

HERON ISLAND - ISLAND OF THE TURTLES

By Michael Salvarezza & Christopher P. Weaver

On a lonely stretch of sandy beach we quietly waited for the sun to disappear into the tropical horizon. Only a few metres away a large female green sea turtle was scooping out a nest. The sounds of her flippers tossing sand out of the hole were the only indication of her presence in the early evening darkness.

A distant flash of lightening followed by a low thunderous rumble seemed like a perfect addition to an already awe-inspiring event. We'd watched her struggle up the beach, a tough and unnatural act for a large turtle, and we were transfixed...we had to wait until she was done depositing her eggs.

Earlier, another phase of the turtle's natural life cycle had played itself out before our eyes only 50 metres from this spot. A clutch of eggs laid during the breeding season hatched, and dozens of tiny green sea turtles simultaneously emerged from the sand, almost as if on cue. We watched, first in amusement as the babies scrambled furiously towards the water like tiny wind-up toys. However, the seriousness of their situation rapidly became apparent. Gulls and terns began to swoop out of the sky, plucking the unlucky ones off the beach. And patrolling the shallows only a few feet offshore were stingrays and reef sharks, each waiting for a quick meal. The odds were stacked against the turtles...and we found ourselves rooting furiously for the safety of the hatchlings.

Heron Island's natural

beauty had completely captivated us. We'd come here to dive, and the diving did not disappoint. But it was the saga of the turtles, along with the island's huge population of seabirds that had added the finishing touches to an already perfect week - a week definitely worth writing about.

You can reach the island by a two-hour catamaran trip or by helicopter from Gladstone - some come in by boat and leave by air but we found the view of the reefs from the helicopter was definitely worth the extra cost. Heron Island lies on the Tropic of Capricorn about 500 kilometres north of Brisbane and 70 kilometres out from the port city of Gladstone. A major feature of Heron is it's actually part of the Great Barrier Reef itself and the diving in the Capricorn-Bunker Group is truly spectacular. In fact, because of the rich diversity of marine life and vast gardens of unspoiled coral, Heron Island enjoys a reputation as one of the better diving locations in the world. For instance, at Pam's Point, we encountered a squadron of large four-metre manta rays which were circling a coral head for most of our dive while smaller cleaner fish groomed them of their parasites and dead skin. At The Bommie, a dive site Jacques Cousteau labeled one of the best in the world, we swam with schools of large sweetlips, lemon sharks, reef sharks and zebra lionfish. At the Coral Grotto, we were stunned at the huge beds of healthy staghorn and soft coral - swimming amongst these were blizzards of brilliant reef fish, including fairy basslets, various species of wrasse and angelfish and the ever-



present barramundi cod.

Our dives at Heron Island also featured occasional stingrays and green sea turtles. Often dives were done as drift dives, with the 'live boat' approach being applied. It's the currents that help feed the corals, and divers who avoid fighting the current are able to manage easily along the reefs - but to minimize impact to the reefs and ensure an enjoyable experience, divers should be very comfortable with their air consumption and buoyancy skills.

The conditions on Heron Island are ideal for diving. In July and August, the water temperature averages 17°C, while in January and February it soars to 26°C accompanied by up to 25-metre visibility. The island is surrounded by a fringing reef and all along this reef edge are giant heads of coral, known as bommies, which can vary in size from three metres to over 30 metres in height. Rarely is it necessary to dive below 20 metres, although for adventurous divers, nearby Wistari Reef

features dives in excess of 30 metres.

Some of the other spectacular dives at Heron include the Hole in the Wall, Coral Cascades and Plate Ledge. Each of these dives features its own special blend of marine life and coral beauty. For instance, at Coral Cascades, we encountered a large variety of nudibranchs, sea squirts and other colorful invertebrate life. At Hole in the Wall we saw large anemones and the ever-present anemonefish, along with schools of hussars and several moray eels.

Heron Island is a small coral cay measuring only 42 acres in size and a 1.7 kilometres in circumference. Despite its small size, it also has a lush forest teeming with raucous bird life and beautiful sandy beaches all along its shores. Heron has a colourful history which began in 1843 when Captain Francis Blackwood aboard the HMS Fly first visited the island. Joseph Beete Jukes, a geologist onboard, named the island after the many reef

herons he spotted on shore. In the 1920s, a turtle soup factory was established on Heron Island due to the large numbers of turtles seen there. Fortunately for the turtles, the endeavour wasn't very profitable and the factory closed in 1927. Since

that time various efforts were made to utilize the island as a vacation destination.

Today, the Heron Island Resort is the only accommodation on the island, which features a variety of activities for divers and non-divers alike. Reef walks, which introduce guests to the fascinating biology of the reef, and bird watching hikes through the island's forest are perfect complements to a day's diving. The nearby reefs are perfect for snorkeling. Visitors can get a unique perspective on the island by taking a helicopter tour. In addition, there are semi-submersible tours of the reef and visits to the University of Queensland Research Station as well.

For nature lovers, Heron Island is the perfect destination. Under water, the reef is ablaze with coral and beautiful marine life. In the trees, thousands of black noddies make their home. Dotting the resort are holes in the ground which are seasonally occupied by short-tailed shearwaters or 'mutton birds' after their annual migration from east Asia - the eerie wails at night actually resemble crying babies! In the winter, humpback whales can be seen offshore as they migrate north from Antarctica. But the star attractions are the green sea turtles. The best time to spot these visitors to Heron Island is during the months of January through early March; watching these magnificent creatures as they struggle to perpetuate their species is absolutely inspiring.

If you're looking for some spectacular diving on the Great Barrier Reef along with some truly amazing back-to-nature experiences, put Heron Island on top of your list. We have.

