



REJUVENATION : FROM REEF TO RAINFOREST

GETTING OUT INTO NATURE IN AUSTRALIA'S PRIZED GREAT BARRIER REEF AND
DAINTREE RAINFOREST PROVIDES A ROUTE TO RESTORATION.

Words by KATRINA HOLDEN

PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF LUXURY LODGES OF AUSTRALIA AND BAILLIE LODGES

REEF

I'm standing on an idyllic beach in Queensland's Great Barrier Reef — and I'm crying. Tears of awe and gratitude glide down my cheeks after emerging onto my own private slice of beachfront from the 100-metre pathway, direct from my beachfront suite at Lizard Island Resort.

Earlier that day, I left Sydney on a brisk winter's morning, travelled the three-hour flight to Cairns and then another one-hour flight hovering over the world's largest living organism and its iridescent aqua blue waters. It's not my first visit to the Reef, and yet it feels like a new discovery, especially as the light aircraft finally turns and descends, sweeping in over the Coral Sea to land on Lizard Island's airstrip.

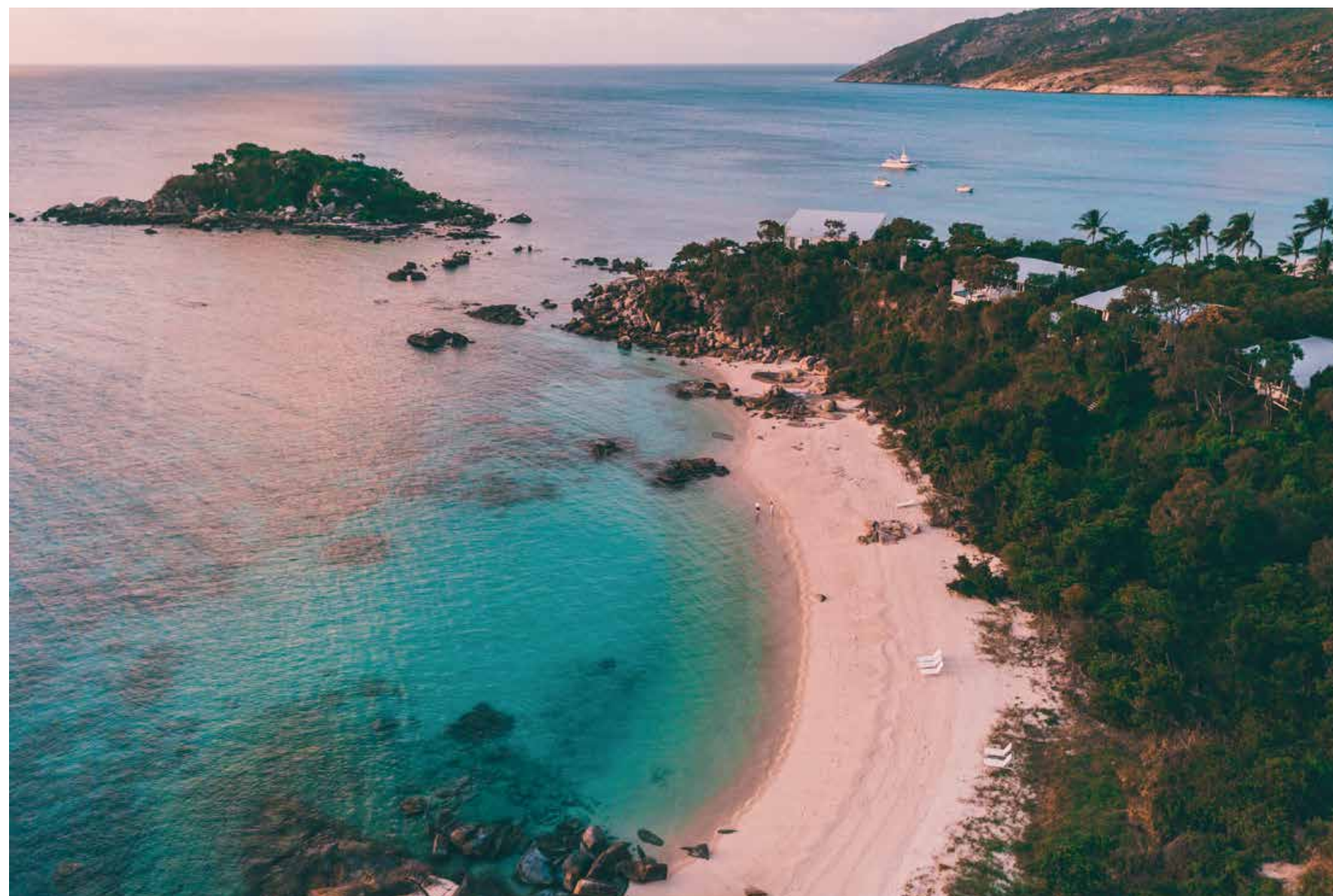
Now, to feel the fine-grained sand beneath my feet, to watch the waves gently collapse onto the shore, and to be aware of the vastness and treasures the water before me holds, I'm aware I'm on sacred ground. It may have been named 'Lizard Island' by Captain James Cook, due to the population of yellow-spotted monitor lizards, but it has been nurtured by the Dingaal Aboriginal people, who know the island as 'Dyigurra' or 'Jiigurru' (which means stingray).

While there's much to do at Lizard Island Resort, a member of Luxury Lodges of Australia, General Manager Leon Park explains to me that they like to encourage guests to get out on the reef, to explore the natural beauty of the island, as much as possible.

My time is spent either in, or on, the warm water, which is wonderfully calming and cathartic. Mornings begin with taking a La Maison du The cup of tea down to the shoreline and, while either seated at my personal lounge or while wading in the shallows, I watch a gathering of birds, including seagulls and heron, and hear them create a chorus of birdsong. I walk to the other side of the island to Sunset Beach — just as beautiful at sunrise — watching water lap over granite rocks and seashells. On another morning, I take a 7am yoga class, held in a pavilion on the beachfront. It's energising and soothing all at once. Our session ends with one guest spotting turtles coming up for air in the distance, and yoga instructor, Laura, asking our group, "Are you relaxed?". That would be an understatement.

I head to breakfast along a boardwalk, framed with frangipani and hibiscus, to gain nourishment at Salt Water Restaurant, connected to the outdoors through its open-air design and position overlooking the beach at Anchor Bay. A continental breakfast of native jam, seasonal fruit, Mungalli biodynamic yoghurt, rainforest honey and coconut granola provides just the right serve of sustenance before I head off on an Inner Reef Snorkel Tour.

We venture to a postcard-perfect snorkelling location known as Northern Direction. With snorkels fixed and masks on, our small group of five plunges into the water with our guide to explore the reef. Underwater, I'm so excited that I almost start speaking the words, "Oh wow" into my snorkel, as I gasp at the colourful coral below and luminescent tropical fish darting past. For about an hour, we're gently swimming through an entire underwater universe and ecosystem. It feels like magic. Our guide stops occasionally to explain some of what we're witnessing, including giant clams (which could be up to 200 years old); peacock rockcods, surgeonfish, Clark's anemonefish (otherwise known as 'Nemo!'), parrotfish, indigo coloured starfish, plate and stag horn coral — and even a black tip shark.



OPENING PAGE A sandbar in the middle of the aqua waters of the Great Barrier Reef.

ABOVE Lizard Island Resort is located on the Great Barrier Reef in Tropical North Queensland.

LEFT Green sea turtles right out the front of Lizard Island Resort.



ABOVE Aerial view of the Daintree Pool at Silky Oaks Lodge.

RIGHT Tour Guide Levi Williams during the Ngadiku Dreamtime Walk. Credit: Katrina Holden.

FAR RIGHT Bathing amid the rainforest on the deck of a treehouse retreat room.



Later that day, I join a sea darts tour right outside the resort. Not sure what to expect, these motorised gadgets allow you to glide through the water on what is, essentially, your own mini submarine. After some practice, our group gets the hang of manoeuvring them, and we head off to discover the stunning coral and marine life located directly in front of the resort. The highlight, for me, comes when we carefully make our way into the cove of Watson's Beach that a colony of green sea turtles call home — as many as 30 or 40, we're told. It's essential for the turtles that we keep a respectful distance (and one must NEVER attempt to touch them, which is dangerous and even potentially fatal, for the turtle). Once more, I can feel myself tempted to talk underwater! It's an incredibly moving and humbling experience to be in their habitat, observing them eating, gracefully coursing through water and coming up for air every few minutes.

There are many other ways to connect with your soul, and surrounds, during your stay. Take the three-hour, 4km hike to Cook's Look, which other guests assure me has spectacular views; go on the guided tour to Blue Lagoon and learn about the coral reef research work conducted here on the island by the Australian Museum since 1973; or indulge in a treatment at Essentia Day Spa. I personally look for almost any excuse to shower and use the gloriously scented iKou Australian lemon myrtle and Tahitian lime body wash, and relish moments spent on my villa's outdoor daybed.

On my final morning at breakfast, I lament the fact I haven't yet spotted one of the island's famed resident lizards. Other guests have been chatting about their sightings. I head back to my room to pack for my next leg of the journey, when, as if on cue, I spot a large lizard mooching in the sun on his gnarled claws.

RAINFOREST

Back in Cairns, I am escorted by private car for a 75-minute drive north into the 185-million-year-old ancient Daintree Rainforest, for a stay at the eco-friendly Silky Oaks Lodge, a fellow member of Luxury Lodges of Australia. Combining the two resorts is a popular itinerary for many travellers, allowing them to take in Australia's prized rainforest and reef. Some with more time on their hands, like a young couple I meet from Sydney, also extend their journey to Mt Mulligan Lodge in rural Queensland to experience the Australian outback.

Silky Oaks Lodge was acquired by Baillie Lodges in 2021, who spent \$20m on a refurbishment.

I immediately feel calmed and soothed by the surrounds of lush, green rainforest vegetation. In my treehouse retreat room, titled 'Forest Dragon', the first thing I do is take a soak in the generously sized egg-shaped outdoor bathtub, sprinkling vanilla honey bath crystals into the slate-coloured tub. Submerged in the water, I feel cocooned in a forest of ferns, with nothing but the sounds of the wild to break the silence.

It's tempting to sit on my deck's hammock and sway away the hours in solitude — but there's much to explore both on site and in the region. For starters, there's the Mossman River that flows through the property from the nearby Mossman Gorge. Guests can canoe, kayak, snorkel or swim in the crocodile-free waters. The lodge's pool is set among the greenery — I take my lunch of grilled barramundi here one day, reclining on a timber day bed. There are multiple guided walking trails around the property for those who prefer to stay dry, which will take you past the lodge's bountiful kitchen garden, gym and media room; and the lodge also runs a daily courtesy shuttle bus to Port Douglas, a 25-minute drive away.

One morning begins with yoga in the open-air Marrdja Pavilion, where our instructor chalks our names on the floorboards in front of our mats. A hearty breakfast of lemongrass and chilli pork sausage, egg, relish, flatbread and apple aioli follows, before I head to the Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre to join the Ngadiku Dreamtime Walk, conducted by local Indigenous people. Our guide, Levi Williams from the local Madja people, grew up in the Mossman community, in one of the 30 houses on the site.

"As we're going into the rainforest folks with the animals, plants, fruits and berries, remember this rainforest here that



LEFT Local seafood features on the menu at Silky Oaks Lodge. Credit: Mark Godbeer.

LEFT, BOTTOM Mossman Gorge. Credit: Katrina Holden.

RIGHT The Manjal Jimalji hike at Silky Oaks Lodge.



you're looking at is the oldest living rainforest in the world. It's 185 million years old – that's 10 million years older than the Amazon rainforest. Our mountains, our rainforest, our waterways hold many stories," says Levi.

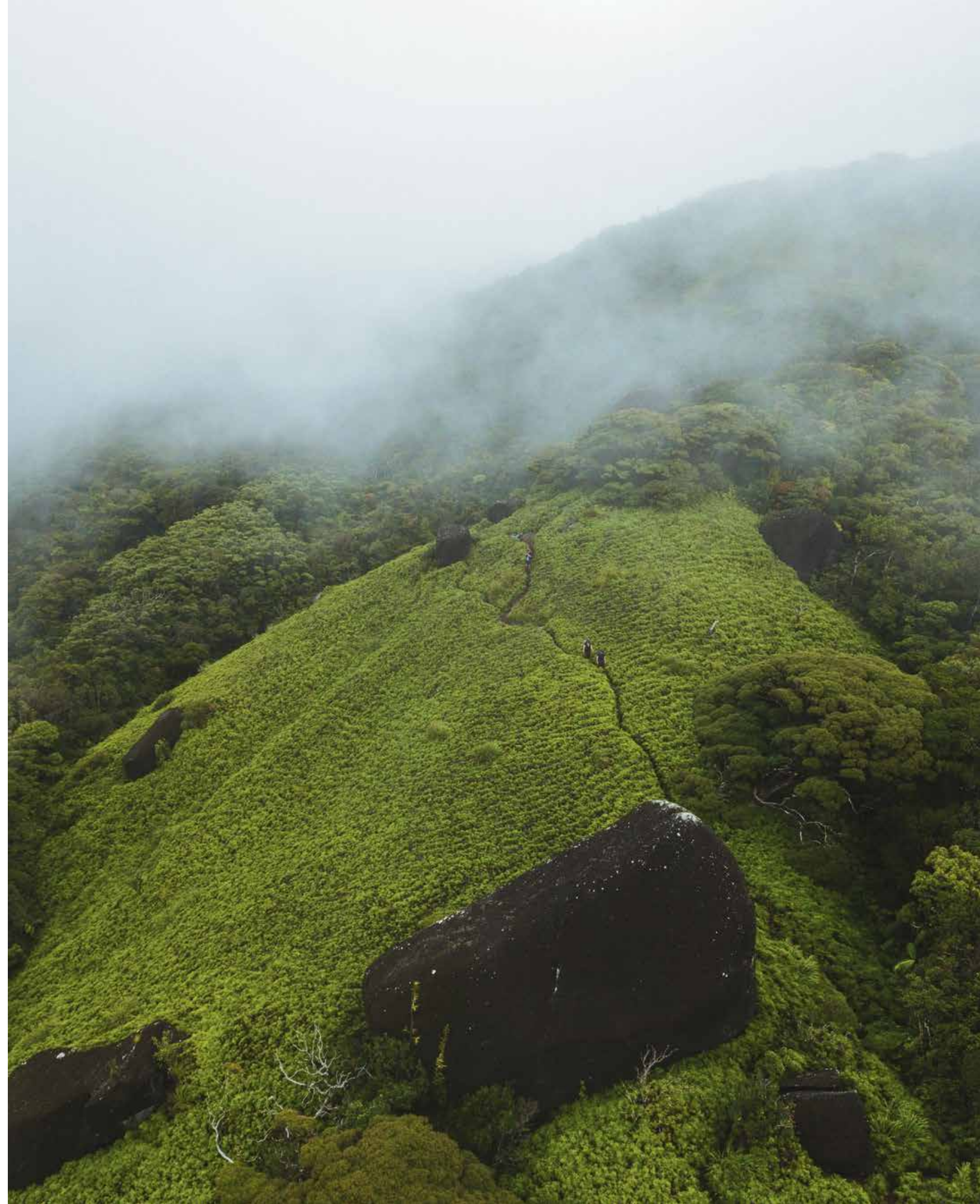
The tour begins with a smoking ceremony of melaleuca paper bark, before he guides us to a 145-year-old red cedar tree, one of the few that remain after decades of logging, explaining how they were 'family' trees with totems and very important to his people.

He points to the sap from a tree that is used to help treat skin cancer; the rock shelter where clan groups meet, and initiations and weddings take place; and his favourite bush tucker: the Daintree walnut. Preparing to paint his left arm with charcoal, iron, zinc and clay calcium, Levi says: "I'm going to show you my unique ID and passport that my grandfather taught me to paint when I was eight years old." Afterwards, he cleans it off with the leaves of a sarsaparilla plant that creates suds when he squishes it, with river water, in his clenched fist.

"I want to be like my elders and be a traditional healer and look after my loved ones," says Levi, who teaches traditional dances to local kids after school each day.

"I want us to be more reliant on the rainforest and not rely on western medicine. That's my goal," he proudly declares.

Uplifted and renewed by the natural world and the wisdom of our First Nations people, I return to Silky Oaks where I am booked in at Healing Waters Spa for one of the holistic specialty treatments, the 90-minute Silky Spirit. The spa is a tranquil haven of grounding, earthy tones and large floor to ceiling windows that overlook rainforest plants and vines. My session is with Aaron, who combines Hawaiian Lomi Lomi massage techniques with crystals designed to balance my chakras. The

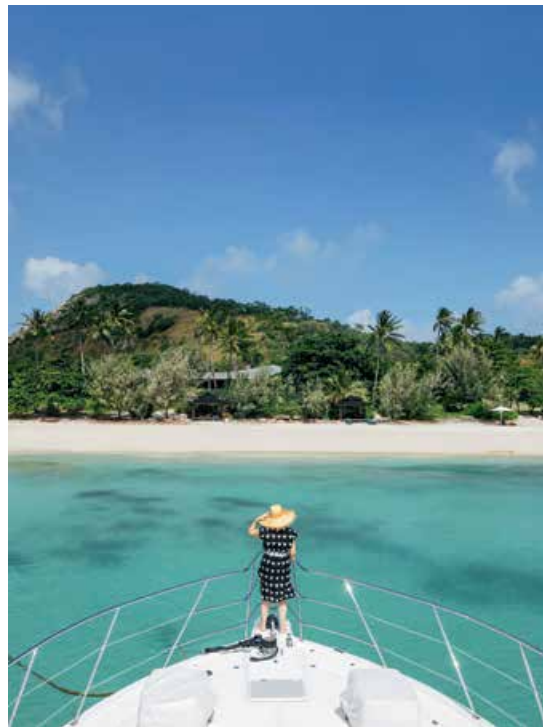




ABOVE The Pavilion Suite at Lizard Island Resort.

ABOVE, RIGHT Treatment room at Healing Waters Spa.

RIGHT AND FAR RIGHT Enjoying time on the water at Lizard Island Resort; the extensive kitchen garden at Silky Oaks Lodge.



pressure is ideal and the intriguing Hawaiian stroke technique at times feels like I have serpents crawling over my skin. I am completely comfortable and feel held in a safe and supported space by Aaron as I hear raindrops splash on the giant leaves outside my window. A tummy massage is optional, but I decide to go for it. It's a strange but powerful sensation, designed to release where we typically store our fears, anxiety and nervous energy.

Relaxing afterwards in another room, Aaron delivers a Serendipity Tea and briefly explains the concepts of the treatment and how my feminine and masculine energies were presenting in the physical form. Left alone and encouraged to take my time, my tears flow again as I feel profoundly shifted through both the massage and my entire journey here.

While there are dedicated 'wellness' retreats and resorts that offer specialist programs and treatments, sometimes a sojourn to heal and improve your wellbeing is as simple as getting back to basics and out into nature. During the Covid-19 pandemic, at a time when we couldn't travel, Tourism Australia invested significant funds into creating a series of uplifting and inspiring 8D videos for the armchair traveller, consulting with colour psychology experts about the effects on the human psyche of different colours that are showcased in our natural environment. Not surprisingly, the Daintree Rainforest was a key star in the 'green' video and the Great Barrier Reef a major component of the 'blue' video — the entire video series received more than 74 million views worldwide. After several days of being embedded among the boldest of blues and the cleanest of greens, I am emerging with greater clarity, calm and uplifted spirits.

Perhaps Levi Williams back at the Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre put it best when he told me that some 18 months earlier during the pandemic, he was feeling low. "So, I went into the rainforest for three weeks — that's what we do when we feel down. I came out healed."

Who am I to disagree with the knowledge of the oldest living culture on Earth?



JOURNEY NOTES

Rates at Lizard Island start from AUD\$2049 per room, per night for twin/double share. This is a fully inclusive rate, covering accommodation, gourmet meals, unlimited non-alcoholic beverages, selected fine Australian and New Zealand wines, beer, spirits and sparkling wine, in room mini bar, picnic hampers, use of non-motorised water sports and motorised dinghies. Rates at Silky Oaks Lodge start from AUD\$1300 per night. Guests can arrive via car or the lodge can arrange private/group vehicle transfers with local preferred operators. Helicopter transfers from Cairns Airport to Silky Oaks' helipad can also be arranged.

Lizardisland.com.au
Silkyoakslodge.com.au