

# Traveller

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INSIDE  
Drive

*'I dislike feeling at home when I am abroad.'* George Bernard Shaw

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BY PRIVATE TRAIN

FEATURING THE ANCIENT WONDERS OF CHINA



DESTINATION  
WHITSUNDAY ISLANDS



# Some kind of bliss

For 20 years Hayman Island has been the benchmark of luxury. Now there's a new contender to the throne: Qualia on Hamilton Island. **Kay O'Sullivan** reports.



**I**t's pronounced "kwahleea" but don't worry if you can't get your tongue around it – just say, "the new resort on Hamilton Island, the one that cost Hamilton's owners, the Oatley family, \$75 million".

Even Sandy Oatley, chairman of Hamilton Island Enterprises, is a tad confused at the resort's launch – which is unusual for an Oatley. They have a habit of being on the mark. Think Rosemount Estate wines, the family company sold to Southcorp in 2001 for \$1.5 billion. Or Wild Oats, whose yacht is in line for the hat-trick at this year's Sydney-to-Hobart.

Qualia means deep senses, Oatley tells us. "No, it doesn't," says a voice from the crowd – most likely another Oatley, as the family likes to work, travel and party in a pack. "It's a collection of sensory experiences." Everyone laughed, especially the chairman, who goes on to explain how Qualia will set new standards for luxury and that it will be uniquely Australian but ever so simple. "Understated" is a word he uses more than once, so is "natural".

Oatley also says the family believes the Whitsundays is crying out for a truly international resort. And, on a personal level, the family wants a place where they are proud to entertain their friends.

Now, having spent a couple of days at the just-opened Qualia, what I want most in this world is to be a friend of the Oatley family.

Qualia signifies a coming-of-age for Australian resorts. No nods to Asia here, no easy references to Bali that scream "tropical resort"; it is Australian to its bopstraps. It is also so simple and understated you wonder where all the millions were spent.

As most guests will come in via the airport even when the resort's helicopter pad and private jetty are built, there's no ignoring the fact that a resort for the privileged few is on an island for everyone. But there's no hanging around mingling with the masses. Qualia guests are whisked away from the airport almost as soon as they are off the plane.

Qualia is only a 10-minute journey from the airport, on the island's northernmost ridge, but once inside the imposing gates the masses are consigned to memory. I can only describe arriving at the Long Pavilion, the resort's hub, as one of life's "a-ha" moments. The sense is that this is exactly how it should be: it is the grandest of entrances but in the most understated, simple and, yes, Australian way.

All you see is water and island, specifically the peaks of Whitsunday Island, the biggest in the group of 74. Everything else in sight – the furnishings and fittings that are also beautiful, as you come to appreciate later – fades into

insignificance next to the natural splendour of the Whitsundays.

I won't bore you with an endless list of adjectives trying to capture the blue of the Coral Sea; I know my limitations. Look to the pictures. Better still, start saving and see it for yourself or do the Australian thing and whack it on the credit card. (Or, best of all, befriend an Oatley.) You could argue that \$1400 a night is a bit steep for a view but no other Whitsunday resort makes such a fuss – in an understated way, of course – of the surroundings.

As far as I can discover, there is only one spot that does not have an all-encompassing view: the library in the Long Pavilion. The lounge, bars and dining areas of the Long Pavilion do; Pebble Beach, the casual beachfront restaurant, certainly does; ditto the gym and pool. You can see the water from the 1000-bottle wine room. In all the rooms, or "pavilions", as they are called, one entire wall is glass.

At present, only 27 of 60 pavilions intended for the resort have been built. (There is also a two-pavilion compound called the Beach House.) The others will be ready early next year. They will be slightly smaller than those built but will have the same configuration of bathroom, bedroom, living area and outdoor space all flowing into each other.

My pavilion, as with the other 26, has an infinity-edge plunge pool. All will have what you expect today: cutting-edge technology, Wi-Fi, plug-ins for MP3 players and digital cameras, wide beds and a fabulous bathroom.

The interiors, all gleaming wood, slate and limestone, are by Sydney design studio Pike Withers; the exquisite furnishing comes from another Sydney company, George Freedman. It's modern but inviting; sensual, even. The only thing missing is the squawk of the cockatoos that plague the Whitsundays. Thankfully they haven't discovered Qualia. I cannot imagine anyone would find cockatoos a sensuous experience.

On the subject of noise, some might doubt the wisdom of opening a resort that is half-built but the building works confined to the opposite ridge and hidden behind mass plantings hardly intrude.

Food and wine are crucial at a five-star resort. There was debate as to whether the wine list would be all-Australian but that notion was consigned to the rubbish bin. The international market might have accepted it on the basis of novelty value but it is doubtful that Australians, who pride themselves on an international outlook and palate, would. The wine list is wide, deep and far-ranging, from around the globe. The Oatley Wines signature series, Robert Oatley, features.



**FAST FACTS**

**Getting there**  
Virgin Blue flies to Hamilton Island from Brisbane for \$159 from \$169 from Melbourne. Jetstar has a nonstop from Sydney for \$149 from Melbourne. Hayman Island's launch and helicopters connect to and from Hamilton Island.

**Staying there**  
Rooms at Qualia on Hamilton Island are \$1600 a pavilion a night with a minimum. The rate will be \$1400 a night when it opens early next year. The tariff includes all meals but not alcohol. Call 9433 3349 or see www.hayman.com.au. Hayman Island's entry-level room is \$665 a night, twin share, with breakfast. Phone 1800 012 345.

**To infinity and beyond ... (clockwise from above) looking out from a plunge pool; inside a Qualia pavilion; getting the "spa" treatment.**  
Pavilion photo: Kylie Hood

Alcohol is not included in the tariff but food is and prices match those of big-city restaurants. The French-born executive chef, Stephane Rio, who heads a team of 12, has designed a menu that draws on his background and training but can only be described as modern Australian. "You would be pretty disappointed if you came here," Rio says, pointing towards the water, "and there was no seafood."

That is not about to happen. Two of three entrees on the menu on the first night feature les fruits de mer - Moreton Bay bugs and tuna seared with toasted sesame, ponzu and wasabi butter. One of the three mains is a crispy-skinned barramundi served with a mound of ratatouille, white asparagus, pumpkin and cherry tomato in a jus gras.

The only disappointment among the vast amount of food I consume over two days is my choice of main from the degustation menu. The

crispy duck fails to live up to its name (too rare for my liking). I'd go back tomorrow for the breakfast, especially the wet muesli.

There is variety on the menu but there are only two places to eat - and on a long stay that could present problems. Breakfast and dinner are served in the Long Pavilion and lunch down on the beach from which Pebble Beach takes its name.

Qualia guests have privileges at various Hamilton Island restaurants but it would have to be a very long stay for me to want to move outside the resort. (The management anticipates stays of up to five days as the norm with longer stays over the festive season.)

If you feel the need to pop outside for a blast of the common man, Qualia has its own fleet of Hamilton Island buggies, a top-of-the-range model that runs silently on battery and is much posher than those Hamilton guests pay for.

They're needed; it's a steep hike from top to bottom, not one I'd relish after a day by the pool.

Room service is restricted to platters. It's not ideal but the decision was taken on the basis of quality. It's too difficult to deliver proper meals in buggies, however quiet they are.

Another quibble: Spa Qualia. It is all that is promised in the blurb - serene space, sensational treatments, meditation and yoga area. And there's not much wrong when you raise your head from the massage table to catch a glimpse of a yacht sailing by. But if you set your cap at the top then all decisions will be scrutinised. Spa Qualia is not doing beauty treatments. Mistake.

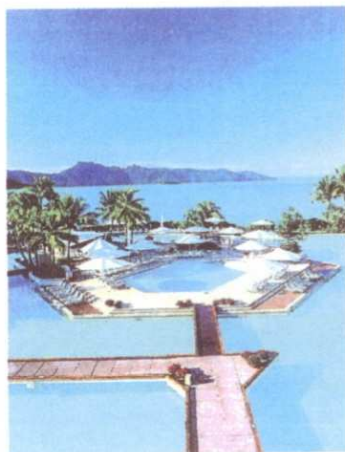
Qualia guests, we are told, are busy people. The point is busy people tend to get frantic before they go on holiday. That said, my chipped polish did fade into insignificance after the Bularrri Yarrul or warm-stone treatment.

Those 300-million-year-old more restorative effect on skin than Dior's Holiday Red perfume.

Perhaps the most illuminating make about Qualia is that beside the bed at the end of the tile of water and a small c-day's temperature. No suggestions as to how to course there's a full range of staff (60 at present, with more out whatever you want. But of place where you make your get what I mean. It's that. This is a resort for grown-ups over 18 are not allowed. Own. You just won't get it.

See more photos of Qualia at [smh.com.au/travel](http://smh.com.au/travel).

## Hayman holds on despite competition



Sandy Oatley's comment that the Whitsundays is in need of an international resort did not go unnoticed across the Coral Sea at Hayman.

Hayman's general manager, Roger Wright, begs to differ. Hayman, he says, is a world-class resort. It has been for 20 years and will continue to be at the forefront of tourism in this country.

Wright points to the resort's innumerable awards and the fact it has been inducted into Tourism Australia's Hall of Fame. International guests take up 30 per cent of Hayman's rooms at any time, he says.

Wright welcomes the competition from Qualia. "It adds to diversity of options in the area, which in turn adds to the area's profile. That has to be a good thing."

Wright concedes some of his clients will give Qualia a try but is confident they will return, pointing to an extremely healthy return-guest ratio.

Both resorts have upmarket appeal but in reality they are different creatures.

Take for instance the day's schedule at Hayman. On Saturday, October 20, there were 19 different activities listed - and that did not include eating or drinking in any of the island's eight food and beverage options or lolling by the huge pool, which seems to be the preferred activity of most guests.

Also, Wright can't imagine Hayman without children. What started as an upmarket, exclusive enclave has evolved into a family resort, though one for well-heeled families.

After buying the resort in 2004, the island's owner, Mulpha Australia, spent \$2.5 million on a new kids' club.

At the risk of stating the obvious, any resort that is 20 years old needs careful scrutiny and lots of TLC in the shape of bucket loads of money. Mulpha Australia is part of a Malaysian company that has the InterContinental Sydney, Hyatt Regency

Sanctuary Cove and the M Hilton in its international portfolio. It has pledged its long-term commitment to the resort.

The pool wing has been beachfront restaurant, AZ updated and there's \$8 million next year's refreshments literature likes to describe and that's on top of the on budget. In a successful move brought in international spa Spa Chakra to manage its more to come.

One thing Qualia won't let is the landing process. That remains one of its main attractions at beats boarding the Sea Garden resort's four launches, for trip from Hamilton to Hay arriving at a private jetty might come close.