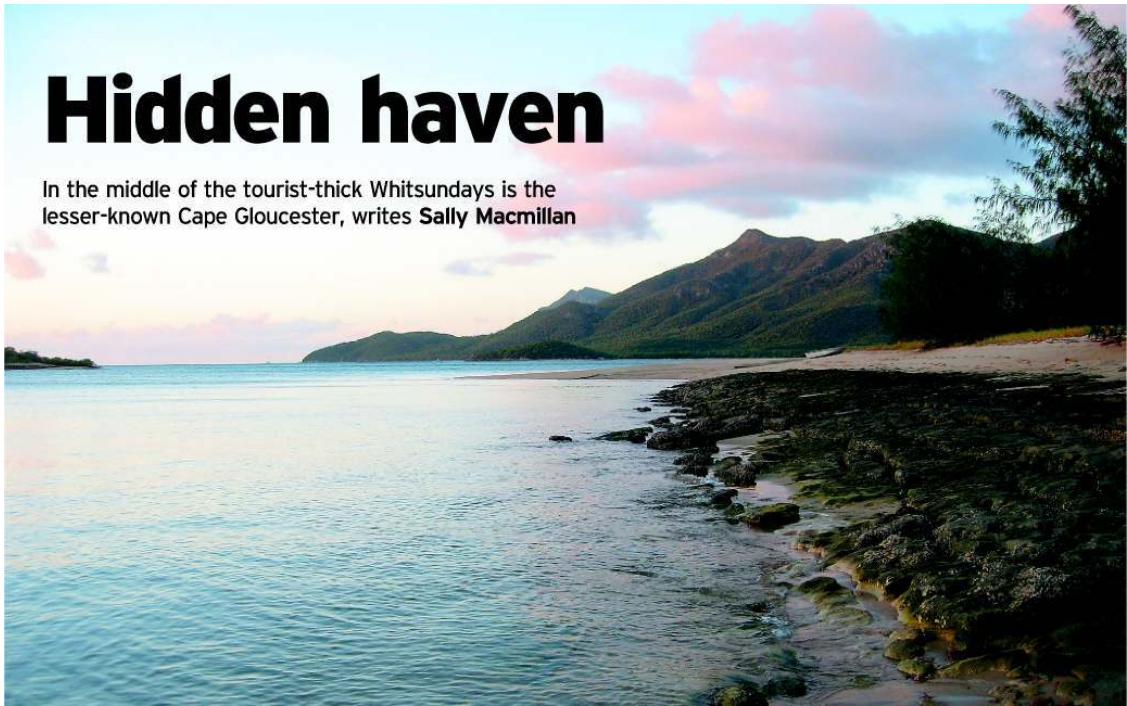




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Hidden haven

In the middle of the tourist-thick Whitsundays is the lesser-known Cape Gloucester, writes Sally Macmillan

SECRET HIDEAWAY:
 Cape Gloucester, an idyll worth discovering for yourself.

SEEMINGLY on a road to nowhere, past O My God Hill and Kangaroo Corner, we bump down a dirt track and finally arrive at a delightfully secluded haven.

Cape Gloucester and its eco resort are far from the madding crowd that can be found at Airlie Beach on the eastern shores of Edgcumbe Bay.

Just past the hamlets of Dingo Beach and Hydeaway Bay, this secluded peninsula has a multitude of beaches, rugged coast, a mangrove-flanked river and stacks of marine and wildlife, and a lush hinterland. And within a 20-minute ride on a jet-ski or in a boat, there's a slew of uninhabited islands with coral gardens.

On the deck of our beachfront cabin, surrounded by native fruit trees and a butcher bird and wild-duck chorus, we chill out in a place on the mainland that looks and feels like an intimate island resort.

It's not hard to understand why locals have kept this place to themselves, anchoring tinnies or yachts in the bay at the front or parking utes and 4WDs at the back. They book in for overnight get-togethers or bring the family for lunch at the open deck bistro and Oar Bar.

It's tempting to just hang here with them, or park the body on the cabin deck lounge.

But adventure calls. We pull our wetsuits on and prepare to rev off on Nick and Teri Talbot Price's Coral Sea Eco Jet Safari.

None of the five of us actually wants to don the rather ludicrous full-length lightweight lycra stinger suits. But Nick's taking no chances of endangering his charges: each ski also has a spray bottle of vinegar,

just in case.

We don't need it, and we spend the next three hours getting up close with everything from dugongs and turtles to dolphins and lemon sharks.

A tinny chugs past, its grinning occupants holding up a gigantic mud crab. We don't sight any of the migratory crocs but see the resident pair of sea eagles.

Back out on the Coral Sea, we turn up the throttle and roar across to Middle Island, about 10 nautical miles from both Cape Gloucester and Bowen.

From the snorkel gardens here you can see the 360-degree restaurant on the top of Bowen Hill.

This island is part of the Gloucester Islands National Park and camping is allowed with a permit.

A little further out is a "secret" island with even more spectacular beaches and coral.

Nick and Eco Resort owner Mark Hallet are looking to become its "guardians". They want to protect it, but take small groups of visitors on day trips.

They're looking to set up a package involving the resort, the eco jets and the Magic Miles ketch that sleeps 10 with ensuite.

Back at the resort, where you can walk among bush turkeys, wallabies, kookaburras, curlews and lorikeets, Mark has more plans for the 60ha property.

It will remain a small eco-sustainable resort, but he is hoping to upgrade it with architect-designed beachfront and bush cabins.

We're more than happy with what we've got right now: a spacious two-bedder with ensuite and livingroom opening out to a

private timber deck with barbecue, surrounded by natural bush screening.

It's 30 seconds to the beach, the large saltwater infinity-edge pool and the welcoming bar and dining deck.

With Gloucester Sunset cocktails in hand, we watch the real thing dipping into the Coral Sea.

ESSENTIALS

Getting there

Virgin Blue has two daily flights and Jetstar one daily flight from Brisbane to Whitsunday Coast Airport, 20km from Cape Gloucester. Pick-ups arranged.

Staying there

Cape Gloucester Eco Resort, Hydeaway Bay Drive. Six one and two-bedroom cabins; open-plan beach cabin from \$100 a night to two-bedroom beachfront from \$240; four attached units (including disabled) from \$100 a night. 4945 7242, www.capeg.com.au

Seeing there

Coral Sea Ecojet Safaris half-day, \$349 per ski (up to three people); mini safaris 90 minutes, \$199, includes transfers to and from Airlie Beach, lunch, snorkeling gear, stinger/wetsuits. www.coralseaecojetsafari.com.au More: www.thewhitsundays.com.au



The writer was a guest of Whitsunday Tourism.