

Opening extract from
**Hornes Down
Under**

Written by
Tony Horne

Published by
Matador

All text is copyright of the author and / or the illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Day Eleven

The Great Barrier Reef is overrated. I thought I would deliberately shock in my opening words today, though I am mellowing somewhat now as I reflect...

At hell o'clock, Matt picks us up and tells us that it is going to be a crackerjack of a day. As for all tours it seems, and he is not even the tour by the way, he gives you a tour and so much more. You get his life story. He tells us that it is twenty-three years since he moved here from Sydney and he has seen it go from two traffic lights to twenty-three.

I say he uses that line every day. It's a lovely little landmark stat though. Either way, Cairns remains tiny.

Our relationship with Matt is soon over. He just drops us at the Reef terminal, and we are soon on board Reef Magic, where the intense pressure to sign up for treats begins, as at least four different crew members visit you. I am tempted by the helicopter flight. Deep down, I know that this is a waste of money but I seem to be falling into Taj Mahal syndrome again. I want to tick it off and say that I did it.

To their credit, the journey to the Reef is taken very responsibly. Eric the on-board marine biologist is giving a talk at 11am. I wasn't expecting anything other than the trip to the Reef, least of all a school lesson on the way. Eleven days in and the work traits that I hoped to leave behind suddenly kick in, as I drop off

during Eric's presentation. This is the normal time for me to feel sleepy after an early start. Nat, of course, hams up the public humiliation that my snoring has bestowed upon her. She has, naturally, been here many times before. That's the snoring, not the Reef.

I awake to overnight breaking news. Our friend Fiona is on a fortieth birthday party in Ibiza. Another friend Claire hasn't been invited. She has however just received a text from someone in Fiona's pink limo, which might be meant nicely though I would suggest has an element of nose being rubbed in it.

I turn to Nat and sigh. I wish our experience had such depth!

What a delight to leave behind such a vacuous culture.

They're obsessive about their headcount on the boat. I think I have been counted eight times. Still, I am sure that every reef organiser has a story to tell about leaving somebody behind. They give name badges to everyone too, and I hate that level of Americanisation, where they shout 'good morning everybody,' followed by 'ok let's try that again, I said good morning everybody.'

Oddly, the slick polished staffing seems to have overlooked the fact that *Jingle Bells* is playing on the speakers, followed brilliantly by *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, and believe me, it is choppy out there today.

I start wondering about why TV-AM did a live show from Australia for the 200th anniversary way back in my childhood. I can see now Anne and Nick sitting there with a backdrop of Sydney Harbour Bridge behind them, and the more that I travel this land, the more I realise that random start-date for the beginnings of Australia is just a load of nonsense. Take, the Aboriginals, for example. Then think again about the two hundred years. Turning a blind eye to what went before.

Yet, as I understand it Captain Cook found land after running aground on this Reef, and so here it began. How bloody big is this thing? After all, we're miles from Cooktown now. The answer

is soon served up in the stat of the day – the size of 70 million football stadia.

An early snorkel makes me nervous. I feel claustrophobic. I'm just not a deep-sea diver, even though this is the pre-school of diving. If we're honest, it is not even first week at nursery. We're parked up on a massive platform miles out to sea. How did they even build this platform? The Reef Magic staff keep shouting to keep off the coral. I am not sure why – there seems to be enough of it to go round. What's it worth anyway?

At lunch, which is a mass-produced, quite unappealing buffet, with its star attraction of barbecued chicken with the never-before tried sesame seeds on, Molly and Nat report that they are loving it. That's the trip, not the lunch by the way.

It has been one of the great moments of my life watching the two of them bond in the water, really having fun and with eyes full of wonder, made even more incredible by the fact that Nat, for all her practical skills, cannot swim.

Sam and I have been in the water less as I have decided to fly in the chopper but Damian from Helimagi – always calling me by my name of course even though I have only spoken to him for ten seconds previously – tells me that our pleasure flight will now be 12.30, or 12.45, or 1pm.

It turns out to be 1.40 and lasts five minutes. At the last second, however, to my utter delight, pilot Sam wants a piece of the action and jumps in the front with me, donning the headset and talking gibberish into it. Damian, in a casual attitude to health and safety asks me to sign for him, with my little man having missed the earlier safety drill.

This means that I don't get a repeat of his gag about there being weapons of mass destruction onboard that I have already forgotten and that I know he tells every day of his life. I do feel complete however that Sam is sitting next to me.

We glide across the Reef just up and down once, exposing beautiful marine colours and then it's over. We spot just two

turtles. I think it cost £70 each, or dollars, or between us. I can't remember – the credit card is running away with us. Foolishly and uncharacteristically too, I allow Sam and I to pose for a photo, which we will later find ourselves in the embarrassing position of feeling forced to buy. I don't know why I have done this.

Was the heli-trip worth it? Er, no. Am I glad I did it? Yes, in a Taj Mahal kind of way.

Next we board the glass-bottomed boat-cum-submarine to explore the Reef in more depth. I am taking it all in. There are nearly three hundred types of fish out there. Or did she say three million? The pathetic fusiliers are so useless that they swim in a pack of hundreds; there's a butterfly fish to my right with three eyes.

I have never seen that before and I can assume it has evolved that way to somehow protect itself and see, if you like around corners; there's stag coral, which just sounds manly, and the big one, a shark.

I make a mental note to show the kids *Jaws* on our return.

I wonder why and how anyone began the process of cataloguing all this – surely a lifetime's work that someone else would have to continue, thereby making it a thankless task, and you would assume, an unfulfilling one. I am sure that millions of pounds worth of grant are available should you wish to go diving at the government's expense, casually noting the odd thing here and there.

All in all, I spend an hour in the water. That's enough for me. I am the only one in there without a wetsuit. The Aussies probably think I am crazy. I prefer to see myself as manly of stag coral proportions. Molly and Nat, however, are lost in the world of Wally.

Wally is something that has been dressed up in some Disney-like magic since before we even set sail this morning. Supposedly, it is a large, colourful whale that miraculously turns up around the same time that we do every single day and allows you to stroke

it underwater while Lianne takes your picture. Funny that.

Or did Wally live on the ship and coincidentally get released into the ocean at the key moment on a daily basis? Either way, the myth of Wally is created.

Now, guess what, Sam and I didn't see this legend of the sea, but Nat and Molly did, and guess what – part two – Lianne got a picture of them which I now have to buy, and guess what – part three – Molly and Sam both want 'I Love Wally' t-shirts, even though the Wally that they saw is blue and the Wally on the t-shirt is green. Clearly there is more than one wally around here.

How on earth, did this Wally come to be, and what of its intellectual property rights, as its image gets bought hundreds of times a day and gets worn in all corners of the globe? Great technique this – create a legend and then flog it to death. I give you Loch Ness, King Arthur, perhaps Jesus Christ himself....

We buy the lot and with the three photos that you choose, you can also get Lianne's all time Reef favourites from her CD, which even though she is a skilled operator, seems a bit cheap to me. I mean, how do you go home and show off somebody else's holiday photos?!

The picture of Nat, Molly and Wally is wonderful but has such vibrant colours about it that it looks super-imposed. I revisit this theme that Wally is a figment of the imagination after all. Nat assures me privately that it is every inch the real deal. Better had be, the amount it has cost me.

We've nodded off again on the way back into Cairns, fatigued to the rhythm of the ocean waves, coupled with the experience as a whole. Only the voice on the tannoy wakes us as we dock, just in time for a final polished performance from the crew.

'Thanks to Captain Simon and first mate Dean...a big round of applause everyone.'

And everyone joins it. I'm astounded. You have paid and paid again for this trip. Why the applause? Do they not make it back to port some days?