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ISSUE

JUNE/JULY 2007

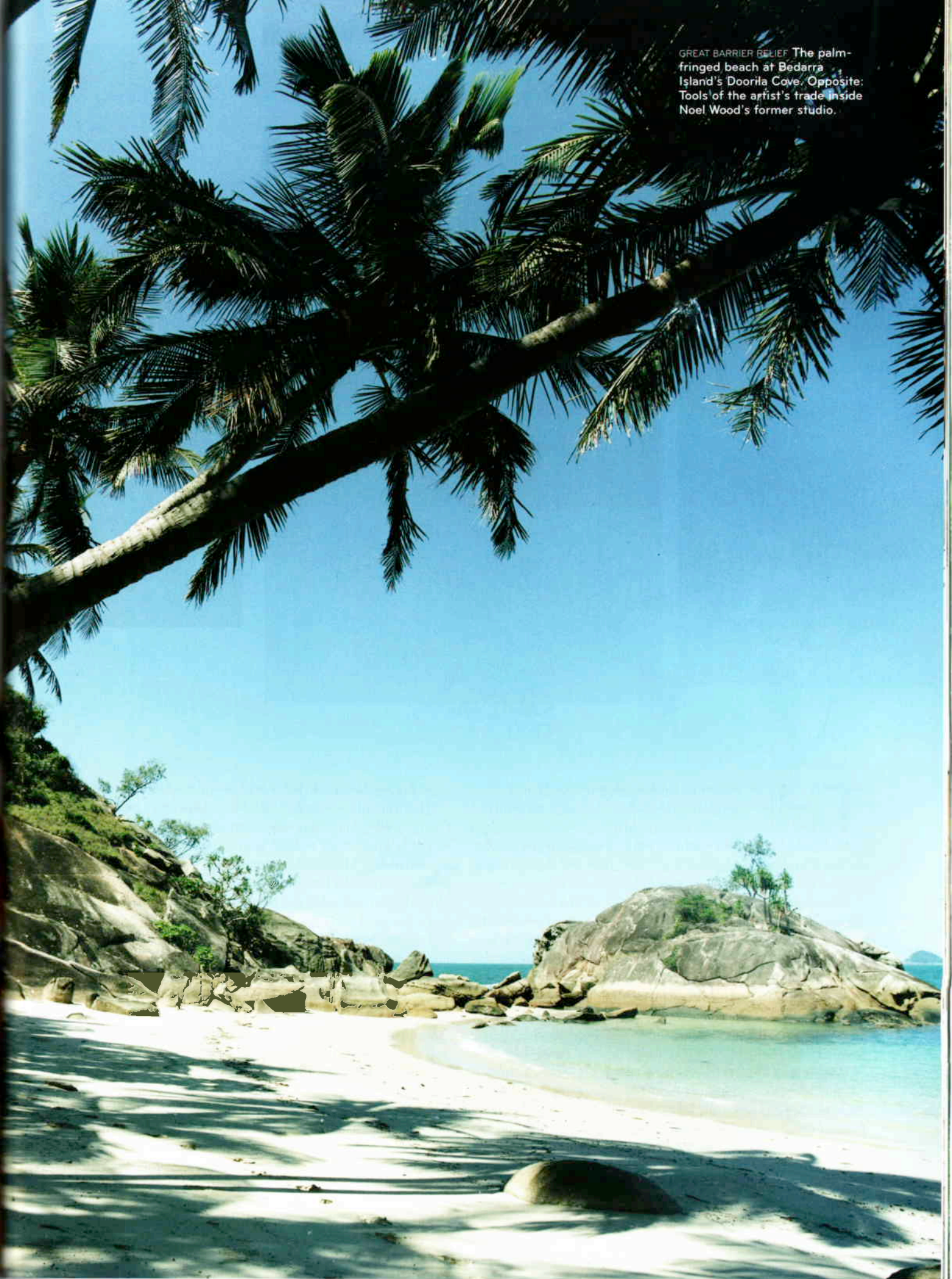
IDR50,000 SGD115.25 MYR456.95
HK\$48 THB220 BRL15 NTS180

ISSN: 1412-1204

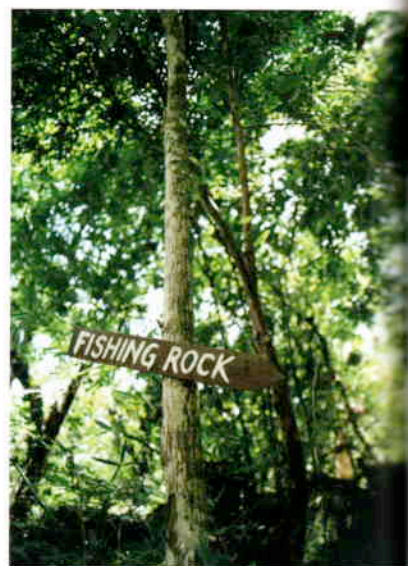


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GREAT BARRIER BELIEF The palm-fringed beach at Bedarra Island's Doorila Cove. Opposite: Tools of the artist's trade inside Noel Wood's former studio.



PRIVACY, PLEASE Clockwise from below: Local color; views across Doorila Cove from the villa's dining terrace; along the vine-strewn trail leading to Fishing Rock, a promontory overlooking the Coral Sea.



THE WATER WAS SMOOTH AND LUCENT WHEN WE GLIDED INTO DOORILA COVE, FRINGED WITH DROOPING PANDANUS AND WEATHERED GRAY BOULDERS. IT WAS A MESMERIZING SIGHT. IN THE WORDS OF WRITER E. J. BANFIELD, THE BUTTERMILK SAND HAD "SUCH SINGULAR FINENESS THAT IT FEELS AS SILK UNDERFOOT."

THE calls from England started, at odd hours, several months before we landed at Doorila Cove. My sister and her family were coming to visit me in Australia for the first time, and felt compelled to remind me, sometimes twice a day, that this "trip of a lifetime" was to include a stay on the Great Barrier Reef. I promised to do my best.

Scouring travel Web sites from my home in Sydney, I soon discovered that most of the Reef's island resorts were priced well beyond our budget. Then I found Bedarra Island Villa & Studio, a pair of beach houses run by an outfit called Contemporary Hotels. Renting both would cost upward of US\$700 per night in the high season. That wasn't cheap, but considering there would be seven of us (myself, my partner Aden, and his daughter Sancia, along with my sister and brother-in-law and their two children), it was at least affordable.

Bedarra itself looked every bit the idyllic desert isle—a 40-hectare emerald jewel lying off the northeastern coast of Queensland. True, its southern peninsula was home to the exclusive Voyages Bedarra Island resort, which has hosted the likes of Andre Agassi and Cameron Diaz. But our roost would be a good two-hour hike north of that, in a private, thickly forested corner of the island shared by only six

other houses. We would be assured complete privacy.

That said, unless you can afford to charter a helicopter from Cairns, getting to Bedarra requires considerable planning. Cars had to be hired, boats booked, food supplies pre-ordered (the supermarket at Mission Beach on the mainland will pack your provisions in cooler boxes to coincide with your arrival). On the plus side, you only need to pack the essentials: sun hats, swimsuits, and a few good books.

Logistics sorted, last September found us driving down the two-hour stretch of the Bruce Highway between Cairns and Mission Beach, the jumping-off point to Bedarra. Cyclone Larry had ravaged this coastline four months earlier, and the scars were still fresh: hectares of flattened banana trees and wrecked buildings. Bedarra had taken a direct hit too; our hosts on the island, Nadine and Guy Callander, would later recount how, after seeing to the evacuation of their guests, they had been forced to take refuge in a cyclone bunker—cum—generator shed. But while the villa suffered some water damage and the studio was buried under leaves and branches, the buildings were otherwise unharmed; even the property's palm trees survived intact.

While not gale force, the spring weather was unkind and our one-hour boat trip via Dunk Island proved a blustery ride. En route



ISLE SPACE Clockwise from below: Carl, the current caretaker of Bedarra Island Villa & Studio; Doorila Cove, where boats from the mainland deliver guests via a quick stop at nearby Dunk Island; mementos of the studio's former owner.



we dropped a newlywed couple off at the Voyages resort, where Bec and Lleyton Hewitt had celebrated their own honeymoon a year before. The place is known for absolute indulgence, with a maximum of 32 guests accommodated in 16 split-level designer villas. A team of chefs prepares fresh menus daily; the bar, stocked with Bollinger champagne, is open 24 hours.

We, on the other hand, didn't even need to worry about dressing for dinner.

The water was smooth and lucent when we glided into Doorila Cove, which would be our own private beach for the next week. Fringed with drooping pandanus and weathered steel-gray boulders, it was a mesmerizing sight. In the words of E.J. Banfield, who wrote the 1908 castaway classic *Confessions of a Beachcomber* while living on Dunk Island, the buttermilk sand had "such singular fineness that it feels as silk underfoot."

Our friendly caretakers Nadine and Guy were waiting to help cart our luggage and nine boxes of groceries the few meters to our lodgings: for me, Aden, and Sancia, a studio among the mangroves, formerly owned by the eccentric artist Noel Wood; for my sister's family, a contemporary two-bedroom villa perched on a large granite rock. Both look out over the secluded cove, and both are solar powered (there's cable TV and a DVD player for those who

want it). Filtered rainwater gushes out of the taps and a private chef can be arranged for one or more evenings.

Sydney-based architect Ian Moore designed the villa's sleek interior to complement its tropical surroundings. The spacious living room is furnished with black leather sofas and leads onto a fabulous deck overlooking the cerulean sea, complete with barbecue and a large dining table. An outdoor bath on the rear veranda invites you to lie back and gaze up at the sky.

The open-plan studio, built of coral stone and teak salvaged from a shipwreck, is considerably more rustic: cement floors, a basic kitchen, and a slothful bamboo-framed daybed set in front of a large fireplace. One wall is fashioned from empty wine bottles, casting a delicate, speckled light. Outside is a piece of driftwood etched with the words NOEL'S PLACE.

Noel Herbert Wood graduated from the Adelaide School of the Arts in 1935, in the depths of the Depression. That same year, at the age of 23, he read an article in *The Queenslander* entitled "It Can Be Done," about a man who had gone to Long Island in the Whitsundays and lived by growing tropical fruits and vegetables. Inspired by this and seeking a Gauguin-esque lifestyle, Wood traveled north looking for somewhere cheap and balmy to live and paint. In

CASTAWAY CHARMS One wall of the property's studio is fashioned from empty wine bottles. Opposite: A morning stroll through the jewel-clear shallows of Doorila Cove.





STILL LIFE Clockwise from above: Noel Wood's open-plan studio has been restored to how it looked 14 years ago, when the artist sold it and retired to the mainland; a walk in the woods; the studio's rustic exterior.



1938, drawing up a contract on a piece of foolscap, he bought six hectares on northeast Bedarra for the equivalent of US\$90.

For the first few years he lived on the island like a genuine castaway, in a rough dwelling of timber and thatch. His wife, Eleanor, and their two daughters made periodic visits, but the island life was not for them and they eventually returned to the mainland. Wood stayed, clearing a corner of the property for a house and garden, planting flowers and fruit trees—breadfruit, paw paw, pineapple—and digging a well.

Today there is little sign of Wood's thriving vegetable patch, but whimsical mementos of the artist are everywhere: in the easel and paint pot that stand in one corner of the studio, his original cane table, a guest book, and a pile of faded, yellowing copies of *The New Yorker*. Wood was also a consummate entertainer with a taste for Armagnac and Veuve Clicquot champagne. His favorite tippie was a mixture of the two that he first drank in Hollywood, where he worked as an artistic director for a few years in the 1950s. He kept his American connections all his life and most of his portraits and landscapes were sold to a dealer in New York, where they fetched high prices.

The studio, comprising a living area and a separate bedroom and bathroom, was originally

built in the 1940s and has been faithfully restored to how it looked 14 years ago, when Wood left the island. The windows are covered only by insect netting, and in the bathroom, one wall is the sinewy trunk of a fig tree. At night, listening to the swish of the palm trees and the haunting *coo-ee* of the curlew in the inky darkness, we felt like we were sleeping among the elements.

After months of anticipation, it took us all of a couple of days to slow down and unwind. Blissfully, there are no cars on Bedarra, no mobile-phone reception, and not much to do other than explore the island by foot and enjoy leisurely brunches and barbecues. At night, the only lights are glimmers from Voyages on the far bay and the vast pointillist canvas of stars above.

Much of the island is impenetrable rain forest, and hiring a small outrigger boat afforded the best way to explore the hidden bays and go snorkeling among the coral. (Don't rely on the villa's snorkeling gear, which is in urgent need of replacement.) To work off lunch, we would walk the narrow paths linking one side of the peninsula to the other, hiking up one vine-strewn path to the lookout over the Coral Sea or along another to Fishing Rock on Bedarra's easternmost arm, which was like climbing onto the back of a mottled brown whale.

Slowly, the island revealed itself. Taking the outrigger to a

EASTER ISLAND

waved back. That's Hanga Roa for you.

On the way to the bar we stopped off at the bungalow of a woman who made elaborate flower designs similar to the ones that Uri wore in her hair. The women in our group gushed over the selection and bought several flowers for our night out.

The bar was packed when we arrived. Uri found us a table and the drinks began to flow. On a stage in the corner the house band, adorned in white shirts, jammed with a blend of Polynesian beats and Rapa Nui and Spanish lyrics.

One by one we were pulled onto the dance floor, first by our guides, and then by their friends. Dancing Rapa Nui style, we quickly realized, required matching

salsa footwork to the seductive sway of South Seas rhythms. It was easy, fun, and with a little practice we were all experts. By the time we left Topatangi several hours later, it seemed we had met each of the island's 4,000 residents and danced with half of them. Easter's final mystery had been revealed: we now knew how the Rapa Nui had a good time.

A day later we boarded a plane to leave the island. When the engines roared to life and the plane surged down the runway, I leaned forward to look out the window one last time. The plane rose rapidly and banked so that the black rim of Rano Raraku, the factory volcano, slid into view, as well as the small dots of the moai

scattered at its base. A few roads twisted between the cone-shaped hills, and stands of trees stuck out from the flat grasslands. Waves crashing against the shore gave the entire island a white, foamy border, and I caught a glimpse of the coast where Cueva de las Dos Ventanas perched above the cliffs. I was surprised at how quickly the island disappeared as endless blue water filled my view. Yet still this tiny place, really just a rocky green speck in the ocean, inspired enough mystery to bewilder the entire world.

"On Rapa Nui, myth is history," Tito had said.

I can't argue with that. And I hope it stays that way. ☺

BEDARRA

(Continued from page 105) many wanderers over the last century. The island takes its name from the Aboriginal word *biagurra*, which translates roughly as "the place of perennial water," and was one of the Family Islands charted by Captain James Cook in 1770. It was not until 1913 that the first European, Captain Henry Allason, settled there, buying Bedarra for the handsome sum of £20 from the Queensland Lands Department. A few years later he sold it to Ivan Menzies, an actor, who wished to found a home for underprivileged English boys, a dream which was never fulfilled. E.J. Banfield, who lived on Dunk Island for more than 20 years, had great affection for the place where "seldom is there any disturbance of the primeval quietude."

These days, Bedarra is sought after by honeymoon couples and sun-baked European jet-setters seeking a peaceful sanctuary. During Wood's time, life on the island was more raucous, thanks to his legendary parties. Tony Cox, Wood's former attorney, would later tell me that every July 1, Wood invited locals "laden with grog" from the mainland to celebrate the date of his arrival on the island. "There were lots of funny stories about how they got back to shore." Whenever Cox's wife came over to help with his garden, Wood, an inveterate ladies man, would always

greet her on the beach armed with a glass of champagne and dressed in a sarong.

Wood was known to have had liaisons with Hollywood actresses and local artists, who would frequent Bedarra. He was friends with Sarah Ferguson, the Duchess of York, who twice stayed at the Voyages resort (back when it was owned by Qantas) and who would paddle across on a surf ski to see him; it is even rumored that he had his bathroom made for Princess Diana, who was expected to visit but never did. Wood lived on the island until 1993, when ill health forced him to move to Mission Beach. His property was subdivided and sold. A friend bought his studio and built the villa before both were sold 10 years ago to the owner of Contemporary Hotels, Terry Schwamberg, who had met Wood a year before he died in 2001, at the age of 89.

"We wanted to recreate the studio

exactly as Noel described," Schwamberg would tell me later. "He was a passionate fellow with a deep cultured voice, like an actor, who loved his life. On one wall he had a Zen Buddhist proverb painted—"Love where you are, love whom you are with, love what you are doing"—which irritatingly my painters covered over."

Still, the place has retained the essence of those words. After six days of setting our watches to island time—of living according to our whims, and luxuriating in doing so—it felt as though we had been on Bedarra twice that long. It was a genuine tonic for city-weary souls.

Watched over by the resident sea eagle, we reluctantly boarded the water taxi back to the mainland. As the boat chugged out of Doorila Cove, the captain turned to me and said, "Nothing like it. Bedarra. It's paradise, mate." ☺

FACT FILE: BEDARRA



GETTING THERE

Qantas (www.qantas.com) flies four times a day between Sydney and

Cairns. From there, it's a scenic two-hour drive to North Mission Beach (try **Sugarland Car Rentals**, www.sugarland.com.au, and budget for about US\$80 each way), where water taxis (US\$250

return) ply the route to and from Bedarra via Dunk Island three times a day.

BEDARRA ISLAND VILLA & STUDIO

Nightly rates range from about US\$455 for the villa to US\$290 for the studio and US\$621 for exclusive rental of both. June through January high-season rates are substantially higher, but for good reason: local weather can get quite wet during the first few months of the year (61-2/9331-2881; www.contemporaryhotels.com.au).