

THE AUSTRALIAN

TRAVEL+ LUXURY

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From REEF *to* RAINFOREST *and* BEYOND

Three dramatically different Australian
landscapes in seven days

ART OF AFRICA
Marrakech's creative
credentials on show

WINE AND DINE
Must-try restaurants
in the Hunter Valley

REEF ENCOUNTER

A trip to far north Queensland spans contrasting landscapes,
but one stands out above all others

MILANDA ROUT

The one thing no one ever tells you about the Great Barrier Reef is how noisy it is. As soon as I duck my head under the impossibly clear turquoise water and get a glimpse of its vibrant inhabitants, I hear loud crackling; it sounds like an electric current running through the ocean.

It's my first time snorkelling this far north, on Mackay Reef, two hours from Port Douglas by boat, and I am way out of my comfort zone. I prefer navigating city streets over the great outdoors; manicured botanical gardens are about as close to nature that I go. I pop my head above the water, take my mouthpiece out and ask a much more experienced fellow snorkeller the first of many questions: "What on earth is that noise?"

"That's the fish eating the reef," she says. "It's so loud, right?"

I put my snorkel back in, put my head below the water and just float and observe as this secret world slowly reveals itself to my untrained eye. I see coral – some bleached and some coming back to life. Dark blue branches, leathery yellow leaves and red boulder-shaped specimens contrast with a graveyard of whites and browns, evidence of this particular outcrop's struggle with warm ocean temperatures.

Then I start to notice the reef's other inhabitants. It's as though the corals are the buildings on a busy street. Schools of iridescent green-blue fish rush by like commuters late for work; a pair of highlighter-yellow butterfly-shaped fish exit a plate coral; tiny neon blue flashes emerge from the floating arms of

soft coral, as if waiting for the traffic to ease before heading out. The intensity of the colours reminds me of the mesmerising blues of van Gogh's *Starry Night* or Matisse's use of deep orange and crimson in his work *The Red Trolley*.

A parrotfish is chomping on dead coral on the sea floor, and I realise these fish are largely responsible for the underwater racket, along with the 9000 other species that call the Great Barrier Reef home. Earlier, on the two-hour catamaran ride out to Mackay Reef with tour operator Sailaway Port Douglas, Kelly Rawding, a marine biologist and master reef guide, had explained how parrotfish are voracious consumers of coral.

"Some species of parrotfish eat about five tonnes of coral a year and it comes out the other end in a cloud of sand," she says.



This means the pristine white cay we later visit is comprised of years of fish poo building up from the sea floor. "Nice to know what you will be walking on," Rawding says with a laugh.

I am on a full-day excursion to the outer reef from Silky Oaks Lodge in the Daintree, near Port Douglas, and my second day of a new itinerary from Luxury Lodges of Australia. It includes a trio of properties that take in three very different landscapes: rainforest, outback and tropical island. The use of helicopters and light planes mean Silky Oaks and the other two, Mt Mulligan, 100km inland from Cairns, and Lizard Island, 110km further north off the coast of Cape Flattery, can be experienced in as little as seven days.

It is the reef that truly grabs my attention, for reasons good and bad. It's well known that this treasured 2300km-long ecosystem is in trouble. Consistently warm summer ocean temperatures have caused mass coral bleaching events, including one in March last year in which 46 per cent of the reef suffered heat stress. It has also made international headlines for all the wrong reasons, with UNESCO threatening to put the World Heritage-listed area on the "in-danger" list back in 2023 due to government inaction on climate change and damage caused by bleaching, cyclones, crown of thorns starfish and agriculture runoff. There is a widespread perception, particularly overseas, that the reef is dead and no longer worth seeing, which has resulted in a decline in visitation. In the section where I'm snorkelling, visitor numbers have fallen almost 25 per cent compared with pre-pandemic levels.



Snorkelling in the clear waters of Lizard Island, main; sea turtle on the reef, below left; Dreamtime walk at Mossman Gorge, below right

This has an impact on both humans and marine inhabitants; tourism from the reef contributes \$6bn to the Australian economy, creates 64,000 jobs and also collects an individual visitor tax to help fund research and preservation.

This weighs heavily on my mind as I edge my flipper in the water to go snorkelling. Is the reef dead? Should I be visiting? What does a healthy reef look like? Does it match my preconceived ideas of a colourful coral world, or am I too influenced by saturated portrayals in cinema (*Finding Nemo*, for example). I see healthy coral – along with bleached and stressed examples – but I am surprised by how much of this healthy coral is actually brown. It is also heartening to view the diversity of marine life: it is their colour that exceeds my expectations.

I continue to process what I have witnessed long after the catamaran docks back at Port Douglas and I return to Silky Oaks Lodge. The property opened in 1985 and underwent a \$20m renovation in 2022 after being acquired by Baillie Lodges, adjoining the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Daintree National Park. Overlooking the Mossman River, the resort comprises a series of open-air pavilions set amid the rainforest and connected by boardwalks. I am staying in one of 40 luxury treehouse style suites, complete with a hammock, and it is wonderfully relaxing just to walk among the dense vegetation, where every shade of green is intertwined in a kaleidoscope of leaves, trees and vines.

I explore more of the oldest surviving rainforest in the world at nearby Mossman Gorge on a Ngadiku Dreamtime Walk

from the Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre. The 1 ½-hour small group tour starts with a traditional smoking ceremony and our guide, Angelina Sipi, explains the history and culture of the Kuku Yalanji people, who have lived in the area for 50,000 years.

She takes us through the lush forest, where the sun barely peeks through the canopy, and points out ways her ancestors would communicate by tapping the huge tree roots of towering bull kauri trees, how they would construct shelters, and what they would forage from surrounding flora and fauna. Sipi also demonstrates traditional ochre painting on her arm, brushing two long wavy lines to represent women and the Mossman River, and raindrops to signify the rainforest. She washes it off



in a creek with leaves from a red ash tree, which she crushes and rubs with water to turn into soap. We take turns in washing our hands and I am surprised at how readily it foams and smells like a regular bath product. Nature really does provide.

“A mate once said this place is like an aisle in Bunnings; you can find everything you want, you just need to know where to look,” says Nieve Liveri, staring up at the stunning red escarpment of Mt Mulligan from beneath her Akubra.

It is two days later and I am in outback Queensland, reached via a 30-minute flight in a small plane from Cairns. Our plans to fly in by helicopter were scuppered by a torrential downpour and low cloud. One of my travelling companions is decidedly grumpy about the missed opportunity to fly over the sandstone monolith, which is 10 times the size of Uluru. But while the rain may have prevented that particular vista, it has been replaced with something far more spectacular: the greening of this harsh landscape.

Mt Mulligan is a 28,000ha working cattle station with a luxury lodge that opened in 2019, catering for just 28 guests. The main pavilion and accommodation is set beside a 20m weir dotted with lily pads and lined with eucalyptus trees, so it is usually green but never quite this verdant. There are waterfalls coming off the mountain range, the lakes are full and the ground, normally dominated by red dirt and yellow grasses, is covered in vegetation (as well as puddles and mud). Liveri takes us on a tour of the property in all-terrain vehicles. When we go off-road, the ATVs roll over plants that release a cooling, fresh

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aroma that's familiar but also seems out of place. "That's the native river mint," says Liveri to my surprise. "It's like spearmint or peppermint; you can eat it and it's perfect for cocktails."

I detect the scent again the next morning when Liveri drives through the darkness to take us closer to Mt Mulligan to see the sunrise. "Watch the sandstone," she advises. "There will be a few minutes where the sunrise makes it look even more red."

We drink coffee, eat pastries and observe our surroundings: there is the gush of Geraldine Falls off the tabletop mountain and the call of the blue-faced honey-eater welcoming the day. The sun breaks through the mist and Mt Mulligan, known as Ngarrabullgan to its traditional owners, does indeed turn bright red for a few minutes. It is stunning.

We see the extent of the greening when we take off the following day to head to Lizard Island, this time on a slighter bigger plane. After heavy rain overnight, the red sandstone escarpment looks almost black. The clouds lift as we fly 1½ hours north, and by the time we reach the coast, all we can see is white sand, coral reefs and aquamarine waters.

Within seconds of landing, we are greeted by Lizard Island Resort staff and one of its namesake residents: a yellow spotted monitor lizard, which nonchalantly walks across the road to bask in the sun. At up to 150cm long, these are not small reptiles (they hunt birds), so

IN THE KNOW

Silky Oaks Lodge has suites from \$1400 a night for two guests, including breakfast, dinner with matched wines, selected in-suite minibar, shuttle to Port Douglas; two-night minimum.

Mt Mulligan Lodge has suites from \$1795 a night for two guests and includes all meals, a selection of beverages, fully stocked minibar, a daily excursion, evening sundowners; two-night minimum.

Lizard Island Resort has suites from \$2516 a night for two guests and includes gourmet meals, select wines, beers and spirits, in-room minibar and non-motorised sporting equipment; two-night minimum stay.

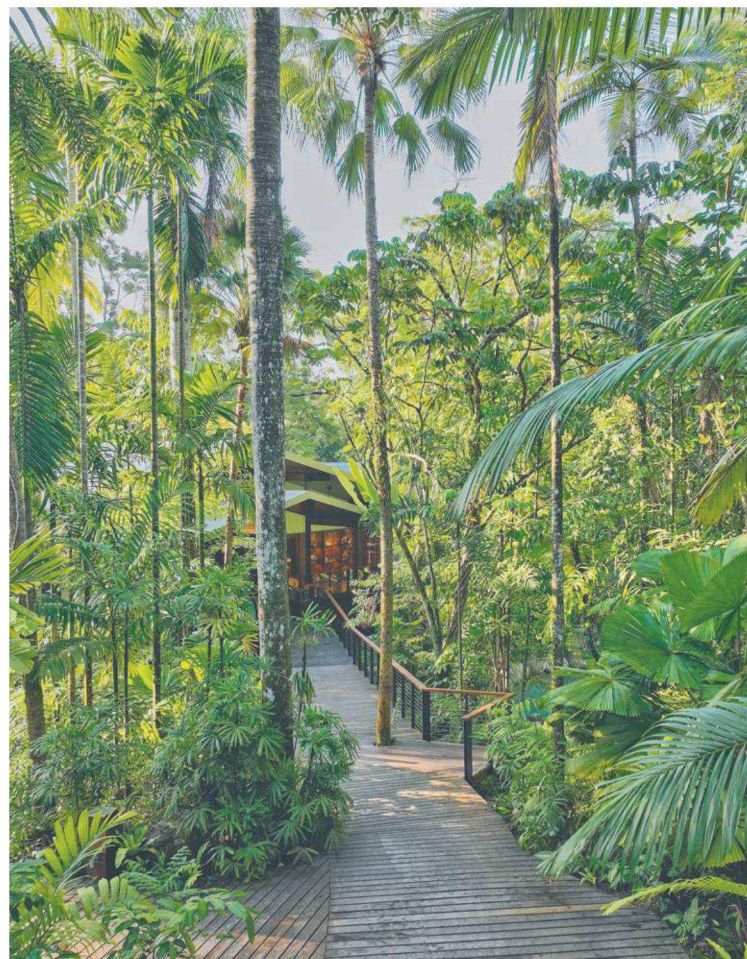
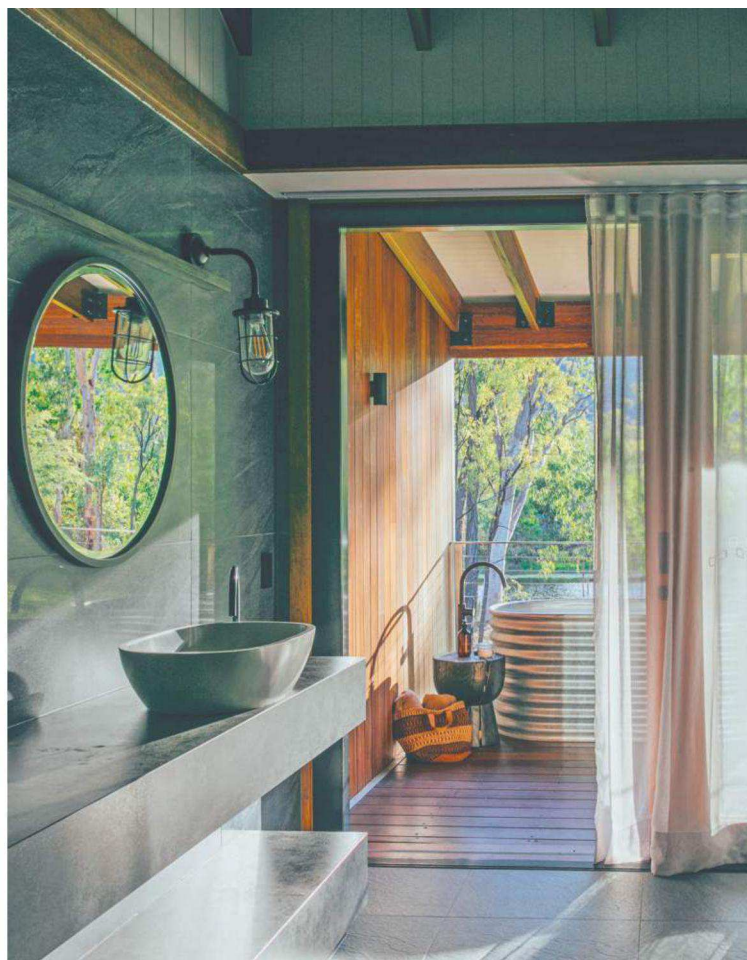
luxurylodgesofaustralia.com.au

A full-day outer reef and Mackay Cay snorkelling tour with Sailaway Port Douglas is \$340 an adult. Includes lunch, morning and afternoon tea; snorkelling equipment and instructions; glass-bottom boat viewing; guided snorkelling tour with a marine biologist.

sailawayportdouglas.com

Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre offers guided Dreamtime Walks from \$100 an adult, including afternoon tea.

mossmangorge.com.au



Mt Mulligan Lodge, left and above; Silky Oaks Lodge, below left; Lizard Island, below; parrotfish and sweetlip fish, bottom



we drive around it on the way to the resort's Salt Water Restaurant and Driftwater Bar for a spot of lunch. My second encounter with wildlife happens a few hours later when I ditch my bags at my oceanview plunge pool pavilion and head into the warm waters of Anchor Bay. Growing up in Melbourne, I am accustomed to gasping in shock at Victoria's freezing ocean temperatures. Not so at Lizard Island. It is so warm I instantly relax and glide in. I am not the only one enjoying a dip; a green sea turtle pops its head up for a breath before diving back into the crystalline water. I will never forget seeing this majestic creature with its wise, discerning eyes.

These marvellous reptiles are just two of 7500 species that call the island home and have been studied at some point by the 15,000 international marine science students to have come through the Lizard Island Research Station since it was established in 1973. Run by Dr Anne Hoggett and Dr Lyle Vail for 35 years until their retirement this year, the Australian Museum Research Institute centre is now helmed by coral biologists Dr Emily Howells and Dr David Abrego. Their arrival, with their daughter, came a year after a devastating coral bleaching event killed 97 per cent of corals on the island's North Point Reef. "That's the sixth year in a row there has been coral bleaching and it is not normal," says Howells of the impact of global warming. "But the reef is not doomed by any means." Abrego agrees: "I want people to see the beauty of it up here."

Beauty is what I witness while snorkelling at Macgillivray Reef off the island. There is coral that has suffered bleaching, and some that has died, but others are regenerating. And the marine life is extraordinary; yellow, black and white sweetlips cruise around plate corals; a moray eel pops its head out of its hideaway; and even Nemo (aka a clownfish) makes an appearance.

As I swim through a huge school of shiny damselfish, which move in unison around me, and the sunlight reflects off thousands of these shimmering sea creatures, I take a moment to appreciate the breathtaking glory of the Great Barrier Reef.

In my reverie, I'm reminded of something Sailaway's Kelly Rawding said on our outing from Port Douglas.

"We just want you to fall in love. That's all I want from everyone who comes here, to start loving the reef so they can start caring about it."

Milanda Rout was a guest of Silky Oaks Lodge, Mt Mulligan Lodge, Lizard Island Resort, Sailaway Port Douglas, Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre and Tourism Events Queensland.
queensland.com

