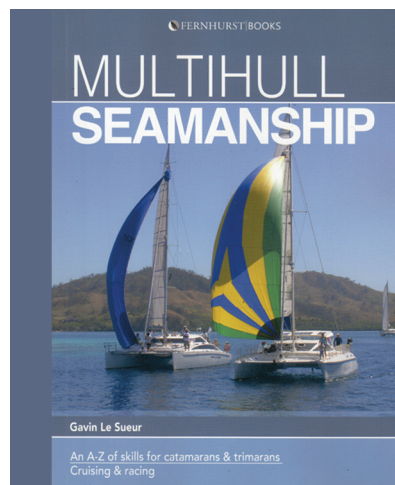
Anchored at Hook Reef – Brilliant colours.

We like coming to Fitzroy Reef because you not only can snorkel but also fish, and you do so in relative seclusion. It is not as busy as Lady Musgrave as there is no coral cay. No tour boats here, just one or two yachts during the day and fishing cruisers sheltering here at night after a day's fishing activity.

The appeal here is the amazing underwater life. It is an absolute jewel. The lagoon boasts a diverse range of spectacular platform corals and bommies, a multitude of brilliantly coloured dainty fish and it is often deserted during the day.

WISTARI REEF

Only 18nm northwest of Fitzroy Reef, 55nm from the town of Gladstone, and only half a mile south of Heron Island is the lagoonal platform reef of Wistari. As is the case with many reefs there are five distinct zones at Wistari: the reef rim, the reef flats, the sanded reef flats, the lagoon and leeward reef edge. Each zone offers



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very different snorkelling and diving because it harbours different species of corals and fish.

If all you do is snorkel, you will be enchanted by Wistari's coral pools and gardens. The hard and soft corals look like you have stepped into an underwater veggie garden. Broccoli looking soft corals, mushroom corals ... and a healthy population of angelfish, damselfish, iridescent pullers, parrotfish and butterfly fish. At low tide the Wistari Reef is very shallow indeed so you have to think thin as you hover over in 50-80cm

of water, going from one pool to another, with sandy patches in between. Being at eye level, you get to see incredible detail and variety up close. Even at mid tide, there are coral pools out on the flats which are well worth swimming over.

If you have dive tanks, then the Wistari Wall is the place to go to, preferably as a drift dive as the current runs fast along the sloping wall which drops from 3-20m and is decorated with many lovely corals. Pelagic fish like

trevally, batfish and tuna abound and a good population of reef fish also reside here, alongside turtles, wobbegongs and reef sharks. And if you are lucky you will also see manta rays.

Although there is little protection at Wistari Reef, you can anchor alongside the reef or grab one of two public moorings. There are also a couple of dive buoys where you can tie up your dinghy while exploring.

HOOK REEF

If you like your privacy, enjoy anchoring on your lonesome away from commercial tour boats and charter yachts, and are looking for a safe entrance, then Hook Reef is your spot! Located only 20 miles off the tip of the Whitsundays, it is a wonderful place to go because you can beat a retreat to sheltered waters if the weather turns.

Finding the way in is easy, as the western end of the southern wall is marked with a cardinal marker. The entrance into the hook is wide, clear of bommies and deep. The current can be strong between Bait and Hook Reefs, looking a bit like a pot boil, but once out of the passage, the water calms down. You can take your pick and anchor on the southern side of the 'hook'

or cross over to the northern side, close to Hardy and Line Reefs. We followed the southern wall for about a mile and anchored in sand in 3m of water at low tide with ample room to swing between bommies. This allowed us to swim off the boat. Of course if you stay further out, you can anchor in clean sand and dinghy closer in, anchoring in sand at the edge of the reef wall. The snorkelling there is magic. You are also allowed to line fish or go spearfishing. There is a wide variety and size of fish and the coral is healthy and colourful. There is some storm damage in places, but overall it is very beautiful and thriving.



TOP: The Stepping Stones at Bait Reef, perfect for snorkeling or diving.

ABOVE: The entrance to Hook Reef is well marked.



BAIT REEF

Sunset at the reef, anchored in the middle of nowhere!

Bait Reef is the nearest of the platform reefs from Hook Island in the Whitsundays, about 16 miles from the north east of the island. This is a fascinating spot which attracts commercial dive boats to the wonderful site of The Stepping Stones. These are 18 flat-topped coral pinnacles which have an abundant variety of fish and corals. The pinnacles rise from a depth of 15-25m and stop within 1m of the surface. There is also a small lagoon and platform reef. Definitely worth a look for the novelty of the pinnacles, especially for a dive with tanks.

You can't anchor there, but there are eight public moorings available for two hours inside the Stepping Stones, and one on the outside, at the Manta Ray Dropoff. So you don't get that feeling of being away

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FAR LEFT: *Take It Easy* in the mill pond of Hook Reef.

INSET: A school of little iridescent pullers.



from it all, you may not be able to settle there for the day if it gets busy and you have to share the spot with lots of tourists! The moorings are however right inside of the Stepping Stones and small lagoon, so you can just jump off the back of your boat for a snorkel or use the dinghy to explore further. The Stepping Stones are like coral gardens, lots of soft coral and fish swarming around. The platform reef is reasonable only and although the fish life is abundant there is more storm damage there than at Hook Reef, with lots of rubble. The colours and scenery from your deck are breathtaking at Bait Reef. This site is really spectacular. Being in a Green Zone, or Marine National Park, you can look but don't take. We stayed there overnight and enjoyed multiple snorkels. A local trevally befriended our boat, spending a lot of time beneath our hulls.

Reef anchorages in the right conditions inspire all who visit. A fascinating world of unforgettable adventures awaits those who dare explore. And the encouraging thing: it's not that hard to get to, and once you have tried it, you will be hooked. So what are you waiting for?

Chris and her partner Wade Bishop have been sailing on catamarans of various sizes for nearly 20 years, cruising Bass Strait, Tasmanian waters and Australia's east coast. In July 2017, they finally retired, and are now sea wanderers. After spending many years on *Take It Easy*, they have just acquired their 'last' catamaran, *Anui*. a 52ft Crowther. Bigger and better things await! Follow their adventures on www.sv-anui.com