

One experience we really recommend is the Reefsleep.  
See <http://www.fantasea.com.au/reefsleep.htm>

The operator has a pontoon anchored to a reef out at sea. Normally they transport day-trippers to the pontoon for snorkeling. However, it also has a couple of rooms. One is a room with a double bed. The other is a room with 4 bunk beds. They both come with their own private toilet/shower facilities. The cost per person includes transport to and from the pontoon, accommodation, meals and a couple of intro. scuba dives. There is also a semi-submersible vessel there, underwater observatory, helicopter and safe snorkeling. See also [http://www.greatsoutheast.com.au/qw/this\\_week/story04.asp](http://www.greatsoutheast.com.au/qw/this_week/story04.asp)  
If you spend the night there and compare it to the price of a day trip plus accommodation and meals, it really is excellent value. They have someone there assigned to you to look after you as well.

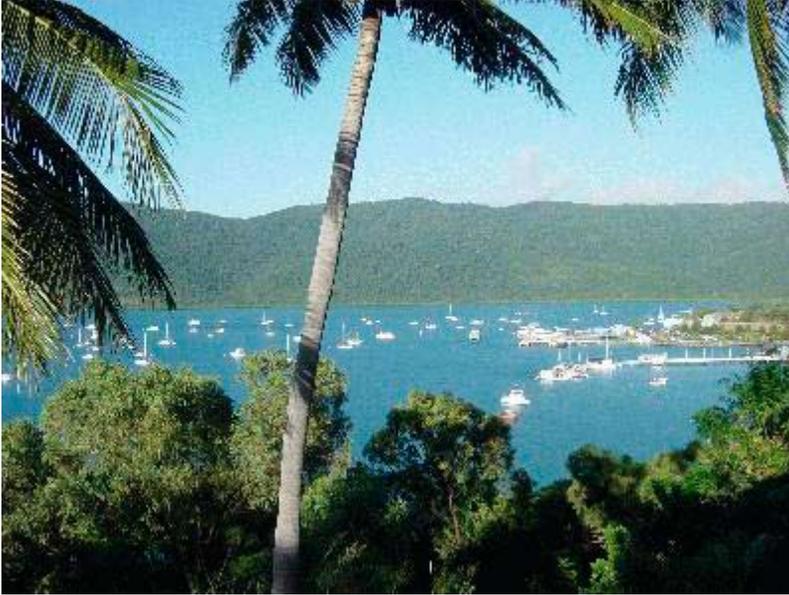


To get there, fly to Mackay (Virgin Blue or Jetstar tend to be the cheapest if you buy tickets over the internet) and rent a car (operators such as Europcar have good rates and have a small discount tie-in with Virgin Blue) and drive the 150km to Airlie Beach/Shute Harbour in the Whitsundays. The boat to Reefsleep departs from Shute Harbour and departs in the morning.

Alternatively, there are a more limited number of flights to Proserpine, which is only 30km from Airlie Beach, or to Hamilton Island, where the same boat operator (Fantasea) also stops-off at on the way out to the reef. There is resort accommodation on Hamilton and an astronomical observatory run by an amateur and open to the public. See also <http://www.tropicalstargazers.org/> to meet local amateurs in the area. They have a Yahoo Group at <http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/tropicalstargazers>

There is plenty of accommodation in Airlie Beach ranging from backpackers to luxury multi-star.

Airlie Beach has a large number of restaurants and an active night-life scene. Shute Harbour is about another 20 mins drive, has more limited accommodation options but is quiet and has stunning views of the the Whitsundays. With a rental car it is easy to stay at Shute Harbour and to drive back to Airlie for dinner.



There are an enormous number of other things to do out of Airlie Beach/Shute Harbour including cruising on ocean going America's Cup yachts or even chartering your own yacht which can be surprisingly affordable. It is also the stepping-off point to many of the islands in the Whitsunday Group.

Out of Mackay, if people like a good rainforest, we recommend staying at the Finch Hatton Gorge Cabins. <http://www.finchhattongorgecabins.com.au/>



There are countless destinations along and on the Barrier Reef ranging from 5 star boutique to camping on islands where you will even need to bring in your own water. For the adventurous, you can even kayak to some (see picture of couple of crazy people in sea kayak below).



Mai and I try and get to some part of the reef whenever we can for a break. Earlier this year we stayed on a nice little island called Keswick, pop. 7 (including us) (<http://www.keswickislandguesthouse.com.au/> and <http://www.stayz.com.au/12763>) and in a couple of weeks time we will spend a week on Heron Island (<http://www.heronisland.com/>)

For highly affordable, independent travel throughout Australia, I think it is hard to beat combining some of the discount airfares that Virgin Blue (<http://www.virginblue.com.au/>) and JetStar (<http://www.jetstar.com/>) offer now and then (tune-into their web site regularly for specials) along with a rental vehicle. For example, fly to Alice Springs, pick-up a high-clearance 4WD and tour the West McDonnell Ranges, Merieenie Loop, Kings Canyon, Uluru, Rainbow Canyon, Alice Springs. Or similar trips in West Australia, for example, fly to Broome and drive the Gibb River Road.

