The Great Barrier Reef

A WORLD HERITAGE AREA

Covering a vast area of 348,000 square kilometres, the World Heritage-listed Great Barrier Reef is the largest coral reef system on Earth and an area of immense natural beauty. Stretching more than 2000 kilometres along Queensland’s east coast from Cape York in the north to Bundaberg in the south, the reef consists of around 3000 separate coral reefs and 900 islands. The reef was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1981 for its outstanding universal value. It was the first coral reef system to be named a World Heritage Site.

INCREDIBLE BIODIVERSITY

Built by billions of coral polyps, the reef is the world’s largest structure made by living organisms. The Great Barrier Reef supports an incredible range of marine creatures, some of which are vulnerable or endangered. It has some of the greatest diversity of life on the planet, including approximately 1500 species of fish, 360 species of reef-building corals, 4000 species of molluscs and 1500 species of sponges. In addition to the coral reef ecosystems, it also consists of more than 2000 square kilometres of mangroves and 43,000 square kilometres of seagrass meadows. Other significant marine animals, such as the dugong, humpback whales and the endangered loggerhead turtle, come to the reef to feed, calve or nest, in the case of turtles. More than 200 bird species use the islands and coral cays.

GREAT SCENIC VALUE

The Great Barrier Reef is one of Australia’s most visited natural sites, with more than 1.6 million visitors each year. It is one of the world’s most desirable locations for scuba diving and snorkelling. While many visitors choose to take daily boat tours from mainland cities, such as Cairns, there are many resorts on the reef’s islands, those on the Whitsunday Islands being among the most popular. One of the iconic sites within the reef is known as Heart Reef, coral which has naturally taken the shape of a heart, located in the Whitsundays.

A PROTECTED MARINE AREA

The reef is protected within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, which allows tourism, fishing, boating and shipping in certain areas. It is managed by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and is considered to be one of the world’s best managed marine environments.

The Great Barrier Reef faces a number of environmental pressures, including from fishing, pollution, plagues of the coral-eating crown-of-thorns starfish and climate change, which leads to warmer ocean temperatures, resulting in coral bleaching. The crown-of-thorns starfish, which attacks coral polyps, occurs naturally in healthy reef environments, but in recent years poor water quality and reduced predators have allowed starfish numbers to increase.

A RICH CULTURAL HERITAGE

Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders have lived in the area for many thousands of years. More than 70 groups have strong ongoing connections with their land and sea country. There are a number of archaeological sites within the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, such as fish traps, middens and rock art, which reflect this long occupation.

CAIRNS

Cairns is the main centre in Queensland’s Far North. It is the gateway to the Great Barrier Reef and the Wet Tropics. The traditional owners of Cairns are the Ginang Walubara Yidinji people, who have lived in the area for many thousands of years. Its European history dates back to 1770, when British explorer James Cook, aboard the Endeavour, mapped the area, naming the inlet on which Cairns is now based ‘Trinity Bay’. The discovery of gold at Palmer River in 1872 drew prospectors to the area – they were the first non-Aboriginal inhabitants of the Far North. Cairns developed as a centre for the thriving agricultural industry around the settlement and on the Atherton Tableland, with the main products being sugar cane, fruit and dairy. It was officially declared a town in 1903.