EUROPE

Treasure hunt

Second-handing shopping can make for the best travel souvenirs **T6**

ITALY

On the road

Travelling Tuscany in search of a Renaissance master's works **T9**



TRAVEL

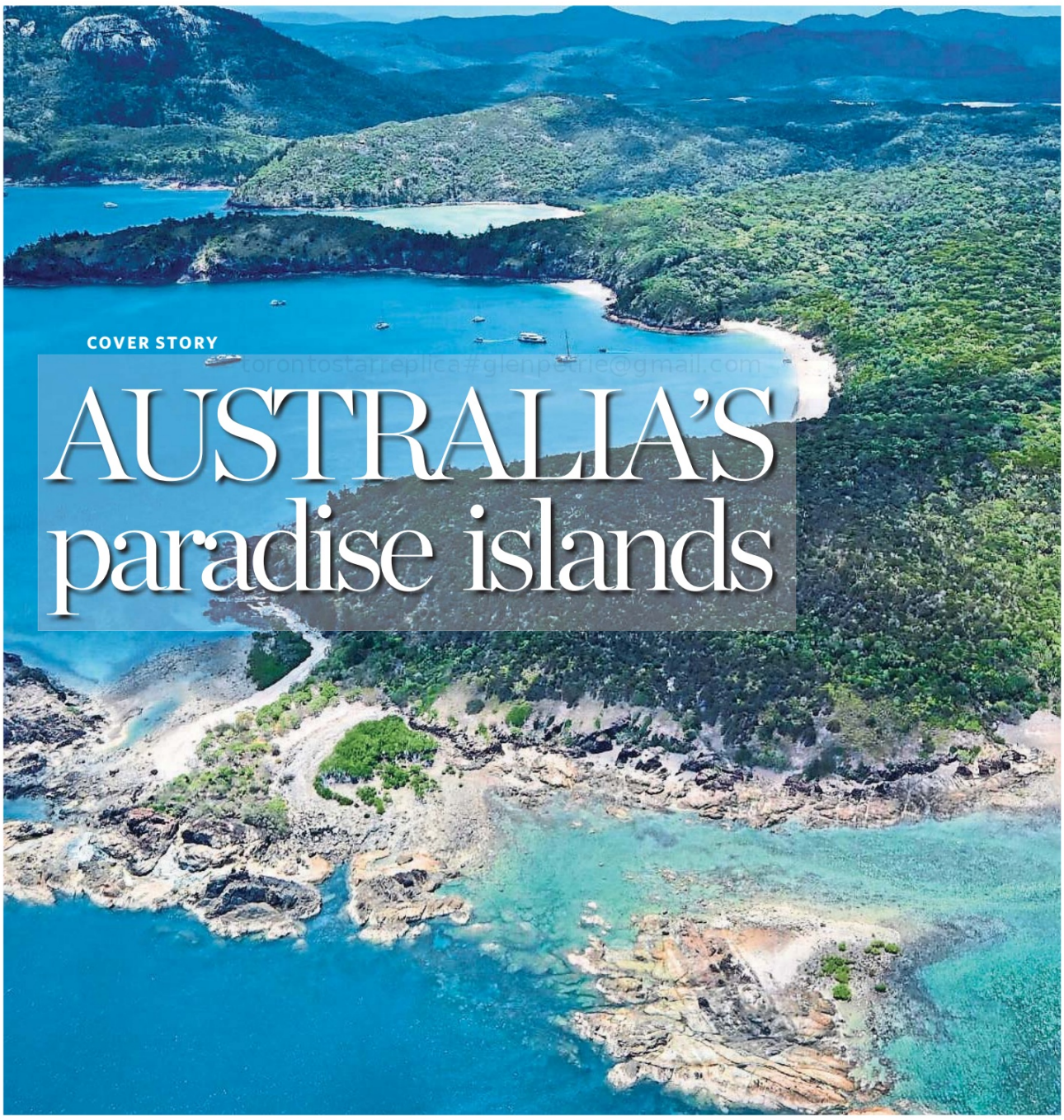
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I spent decades thinking about Australia's astonishingly beautiful Whitsundays. Finally, I went **T2**

the ISLANDS *of my* DREAMS

GEN PETRIE PHOTO

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COVER STORY

AUSTRALIA'S paradise islands

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In the pristine Whitsundays, I found my dream destination (but for a few perils)

GLEN PETRIE
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Some images stay with you.

A magazine spread 30 years ago stopped me in my tracks with a surreal image of mint seas streaked with bands of white sand, the two colours bleeding into one another like a watercolour painting. "Australia's Whitsunday Islands," said the caption, and I vowed to one day go.

A recent business trip to Brisbane finally gave me my chance.

The spectacle of dreamlike, swirling sands is a top reason visitors come to the Whitsundays, but not the only one. The 74 islands dotting the Coral Sea between the Queensland coast and the Great Barrier Reef include six national parks, which are strictly protected under the Nature Conservation Act. Most islands are uninhabited. Only a few host hotels.

A two-hour flight from Brisbane put me in Airlie Beach, mainland hub for exploring the archipelago. I spent a week boating to deserted beaches, the great reef, smaller reefs, forest trails and resort hideaways. Mission one: a beeline to the scene seared into my memory, the swirling sands of Hill Inlet.

"Watching someone see Hill Inlet for the first time never gets old," said Megan, deckhand-guide on the Whitsunday Bullet catamaran that rocketed me to Whitsunday Island, the largest in the chain. Our group beached for a hike to the hilltop lookout. Anticipation built as we climbed, and at the summit, the famous view elicited gasps from the group.

It looked just as pristine and surreal as I'd imagined. Shifting tides lifted baby-powder sand and carried it through the shallows. White lines reached across the sea like jet trails. Bands of green and white curled in a sort of pinwheel. A sandbar as bright as a snowbank slowly changed shape. In an hour, it would disappear.

"The tides and colours are always changing, so it's never the same view," Megan said.

The green water glowed as if lit from within, the effect of sun reflecting off suspended grains of white sand. The sand comes from Whitehaven Beach, our next stop, visible in the distance and described as one of the best white-sand beaches in the world by Travel + Leisure.

The beach isn't coral but rare 98.8 per cent pure silica. No one is certain why it's here, since silica comes from quartz, and there's none around. Temperatures here reach the 30s, yet the sand isn't hot be-

SEE WHITSUNDAYS, T4



Passing Whitsunday Island by helicopter.

Fast boats and ferries take visitors to several of the Whitsunday Islands on day tours.

GLEN PETRIE PHOTOS



The Great Barrier Reef air tour shows just a small part of its 2,300-kilometre expanse.





GLEN PETRIE

Finer than sugar, as light as flour, the sand felt like silk

WHITSUNDAYS FROM T2

cause it throws back most of the sun's rays. Finer than sugar, as light as flour, the sand felt like silk as it sifted through my fingers.

The next day I blew my budget on a helicopter trip to the Great Barrier Reef, 70 kilometres offshore. The chopper would save me a three-hour boat ride, and also give me the ultimate aerial view of the swirling sands.

"Seeing it from the air is next level," said Maurice Allert at Sailing Whitsundays, a local tour agent. He advised me to time my trip for low or mid-tide, when the mingling effect is more pronounced. He was right: The scene from aloft was even more mesmerizing than from the hilltop.

We passed over large islands and small atolls. As with so many Aussie places, the area was named by Captain Cook, who passed through on Whit Sunday, or Pentecost, the seventh Sunday after Easter, in 1770.

The helicopter circled valentine-shaped Heart Reef and set down like a dragonfly on a deck at the nearby Reefworld, a floating pontoon for day-trippers. (Heart Reef itself is protected, with no anchoring, snorkelling or diving allowed around the fragile coral formation.) For those who don't swim, there's an underwater observatory and a submarine at Reefworld. Visitors can also overnight in tented pods or in underwater rooms where sharks glide past the windows.

I snorkelled in a stinger suit. Here, Australian box jellyfish, with tentacles three metres long, can kill you. Tiny irukandji, barely visible, can cause severe pain.

I spied a blacktip reef shark (harmless, they said) and a Maori wrasse, a fish as big as a sheep. Mostly, I saw rubber flippers waving in my face and, sadly, the white tips of bleached coral caused by rising sea temperatures.

The coral looked healthier on a tour to Hook Island's fringing reef. Currents there keep the water a bit cooler. A tiny sliver of a jellyfish brushed my hand and left a tingling sensation.

The next day, I decided to avoid the sea's threats by hiking (or bush walking, in Aussie lingo) the hills of Hamilton Island. It's one of the few privately owned islands in the Whitsundays, and the most developed, with highrise hotels and its own airport. Seventy per cent of its bushland is protected, however, and laced with trails. I followed dusty paths to scenic look-offs and secluded coves, but alas, Australian nature can ruin your vacation above water, too.

"Watch where you duck in for shade, mate," a local warned me. Touching the gympie-gympie, a broadleaf bush found on Hamilton, can cause months of excruciating pain from the toxins in its needle-like hairs.

After that, I played it safe on tiny Daydream Island, home to a sole resort, which day-trippers can use for a fee. And back in the town of Airlie Beach, I swam risk-free in a man-made lagoon.

I still have about 70 Whitsunday Islands left to explore. I won't wait 30 years.



MEL UNTAL

The shifting patterns of sea and sand continually change and are never the same twice.

The writer sifts 98.8 per cent pure silica sand, finer than sugar, on Whitehaven Beach.



GLEN PETRIE

Golf carts replace cars on Hamilton Island, the most developed of the Whitsundays.



GLEN PETRIE

Helicopters take tourists 70 kilometres out to sea to visit the Great Barrier Reef from floating pontoons.

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