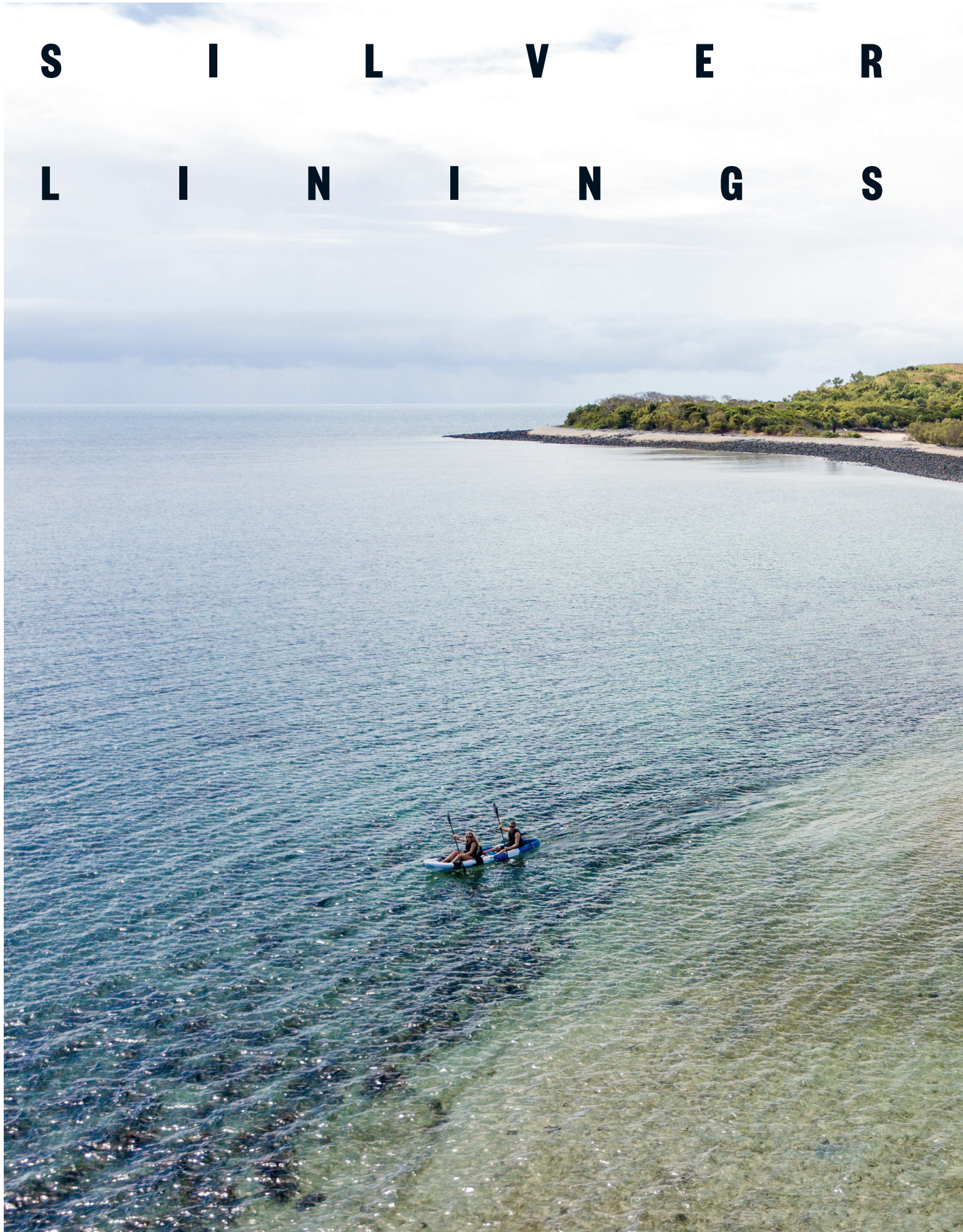


**S I L V E R**

**L I N I N G S**



YOU'VE HEARD OF HAYMAN, HAMILTON AND DAYDREAM. BUT YOU'LL NEED TO TRAVEL TO THE NORTHERN EDGE OF QUEENSLAND'S WHITSUNDAYS TO FIND CAMP ISLAND, AN UNDER-THE-RADAR PRIVATE STAY, WRITES **FAITH CAMPBELL**.

Photography by Krista Eppelstun



**SURPRISE  
ISLAND**





One of the four villas at Camp Island Lodge

**IT'S  
RAINING  
IN PARADISE  
AND PETE SHIELS IS  
STOKED.**

“You don’t get better than this,” he says from his kayak. The sea is swimming-pool calm, it’s a sultry 20-something-degrees and raindrops tap-tap-tap around us. Shiels, the co-caretaker of Camp Island Lodge ([campisland.com.au](http://campisland.com.au)) with wife Lizzie, is right.

Then a bird drops from the sky. Pete, Lizzie, my boyfriend and I look up. Then down at the floating bird and back to the sky. “It’s that awful chicken hawk again!” exclaims Lizzie. Staying low, a cormorant sneaks away as the hawk circles back to the scene of the crime. I’m gingerly raising my oar in defence when two seagulls enter the fray, squawking madly in pursuit of the hawk. “Cool,” murmurs my boyfriend.

When nothing much feels certain, Mother Nature’s mercurial moods are always good for perspective.

“Ninety-nine per cent of the time living on the island is great, awesome,” shouted Lizzie over the engine of the boat taking us to the island earlier that day. Pete captained *Little Upstart* three kilometres across Abbot Bay from a landing on the Elliot River in Guthalungra, 2.5 hours drive south of Townsville. “But if you want to duck out to a café you have to check the tides, check the BOM, check the fuel...”

Other than finding the best place to watch the sunset, applying sunscreen thoroughly and figuring out the coffee machine in the decked-out kitchen of my dreams, my boyfriend and I don’t waste a second of our island time worrying about logistics. The Whitsundays will do that to you.

While we’re here it’s just the Shiels and us. The lodge can only be booked for exclusive use so the other two king bungalows are empty, as is the larger one for families. And we have our pick of comfy napping couches in the breezy living and dining pavilion with its deep wraparound veranda. There’s no chitchatting with strangers at the pool, the hammocks are always empty and we don’t wear shoes at breakfast. (Lizzie and Pete have their own separate cottage and their interaction with guests varies depending on numbers, length of stay and prior arrangement.)

The drizzle can’t stop us climbing the island’s one hill to survey our domain, which is small enough to kayak around but big enough to spend days exploring. To the north, mainland Cape Upstart National Park wears a halo of cloud, while off in the south, Abbot Point pokes a utilitarian finger at the horizon – the working coal port’s conveyor system extends kilometres out to sea.

In every direction it’s grey – from steel and gunmetal to the pale belly of a dove. I reckon it’s as beautiful as any sunny day, which Lizzie has assured me are painted in “so many different blues...”



*Sunrise from the lodge's beach*

It's difficult to describe but it's spectacular". Adding our two rocks to the stack at the top of the hill triggers something and sandy grass in the distance suddenly turns into a mob of wallabies that bound away into the scrub. (Lizzie says that mammals, including echidnas, likely washed up here in flood debris.) Not simply on our own private island, we're also in our own private nature reserve – an offshore offshoot of the national park.

Later, loaded with a bucket of bait, *Little Upstart* charges across the waves until Pete cuts the engine at his secret fishing spot, which looks to me like every other corner of the ocean. Soon we're pulling in coral trout, rock cod and grassy sweetlips, tossing the small ones back, cursing the ones that get away. "Hey, you've got it!" says Pete as I catch my first-ever fish. After swallowing a wave of seasickness I reel in a second and third – high-fives all round.

Teach a person to fish and they'll eat panko-crumbed grassy sweetlip sandos for lunch and pan-fried filets with fragrant mango salsa for dinner. Hand her a hammer and a chisel and she'll chip oysters off the rocks on the island's north-west shore.

This region is a land of tropical plenty – where Kensington Pride mangoes originate, tomatoes, melons, macadamias and cattle are farmed and huge muddies wait for anyone handy with a crab pot. If you're one of those for whom cooking and holidays cancel each other out, the lodge will engage a chef to handle the former while you surrender to the latter. With Lizzie's words in our ears ("Close the kitchen door to keep the naughty skink out"), we fall asleep with our bungalow's doors wide, the ceiling fan whisking up warm air and rain on the tin roof drowning out the sea.

Stirred by sunrise and excitement we take turns going back and forth between bed and the coffee machine while the sun keeps

busy burning off the last of the rain clouds. The Shiels propose snorkelling at a little place they know and on the way over everything is still, clouds floating on the glassy bay. We approach a cove so wildly picturesque I want to crack *Castaway* jokes. "Look at the sand," says Lizzie, pointing over the edge of the boat. "It glitters like gold!" And it does, in a way the crystalline water embellishes and my phone's camera can't capture.

While the Shiels wander inland up the creek, we wriggle into stinger suits and snorkel around the rocks. I bob on the surface, watching light turn schools of fish into shimmering silver. A turtle comes closer and closer, so near I hold my breath, before it looks me in the eye and realises that I'm not, in fact, another turtle. I wave a stinger-suited hand as it hurries away into the murk.

The few times that the pandemic has been mentioned during our stay it's in the past tense and I've felt a mix of bafflement, nostalgia, good fortune and hope. Here, where every precaution is taken, we're far removed from the all-consuming new normal. I float on my back, squint at the spotless sky and wonder if there are any words that won't shrink this feeling.

On the day we leave, Pete's up early to mow the patch where Townsville Helicopters ([townsvillehelicopters.com.au](http://townsvillehelicopters.com.au)) will land to collect us for our ridiculously scenic airport transfer. We take a last walk along the crunchy coral piled on the shore, turtles popping up in the waves as if to say goodbye or, maybe, go away.

Our pilot, Naomi, has been flying choppers in the area for two years but it's her first time here. "The water is clearer than in my bath," she deadpans before taking us up, once around the island and away. Flying above the sea towards Old Reef and the horizon, there's nothing but endless blues around us. Lizzie was right. ●