

Lady Musgrave Island, Australia

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Snorkeling Adventure: Lady Musgrave Island

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The pointed prow of *The Spirit of 1770* cut smartly through the chop, the shoreline receded rapidly, and the chop soon beefed up into hefty swells. After an hour, with our destination not even a speck on the horizon, the trip felt less like a simple boat ride than an ocean voyage. We were heading for Lady Musgrave Island, which turned out to be 32 nautical miles at sea—much farther out than I envisioned when I planned a day on Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

This tiny, low-slung island—less than 40 sandy acres, even at low tide—perches atop 3,000 acres of living coral at the southern end of the Great Barrier Reef. Everything I'd heard about the world's longest reef impelled me to go there, but nothing prepared me for the microcosmic grandeur that I found in just one island. When *The Spirit* pulled into the navigable lagoon, all I wanted to do was get wet. Equipped with mask, snorkel and fins from the boat's stash, I slipped into the calm water. With the warm sun on my back, I floated easily above a coral head as a small universe went about its business before my mask. I'd heard about the clarity of the water, but I was bowled over at visibility of 20, 30, even 40 feet below.

I'd heard about the abundant marine life, but was awestruck by the rainbow of brilliant reef fish whose entire world was a single coral pinnacle that provided both protection and food. From the waterproof fish chart I had with me, I identified pufferfish, clownfish, triggerfish, coral trout, sweetlip, trumpetfish, angelfish, yellowjacks, and more others than I could keep mental track of—plus many that I didn't recognize, chart or no chart. Some little fish swam in schools, as synchronized as the Rockettes on stage. Others traveled solo. Some darted nimbly about. Others swam more deliberately. A snakelike moray eel peered from its lair, ready to prey on anything tasty that happened by.

A few fin kicks propelled me over deeper, darker water at the edge of the reef, where I lingered long enough to look for bigger fish. Grouper, reef sharks, eagle rays, barracuda and Maori wrasse patrol the fringes of the island and sometimes even enter the lagoon in its center, but the real thrill is the huge manta rays. These gentle giants feed on plankton and present themselves to the cleaner wrasse that vacuum small organisms from their tough hides. Amphibious sea turtles usually hang at the bottom of the reef, periodically bob up to the surface for air and climb ashore between November and February to lay their eggs in the sand.

I swam back to the shallows, where the coral head has grown close to the surface. A couple of other folks from *The Spirit* were scuba divers, so they knew how to take a deep breath, pike and kick to submerge to explore the coral more closely before needing

to come up for air. I was an observer, but they were participants, and I knew that I would learn to dive before returning to the Great Barrier Reef. – *Claire Walter*

If You Go

Day trips to Lady Musgrave Island are offered several times each week; \$110 for adults, \$40 for ages four to 14, including lunch, and snorkeling gear (mask, snorkel, fins, plus optional personal flotation device). From the Town of 1770, it's Captain Cook Great Barrier Reef Cruises' *Spirit of 1770*; information from 011-617-4974-9077 or www.greatbarrierreef.net/Discovery/tour/pclay.html. Limited information on the Town of 1770 is available at www.ozemail.com.au. From Bundaberg, the operator is Lady Musgrave Cruises; information from 011-617-412-249-685 or www.fcfc.com.au/lm/lm/htm. For general information on the Great Barrier Reef, check www.barrier-reef.net. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park's website is www.gbmpa.gov.au.

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