

THE AUSTRALIAN

# wish

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## WOT'S NEXT

Graeme Wood on Wotif.com and his passion for sailing

## OUT TO LUNCH

Simply the best ways to celebrate the holiday season

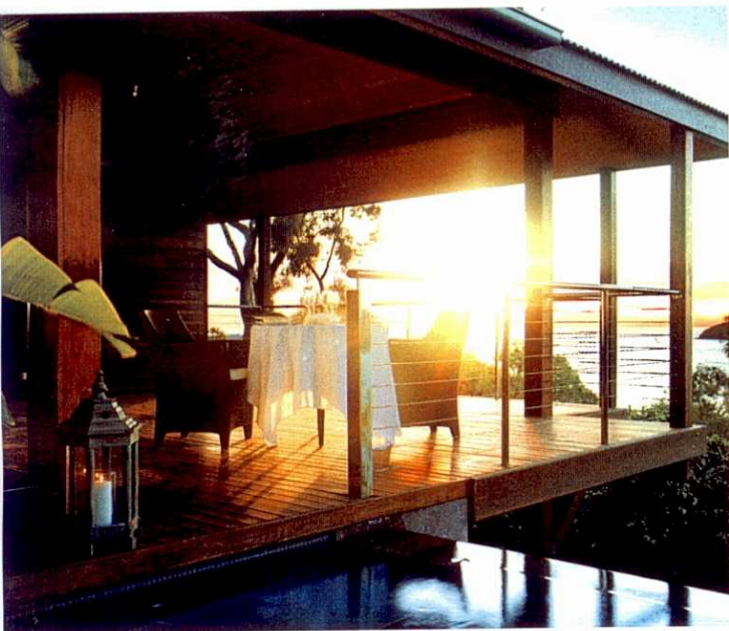
## THE HIGH LIFE

Margaret Throsby on the Tour du Mont Blanc

# Scene Queen

**EXCLUSIVE** Designer Catherine Martin on the set of *Australia*





# SPLENDID ISOLATION

Hamilton Island's new five-star Qualia resort is big on child-free space and pampered privacy. *Georgina Safe* hangs up her Do Not Disturb sign.

**N**estled into the northern tip of Hamilton Island on the Great Barrier Reef, Australia's latest luxury resort is entered via an airy central pavilion framed by a swimming pool that runs its entire length. The resort's name, *Qualia*, derives from a Latin term meaning "a deeper sensory experience" and, from the sea breezes that flow through the resort to the sound of waves breaking on the Coral Sea shore and the views of lush vegetation on neighbouring islands, it is indeed a feast for the senses. Even the trip from the island's airport comes with sparkling water in Riedel glasses served by the same buff men who collected my luggage from the carousel.

The brainchild of Bob Oatley, who twice won the Sydney to Hobart with his yacht *Wild Oats* and liked the nautical lifestyle so much he bought Hamilton for \$200 million in 2004, *Qualia* lifts the island from the domain of the white-shoe brigade and backpackers to an international luxury destination. Each of the resort's 27 one-bedroom "pavilions" – so-called because they are four times the size of an average hotel room and come with their own plunge pool – has been designed by Australian architect Chris Beckingham to blend into the surroundings. Eventually, there will be 60 pavilions. In the meantime, if you're after something larger,

consider *Qualia*'s spacious Beach House, which could be yours for \$3000 a night. The pavilion I'm allocated is \$1600 a night. Would I spend my own money on such a treat? You bet.

Set among 12ha of eucalypts, sand and pebbled shores and built using Australian hardwood and Bowen granite, the retreat has an understated aesthetic that is the antithesis of nearby Hayman Island's glitzy glamour. On arrival, you are given an activities schedule listing a dizzying range of pursuits: private boat charters, scuba diving, snorkelling, bocce on the beach at sunset ... you name it. The welcome letter in my room reads, "Here you're free to do as much or as little as you please". I opt for the latter, beginning with a dip in one of *Qualia*'s two huge swimming pools before retiring to a sunlounge to watch the superyachts and catamarans drift by.


Lunch is at Pebble Beach, so named for the shore's smooth grey stones and echoed in the muted, natural tones of the restaurant's decor. Soothed by the sounds of the lapping sea while enjoying ocean views and freshly caught seafood makes the office feel like a distant memory. And I'm in the perfect frame of mind to visit Spa *Qualia*, also designed by Beckingham, where I succumb to a blissful 90-minute facial.

Returning to my pavilion pool after spa time, I notice a tanker-sized private vessel resembling Jamie Packer's Arctic P has dropped anchor,

and directly beneath the vertiginous cliffs four kayakers have pulled in for a breather. Despite our varying circumstances – respectively high and dry sybarite, ocean oligarch and minnows in the shallows – the bizarrely simultaneous popping of three champagne corks unites us. That's until a freak rainstorm dissipates the flotsam and jetsam and I retreat to soak in a pre-dinner bath.

Served in a minimal space adjacent to the Long Pavilion, dinner is delicious and reasonably healthy to boot. *Qualia*'s executive chef, Stephane Rio, presents a fresh take on locally sourced produce, with dishes including seared kangaroo with celeriac confit and wild mushroom terrine to Hervey Bay scallops with poppy seed crepes and King George whiting with sea urchin tortellini.

The following day, a helicopter flight ferries us to Whitsunday Island's Whitehaven Beach for a champagne picnic. We could be the only two people on its 7km stretch of pure silica sand, soft and white as icing sugar, as fresh winds have made seaplane landings and boating excursions a risky business. Our splendid isolation is true luxury. Sadly, however, the chopper that deposited us is soon back to return us to the island.

Back in Sydney, I find Whitehaven sand in my bag and shoes for several days afterwards, a sprinkling of fairy dust to remind me of paradise. *Georgina Safe* travelled to Hamilton Island courtesy of *Qualia* ([www.qualia.com.au](http://www.qualia.com.au)). 

Heavenly haven: Work your way through the resort's activities program or hide away in the sanctuary of your bumper-sized "pavilion" with its own private plunge pool overlooking the reef.