

[Life & Luxury](#)[Travel](#)[Review](#)

Sleep in luxury by the ancient Daintree Forest from \$489 a night

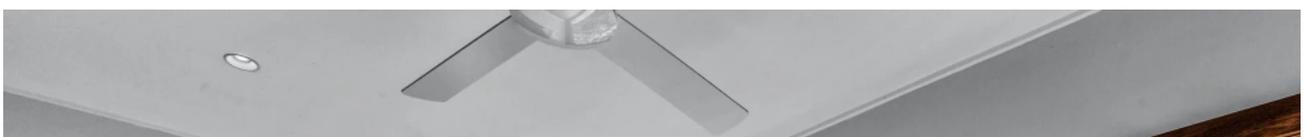
Following its \$20 million revamp under new owners James and Hayley Baillie, Silky Oaks Lodge is wowing a new generation.

Nina Karnikowski

Feb 16, 2022 - 11.10am

The tangle of rainforest – thick with palms and cycads, soaring figs and twisting vines – diffuses the afternoon light, so it's easy on the eyes; the roar of the boulder-studded river below providing a calming soundtrack.

A breeze moves through the trees, offering sweet relief from the tropical afternoon heat, intensifying the pop and crackle of appreciative insects.





Silky Oaks Lodge has been revamped to allow guests to connect with their natural surrounds.

The view and sounds of the Mossman River and surrounding rainforest are so arresting that it takes a minute or two to notice the man-made beauty framing it – the dramatic seven-metre rosewood-panelled roof, reaching high above the open-sided central pavilion of the freshly revamped Silky Oaks Lodge. (The rosewood was sourced in New Guinea).

But this, it seems, was precisely the intention behind the upgrade of Silky Oaks, which reopened in December last year after a \$20 million rebuild by the team at Baillie Lodges. They sought to open up the man-made space to draw in more of the rainforest, helping guests connect more deeply to country, and, hopefully, with themselves.

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The team behind the refurb sought to open up the lodge to draw in more of the rainforest.

Leaning over the balustrade of the central lodge – which houses reception, the Treehouse Restaurant and an expansive bar and lounge area – I can't imagine taking any other approach. Spread out before me is 32 hectares of jungle. It's a spectacular adjoiner to the world's oldest living rainforest, the 180-million-year-old world-heritage-listed Daintree National Park, which fans out over 1200 square kilometres.

How to compete with the jade-coloured water tumbling over ancient granite boulders? Why shift the lens off this blazing blue Ulysses butterfly drifting through the trees? Who would dare try to steal the attention from this shifting, pulsing piece of living planetary history?

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Baillie Lodges added it to its portfolio of five lodges after an investment injection from the US-based KSL Capital Partners.

After closing for refurbishment in 2020, and following a number of COVID-related delays, Silky Oaks Lodge finally reopened in December, offering guests a textbook model of low-key, low-impact luxury that arrived at precisely the right moment.

Post-pandemic, the lodge caters perfectly for our longing to get closer to the natural world. Many guests who book in are also craving a deeper understanding of the culture of the First Nations people on whose land we stand. The latter have become especially important in the Daintree since September last year, when the rainforest was returned to its traditional Kuku Yalanji custodians in a historic hand-back ceremony.

Wandering through the communal spaces, nods to nature and the rainforest's cultural heritage abound. There are the stunning large-scale photographic works by Australian artist Catherine Nelson hanging in the lounge and restaurant, depicting Kuku Yalanji children playing in the Mossman River. A collection of 45 ceramic discs – etched with rainforest flora and fauna and commissioned by artists from the nearby Kuku Yalanji Arts Centre – lines the entry passage.

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A bathroom with a view – and an al fresco bath – in the Treehouse Retreat.

The colour scheme and furnishings, part of the refresh led by Sydney-based interior design team Pike Withers, mimic the surrounding rainforest. River blues, forest greens and granite greys adorn pillows and chairs; quartzite tops on tables, sideboards and benches by Australian company Artedomus ground the communal spaces; and matte black exteriors on the 40 pre-existing treehouse suites make the greens of the rainforest pop.

Speaking of treehouses, my Treehouse Retreat room perches elegantly over the rainforest. For an elevated experience, there are two Billabong Suites, and the exclusive two-bedroom Daintree Pavilion, complete with

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Executive chef Mark Godbeer's light and expertly balanced three-course menus brim with fresh Australian native ingredients.

Bathrooms have been refurbished with stone tiles, quartzite benches, rain showers and freestanding alfresco stone bathtubs. Comfort levels have been raised with melt-into-me Baillie beds and crocheted hammocks. I spend a lazy half hour swaying in mine, doing nothing more than staring into the treetops.

It's soon time to wander to the Treehouse Restaurant for dinner, an experience that, over my three days staying at Silky Oaks Lodge, never falters. Executive chef Mark Godbeer's light and expertly balanced three-course menus brim with fresh Australian native ingredients. They include everything from finger lime to Davidson plum, quandong to lilli pilli and

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to be a highlight of my stay. Seeing everything from turmeric to purple yams, betel leaves and edible ferns growing in more than 30 raised garden beds on a little-used slice of land does something good for the soul.

Doing good things for the soul is the focus of almost all activities at Silky Oaks Lodge.

The Healing Waters Spa area shows off the elegant, clean and airy lines of the revamped lodge.

My visit to the seven-room Healing Waters Spa (a name inspired by Indigenous beliefs about the replenishing forces of the Mossman River) scrubs and massages tension away with botanicals including sandalwood and lemon myrtle. A sunrise hike along one of the lodge's riverside walking trails, followed by a dip in the crisp, crystalline waters, makes me fancy I

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heritage-listed Great Barrier Reef to explore, including a sunset sailing and snorkelling trip out on the reef aboard a luxury catamaran. Nor can you miss a visit to Mossman Gorge, a 10-minute drive away, and where I take an unforgettable afternoon Dreamtime Walk with local Kuku Yalanji man Cameron Buchanan.

After being welcomed to country with a traditional Melaleuca smoking ceremony, I follow Buchanan's dreadlocked head down the rainforest paths. He points out everything from the barbed tendrils of the Wait-a-While Palm, which his ancestors used to cut meat and hook fish – to the sarsaparilla leaves which the Kuku Yalanji use as soap.

“This is our grocery store, pharmacy and hardware – everything is here, you just need to know where to go shopping,” he says with a grin.

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the land a chance to regenerate, and make sure there's enough for future generations. It's a lesson for our troubled planetary times if ever there was one. "You have to look after Mother Nature," he says, "or she won't look after you."

It's a phrase that echoes in my mind as I ease into the outdoor tub on my final night in the Daintree. Gazing up at the night sky through silhouetted palm leaves, listening to the frogs tinkle and the night birds hoot, I vow that having been so well nourished by Mother Nature over these past three days at Silky, I'll do an even better job of looking after her in return as soon as I get back home.

The writer travelled as a guest of Baillie Lodges and Tourism Tropical North Queensland.

NEED TO KNOW

Silky Oaks Lodge is a 75-minute drive north of Cairns at 423 Finlayvale Rd, Mossman, Queensland 4873.

Rooms start from \$489 a person a night for a Garden Retreat, and continue to \$2500 for the two-bedroom Daintree Pavilion. Rates include breakfast, sunset drinks with canapés, dinner with matched wines, in-suite bar, morning yoga sessions and use of the lodge's kayaks, mountain bikes and snorkelling gear. For more information, see baillielodges.com.au or tel (02) 9918 4355.

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