

# Lady Elliot *Island*

One of the Great Barrier Reef's best-kept secrets, Lady Elliot Island offers an eco tourist's treat perfect for the environmentalist in you.

**Words: Faye James**



It's only when we're huddled around possibly the tiniest plane I've ever seen, swiftly receiving a safety briefing, that I suddenly begin to feel the panic sweats trickle down my back. Right before my eyes sits a minute 10-seater plane with a single engine propeller, charged to go no higher than 1,000 feet into the sky.

I eyeball my fellow passengers, all equally pallid. Today, this is my flight to Lady Elliot Island where I've booked myself in for the weekend. I wonder if it's too late to turn back, but the lure of the Great Barrier Reef is calling.

As we climb aboard, the minute stature of the plane closes in on us and I fear I'm in for two hours of knuckle-clenching action. But as soon as we ascend into the hazy, azure skies and I look down at the Lego-like town below, I actually start to have the best time of my life.



The fascinating thing about taking a scenic plane ride is that it is almost akin to actually flying yourself. With the landscape riding so closely below, and each twist and turn feeling like a movement of your own, the experience is truly magical. We noisily chug along the coast passing the glorious shores of Brisbane, The Sunshine Coast,

Hervey Bay and Bundaberg before we make a dramatic descent onto Lady Elliot Island, The Great Barrier Reef's southernmost coral cay.

As we land on possibly the smallest runway ever, a sense of tranquility hazes over me. In one fell swoop, mobile reception disappears, and I am forced away from the distractions of technology to gaze upon a small island of unparalleled beauty.

At the moment it's breeding season for the hundreds of birds who have flocked to the island. You can hear their gentle screeching in the background and witness them swooping through the trees. I'm picked up by a bubbly, freckle-faced environmental scientist named Elana who takes me through where I can snorkel on the island and what other activities are on offer. There's everything from Guided Reef Walking, Island Discovery Tours and Turtle Updates, to Fish Feeding and Night Stalking – where an environmental scientist is on hand to share their expert knowledge 📍



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of the island's inhabitants. Elana recommends a snorkel safari first, which she'll be hosting. "It's manta ray season at the moment too, so maybe you'll see a couple of those along with some reef sharks and turtles," she says through a giant smile. I raise my eyebrows. Surely I'd only get that diving, right? Apparently not. The snorkel safari takes you into waters deep enough to swim with the sharks.

After a quick freshen-up in my perfectly modest yet comfortable room, I board the snorkel safari. There are about

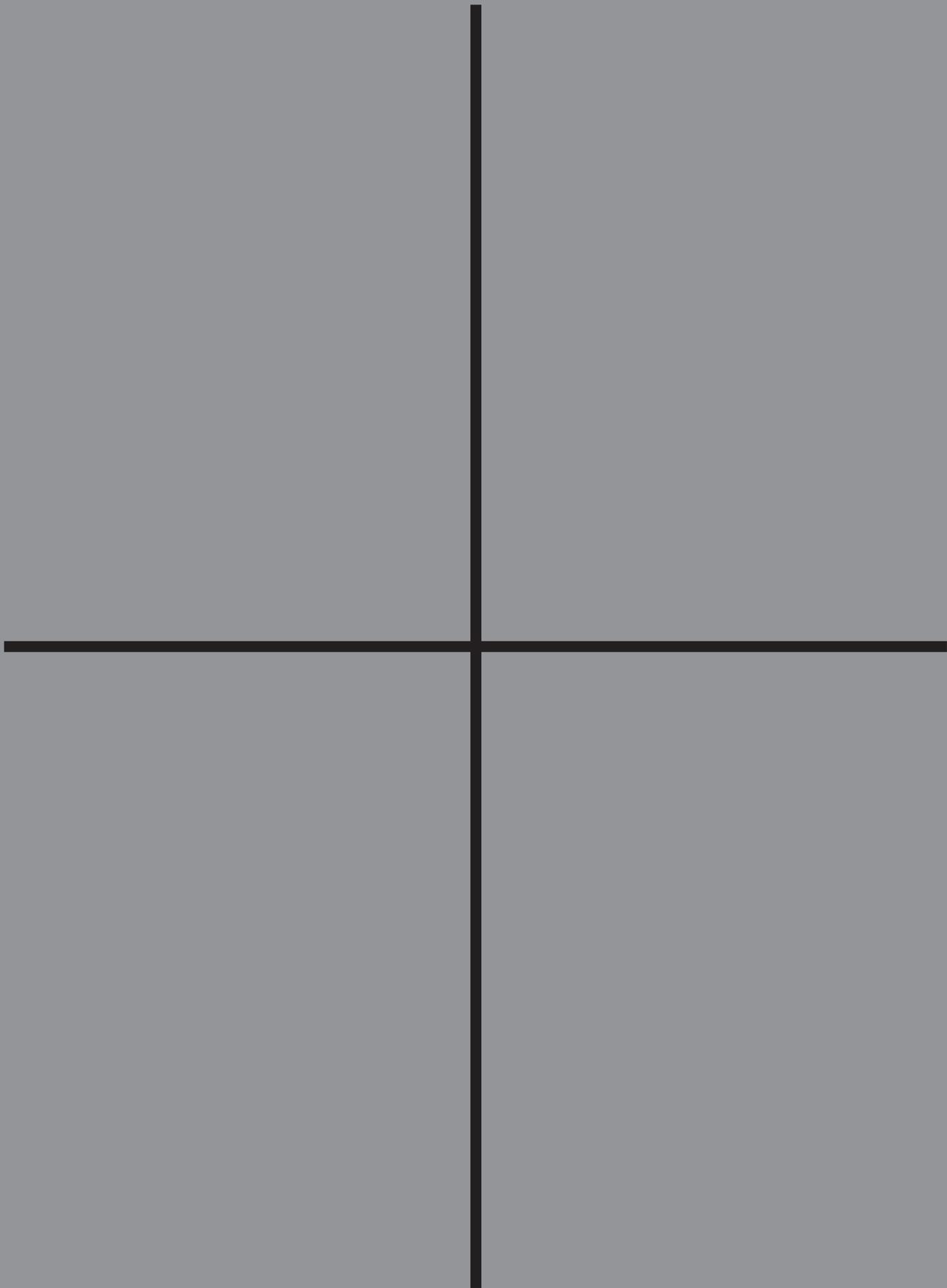
10 other passengers ranging from gap-year-abroad youngsters to ticking-off-the-bucket-list seniors. It's refreshing to see that the island attracts such a varied mix of tourists but all with seemingly one interest in common: protecting the environment and preserving the beauty of the Great Barrier Reef. As we head out into deeper waters, the water current gets noticeably choppy. Once in the ocean, the need to stay close to Elana and not drift off along the way becomes increasingly apparent. First-time snorkellers be warned –

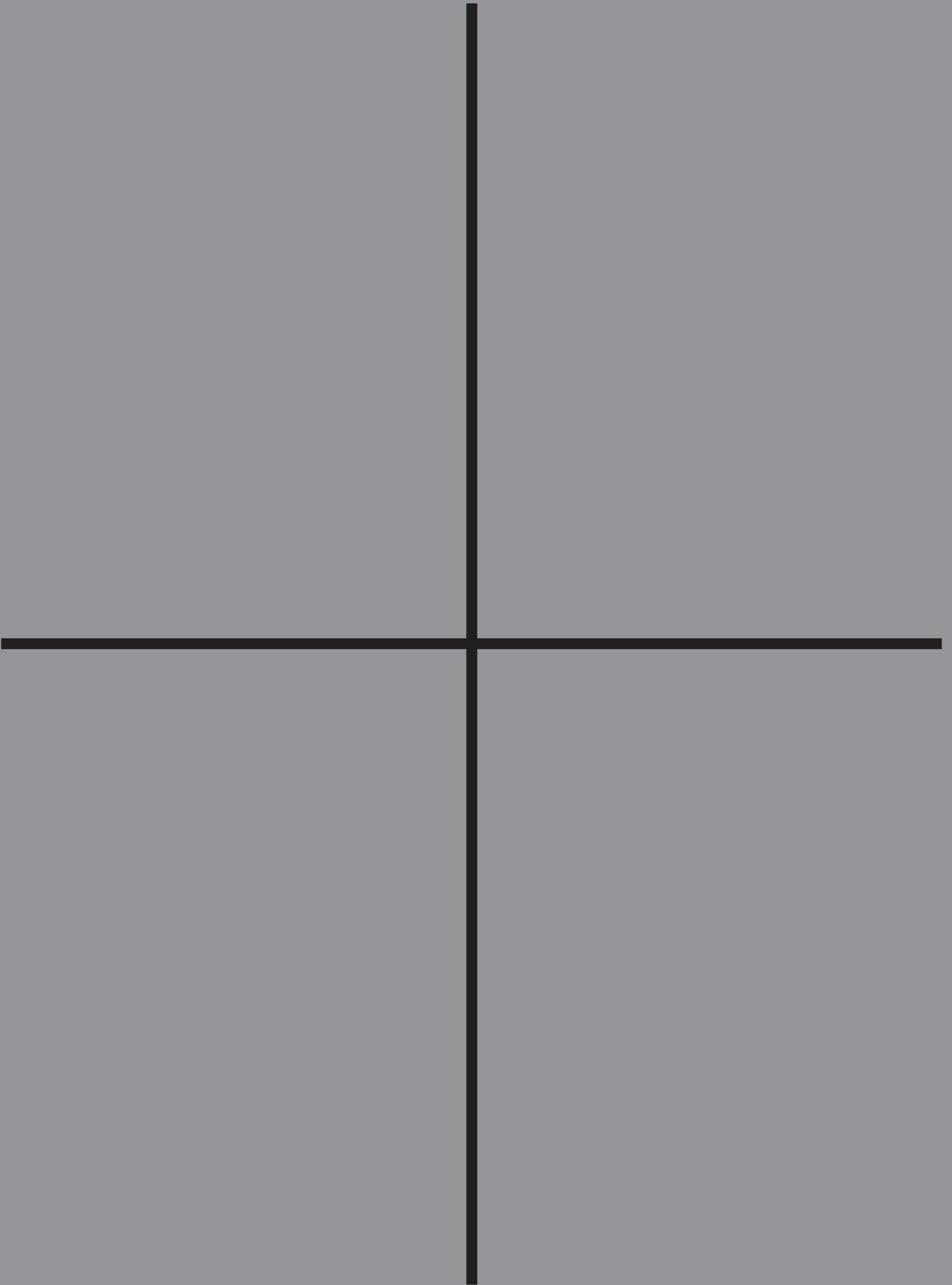
this is more of an intermediate to advanced deep-water swim and you'll feel your heartbeat rise from the power of the swell.

First, a shark darts around below me. It's a large reef shark and I feel a slight panic rise within me before another two or three dart past me. Next a bunch of turtles and a flurry of fish, including clown, angel and parrot varieties. I feel like I'm on the set of *Finding Nemo*. I am almost too excited to breathe. About 45 minutes into the snorkel we round off our amazing safari with a shark literally coming up for a cosy snuggle with our group, before Elana sights a giant Manta Ray and plunges down into the deep water to show us the magnificent creature. If there was one snorkelling experience to remember and treasure in my memory forever, it has to be this one. Simply outstanding. Those who are less confident can do the Glass Bottom Boat snorkel, which takes you only into shallow water for 30 minutes. There are certainly less sharks to worry about and when I went on this snorkel the next day, I got to swim really close to a few turtles – one of which I was certain waved at me and flicked me a cheeky smile.

In fact, nature and environmental discoveries are at the forefront of this weekend. ▶







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## Round-up

### GET THERE

**Lady Elliot** is a two-hour scenic flight from Gold Coast airport.

### STAY

**Lady Elliot Island Eco Resort**  
ladyelliott.com.au

### FASTFACT

Guano miners first appeared on the Island in 1863. In 1969, Mr Don Adams arrived and began a revegetation program turning it into the beautiful wildlife sanctuary it is today.

Lady Elliot Island



Lady Elliot Island isn't about gourmet food or luxurious accommodation, but for an experience that brings you closer to nature and to really appreciate and understand what this amazing earth actually offers, this island is the place to reset your perspective on life.

At dusk on the Night Stalk, creatures such as strawberry hermit crabs and green tree frogs come out to play and Elana is once again there, passionately talking about the creatures and their

unique oddities. She even takes us to visit the island's residents' graves and gives us a brief history on the lighthouse keepers and how one of the old residents still creepily haunts the island.

After an awe-inspiring weekend, I leave Lady Elliot Island with a certain ache in my heart, a yearning to come back year upon year and befriend all those amazing creatures once again and, most importantly, to remind myself of the true wonders of this beautiful world. [O]