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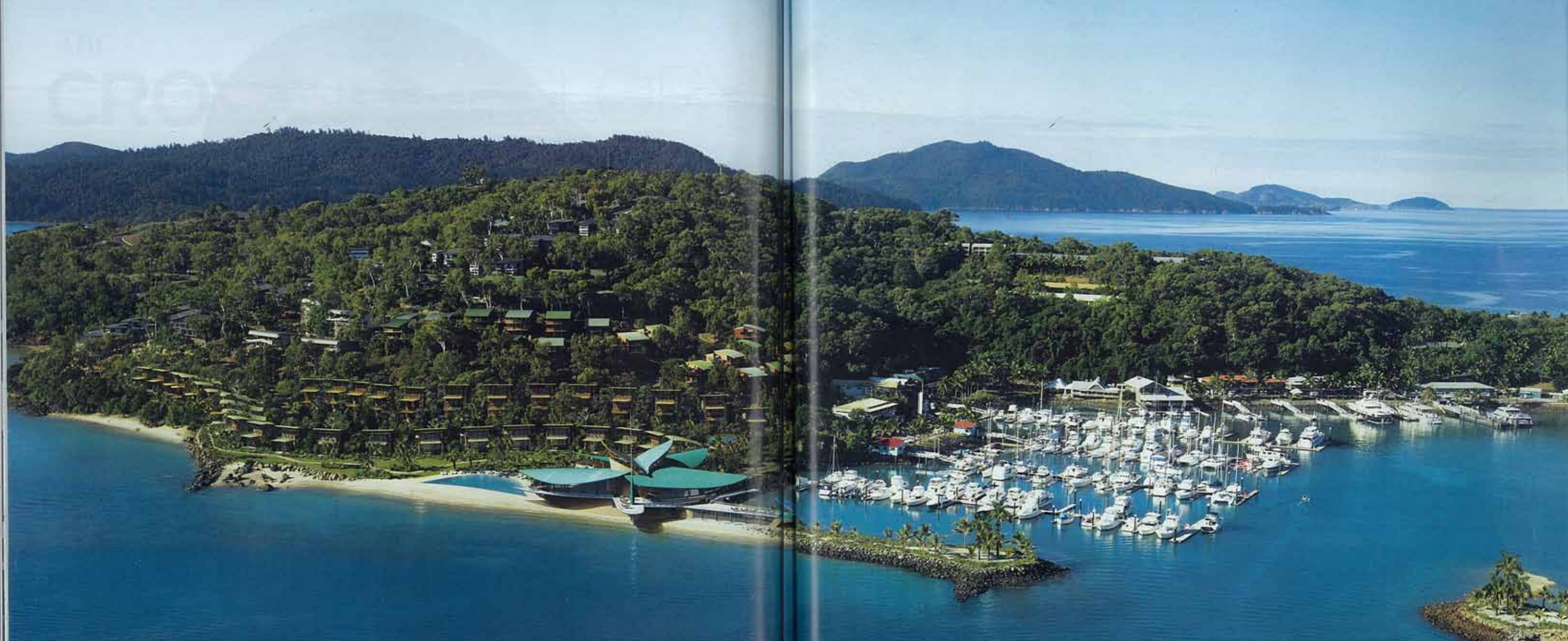
INSIDE LAS VEGAS' MOST LAVISH NEW SUITES

ABOARD THREE CHARTER YACHTS IN

THE CARIBBEAN AND MEDITERRANEAN

An Australian billionaire's five-star resort offers a dramatic setting for the

*Audi-sponsored **HAMILTON ISLAND** yacht races off the Great Barrier Reef.*



Island Wonder **Down** **Under**

BY DOUGLAS MCWHIRTER



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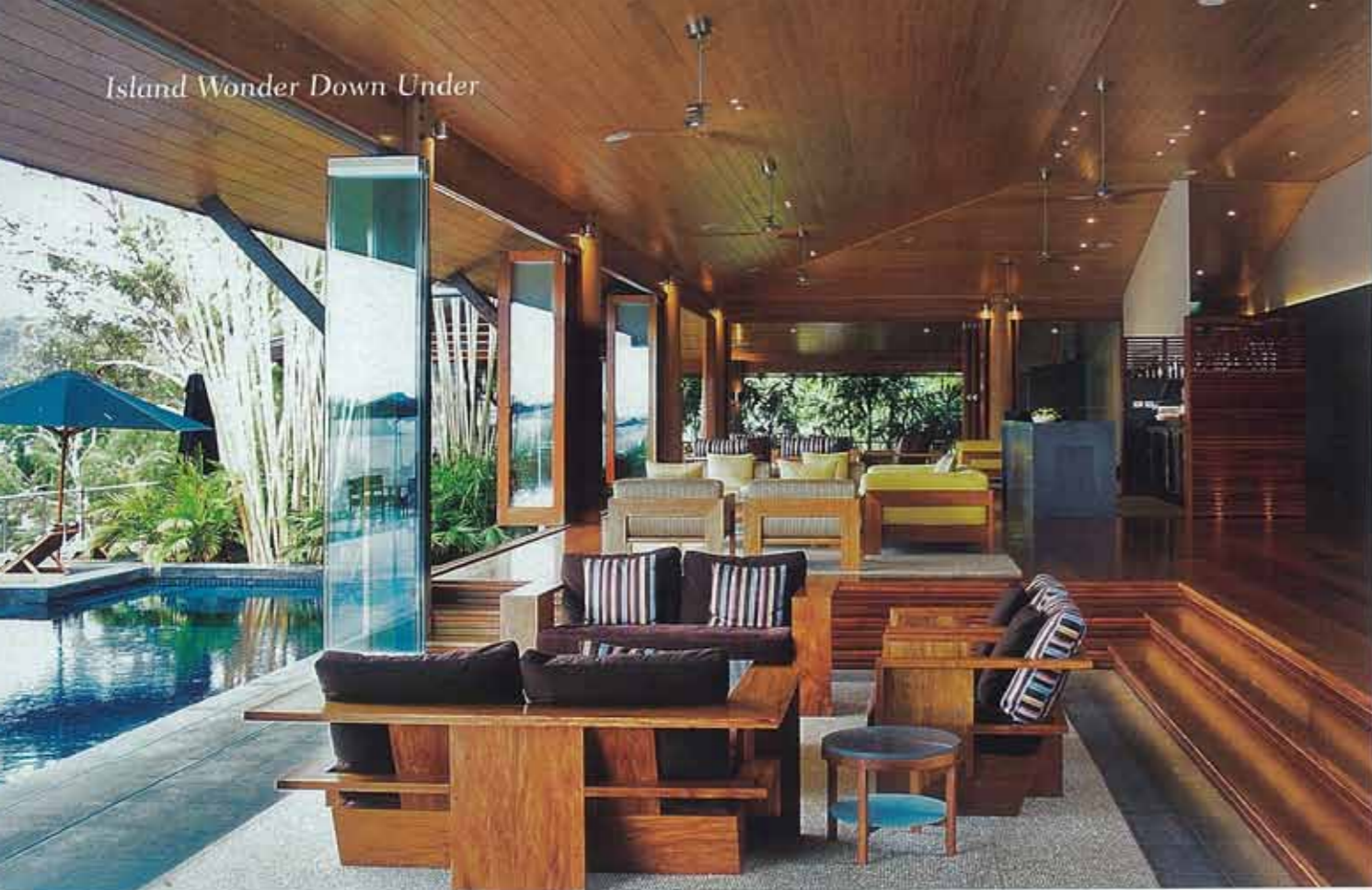
Y THE THIRD DAY OF THE

Audi Hamilton Island Race Week 2009 off Australia's Great Barrier Reef, the weather gods are clearly unhappy. A high-pressure system has settled over the island on this August morning, bringing the winds to a standstill and leaving a flotilla of roughly 200 becalmed sailing yachts to idle in the sun.

After a time, as race judges attempt to calculate accurate handicaps for a course that is as smooth as glass, the stagnant air suddenly begins to stir. Within a matter of minutes, yachts of every size and description snatch at the burgeoning breeze, fill their sails, and gradually head north. The favorite this day is *Wild Oats X*, a 66-foot supermaxi yacht owned by one of Australia's wealthiest men, the vintner

Robert Oatley's sailing yacht *Wild Oats X* (above), and the Long Pavilion at his *Qualia* resort (opposite).





billionaires sometimes do: He bought an island.

Comprising roughly 1,200 acres, Hamilton Island is one of the largest of the 74 islands in the Whitsunday archipelago, located in the heart of the Great Barrier Reef. Since 1770, when Captain James Cook and the crew of *Endeavour* sailed the length of the reef during the festival of Whit Sunday, the once-uninhabited Hamilton Island has been, at various times, a deer ranch, a national park, and home to former Beatles member George Harrison. Between 1975 and 1996, developer Keith Williams built several hotels and a marina on the island, transforming it into a popular resort destination that, since 1984, has served as the setting for Race Week.

Flush with cash from the 2001 sale of Rosemount Estate, Oatley acquired Hamilton Island for a reported \$179 million in cash and debt with an eye toward building a world-class resort that would be uniquely Australian. In October 2007, he unveiled Qualia, an exquisitely designed complex of Zen-calm pavilions on the island's secluded

northernmost tip that blends seamlessly into the landscape and the sweeping ocean vistas. "There have never been many luxury properties here," says Qualia general manager Jason Friedman, who hails from New York City. "Australia was 15 years behind everybody else, but Qualia has changed that. The Oatleys have definitely raised the bar for other [hoteliers] in this country."

Qualia was the first of three major development projects that Oatley, his oldest son, Sandy, and their family company, Hamilton Island Enterprises, undertook after purchasing the island. The Hamilton Island Yacht Club—which features a majestic, aesthetically arresting clubhouse and 35 freestanding three- and four-bedroom villas on the water's edge—held its soft opening during the 2009 Race Week. The Oatleys' third and final project is the creation of the Hamilton Island Golf Club on nearby Dent Island, the centerpiece of which is a rugged 18-hole golf course designed by British Open winner Peter Thomson.

Despite the scale and enormous cost of these developments, they represent

much more than business ventures to Oatley. "Bob Oatley is a very proud Australian, and he built his family into a great Australian family," Friedman says. "For him, this is a footprint, a physical legacy."

Part of this legacy has been to preserve the natural setting of each site. "The Oatleys wanted Qualia to blend into the environment," Friedman says. "It had to disappear. No roof on the property breaks the tree line. What's more, we painted the roofs of the buildings different muted shades of green to avoid a monotonous color that would have been too noticeable."

In the development of Qualia, Friedman notes, the Oatleys spent \$12 million on landscaping alone—much of it to ensure the privacy of the resort's guests. Although some of the guest pavilions are situated only a few yards apart, the strategically planted flora conceals each structure from its neighbors so that occupants enjoy complete privacy while showering outdoors or relaxing in their personal infinity plunge pools, some of which overlook the Coral Sea and Whitsunday Islands.

Open floor plans, rich hardwoods, and shimmering pools contribute to Qualia's uniquely Australian ambience.

The overall result is not only sublime but, as Oatley intended, uniquely Australian. "We all live on the coastline," says Glenn Bourke, CEO of Hamilton Island Enterprises and an avid yachtsman himself. "Australians are either in the water or on the water all the time. Here at Qualia, we go out cruising on a boat, then we have a beautiful dinner in a restaurant overlooking the sea, and the next day we go diving on the reef. That's how we live, and that, to me, is Australia."

AUSTRALIANS' LOVE AFFAIR with the water is boldly expressed in their yacht races. The 628-nautical-mile Rolex Sydney Hobart Yacht Race, the country's most prestigious regatta, is considered one of the most challenging competitions of its kind in the world. (Not surprisingly, Oatley's *Wild Oats XI*, the sister ship to his yacht in the 2009 Hamilton Island regatta, has taken top honors in the Sydney-to-Hobart race for the last four years.) And the Audi Hamilton

Island Race Week, which just completed its 26th annual race in August, continues to grow in stature, drawing yacht owners from all over the country who return to the island each year like a flock of well-plumed migratory birds. Their preferred roost, of course, is Qualia, which books up months in advance.

As Race Week gets under way, the island comes alive. Contending yachts arrive in the harbor; Gulfstream Vs and helicopters deposit passengers at

HAMILTON ISLAND: AN EXPLORER'S GUIDE



SINCE HAMILTON ISLAND'S acquisition by Robert Oatley's Hamilton Island Enterprises, the once-sleepy tropical resort property has been completely transformed. Today guests on the island can fill their days and nights with any number of pleasurable diversions, from spas to sports and more.

QUALIA: The resort offers 60 spacious one-bedroom pavilions designed by Australian architect Chris Beckingham. The leeward, or southwest-facing, pavilions start at \$880 per night, are roughly 970 square feet, and offer private sun decks. The slightly larger windward, or north-facing, pavilions measure roughly 1,300 square feet, feature personal infinity plunge pools, and run about \$1,350 per night. The Beach House, priced at \$2,785 per night, is a secluded oceanfront pavilion equipped with its own full-size pool, a 10-person dining room, a large bedroom suite, and a guesthouse. *Qualia*, +612.9433.3349, www.qualia.com.au

SPA QUALIA: Located at the geographic center of the Qualia resort, Spa Qualia offers distinctly Australian treatments that combine traditional and contemporary approaches to relaxation. Guests pass through a courtyard of goldfish ponds and tropical flora to reach six treatment suites—two for couples, four for individuals. *Spa Qualia*, +617.4948.9484, www.qualia.com.au

HAMILTON ISLAND YACHT CLUB: Easily the most architecturally distinctive structure in the Whitsundays, the Hamilton Island Yacht Club boasts bright-green roof panels that sweep above a cavernous glass-walled waterfront structure, which houses conference and wedding facilities, restaurants, and a gym. The club's 35 villas, located just steps from the marina, range in price from about \$2.6 million to \$3.2 million. *Hamilton Island Yacht Club*, www.hamiltonislandyachtclub.com.au

HAMILTON ISLAND GOLF CLUB: Home to the only championship island golf course in Australia, this club is actually located on nearby Dent Island, a short ferry ride from the Hamilton Island Marina. Five-time British Open winner Peter Thomson designed these par-71 links to offer 360-degree views of the Coral Sea, whose frequent and erratic ocean breezes are prone to hijack even the most carefully executed drive. *Hamilton Island Golf Club*, www.hamiltonislandgolfclub.com.au —D.M.



The recently opened Hamilton Island Golf Club, which features an 18-hole course, is actually located on nearby Dent Island.

the airport; and the island's 2,000 hospitality workers scurry to make last-minute preparations. Audi, which sponsors the event, shuttles arriving guests to Qualia in a fleet of Q7s and displays other models at various scenic points: An A6, for instance, occupies a promontory adjacent to the Hamilton Island Golf Club's 15th green, the Pacific Ocean serving as its backdrop.

At times, Race Week seems more like a beach-town block party than a formal regatta. To be sure, the yacht owners and crews are as serious and focused as any on Earth; but after a few frustrating days waiting for the wind to pick up at the starting line in Dent Passage, the participants crave diversion.

On the afternoon of day five, yacht owners and their spouses gather in Qualia's Long Pavilion for the annual Moët & Chandon Luncheon, one of the more aggressively sought-after Race Week tickets. Here, the wait staff buzzes about, topping off Champagne flutes, while members of Australia's upper crust regale one another with tales of victory and defeat at sea. Two hours and several hundred bottles of premium Champagne later, the crowd is merrily looped. Clothing designer Camilla Franks, a former actress now known in Australia as the "Kaftan Queen," assumes custody of the microphone and launches into an effervescent introduction of her latest line of exotically colored kaftans. "Own your curves!" she exhorts the women, by which she apparently means obscure

them beneath the ample fabric of her garments. Under normal circumstances, rugged men of the sea care little for this type of presentation. But today they sit in rapt attention as a platoon of young female Qualia employees that Franks has enlisted to model her creations stands ready to the left of the podium. At the command of the Kaftan Queen, the lovely "women of Qualia"—good sports all—begin to stroll patiently between the tables, proudly owning their curves.

Robert Oatley is noticeably absent from the Moët & Chandon Luncheon. Hamilton Island Enterprises is preparing for the grand opening of the new golf course on Dent Island, an event scheduled for the following day. So as his guests happily sip Moët across the channel at Qualia, the 81-year-old Oatley reportedly savors a few holes of golf on his new course

GETTING THERE: V Australia—Sir Richard Branson's new transpacific airline—wines, dines, and entertains business-class passengers on such a grand scale that a 13-hour journey from Los Angeles to Sydney feels more like an evening spent in a posh London club. From Sydney, travelers can transfer to Virgin Blue or Jetstar, which offer direct daily flights to Hamilton Island. V Australia, 800.444.0260, www.vaustralia.com —D.M.

before officially turning it over to his fellow Australians.

DURING THE NEXT two days, attention returns to the race. On the day after the Moët & Chandon extravaganza at Qualia, trade winds begin blowing through the Whitsundays from the southeast, introducing a competitive energy into what has been, until now, a rather lackluster regatta. Heading into the Molle Islands race—the final event in the IRC grand prix division—Oatley's *Wild Oats X* is one point ahead of *Black Jack*, its archrival, in the line honors count. But given the vagaries of the sea, anything can happen—and it does. In the end, the weather gods smile on a 55-footer from Melbourne called *Living Doll*, blessing the yacht with enough thrust to take top honors. To the surprise of race watchers, *Wild Oats X* finishes in 10th place.

More likely than not, Robert Oatley did not dwell on this defeat for long. He and Sandy are busy with plans to build a luxury hotel at the golf club, as well as with the completion of their Yacht Club and the management of their world-class resort, which is running at 98 percent occupancy. "Our work here on Hamilton Island has been and continues to be the greatest reward," Sandy says. "It feels sometimes like we are defying gravity." ■

Audi Hamilton Island Race Week,
www.hamiltonislandraceweek.com.au