

Living the dream: Dining on the Great Barrier Reef

Travel & Dining Adventures

By David Rottenberg

Many of us only dream of sailing away into the sunset, living in luxury and visiting far-off destinations known only to the super rich. I've actually lived the fantasy aboard *Silver Shadow*, a six-star (yes, six!) cruise ship operated by **Silversea Cruises**.

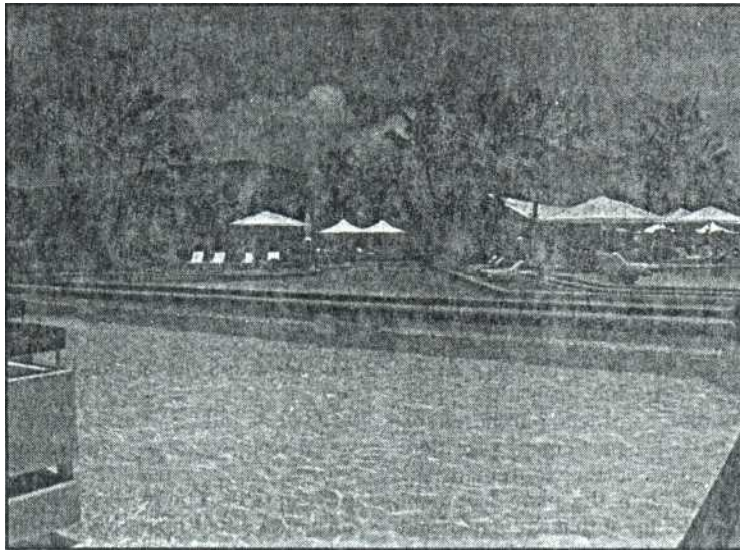
The vessel houses a limited group of passengers who want to experience a world of relaxation and pampering, administered by a solicitous and attentive crew. The accommodations are top quality, cuisine is superb, activities and programs are engaging.

Shore destinations also differentiate this cruise line from the others. Most operators leave and return from set points. Silversea's vessels meander all over the world, going from one exciting place to another, creating fresh menus and bringing new entertainment on board at major destinations. There is little repetition, only an ever-changing variety that permits passengers to hop on where they wish -and to stay on as long as they wish without getting bored.

Being a smaller ship, comparatively, *Silver Shadow* is able to dock where larger vessels cannot enter. One such area is Hayman Island and its nearby Great Barrier Reef.

We were taken off the *Silver Shadow* in mid-ocean by a large catamaran and transported to a floating platform fixed to the bottom of the sea, ReefWorld. We entered a submersible with glass bottom windows to cruise the reef. Brilliantly colored fish swam by, as curious about us as we were about them. Coral of all shapes, sizes and colors formed a reticulated line that stretched into the murky distance. Giant clams opened and closed as our shadow passed over them. The effect was magical, watching new forms of life as if we were on another planet.

Many of us then snorkeled the reef to get up close and personal



Swimming pools and lagoons surround the exclusive Hayman Island Resort.

with the profusion of wildlife.

A leisurely lunch was served -- fruits, salads, cold meats in endless profusion - topped with all the drinks and beer one could desire. No land was visible but the horizon remained fixed while we dined on the pontoon during wavy seas.

A ship tender then took us over to Hayman Island Resort, an exclusive property catering to the wealthy. Don't look for the island in your average nautical charts or world maps. You won't find it. Even most guidebooks don't give it much coverage. But those "in the know" are familiar with it. It is a member of "Leading Hotels of the World" and has been named the top resort in Australia for three years in a row.

Hayman Island is part of the chain of Whitsunday Islands, a group of 74 bits of land that jut from the sea between Newcastle and Townsville in the province of Queensland, Australia. Despite its small size, the island contains the resort and its staff housing, most of whom live on the grounds.

Most guests fly to nearby Hamilton, Island's airport and then sip champagne as they sail over to Hayman Island in the resort's private yacht.;

In topography and weather, Hayman Island is reminiscent of

Tahiti or Hawaii. In fact, it lies on the same latitude as Hawaii.

There are only about 250 rooms on the property, along with a series of elegant themed penthouses. The French penthouse, for example, contains classic Louis XVI furnishings and a 19th century marble fireplace. For a different flavor, the Moroccan penthouse reflects Moorish influences with the use of ebony, ivory and silver. The property can accommodate groups as large as 500 guests for corporate meetings or events.

Lagoons and pools interlace the hotel. The pool bar resembles a Mexican palapa, with open walls and thatched roof. The view looks out on the beach and the bay, creating a scenic and casual place to while away the afternoon heat.

Wildlife onshore is varied and friendly. Ducks will quack their way to one's lunch table, looking for handouts. Wild, gold-crested white cockatoos screech in the trees, flying from perch to perch. They even occasionally fly into a room to feast on the remains of room service.

Exquisite walking paths and gardens on Hayman Island include Italian fountains and beautiful lagoons filled with colorful lily pads. A wedding, was

being set up on the day of my Visit; '45 'satin-covered' chairs

facing the gorgeous mountains and bay, giving the couple who stood before the minister an unforgettable sendoff into married life.

Guests have many dining options, created by an international group of award-winning chefs. A French restaurant, La Fontaine, offers rich furnishings, Waterford crystals, romantic lighting and a large wine cellar. Oriental, set on the Japanese lake and overlooking a ceremonial tea house, specializes in the cuisine of Asian cultures. Azure, with its open show kitchen looking out to the sea, serves traditional Australian favorites, with a special focus on seafood.

Poolside, I savored fish and chips the way they should be made. My fish tasted as if it had spent that morning still in the ocean. The firm white flesh was lightly battered with a tasty golden coating. The chips had an authentic English taste, offset by excellent Australian beer.

When coming to Hayman Island, bring money - lots of it. Beauty and elegance have their price. My fish and chips, for example, ran a costly Australian \$28 (about \$20).

After a day on the Great Barrier Reef and onshore at Hayman Island Resort, I prepared to return to *Silver Shadow*. I had an evening planned, once again dining on excellent Italian fare in the vessel's Terrace Room, enjoying an outstanding French cabernet and then retreating to the lounge for the evening's entertainment.

Luxury has its price, whether on the *Silver Shadow* or at Hayman Island Resort. But the experiences and memories will more than compensate for every cent.

For more information about Silversea Cruises or Hayman Island Resort, consult your travel agent or visit www.silverseacruises.com and www.hayman.com.au.

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