

Clockwise from below left: Ancient Daintree Rainforest; a white-lipped tree frog, the tree snake's favourite snack; views from rainforest to reef; Daintree Eco Lodge & Spa banyan; Four Mile Beach, Port Douglas; sailing away in luxury with Sailaway. Centre: Daintree River cruising.



Cross the Daintree River and enter a world that feels like it's been left behind by time, then step back into Port Douglas for all the comforts of modernity.

untamed heart

The sultry Queensland resort town of Port Douglas takes the art of leisure very seriously. A warm, green, tropical coastal gem in a dream location, it's just an hour's drive from Cairns, set between a pair of the world's most extraordinary UNESCO World Heritage sites: the Great Barrier Reef and Daintree Rainforest.

But the locals didn't let the prospect of luring tourists go to their heads – no GC-style high-rises and theme parks for "Port". Nothing built taller than a palm tree, in fact, and nothing beachfront so, when you are basking on gorgeous Four Mile Beach, you'd never guess you were close to civilisation. Yet, a few sandy steps through the bush lie all the wonders of a contemporary resort town: well-regarded restaurants, slick cocktail bars, boutique shopping, smart accommodation, art galleries, friendly pubs, a lively marina and a full calendar of events. So it is possible, on any given

day, to experience both true, off-the-beaten-track, once-in-a-lifetime wilderness and all the plush comforts of resort life.

In fact, it is possible to take all the plush comforts of resort life with you to your once-in-a-lifetime wilderness experience, as we did on an afternoon cruise to Great Barrier Reef's Low Isles. A very beautiful luxury catamaran is a seriously fun way to go, especially if the sea gets up a bit, the sails are unfurled and you really get cracking. It's a great, wind-blown thrill ride, in this case complete with delicious snacks and refreshments.

Low Isles are two islands about 15km from Port Douglas: Woody Island, a 45ha mangrove island, and petite 1.6ha Low Island, all golden sands and greenery.

The tender dropped us off on Low Island, where we toggled up for a guided snorkelling trip. We were



Clockwise from below left: Julaymba Restaurant & Bar; Low Island's lighthouse; the Daintree coastline; getting ready for a spot of jungle surfing; a softer side of Hartley's Crocodile Adventures.



surrounded by 22ha of reef, which we could simply wade out to, through deliciously warm, calm and clear marine-park waters, swarming with sea life. A super-keen snorkeller, I was dubious about going on a guided trip. Wrong. It was really good to have an expert pointing out the highlights: giant clams, and fetching soft corals in a million autumn shades; lettuce, mushroom and plate corals a gorgeous backdrop to the countless varieties of impossibly flamboyant fish dashing about as we bobbed above, relaxing on buoyant foam “noodles”.

After exploring the island, its photogenic lighthouse (operating since 1878) and an amazing variety of different plants and birds for such a tiny spot, it was all aboard to sail back to Port, this time heading into a textbook-glorious tropical sunset, with plenty of bubbles and canapes to go round. Bliss.

Back on dry land, the place to go is On the Inlet, a casual bar/eatery right beside the water, notable for its buckets-o-prawns and its celebrity fish, an enormous grouper named George who, if the mood strikes him, shows up for a daily 5pm feeding which pulls the crowds.

You don't need to drive far from Port Douglas to arrive at the World Heritage Daintree National Park, but it's worth the effort (hardly effort: it's beautiful) to drive further north. Because once you cross the croc-infested Daintree River you enter another, wilder world. There's no mains electricity, there's every chance you'll spot a wild cassowary, and even the plants seem out to get you (like the wait-a-while plant, which will grip you with its evil little barbs). This is glorious, fecund, unique 160-million-year-old rainforest (older than the Amazon by roughly 80 million years, if you're counting), and adventure awaits.



EAT **2Fish Restaurant** has been a Port Douglas institution, specialising in contemporary seafood, since 2003. They use fresh, locally sourced and sustainable seafood where possible. Try the ever-changing market catch, with your choice of flavours: pickled Mareeba watermelon and cucumber salad, Asian herbs, chilli, pink finger, bean sprouts and a *nam jim* dressing; or steamed green beans, broccolini, asparagus, sautéed kipfler potatoes with Champagne and citrus beurre blanc. 2fishrestaurant.com.au

The Junction Cafe is low-fi, low-key, casual and in the heart of Mossman, across the road from the charming Mossman Markets, on the route from Port Douglas to Cape Tribulation. The vibe is retro and relaxed, the food home-style (think big brekkies, fruit-laden waffles, heroic scones, home-made prawn spring rolls and home-cured salmon). The coffee is excellent. [1/5 Front Street](http://15FrontStreet.com.au)

Mason's Cafe on Cape Tribulation offers huge helpings of all the exotic meats you can dream up: buffalo, crocodile, kangaroo, emu and boar for starters. Croc dog, anyone? [3781 Cape Tribulation Road](http://3781CapeTribulationRoad.com.au) **Julaymba Restaurant & Bar** at Daintree Eco Lodge & Spa attracts lodge guests and visitors from all around the region thanks to its beautiful rainforest locale and thoughtful, daily changing menu. Soba-wrapped Queensland tiger prawns with *nam jin* and Vietnamese street salad, for example, or local barramundi with warm vegetable and quinoa salad with a Mungali yoghurt dressing. daintree-ecolodge.com.au

DO **Sailaway's** luxury Lagoon 500 catamarans do trips – in great style and comfort – to the Low Isles in the Great Barrier Reef from Port Douglas. sailawayportdouglas.com

Mossman Markets operate on Saturdays from 7am till midday and are well worth a stop to get a taste of genuine local life. It's no tourist trap: this is where locals gather to exchange goods and gossip. A great place to stock up on local eats on the road between Port Douglas and Daintree/Cape Tribulation.

Jungle Surfing Canopy Tours get you in among the rainforest on an adrenaline-pumping zipline experience. junglesurfing.com.au

Hartley's Crocodile Adventures is one of North Queensland's oldest attractions, and was the first place in Australia to breed crocs in captivity. It's a chance to get really close to some huge salties, but there's way more than croc action on offer. There are koalas and cassowaries, masses of bird life, snakes and wallabies and quolls, emus and more. There's also a thriving crocodile farm (they sell skins to Louis Vuitton, among others) to visit and a cafe where you can eat a croc burger while watching crocs swim by. crocodileadventures.com.au

Solar Whisper Daintree River Wildlife Cruise A splendid, eco-friendly way to see crocodiles and other Queensland natives doing their natural thing in the wilds of the Daintree River. solarwhisper.com

REBEL



STAY **Mandalay**
Luxury Beachfront
Apartments are quiet,
close to the beach and a
short wander to the hub of
the Port Douglas dining
and shopping action. The
roomy, breezy, fully
equipped apartments
range from one- to
three-bedroom and all
have aircon, balconies, full
kitchens, separate
laundries and ensuites.
The Mandalay has tennis
courts, barbecue facilities
and two swimming pools
with spa. mandalay.com.au
Daintree Eco Lodge &
Spa, in Daintree's
rainforest-clad Jinbirrba
Valley, is an established
favourite among eco-
tourists with a taste for
simple luxury. Its 15
rainforest banyans, some
set high in the canopy,
others beside the pond,
are a haven of pampering,
unspoiled wilderness and
deep relaxation – and are
gradually undergoing an
elegant makeover.
daintree-ecolodge.com.au



Photographs Shelley Howells, Queensland Tourism

Jungle surfing, for example. Jungle Surfing Canopy
Tours in Cape Tribulation will have you whizzing through
the trees on ziplines in no time. You see the flora changing
through the different levels of the forest as you go, and
there's one tree platform from which you can see all the
way out to the Great Barrier Reef. The operation is so
eco-friendly that there is a resident population of very rare
Bennett's tree kangaroos. We didn't spot them, but we
did observe wompoo fruit doves nesting, an adorable
spike-headed Boyd's forest dragon and lots of gleaming
blue Ulysses butterflies.

Another environmentally considerate tourist gem is the
Solar Whisper Daintree River Wildlife Cruise. The solar-
electric boat is super quiet and it's small too, so it can get
close to the critters and up some of the small creeks that
run off the Daintree River. There's a "croc cam" on board,
so the guide can zoom in on the sometimes difficult to
spot – but abundant – wildlife. The river is wide and
shallow and just nine kilometres from the sea, so it's briny
and only saltwater crocs thrive there. "Salties" are the
scary ones that grow huge and eat everything. ("Freshies"
are considered harmless). We met a two-metre-long saltie
named Gump (so-named because he lives at Forest
Creek, geddit?) and Elizabeth (known to lift an arm as if in
regal salutation) and one so little – no bigger than my hand
– they hadn't named him yet because he was still too
young and vulnerable to become attached to. We saw
striated heron and sacred kingfishers, dangling sunbird
nests, a great egret and a lime-green common tree snake

elegantly wrapped around a branch.

That night, we slept in the rainforest in the luxury of
Daintree Eco Lodge & Spa's beautiful rooms set high atop
stilts. With the screened windows open, we could listen in
on the exotic squawks, trills, cheeps, clicks, rustles, croaks
and squeaks of the rainforest at night while we plotted the
next day's excursion to the ancient, untamed wilderness
right on our doorstep.

STORY **SHELLEY HOWELLS**

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