QUALIA

BEN CABANGUN IS QUALIA'S SOMMELIER. As such, he is responsible for a cellar and two well-stocked bars that have wine connoisseurs gushing with delight. He also gives Talk & Taste classes on topics such as wine and cheese, champagne and oysters, and sake and sashimi. His talks are classy affairs: top-flight beverages, first-class food, fine china and glassware combine with his astonishing depth of knowledge for an engaging, unpretentious presentation. Even the most sophisticated guests walk away having learned something new.

Ben is not the exception on qualia; all staff are topnotch, from gardeners to waitresses, from chefs to bartenders. They are carefully selected and well trained, and the word 'no' doesn't seem to feature in their vocabulary. The resort on the Whitsundays' Hamilton Island has received a host of top honours since it opened a decade ago. "The staff are what makes this place special," says general manager Kyle LaMonica. "We try to surpass our guests' expectations by figuring out what they want before they even want it."

As one of Australia's – if not the world's – top resorts, everything on qualia is beyond expectations. This starts as soon as you get off your flight at Hamilton Island Airport: you are intercepted before reaching the baggage carousel and asked to surrender your boarding pass and luggage tag. Waiting for your suitcases to arrive is a job for the porters; you are ushered to a waiting black European limousine, a pleasantly cool refuge from the island's humidity.

qualia's Long Pavilion enjoys unrivalled island views.

Exclusive qualia is tucked away at the northern end of Hamilton Island in a lush tropical oasis. "As soon as you come through qualia's gates you are in another world," Kyle says. "It's very private and very peaceful." The centre of the secluded retreat is the Long Pavilion, perched on a ridge to harness a quintessential Whitsunday panorama in hues of blue and green. The view extends over the infinity pool, across a turquoise passage of water to wild Whitsunday Island, the largest of the 74 islands in the group. Guests tend to sit here mesmerised by the soothing visual feast.

The Long Pavilion is also the focus for qualia's culinary virtues, as it's the site of the main restaurant. Doug Innes-Will is one of 21 chefs cooking across two restaurants at the resort, Long Pavilion and Pebble Beach. He describes the food as "modern Australian". The Long Pavilion tasting menu takes its cues from Asia, while Pebble Beach delivers more traditional European-style meals. Menu design is a democratic process on qualia. "We have a big team with some great chefs on it," Doug says. "And they've got great ideas." Those ideas are transformed into some creative taste combinations such as marrying sashimi swordfish with fermented plum, nori salt and red shiso for an entree; or avocado, yuzu sorbet, mango and roasted white chocolate for a dessert.

With its commanding position high above the sea, the Long Pavilion is an impressive stage for welcome drinks, fine cuisine and meetings. Pebble Beach, on the other hand, is all about recreation. At the base of a steep hill and separated by a dense garden of tropical foliage, it is a cove of tranquillity.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Poolside at Pebble Beach; north-facing Windward Pavilions set along the peninsula; liquid pleasures prepared by the bartender; solitude and greenery surround a Leeward Pavilion; a chef puts the finishing touches to sashimi swordfish served with plums.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: The spacious bedroom in a Windward Pavilion; the Long Pavilion, where guests gather for dinner; free-standing bathtubs boast Coral Sea views; Windward Pavilions come with private plunge pools.

During the day the large pool and breachfront activities, including sailing and kayaking, are the main attractions. Near the pool a stretch of lawn, shaded by coconut palms, is set up for boules and croquet. In the evening the Pebble Beach restaurant becomes an intimate venue for couples to dine. In short, the meaning behind qualia's name begins to make sense: it is a 'collection of deep sensory experiences'.

Accommodation is either in the north-facing Windward Pavilions, sprinkled throughout the gardens behind Pebble Beach, or the southern-facing Leeward Pavilions on the other side of the peninsula. With 120 square metres of living space, the Windward Pavilions dwarf a standard hotel room and come with their own plunge pool and sundeck. The bedroom and bathroom feature one-way floor-to-ceiling glass walls, so you can enjoy the view in complete privacy. Although smaller than the Windward Pavilions, at 90sq m, the Leeward Pavilions offer stylish luxury, stunning views and, of course, seclusion. The ultimate residence of the resort is the Beach House, with twice the floor space of the Windward Pavilions. Airlie Beach architect Chris Beckingham designed qualia, incorporating stone and fine timber to create generous, but fundamentally simple spaces in perfect harmony with their natural surrounds. "Our pavilions are spread out nicely so that each has its own privacy," Kyle says. "Privacy is the biggest common denominator for our guests."

Although qualia attracts its fair share of guests who come solely to unwind and relax, there's an extensive list of activities available for the rest. For those who feel the need to leave this discreet retreat, transport is provided: each pavilion comes with a two-seater golf buggy. Considering the size and hilly terrain of Hamilton Island resort, this is quite a necessity.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Pebble Beach offers an infinity pool and relaxed waterfront dining; a Coral Sea panorama from qualia's gardens; resident wallabies.

For the most part, the warm tropical waters of the Whitsunday Islands are the main attraction. The islands are mostly uninhabited, with deserted beaches, picturesque coves and deep, fjord-like bays that are among the best sailing and boating destinations in the world. The proximity to the Great Barrier Reef adds another dimension. Sleek powerboats, yachts and helicopters are on hand to whisk guests away to explore Bait and Hardy reefs, popular outer reef destinations for divers and snorkellers.

The resort operates a 45-foot cruiser called *Atomic* to take guests to Whitehaven Beach, on the eastern side of Whitsunday Island. It's an exhilarating trip to one of the world's most beautiful beaches, a seven-kilometre strip of silica sand so white that it makes unprotected eyes water. Another of qualia's signature experiences is a trip to Hamilton Island Golf Club, on neighbouring Dent Island. Arriving at the 18-hole course by boat or helicopter is a golfer's dream. Designed by one of Australia's most successful golfers, Peter Thomson, it is the country's only island championship golf course.

Back home, the spa offers less strenuous pastimes: gifted therapists pamper guests with a multitude of treatments. And then there are the lush tropical gardens to explore. Banana-leafed heliconia with unusual red flowers, rainbow cassias with garlands of yellow-pink flowers, various bird of paradise plants and ancient cycads, with their striking cones, are some of the highlights. Wallabies and curlews also call qualia home. You can wander around on your own or in the company of a knowledgeable guide who will point out all the highlights. These gardens epitomise all that qualia is renowned for: seclusion, privacy, tranquillity and satisfying sensory experiences.

LOCATION
On the northern tip of Hamilton Island, in the Whitsunday Island group.

GETTING THERE
Qantas, Jetstar and Virgin Australia operate direct daily flights from Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Cairns.

WHAT'S INCLUDED
Classic-rate packages include accommodation, breakfast, non-alcoholic beverages, a two-seater golf buggy, chauffeur service, airport and marina transfers and use of non-motorised watercraft. Gourmet-rate packages include the above plus dinner at Long Pavilion or Pebble Beach restaurants.

WHAT TO BRING
Sunscreen, swimwear and reef shoes for boating. Smart casual during the day and casual elegant for evenings. A jacket will come in handy during the cooler winter months.

WHEN TO COME
Hamilton Island enjoys warm, tropical weather year-round, with an average annual temperature of 26°C. The wet season (January–March) is humid, while winter months (June–August) boast clear, blue skies.

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