

LINE HONOURS

Privately owned Hamilton Island is looming large in the landscape of luxury getaways. We visit this lovely location just off the coast of Queensland, Australia, on the occasion of Audi Race Week

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Images courtesy of Hamilton Island

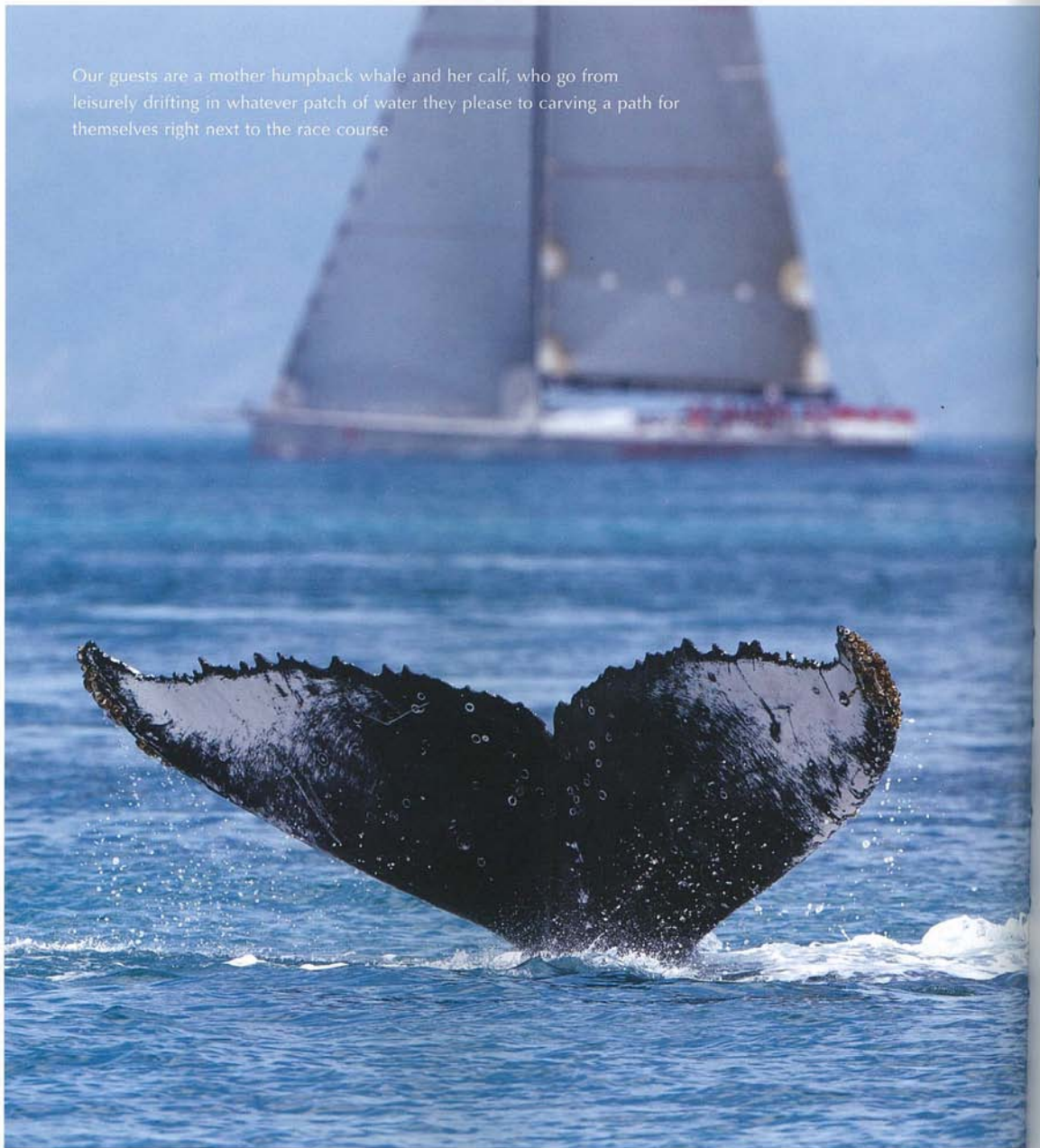
We're aboard a fine vessel called the *Ghost*, the official media yacht of Audi Race Week on Hamilton Island, and we're going nowhere. Some 500 metres off the starboard bow, two unexpected guests have us in their sights and are steadily powering their way towards the boat. So unexpected are they in fact that the race itself fades into the background momentarily.

Our guests are a mother humpback whale and her calf, who go from leisurely drifting in whatever patch of water they please to carving a path for themselves right next to the race course. The race in question is the largest offshore yachting regatta in Australia and involves many different classes of yachts. As of 2010, the organisers have not created a division for whales so they are a bit of a diversion for the moment. There are also reports of a pair of albino dolphins somewhere in the mix but we don't see them, unfortunately.



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Back aboard the *Ghost*, we are awaiting the start of proceedings. Given that tomorrow is lay day, today is traditionally reserved for the Club Marine Classic Long Race, with IRC Classes, the Coppersmith Rock Race, Performance Passage and Around Islands all mixing it up. It's a very pleasant day, from a landlubber's perspective, but we are told that the changing weather is holding up the start. The Long Race has already been replaced by a shorter race, thanks to the peachy weather, and nature's irascible fickleness is working towards changing the day yet again.

All around us are yachts of all persuasions, from behemoths such as Lang Walker's *Kokomo* and Bob Oatley's *Wild Oats XI* to nimble players such as *Manly Too*. The organisers put the number of boats in the water at 200, with everyone out on the water in advance of the lay day. We are told that somewhere in our midst is the recently famous Jessica Watson, teen-solo-sailing-around-the-world sensation, and Australian sailing icon, Iain Murray (at the helm of *Wild Oats X*) representing the other end of the experience spectrum.

Murray will enter our sights again, at an unexpected venue but for now, the race presses on, with yacht after yacht careening here to fro as they struggle to come together as a group behind the mandated start line. Wind changes and delays alike are playing havoc with everyone's concentration and the line breaks down a couple of times. Once the boats get going though, they move with a speed that belies their elegant profiles. On the day, *Lahana* is the big winner, at least amongst the IRC Grand Prix contenders but the champion of this year's regatta, now in its 27th year, is a mischievous boat called *Loki*.



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The field at Audi Race Week is crowded and there are more than a few boats with sterling reputations, including of course the *Kokomo*, *Wild Oats X* and *XI*, *Lahana* and *Loki*. Overall race winner *Loki* for example is the second Reichel Pugh boat of the same name for owner Stephen Ainsworth, the first having been abandoned off the coast of Sicily in 2007, then lost through bad weather. Audi Race Week has been eventful for *Loki*, which won three of its IRC Grand Prix division events but whose eventual victory was by a mere hair's breadth.

The final day of racing says it all for *Loki* and Ainsworth, under intense pressure from Harvey Milne's *Aroona*. Ainsworth believed the chance had slipped by him and that the *Aroona* had won it. He even took the helm himself on that fateful day, with his wife and friends aboard, settling in for a fun day. Of course, *Loki* did indeed win and, as Uwe Hagen, Audi Australia's Managing Director said, "the best boat and crew have been victorious."

Sitting pretty aboard the *Ghost* during the race itself, you can't escape the impression that it's all about good fun though—whales notwithstanding. Lang Walker, for example, is a billionaire property mogul who has a number of yachts, all somewhat confusingly named *Kokomo*, so this is clearly about passion not so much professional success. Similarly, Bob Oatley—called the pioneer of Australia's wine export industry by *Forbes* magazine—has nothing really to prove, except perhaps the success of Hamilton Island, on the whole. Oatley of course also owns the island and is responsible for its upscale transformation in recent years, having ploughed more than A\$300 million into it.

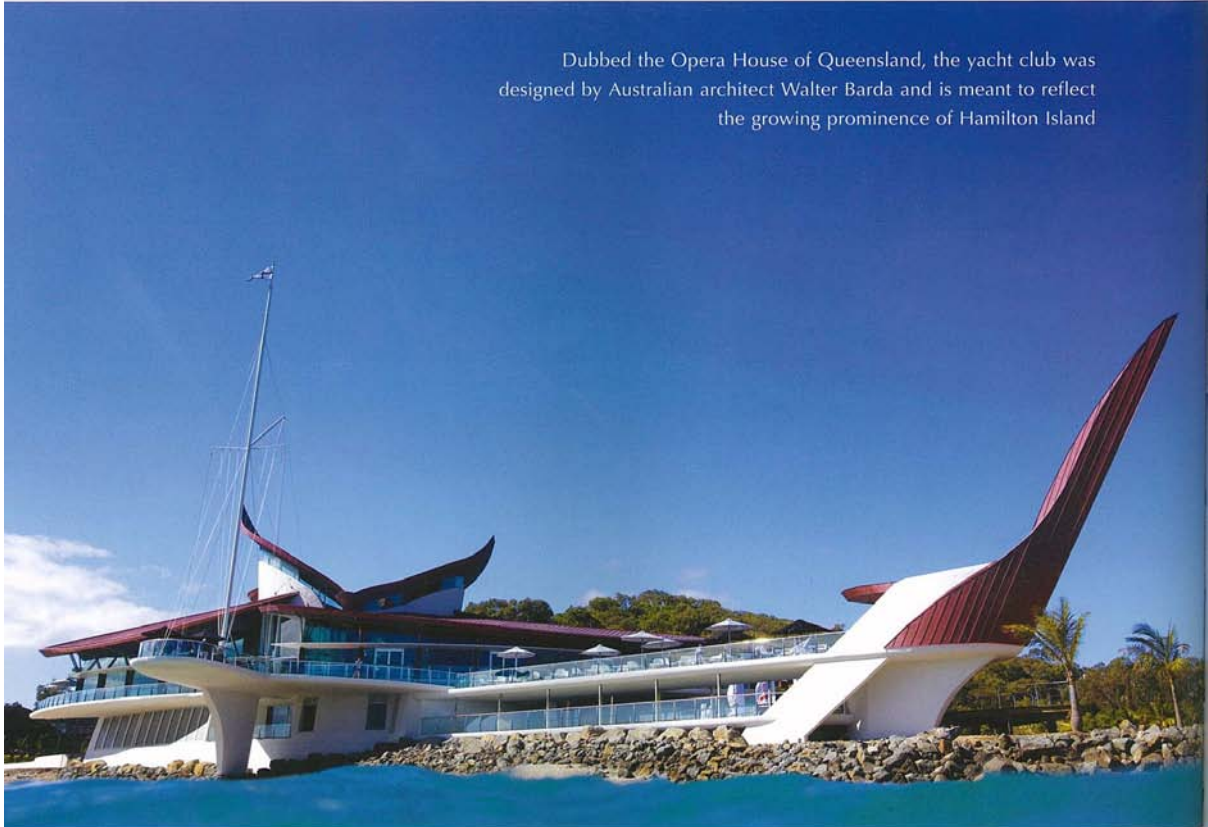
Just how does a spirits entrepreneur and his family come to own a gem like Hamilton Island, the largest inhabited island of the Whitsundays and scene of some celluloid infamy in *Muriel's Wedding*? First of all, the island became a public company in 1996 and the Oatleys won a bid to acquire 100% of the shares in 2003, via 21st Century Resort Holdings Pty Ltd, which they control, and they operate most of the businesses on the island via Hamilton Island Enterprises, which they own. Nearby Dent Island, which features an excellent golf course is divided between federal, state (Queensland) and private (the Oatley family) ownership. That said, Hamilton Island itself has been in private hands since 1975, when Keith Williams and Bryan Bryt began developing it.

Today, the island has infrastructure that would be the envy of many a nation, with Hamilton Island Airport providing air links with the rest of Australia, including direct flights to Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Cairns. It is the only island in the Great Barrier Reef with its own commercial airport. The other way to get to the island would be via ferry, from Shute Harbour on the mainland. If you have your own yacht, then you'll be cruising into Hamilton Island Marina, which has 240 berths and normally has plenty of space (unless you visit during Race Week, when it appears to be quite full.) Hamilton Island Enterprises puts the marina occupancy at an average of 87% all year round.



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Dubbed the Opera House of Queensland, the yacht club was designed by Australian architect Walter Borda and is meant to reflect the growing prominence of Hamilton Island



Travelers who expect to be arriving via whale should take note that, aside from the usual difficulties, there are no berthing services available at the present time.

While you can't drive to the island, the lack of bridges putting paid to that notion, roads are aplenty on the 650 hectare island. Once you're on the island, you'll notice that regular motor vehicles are largely limited to public shuttles. Apparently, the way to get around the island is via golf buggy, which allows you to zip about the place in relaxed style. Terrorizing bystanders is optional and not at all recommended.

Of course, for the duration of Audi Race Week, the German automaker placed a small fleet of Audis on the island, for the purpose of ferrying important folks to important dinners—two with celebrity chefs Matt Moran and Shannon Bennett—and for official guests at the top-of-the-line resort, *qualia*. Audi also provided an A5 Cabriolet 2.0 TFSI quattro S tronic as a prize to the overall winner and an S5 Sportback to any crewman who managed to best their Motorsports Ambassador Brad Jones in a driving challenge.

The drive challenge takes place on the lay day, the day after our frolics-with-whales race, at the airport. With the sailors otherwise occupied, it seemed a good time to check out the brand new A\$85 million yacht club, which opened properly late last year. Already dubbed the Opera House of Queensland, the yacht club was designed by Australian architect Walter Barda and is meant to reflect the growing prominence of Hamilton Island as a top-shelf yachting destination. It also reflects on perhaps the most important reason the Oatley's got involved with the island in the first place. **"The Oatley family was originally drawn to Hamilton Island through our passion for sailing and it seems fitting to recognise the Whitsundays' reputation as one of the world's great sailing regions with the building of this yacht club. We expect the creation of the yacht club to further cement Hamilton Island's status as a centre of international boating excellence,"** said Sandy Oatley, Chairman of Hamilton Island, on the occasion of the official public opening of the yacht club in December, 2009.

On our visit, Murray, Commodore of the Yacht Club, cheekily added that Bob Oatley simply wanted a yacht club that he could proudly say was his. Murray, also Regatta Director for the 2013 America's Cup, collaborated on the design and construction of the yacht club via his property development firm, Murlan.



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The Yacht Club Villas are meant to offer the best in waterfront living, with their expansive views over Dent Passage and easy access to the facilities at the yacht club

Likewise, the Hamilton Island Yacht Club Villas—also designed by Barda and developed jointly with Murray—are meant to offer the best in waterfront living, with their expansive views over Dent Passage and easy access to the facilities at the yacht club. Unlike some other developments around the world in recent years (Sentosa Cove, for a local reference), this one does not offer “parking” space for personal boats at the front door. Murray, who showed us around the different villas, explained that since owners of the 35 villas get guaranteed berths at the marina, additional space at the villas was not necessary. Each villa is a four-bedroom/four-bathroom proposition, spread over three or four floors (depending on position), with large balcony and terrace areas. At press time, 22 of the 35 villas have been sold, with six more on offer. The remaining villas are meant for holiday rentals. Details on the property, including pricing, are available on request by emailing propertysales@hamiltonisland.com.au.

While whale sightings and yacht racing are well and good, that’s merely a teaser. Hamilton Island also boasts Australia’s only championship island golf course, which is actually on Dent Island. The par 71 course was designed by Peter Thompson, measures 6,120 metres and is quite the challenge. With a series of holes strung out along ridges and across steep valleys, the different elevations and constantly changing breezes, even the best golfer is going to have to opt for a drop—more than once.

Other challenges you can take up, if so inclined, include various hiking trails that are anything but a walk in the park. Of course, given that this is a sailing paradise, you could find your own sea legs here. The island boasts a number of programmes related to sailing, for all levels of interest and competency.

Aside from its own attractions, Hamilton Island is also well positioned to be a gateway to the pristine beaches of the Whitsundays and the incredible natural wonder that is the Great Barrier Reef, for example. To be practical about it, Hamilton Island is the only island that boasts all the trappings of civilization, so to speak, that serve as a launching pad for outward bound adventure.

STAY IN STYLE

Nestled on the northern-most tip of Hamilton Island, the peaceful beach retreat of *qualia* (spelt that way, pronounced kwah-lee-ah) is a refreshing take on the contemporary beach resort. The design and feel of the place is distinctly Australian, which is only to be expected of course. With the Great Barrier Reef as home ground, *qualia* has been designed around the natural landscape and promises to relax the mind and seduce the senses in its beautiful, unspoiled setting.



Enjoy the island's natural beauty from the comfort of one of the resort's 60 luxuriously appointed private pavilions. Leeward pavilions delight with spectacular sunsets, while Windward pavilions boast postcard-perfect views of the Coral Sea and their own private plunge pools.



The Beach House—the equivalent of a Presidential Suite—offers the ultimate in luxurious living, with its two lavishly furnished bedrooms, 10-seat dining room, full-sized private pool and extensive entertainment area.

Pamper yourself at Spa *qualia*, a world-class facility at the highest point on the island, or enjoy a dip in the resort's pools, work out at the gym on the water's edge, spend a quiet afternoon in the library, or be treated to authentic Australian cuisine in the resort's restaurants.