

Down Under Wonderland

Someone once said there are two ways for man to meditate on the glory of the universe — to look up at the stars, and to look out on the Great Barrier Reef.

Jack Goldfarb chose the underwater option.

What was a seasick-prone landlubber like me doing on a high-speed catamaran scudding across a 40-mile stretch of choppy, windswept water off Queensland, Australia? Heading for the Great Barrier Reef, of course.

Unluckily, normally calm Cleveland Bay off the resort of Townsville was being buffeted by freakish gusts so strong this August morning that our trip was almost called off. Queasy, but still game, this non-sailor took on the challenge of the Reef, because, excuse the expression, it was there.

And *there* it has been for some 20 million years. A chain of underwater shoals, coral gardens and sandy cays that arches in a 1250-km parabola parallel to Australia's tropical northeast coastline.

Earliest mention of the Great Barrier Reef comes from the Chinese, who claim their fishermen combed the area 2000 years ago searching for prized sea cucumbers. When dried and simmered in a soup pot this Oriental delicacy was apparently worth every nautical mile of the journey. But not until British explorer Captain James Cook sailed the length of the reef in 1770 had any European ever known of it. Cook found out the hard way when his barque, the *Endeavour*, ran aground on the treacherous shoals. Having repaired

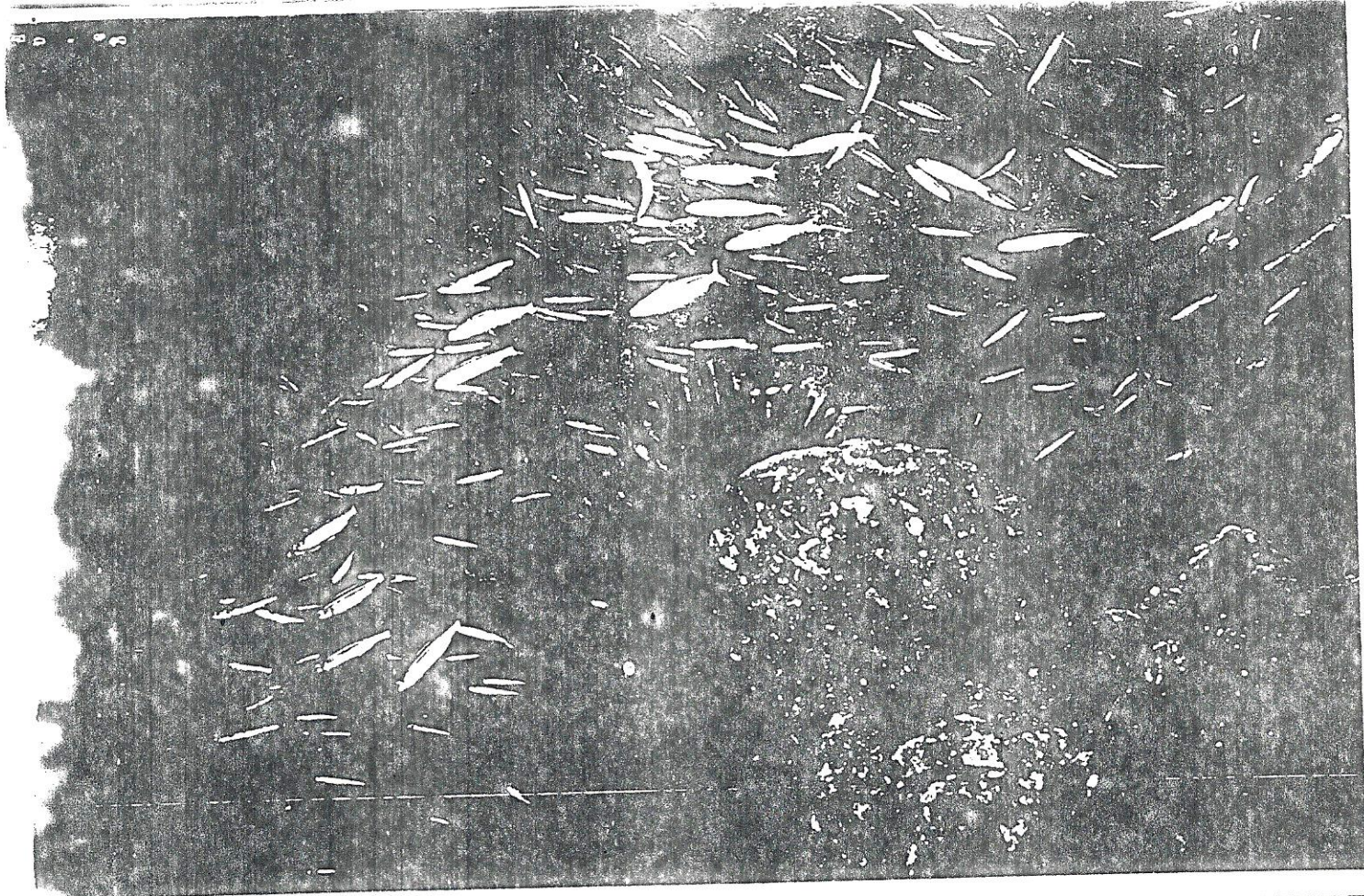


his damaged vessel, Cook returned home to tell of his discovery. Six decades later, Charles Darwin, aboard the globe-circling HMS Beagle, came to Australia and concluded that a thorough study of the astonishing variety of the reef's marine life would not be possible in one lifetime.

Called "Great", but literally the *greatest* of all coral reefs, the Barrier is awash in superlatives. It is considered the most fascinating natural wonder of the world; the most massive structure built by living creatures; the world's largest living thing—with more life per square inch than anywhere else on this planet; and, more grimly, the most perilous navigational hazard on the high seas.

Steadily growing, ever evolving, the reef is an accumulation of the chalky remains of billions of minute marine organisms, creatures smaller than a pinhead, which produce within their fleshy bodies stony skeletons of hardened calcium carbonate. Microscopic coralline algae form the "cement" that binds the skeletal debris together, and are responsible for the rainbow of colours illuminating this natural phenomenon.

There is a variety of ways to experience the Great Barrier Reef at close range. You can fly over it in a helicopter or amphibian plane, sail out in a catamaran or yacht, peer down through a glass-bottomed boat, dive down with scuba or snorkelling



equipment, or even go on a guided walk across it – with proper footwear, of course – at places where the shifting tides uncover the submerged coral.

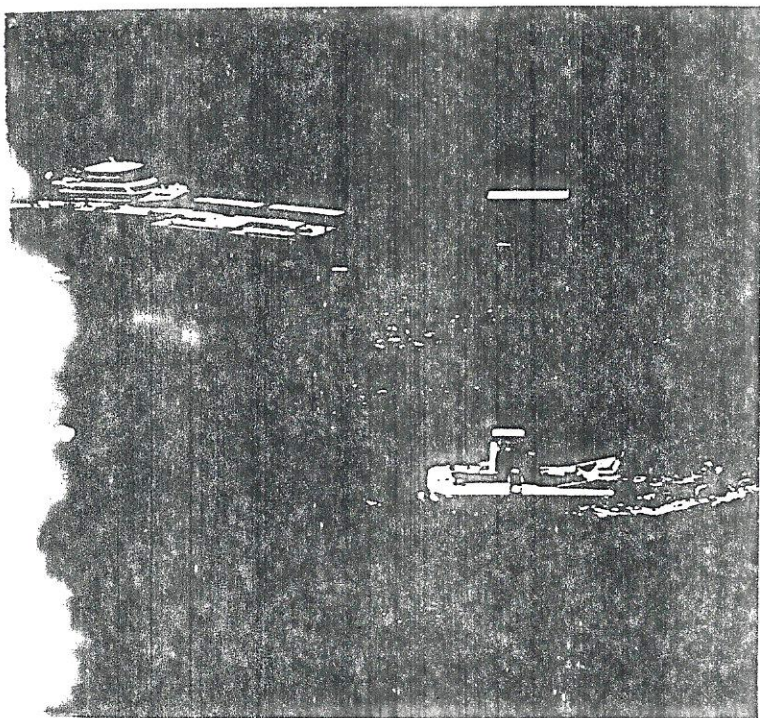
But I heard of a more novel approach: a "submarine" with a completely glass-panelled hull which cruised the ocean depths, steering through the coral gardens, gliding past schools of exotic fish and strange sea creatures. On this first underwater viewing craft of its kind the observers could get a fish's eye view, looking upward instead of the customary downward perspective in a glass-bottomed boat.

So there I was on the catamaran en route to a floating pontoon "island" where a waiting Yellow Sub was to link up with us. We had left Townsville pier on schedule at 9.30am and paused briefly at pine-forested Magnetic Island (whose granite promontories were once mistakenly thought to have had magnetic power) to pick up several passengers. All according to plan – except for the blustery southeasterly wind which whipped up angry whitecaps and kept me clinging nervously close to the rail.

But then, just as unexpectedly, the squall began to blow itself out and I, now on steadier sea legs, settled back into a cushioned deckchair to enjoy the ride. Ninety minutes out of Townsville we made our rendezvous. Gleaming in the

Above: The Barrier Reef is considered one of the most fascinating natural wonders of the world. It is awash with superlatives. Right: Brilliant corals, comprising the chalky remains of billions of marine organisms, form the reef: A diver in the grip of this extraordinary underwater world explores the seascape of corals.





The "yellow sub" is an ingenious way of being submerged under the sea without getting a fingernail wet.

sunlight, the futuristic-styled sub rocked gently at its anchorage as we climbed aboard.

To be precise, the underwater craft was actually a "semi-submarine" as its platform-designed deck and conning-tower always remained above the surface. We were briefed on its safety features. Bulging ballast tanks on each side of the deck, its operators claimed, rendered it unsinkable. Protective crash "bumpers" on the undercarriage kept the reef at a safe distance. Below deck, the plush-carpeted viewing chamber with its 5cm-thick, laminated windows, opened up the fantastic panorama of the reef world.

On comfortably padded benches facing outward, 20 excited passengers awaited the start of their undersea adventure.

----- AND ABOVE

About 70 kms northeast of Townsville a floating hotel moored in the protected lagoon waters of a part of the Barrier Reef called John Brewer Reef, has just been completed and will open in December 1987.

The Four Seasons Barrier Reef Hotel is an ambitious project — the only one of its kind in the world. The large, 200-room, luxury hotel has been built on massive barges and includes restaurants, bars, entertainment and convention facilities plus a full sized tennis court, helicopter pad, outdoor relaxation areas, pontoons for service craft and

Hundreds of trevally and mackerel encircled the sub, poking gaping mouths close to the windows as if expecting, even demanding, a handout before they would let us depart. Surely enough, morsels of bread floated down, tossed by the crew from the deck above. While the gulping fish thrashed about, "vacuuming" the area, the sub rumbled off along the Reef.

In the blue, crystalline waters, a mind-blowing seascape of corals surrounded us. A riotous profusion of forms, colours and movement: thickets of orange and pink shrubbery, groves of miniature flame-red trees, flowerbeds of delicate maroon and jade-green, bushes of yellow and mauve fern-like plants, bristling clusters of green and purple-brown antlers, ledge upon ledge of giant grey-green

a marina for visiting yachts. Guests will be able to see the reef and marine life from a 24-hour, illuminated, underwater observatory. The semi-submersible, yellow sub will also operate from the hotel. The Four Seasons Barrier Reef is expected to attract scuba diving enthusiasts from around the world and for learners there will be practical courses run in a salt-water pool enclosed by the pontoons of the marina. There are also excellent fishing facilities, both game and sport. The hotel is linked to the mainland by catamaran and floatplane from Townsville.

mushrooms. The artistry of nature had sculpted the surrealistic scenery in exquisite detail.

Darting in and out of the coral branches were schools of iridescent, bizarre-shaped fish that could have swum out of a Dali canvas. The camouflaging branches were both a playground and a place to hide from predators.

As the sub manoeuvred through narrow passages between coral formations, a menagerie of marine creatures crossed our path. Gaudy anemones, slow-moving, soft-bodied, but capable of lethally stinging their prey with a lasso-like thread; clams measuring more than a metre wide; hulking green turtles lumbering through the deep; molluscs of every description; sea snakes and a *bêche-de-mer* or two, those culinary catches that lured the ancient Chinese down this way.

Yet we saw only a tiny fraction of the reef's marine life. Naturalists and marine biologists have counted and identified 350 types of coral and 870 different species of fish on and around the reef.

Threats to the future of this subaquatic wonderland have appeared in recent years. Pressures have arisen to explore for oil and mineral deposits. Careless boats have inflicted damage by dragging anchors through coral gardens. And recurrent devastation has been caused by the notorious coral-devouring Crown of Thorns starfish whose numbers periodically swell alarmingly. Whether it is the hundreds of local volunteer divers who wage war on the starfish, or nature's own cyclical pattern, eventually the starfish retreat and the normal ecology of the reef is restored.

My view from the submarine was more than just a sense of peering into a teeming aquarium tank or watching an underwater documentary film. True, there was the unreality of being submerged in the undersea world without getting a fingernail wet, but more compelling was the immediacy of the raw, primordial environment. Its awesomeness. Its splendour.

At the pontoon dock we transferred back to the catamaran for the return to Townsville. So serene and relaxed was the trip back that I even fleetingly fantasised about owning a sailboat someday...

BRISBANE FLIGHT FACTS

Air New Zealand flies to Brisbane from Auckland every Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday. The airline flies to Brisbane from Wellington every Thursday and Sunday, and from Christchurch every Tuesday, Friday and Saturday. The Air New Zealand Office in Brisbane is located at Watkins Place, 288 Edwards Street. For reservations telephone 229-3044, for flight information telephone 229-3149.