



MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate release

August 6, 2019

Putting the 'great' into Great Barrier Reef Festival

When the inaugural Great Barrier Reef Festival started on Thursday, a team of volunteers held their breath.

Although this was the 19th year of the former Whitsunday Reef Festival, it was the first under a new name and global brand.

There were new partners, new directions, and high expectations, all exceeded over the four-day program of events.

Whitsunday Mayor, Andrew Willcox, summed it up succinctly in his official opening speech before Friday's Whitsunday Coast Airport Fireworks by the Foreshore.

"This festival celebrates what it means to live in the Whitsundays – after all folks, we are the heart of the Great Barrier Reef," he said.

His comments were reiterated by Tourism Whitsundays chairman Al Grundy.

"It's just so awesome to see everyone here and to see Airlie Beach alive – and we are very much alive – we're pumping," he said.

By the time these speeches were made, the festival was already well underway.

The action-packed program of events kicked off with new, reef education workshops in the Coral Sea Marina Resort, featuring the region's Master Reef Guides and special guests 'Citizens of the Great Barrier Reef'.

Thursday night was the festival's fundraising comedy gala, this year embraced by new partners Fish D'Vine.

MC, local comedian and Fish D'vine Chief Operating Officer, Matt Isabella, said he was already gearing up for next year.

"When people walk out of a venue and shake your hand you know you've done something right – it was fantastic, and great to see everyone so happy," he said.

Friday's festivities began with the brand-new Coral Sea Marina Resort Lantern Parade.

General Manager, Kate Purdie, said this was an auspicious moment in the newly rebranded marina and festival's histories.

"It's a terrific time for us to be working together to put a spotlight on the reef," she said.

Shining a light on the reef was exactly what parade participants did, through reef-themed lanterns, including beautiful jellyfish, whales, and even a giant manta ray.

Once Mayor Willcox had judged the lanterns, prizes were awarded, and the procession set off for Airlie Beach.

Here it integrated into the night markets, carnival rides, Mama Africa Pop Up Bar and Whitsunday Foodservice Eat Street.

At 8pm the Whitsunday Coast Airport Fireworks by the Foreshore lit up the Airlie Beach night sky.

Above Ground Zero Fireworks went above and beyond to deliver a show worthy of the heart of the Great Barrier Reef and event partners the Whitsunday Coast Airport.

On Saturday the Fraser Ford Revvin' the Reef car, truck, and bike show made full use of an Airlie Beach main street closed to moving traffic.

Live music from Joshy J and the Ricochets took everyone back in time, with the event culminating in 'Miss Revvin the Reef', a vintage-style pin-up competition won by Kylie Forgione.

The Wilmar Sugar Wearable Art Awards were once again a spectacular display of art that walks, and a perfect segue into the Rotary Street Parade.

Organiser and Rotarian, Merewyn Wright, said entrants embraced the theme: 'The Living Reef – A World Down Under', in a parade filled with colour, celebration and above all, life.

The festival's platinum partner Cruise Whitsundays won 'best theme' entry for their float incorporating a glass-bottom boat.

Just Tuk'n Around won 'best business' entry, with the Whitsunday Christian College winning 'best not-for-profit' and Whitsunday Rocks taking out 'most unusual and wacky' float.

The Airlie Magic Mile was the last event to take place on the main street, with participants running an actual mile in a traditional race.

While all this was happening onshore, out on the Whitsunday islands, history was being made.

In partnership with Cruise Whitsundays and Reef Ecologic, the Great Barrier Reef Festival held a dedicated artist talk and tour to the Whitsundays' coral nurseries and newly installed Ngaro Underwater Marine Sculpture Trail.

Reef Ecologic Director, Adam Smith, said this was a chapter in a story of hope.

“We all have a reason for visiting the reef, but this is another layer,” he said.

“It’s a touchpoint to allow people to have a conversation about the current and future status of the reef and what we can all do to make a difference.”

On Sunday, the festival wrapped up with the Whitsunday Transit Family Fun Day and Reef Gateway Hotel Recyclable Regatta.

The weekend’s live music, delivered by Timomatic, Thandi Phoenix and 8 Ball Aitken, was brought to a close by Mackay duo Swoon and Elektrik Lemonade at ‘Chill in the Park’.

Festival chairwoman Margie Murphy said a heartfelt “thank you” to everyone who partnered with the festival, as well as the volunteers and people who attended the events.

“We’re going to be 20 in 2020 so we may have set the bar high this year but next year will be bigger and better still,” she said.

The 2019 Great Barrier Reef Festival was proudly supported by Cruise Whitsundays.

For more information visit www.greatbarrierreeffestival.com.au or follow the festival on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

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About Tourism Whitsundays: *Tourism Whitsundays (TW) is the organisation responsible for destination marketing and visitor attraction for the Whitsunday region. It is the lead agency recognised by Tourism and Events Queensland and the Whitsunday Regional Council to lead the promotion of the region as a tourism destination. Tourism Whitsundays markets all aspects of the region including the Great Barrier Reef, Whitsunday Islands and Coast, accommodation, boating and sailing, fishing, touring, recreational activities, adventure, dining, shopping, weddings and honeymoons, conferencing and business events.*

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