

4. COMMERCIAL PASSENGER VESSELS

In 1984/85 there were around 275 commercial vessels operating to take passengers to the Great Barrier Reef. Although generically termed "charter boats" these vessels offer a range of services from water taxis to extended cruises.

Around 1 274 000 visitor days on the reef were generated in 1984/85 in charter boats. This is the largest single component of recreational visits to the Great Barrier Reef.

Limited charter activity in the Reef Region early this century was brought to a halt during World War II when fishing and tourist boats were impounded. Following the war, charter activity continued to be mainly weekend fishing trips. The 1950's saw an increase in "adventure" trips (including fishing, crocodile hunting in the north) plus an increased interest in sightseeing and underwater activities. The equipment for snorkelling and SCUBA diving became available in the 1950's (Burns *et al.*, 1984). By 1980, there were around 120 commercial vessels operating from ports adjacent to the Reef Region. The earnings of this fleet were around \$20 million for 1980 (Hundloe, 1985).

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority manages the operation of tourist facilities and tourist programmes including commercial passenger vessels in the Marine Park. Due to obvious growth of this industry the GBRMPA commissioned a detailed survey of the industry to provide information for planning, managing and monitoring the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

This study of the Great Barrier Reef charter boat industry was undertaken by the Institute of Applied Environmental Research, Griffith University (IAER, 1986). The research was undertaken by interviewing the population of charter boat operators. Information was collected on the type and location of operations and on some economic characteristics of the industry.

Operations were categorised into eight types encompassing the range of commercial charter activities available.

Scheduled day trips

The largest number of visitor days, around 826 400 in 1984/85, are generated on "scheduled day trips" which operate on set timetables to set destinations. Such trips are available from all major ports adjacent to the Great Barrier Reef. A variety of vessel types are involved and a variety of activities undertaken.

Around 40 percent of scheduled day trips in 1984/85 were undertaken on large, high speed catamarans. These have been progressively introduced to the Great Barrier Reef since 1982 and by May 1986 there were 15 catamarans (over 20 m in length and with passenger capacities from 130 to 300 passengers) operating. Twelve of these catamarans are included in the 1984/85 figures for scheduled day trips. These catamarans travel to reefs or resort islands. On reef locations, passengers may disembark onto anchored pontoon facilities. Passengers may spend a few hours swimming, snorkelling, SCUBA diving or, on some reefs, reef walking.

A new type of coral viewing vessel, the "semi-submersible" was first introduced in 1983. These vessels allow passengers to be seated under water level and view coral and marine life through sloping glass panels in the hull of the "sub". The vessel does not actually dive under the water but can be manoeuvred through reef lagoons and along reef edges with passengers observing below water level. This provides a different, and probably superior, perspective to conventional glass-bottom boats. A semi-sub now accompanies every reef-based large catamaran operation.

The catamaran day trips provide the opportunity for people to travel to the reef quickly and in relative comfort and to view reef life without the necessity to get wet. This application of technology to extend a reef experience to a broader cross section of the population is one of the significant developments in reef tourism in recent years.

Other scheduled day trips are undertaken by 47 vessels offering a range of trip types. All major ports host vessels which provide day trips for fishing, snorkelling, diving or sightseeing trips to islands. Most trips offer a combination of activities. In the Whitsundays, a number of yachts offer day sailing trips. Only half a dozen scheduled day trips are dedicated fishing trips.

Unscheduled day charters

Around 30 vessels offer unscheduled day trips, that is they are available for day charter on an opportunistic basis. Such trips are available from most major ports. Destinations may be flexible depending upon the wants of the charterers, who usually charter as a group. The range of activities available is as wide as for scheduled day trips but there is more emphasis on fishing. Included in the unscheduled day trips category are vessels of the Cairns game fishing fleet which are too small to be in survey for overnight passengers and which may work to motherships or island resorts.

Scheduled extended trips

This is a small component of the charter fleet at 14 vessels. Most of the vessels are monohulls, lengths range from 16 to 35 m and passenger numbers range from 6 to 40. Scheduled extended trips in 1985 operated out of Mackay, Shute Harbour, Townsville and Cairns.

Generally trips are up to one week in duration and operate a fairly set route. Each vessel offers a range of activities, diving, snorkelling and island visits. Generally cruising/sightseeing are emphasised. None of these are specialized fishing trips.

Unscheduled extended charters

Sixty-seven vessels offer unscheduled extended charters. Vessels providing this service operate out of all major ports and usually are chartered by groups of people. The vessels are mostly conventional motor driven single hulled vessels (lengths range from 13 to 21 m) and sleep 6 to 20 people. Trips may last up to 21 days though most are for one week or less.

Many of these vessels offer specialized fishing trips to more remote locations including the outer reef, and are flexible in destination depending upon the success of fishing. The majority of the Cairns game fishing fleet falls within this category. Other vessels offer specialized SCUBA diving trips and are fitted with air compressors. Unscheduled extended charters account for over 500 000 visitor days per annum.

Water taxi

"Water taxi" is the term given to a small number of speedboats which are run on a hire basis to transport people and goods from the mainland to islands or between islands. The water taxis are fast monohulls or catamarans with powerful outboard motors. Taxis may make several trips in one day.

Bareboats

In 1984 there were 85 bareboats operating in the Reef Region, over 80 of these in the Whitsundays. By 1986, the number operating in the Whitsundays had grown to 151. (Whitsunday Marketing Services, 1986). Bareboats are hired out on a sail yourself basis, though inexperienced sailors may hire the services of a skipper. Most bareboats are sailing boats (though at least one bareboat company is introducing motorized cruisers).

Seven major bareboat hire companies operate in the Whitsundays. The area lends itself to yachting with sheltered waters and a variety of destinations in the bays of the numerous islands.

Floating hotel

At the time of the survey there was one vessel, a 34 m ex navy Fairmile, operating as a floating hotel. It was moored within the lagoon of Hardy Reef and passengers were ferried out and back on other vessels. The floating hotel accounted for only 1 500 visitor days but is mentioned here because it provided a distinctly different operation. During the Cairns game fishing season August to October, a number of vessels operate as mother ships providing overnight accommodation. Interest in the floating hotel concept has since led to a vessel being moored at Michaelmas Cay, a large vessel has been constructed to operate in conjunction with an island resort and a proposal exists for a five storey floating hotel at a reef off Townsville.

Ferry

The demarkation between ferries and scheduled day trips is difficult to determine in some instances. Ferries have been defined as services which transport people to and from island resorts plus boats/barges which carry campers to islands. The majority of the people travelling on ferries are resort guests, rather than day trippers. Seventeen ferries operate in the Reef Region, carrying passengers for 209 200 visitor days.

All vessels

The information on trip types, vessels and visitor numbers is summarized in Table 18. Scheduled day trips generate by far the greatest number of visitor days with large catamarans contributing around half the scheduled day trip visitor days.

Table 18. Number of vessels, passengers, visitor days, 1984/85.

	Number of vessels*	Passenger numbers	Visitor days
Scheduled day trip	58	826 400	826 400
Scheduled extended trip	14	11 500	43 400
Unscheduled day charter	29	17 000	17 000
Unscheduled extended charter	67	13 100	52 700
Taxi	5	30 600	30 600
Bareboat	85	10 600	93 200
Floating hotel	1	700	1 400
Ferry	17	209 200	209 200
Total	276	1 119 000	1 274 000

*Principal activity

Table 19. Percentage of vessels, visitor days.

	Percentage of vessels	Percentage of visitor days
Scheduled day trip	21	65
Scheduled extended trip	5	3
Unscheduled day charter	11	1
Unscheduled extended charter	24	4
Taxi	2	2
Bareboat	30	7
Floating hotel	1	1
Ferry	6	16

Information on the home ports of vessels (Table 20) throws light on the concentration of tourist activity. The Whitsundays carries the greatest number of commercial passenger vessels - many of these are bareboat yachts.

Table 20. Vessels by home port.

Home port	Numbers of vessels
Bundagerg	4
Gladstone	22
Rossllyn Bay	15
Mackay	9
Whitsundays*	137
Bowen	3
Townsville	26
Lucinda	1
Cardwell	4
Mission Beach	3
Innisfail	6
Cairns	39
Port Douglas	9
Total	276

*Shute Harbour, Airlie Beach and Islands

Many vessels offer a range of recreational activities. Over half the vessels offer fishing as an activity while diving is undertaken from half the vessels. The activities in which passengers can participate are listed in Table 21, along with the percentage of vessels which nominated these activities as important (adds up to more than 100 percent).

Table 21. Activities offered by charter boats.

Activities	Percentage of boats involved
Fishing	55.5
Diving	50.6
Snorkelling	41.6
Cruising/sightseeing	34.4
Beach activities	22.0
Reef activities	21.1
Taxi and ferry	15.5
Game fishing	10.5
Shelling/oystering	7.2
Sailing	6.2
Resort activities	4.0
Sailboating	3.8

Economic characteristics

Economic information gained from this survey focused on the current market value of vessels and revenue from fares. Current vessel market value was based on estimates by operators. Unfortunately operators may overestimate the amount of money they would actually obtain from the sale of their vessel and business, so this figure should be treated as indicative only.

Table 22. Market value of vessels.

Vessel type	Number of boats	Market value
Bareboats	85	\$8 670 000
Other	193	\$49 500 000
Total	278	\$58 179 000

Revenue information was gained from operators, or was estimated based on trip numbers, passenger numbers and fares in those cases where operators did not supply a figure for revenue. Sales of other goods (drinks, T-shirts) or services (air fills, diver training) are not included.

Table 23. Annual revenue.

Vessel Type	Number of boats	Market value
Bareboats	85	\$4 369 000
Other	193	\$30 687 000
Total	278	\$35 056 000

Marine Park Sections

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park is currently divided into six "Sections" for planning and management purposes. The number of vessels in home ports adjacent to the Marine Park Sections and estimated visitor days are shown on Table 24.

Table 24. Vessels by Marine Park Section, 1984/85.

Marine Park Sections	Number of vessels by home port	Estimated visitor days
Far Northern	nil	minimal
Cairns/Cormorant Pass	52	254 000
Central	174	768 000
Capricorn/Capricornia	50	252 000
Total	276	1 274 000

The commercial passenger vessel sector is an important component of Great Barrier Reef activities in that this sector provides the greatest number of visitor days in the Reef Region. It is an industry undergoing recent and current technological change and, in some areas at least, expansion which has the potential for significant management implications.