

The Great Barrier Reef

Gateways to the Reef »
Top Reef Encounters »
Nature's Theme Park »
The Perfect Reef Trip »

A diver explores the wonderland of Kelso Reef (p28), off Townsville



Gateways to the Reef

There are numerous ways to approach Australia's massive undersea kingdom. You can head to a popular gateway town and join an organised tour, sign up for a multiday sailing trip exploring less-travelled outer fringes of the reef, or fly out to a remote island, where you'll have the reef largely to yourself.

Port Douglas

1 An hour's drive north of Cairns, Port Douglas (p440) is a laid-back beach town with dive boats heading out to over a dozen sites, including more pristine outer reefs such as the Agincourt Reefs.

Townsville

2 Australia's largest tropical city (p395) is far from the outer reef (2½ hours by boat) but has some exceptional draws: access to Australia's best wreck dive, an excellent aquarium and marine-themed museums, plus multiday live-aboard dive boats departing from here.

Cairns

3 The most popular gateway to the reef, Cairns (p414) has dozens of boat operators offering both day trips and multiday reef explorations on live-aboard vessels. For the uninitiated, Cairns is a good place to learn to dive.

The Whitsundays

4 Home to turquoise waters, coral gardens and palm-fringed beaches, the Whitsundays (p391) have many options for reef-exploring: base yourself on an island, go sailing or stay on Airlie Beach and island-hop on day trips.

Southern Reef Islands

5 For an idyllic getaway off the beaten path, book a trip to one of several remote reef-fringed islands (p361) on the southern edge of the Great Barrier Reef. You'll find fantastic snorkelling or diving right off the island.

Clockwise from top left

1. A windswept vista at Port Douglas (p440) **2.** Marina at Townsville (p395) **3.** Cairns' northern beaches (p428)

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