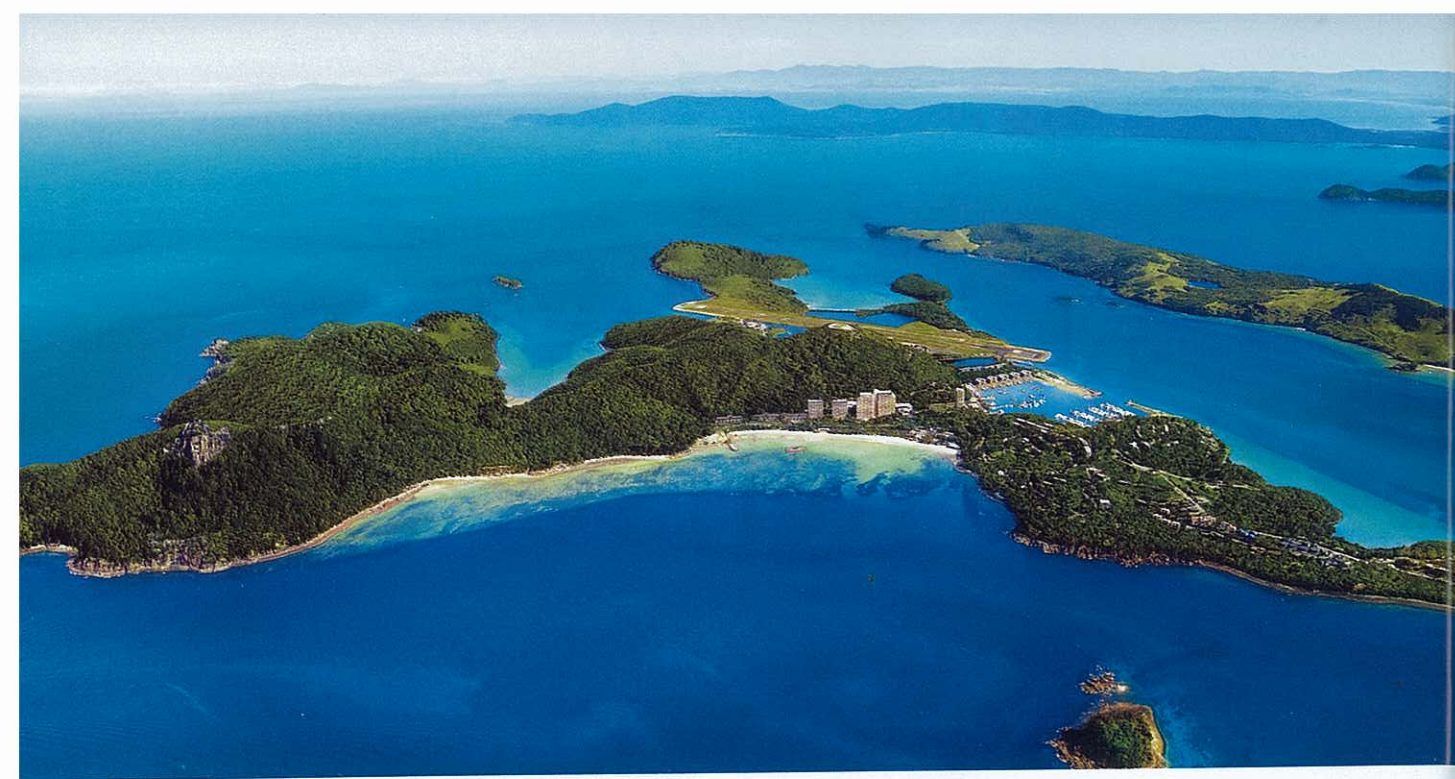


playing in paradise

Hamilton Island's growing list of high-end tourism attractions now includes a classic Peter Thomson-designed golf course on neighbouring Dent Island.
By Paul Myers.





Opening spread: The 15th green of Hamilton Island's spectacular course is located on the southern end of Dent Island. Photo by Andrea Francolini. This page, clockwise from top left: Aerial view of Hamilton Island, with Dent Island adjacent to it; the new Yacht Club villas next to Hamilton Island's marina; a plunge pool in one of qualia's windward villas; Cherie Byrnes chipping to the 14th green.

Whatever you might have thought previously about Hamilton Island, think again. Since the Oatley family of Rosemount Wines fame bought the popular Whitsunday playground in 2004, the island's one-time party reputation has been transformed into a more sophisticated, exclusive and varied experience.

The launch in 2007 of qualia, an enclave of 60 exclusive villas on the island's northern peninsula, was the first part of a \$300 million development program that signalled the Oatleys' desire to cater as much for high-end guests as Hamilton's middle-market stalwarts who have been travelling there since its launch as a tourism destination by developer Keith Williams in 1983.

Late last year came the release of 35 privately-owned yacht club villas, each costing well above \$2 million, and an imaginative yacht club commanding a key position at the entrance to the island's marina.

And now Hamilton Island Golf Club on adjacent Dent Island, a few hundred metres across the channel, has added a whole new dimension to playing in paradise.

While most visitors may not go to Hamilton Island just for golf, those who do won't be disappointed. Either way, their partners and companions are bound to hear a lot about a course that begs to be played time and again.

The Peter Thomson-designed 6120 metres par-71 layout isn't long, but the prevailing south-east wind, often exceeding 20 knots, can play havoc with scores on numerous elevated into-the-wind and across-wind holes, especially on the back nine.

Not that you'd want it any other way. The experience of playing what is essentially an Australian bush course (no coconut palms and

man-made lakes and ponds here) in a tropical island setting is unexpected and unique.

More than once, you'll marvel at the sweeping views across the Whitsunday islands, none more so than on holes 13 through 16, where you feel your ball could be swept in an instant into the aquamarine sea below. That's unlikely, because there's so much rough and scrub that any shot off target is swallowed before it can stray further.

“... an Australian bush course... in a tropical island setting is unexpected and unique.”

Here you feel on top of the world, even if your top game hasn't come along too. It's hard to identify comparable courses. There's a touch of New Zealand's Kauri Cliffs on the ocean-view and cliff-face holes with their accompanying sweeping vistas, something of Moonah Links' Open Course (also designed by Thomson) in the rolling fairways and tightly-positioned greens with no room for error, and a semblance of hundreds of other Australian clubs that are nestled in eucalypt-dominated bush settings.

But essentially, and as trite as this may be, Hamilton Island golf course is itself. No course in Australia has such scintillating views, few others snake their way around the landscape without doubling back, not many (any?) have a distance of

almost a kilometre from one green (the 17th) to the next tee. And virtually none is as hidden from view on approach as this is.

One small downside is that you can't walk. Carts are mandatory, but by the time you reach the end of the round you'll appreciate why.

The opening three holes, all par-4s, are gentle enough without much to go wrong. Then comes a classic 178-metre or 161-metre (depending from where you play) par-3 that provides the first elevated glimpse of the Whitsunday Channel, a tricky stretch

of water separating Shute Harbour/Airlie Beach and the mainland from Hamilton and the region's 73 other islands, only six of which are inhabited.

Stay alert, for this isn't a hole to go straight at the pin. Protected on the left by a deep gully and a strong crosswind, the smart play is to hit two clubs less to the right, land the ball on the steep slope leading to the green and let gravity do the rest. My playing partner, Hamilton Island's golf pro Cherie Byrnes, did just that and had a 10-foot birdie putt.

Two par-5s in a row – one short and playable, the

first pro

After a decade on the European LPGA tour, Hamilton Island's first golf pro, Cherie Byrnes, is delighted to have settled back in Australia for her first club posting.

A native of the Nelson Bay area of NSW, Cherie, 33, has played 18 years of competitive golf since being selected in the NSW junior squad at the age of 15. She turned pro in 2000, went immediately to the European qualifying school in Portugal, and kept her card continuously until the end of the 2008 season when she decided to head home.

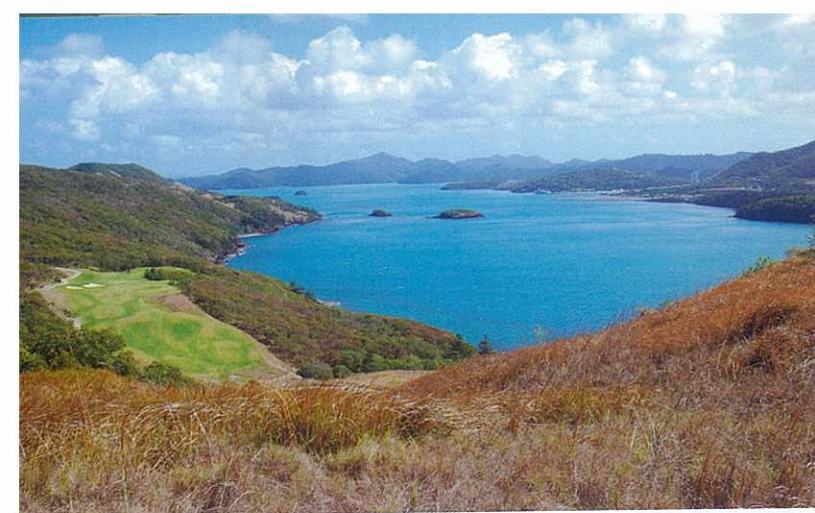
Her career highlights included playing in six British Open championships, placing third in the Portuguese Open in 2006, recording nine top-10 finishes, and playing in 13 events on the US LGPA tour in 2004. She also won the Victorian amateur title before turning professional.

Cherie is likely to play this year in selected Australasian tour events including the Australian



Masters and Australian Open, both of which will be held in March.

Cherie believes Hamilton Island's golf course compares favourably with other top resort courses in the country. "It's tight, utilises the natural landscape very well and has wonderful views from so many holes," she says. "I think it will really come in to its own and be highly appreciated as more people play the course," she adds. "It's got everything you could want."



other tight and tough – precede three final three holes on the front nine that might induce you to believe you can play this course to your handicap.

Well, just like past perceptions of Hamilton Island itself, think again! As you rise higher towards nirvana on the back nine, you still won't be prepared for the wind or the jaw-dropping beauty of holes 13 through 18.

The 13th fairway is, well, Thomsonesque: convex in shape to ensure virtually every drive (and second shot) rolls towards the rough! Depending on which tee you use, the par-3 14th can be played across a deep gully or straight into the wind. In a big blow, the former may require driver or 3-wood to reach the green!

The 15th, an absolutely stunning par-4, sweeps to the southern-most point of the course and the island, before you head back to the clubhouse via the superb par-3 16th, lonesome par-4 17th and, after a kilometre drive in the cart, reaching the tee of index one on the card, the magnificent elevated par-4 18th.

While the hole indexing of the two nines suggest equality, it doesn't take account of the wind, which really comes in to play on the back nine and can add four or five shots to your front-nine score.

The word that springs to mind in describing this course is uplifting. Not only does it add immeasurably to the total Hamilton Island experience, the sensitive design with minimal interference to the landscape is a wonderful example of how a golf course can blend into its natural surroundings. Indeed, only one hole – the 17th – is visible on approach or from Hamilton Island itself.

A golf ferry leaves every hour from 7am for the course, returning on the half-hour to the Hamilton Island marina. Make sure to try the golf pro treatment at qualia's gorgeous spa, followed by dinner in the Long Pavilion, the deepest imaginable sleep in the softest beds on earth, and you'll be ready to tackle the course again. The answer as to whether it puts as big a dent in your game second time around will, more than likely, be blowing in the prevailing wind. ❁

Above, from left: Looking north along the 17th hole, with Hamilton Island in the (right) background; interior of a new Yacht Club villa.

at a glance

Getting there: Hamilton Island is 16km from the North Queensland coast. It can be reached by regular ferry service (13 times daily, 6.45am-4.30pm) from Shute Harbour (30 mins), or by direct flights (Virgin Blue, Jetstar, Qantas and Sunstate) from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Cairns.

Accommodation: Five-star resort accommodation in private villas at exclusive qualia from \$A1821/person for three nights incl. breakfast & dinner (alcohol not included), one round of golf with cart; or from \$A705-\$A999/person for three nights in 3 to 5-star accommodation, incl. breakfast, one round of golf, one body treatment in relaxation centre; Beach Club (5-star) from \$A570/person/night incl. breakfast.

Bookings: 13 7333 (in Australia) +61 2 9433 0444 (international)

Green Fees: \$A150 including cart and ferry to/from Dent Island for 18 holes/\$A100 for nine holes.

www.hamiltonislandgolfclub.com.au



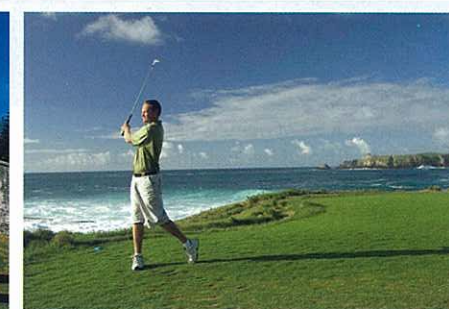
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