



For a destination with a difference, how about a coral cay?
CHRISTINE DANGER explains what these beautiful little islets are about and takes us visiting six of them in Far North Queensland.

Have you ever seen those amazing wisps of whiteness gleaming out from a turquoise sea, these tiny sand islands on the Great Barrier Reef? If you have, like us, you probably go searching for them because sand cays, as they are called, not only provide a bit of shelter at anchor, but most importantly they are absolutely stunning. On the other hand if you have never seen them, then you'd better add them to your bucket list! Either way, here are six solitary sand cays worth visiting in Far North Queensland.

SO FIRST OF ALL, WHAT IS A SAND CAY?

Unlike continental islands which share the same geology as the nearby mainland, a sand cay is a small, low elevation sandy island on the surface of a coral reef. A cay forms when ocean currents transport loose sediment across the surface of a reef to a low area where the current slows or converges with another current, releasing its sediment load. Gradually, layers of deposited sediment build up on the reef surface and an island is formed. Its shape changes with time, governed by the weather patterns and tidal movements.

Some cays are still relatively young, and start their life as a sandbank. Other more established ones are covered with vegetation which gives them more stability.

The cay resulting from sediment accumulation is made up of the skeletal remains of plants and

PARADISE FOUND

Return to *Anui* after a little wander on the cay.



animals from the surrounding reef ecosystems. Much of this sediment is comprised of coral skeleton – calcium carbonate – that has been processed through various species of parrotfish. As the parrotfish feed, their beak-like mouths scrape algae off dead coral, taking small pieces of coral skeleton with it. The parrotfish then eliminate the sand, which falls to the reef floor in a very fine sandy powder. Yap, fish poo! Think of that next time you sit on one of those gorgeous islets gazing at the amazing views and graduations of colours!

I can hear you ask, so you want us to sit on a pile of poo. What’s the attraction?

Well first of all, the cay despite its small elevation, together with its surrounding reef, provide a little bit of shelter for anchoring, particularly at low tide when the reef breaks the effect of waves and swell.

Secondly, cays are home to a great diversity of wildlife, both in the surrounding reef and on the islet itself. You go there not only for snorkelling, but for bird watching.

And lastly, you go there for how they make you feel – serene, in awe, away from all your worries!

So let us take you to six of our favourites you might like to visit along the Far North Queensland coast, and tell you a little about their appeal.

1. UNDINE CAY



TOP: Aerial of Undine Cay – a different perspective!
ABOVE LEFT: Reef dweller – a black patch Triggerfish.
ABOVE RIGHT: The seascape at Undine Reef.

Undine is one of those dreamy islets that appear in the middle of the ocean and take your breath away. It is surrounded by turquoise water, with a shallow reef further out. No public mooring there, but good anchoring in 10-12m of crystal clear water. It begs for

you to hop into the dinghy as soon as you have safely anchored and come ashore on a pristine patch of sand where the only footprints are those of a few sooty terns. Although the shallow reef surrounding the cay is not as striking as other reefs we have been to, we still managed to spot species of fish we had not seen before and the soft coral was pretty.

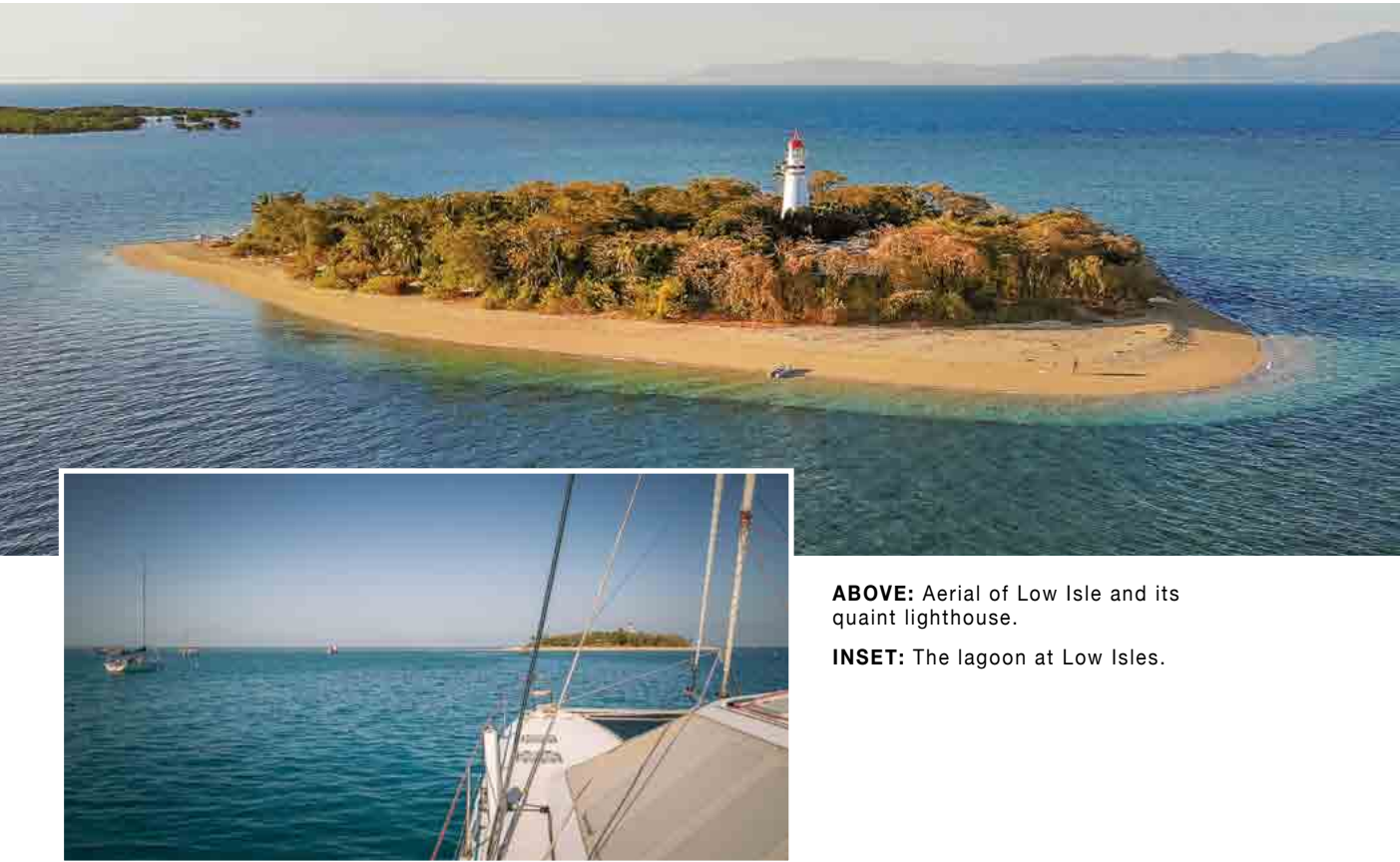
2. VLASOFF CAY



TOP: Amazing graduations at Vlasoff Cay.
ABOVE: Helicopters land on Vlasoff Cay if no one is on it.

About 20nm from Cairns through a network of reefs, is the tiny Vlasoff Cay, not vegetated, gleaming in the sunshine and nestled in the middle of turquoise waters. You can anchor in 8-10m of water over sand or pick up one of four public mooring buoys. You will gaze at unbelievably beautiful graduations of aqua and ultramarine as far as the eye can see. You wish you could get Vlasoff to yourself. But you possibly won’t. It is a favourite with choppers from Cairns, which fly over quite often; some land there and drop couples for a brief visit, complete with sun umbrella, deck chairs and a glass of bubbly. But here is a little secret: as long as there is someone on the cay, no helicopter will land – a safety precaution. So if you sail to this gorgeous little islet, we think it is a rather cool place to take a picnic and a bottle of fine wine and celebrate the joy of being there on your own deserted island.

3. LOW ISLES



ABOVE: Aerial of Low Isle and its quaint lighthouse.
INSET: The lagoon at Low Isles.

Fifteen kilometres off the coast of Port Douglas, Low Isles is a good spot for sheltering in stronger wind and for birdwatching. Low Isles is actually two sand cays which have evolved quite separately with regard to their vegetation. Low Isle itself is a pretty vegetated coral cay complete with palm trees, its own lighthouse and a couple of buildings looked after by a caretaker. The coral cay shares a common reef with the mangrove island called Woody Island. In the shelter of the reef and in between the two islands is a quasi-lagoon with

three public moorings, and another two further out. So chances are when you get there, you won’t have to anchor. But if you do, there is plenty of space in 8-10m of water over sand.

What is attractive about this spot, apart from the scenic cays, is the birdlife. Lots of sooty terns, imperial pigeons, a couple of ospreys which have built their nest on the side of the lighthouse top, whimbrels, reef egrets to name a few. The snorkelling there leaves a bit

to be desired. The reef is dominated by soft corals and the usual variety of fish such as parrotfish, angelfish and fusiliers. But being very close to the mainland, the waters are affected by coastal runoffs which have damaged the coral garden and severely limit visibility. We still liked Low Isles though for its great shelter and birdlife.

4. MACKAY CAY

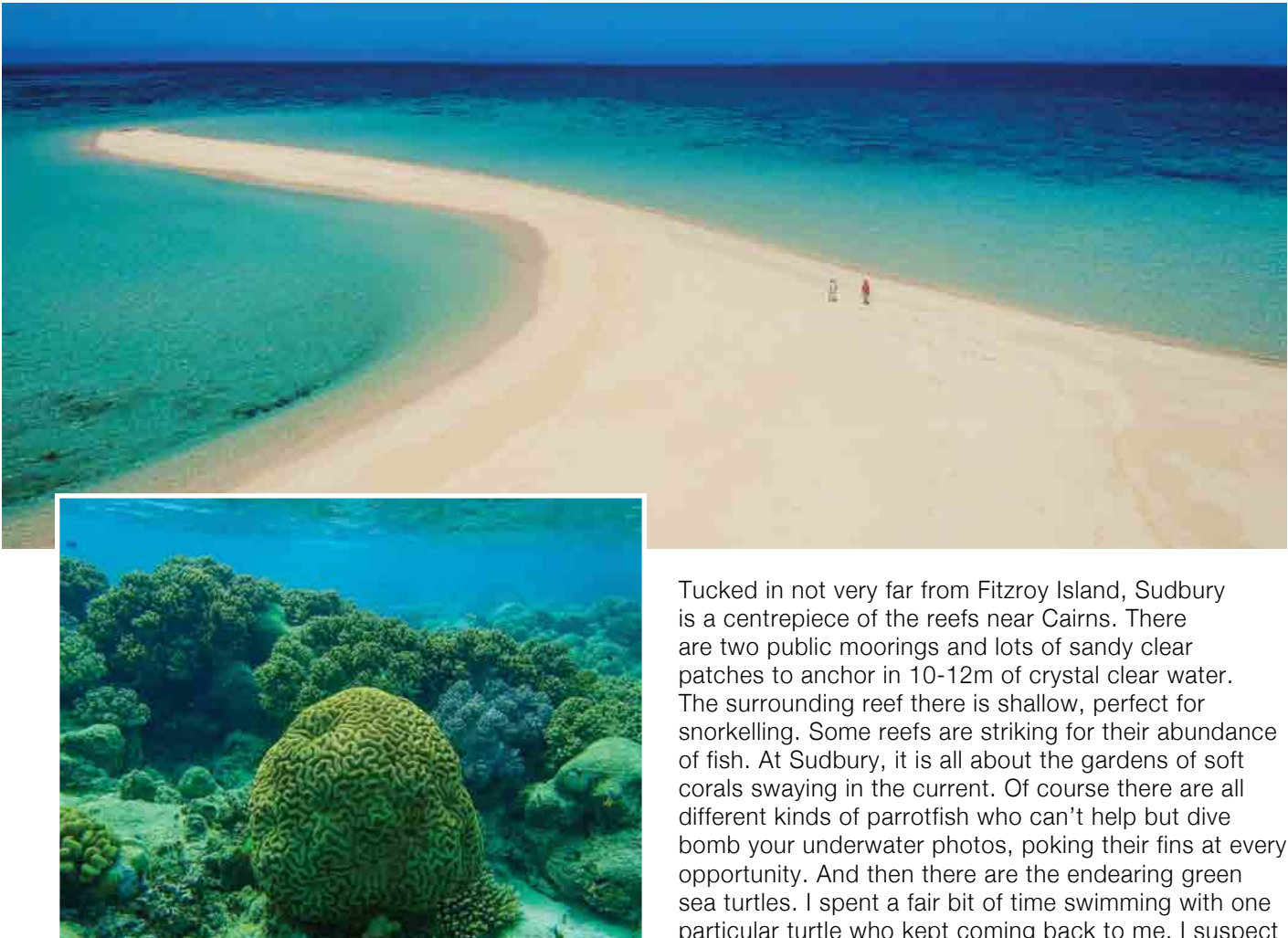


TOP LEFT: Aerial of Mackay Cay and its beautiful colour graduations.
TOP RIGHT: *Anui* moored at Mackay Reef in totally calm weather!
ABOVE LEFT: Crinoid Feather Stars clinging to the reef wall.
ABOVE RIGHT: A few yachts in the anchorage at Mackay Cay.

On most days, you will see the rainforest covered range along the mainland whilst enjoying the cay and snorkeling this reef. And yet it is such a different world out on the reef! There are two public moorings there, as well as ample space to anchor in 10-12m of water over sand, clear of bommies. You can go and admire your catamaran from the dazzling height of the sand cay top – 3m – which gives you a different perspective on your

surroundings and the colours of the reef will take your breath away.
Hopping into the clear water and seeing what lies beneath is one of those ‘OMG’ moments. We have snorkelled at dozens and dozens of sites, but Mackay Reef, particularly around the reef wall drop off impressed us. We were there for several days and explored different sections of the reef each day. There are giant clams in neon shades that hardly seem real, clownfish in their favourite anemone, the usual array of colourful parrotfish and surgeonfish zooming in and out of ledges and hidey holes. And at the drop off, on the outside, pelagic species patrol, and odd-looking tunicates and gorgonian fans decorate the wall.

5. SUDBURY CAY



TOP: Aerial of Sudbury Cay.
INSET: Beautiful coral gardens at Sudbury Reef.

Tucked in not very far from Fitzroy Island, Sudbury is a centrepiece of the reefs near Cairns. There are two public moorings and lots of sandy clear patches to anchor in 10-12m of crystal clear water. The surrounding reef there is shallow, perfect for snorkelling. Some reefs are striking for their abundance of fish. At Sudbury, it is all about the gardens of soft corals swaying in the current. Of course there are all different kinds of parrotfish who can’t help but dive bomb your underwater photos, poking their fins at every opportunity. And then there are the endearing green sea turtles. I spent a fair bit of time swimming with one particular turtle who kept coming back to me. I suspect he was utterly bewitched by my figure hugging wetsuit, finned feet and oh-so-sexy snorkel!
Sudbury is another one of those sights that will erase all your worries in a nanosecond. Down below, there are no bills to pay, no project deadlines, no appointment schedules ... Once you are below the waterline, nothing else matters, you are in this very moment.



TOP: Mooring at Michaelmas.

ABOVE L-R: Thousands of Sooty Terns nest at Michaelmas Cay.

Batfish under our hulls.

We found Nemo at Michaelmas Reef!

6. MICHAELMAS CAY

Not only is Michaelmas cay stunning, but it is also an extremely important nesting habitat for migrating birds, the largest in the southern hemisphere. We are talking about thousands and thousands of nesting birds. In fact when you first approach the cay, all you can see is a dark cloud above the islet – hundreds of birds flying over – and all you can hear is their deafening calls, day and night non-stop. You will see brown boobies with their odd blue beak and green feet (the males), lots of sooty and bridled terns, beautiful noddies, even a frigate bird or two. It really is a special spot for birdwatchers. The sand cay has limited public access, with a roped area for visitors to stay within, so as not to disturb the nesting birds.

The waters around the cay are a haven for turtles resting and foraging all over and have a rich marine fauna including giant clams. Another cool thing: dozens of schooling batfish and snappers mingle under your hulls ... It is great to jump off the back of the boat and join in to the action. They are really inquisitive, swimming under you, around you, at you, totally

unafraid. And the black trevallies are very tame too, even if a little more daunting when they come close.

The sandy lagoon is one of the rare spots that are wind and swell protected and the coral is immediately adjacent to the beach. This is because it is protected by not only Michaelmas reef and cay, but also the Arlington Reef – a reef within a reef! There are two public moorings close in and space to anchor in clear water over sand a little further out. You can also hook onto the moorings of several tour operators when not in use. They are well maintained. You just have to be prepared to vacate if the tour boats turn up.

So if you are seeking a one of a kind reef experience, consider sailing out to one of the fantastic coral cays along the Queensland coast. We have given you six in Far North Queensland, but there are some 300 in the whole Great Barrier Reef. So here is an idea: See how many you can discover. Go and witness some unforgettable graduations of colour, some amazing undersea creatures and stunning birds while playing castaway. Have fun!

Chris and her partner Wade Bishop have been sailing on catamarans of various sizes for about 20 years, cruising Bass Strait, Tasmanian waters and Australia's east coast. In July 2017, they finally retired, and are now sea wanderers, living on board their 'last' catamaran, *Anui*, a 52ft Crowther. Follow their adventures on www.sv-anui.com