

Going loopy in tropical QLD

How far would you need to drive to see sandy beaches, mountainous rainforests and fertile tablelands? Not as far as you think...

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CAIRNS CBD has a sandy-edged pool just a few metres from the sea. That might seem a strange place to put a public pool, but between mid-spring and mid-autumn the waters in this region are home to 'stingers': deadly jellyfish like the sea wasp and the tiny irukandji. So swimming pools are important.

On our first day in Cairns my wife Kellie and I checked in at the Australis Cairns Beach Resort, which has a pool of its own. It's actually just north of Cairns, in a little town called Holloways Beach. We had lunch across the road at the Strait Beach Café, where we sat between two trees that framed an ocean view. A gentle breeze turned down the temperature from hot to summer perfect.

While in Cairns you should head to the casino. Not to gamble away your hard-earned, but to visit its rooftop Wildlife Dome. Hundreds of birds native to this region fly (or walk) free within its geometric walls. There is also an estuarine crocodile named Goliath, but for obvious reasons he doesn't have the run of the place.

A 'seaside city' in the daytime, Cairns really comes into its own at night, with a fabulous selection of restaurants and pubs, not to

mention the ideal climate for al fresco dining.

Our transport was a Subaru Liberty we picked up from Thrifty at Cairns Airport. I've clocked serious kilometres in Liberties and Outbacks, and of all the cars you don't need to be a millionaire to afford, I reckon they have the most comfortable seats for touring.

Our first trip in this one was a quick 20 minutes from Cairns to Palm Cove. While Palm Cove is situated on a palm-fringed beach, I found its line of resorts and speed-humped main road a little too 'planned' for my tastes. Like Cairns, however, its restaurant scene came alive in the evening. From our accommodation at Reef House Resort and Spa, we were in walking distance to a dozen or more eateries – everything from high-end seafood fare to pub grub.

Palm Cove is in close proximity to Kuranda Scenic Railway. You've probably heard good things about this train journey up a forested range, and they're all true. If you can stump up the extra 50 bucks, travel Gold Class – you get lounges, free drinks and snacks, and the chance to lord it over the peasants in the regular carriages. Whatever you pay, you'll get some fascinating

history about its construction and eye-popping scenery.

Unlike the overrated Cairns Night Markets (which is geared towards overseas tourists) Kuranda Markets has shop after shop stocked with locally made products, everything from fine art to children's toys. Be warned: you will spend money.

The ideal way to get back to sea level is the Skyrail. If the only cableway you've travelled on is at Taronga Zoo, you're in for a shock: the Skyrail is huge. Suspended over 7.5 kilometres of rainforest, it stretches from Kuranda to the town of Caravonica at the base of Red Peak. It has two stops along the way where you can learn more about the rainforest.



BELOW: Sheraton Mirage Port Douglas has 20,000 square metres of lagoons to swim in and backs onto Four Mile Beach.

While the Captain Cook Highway between Cairns and Palm Cove is largely forgettable, between Palm Cove and Port Douglas it's anything but. Driving right beside the Coral Sea, we were almost disappointed to arrive at our destination.

That was until we checked in at the Sheraton Mirage Port Douglas. It doesn't measure its pools in metres but in hectares. Its Ocean Breeze swim-up bar closes at 8pm, which is just as well – in the tropics, no one gets out because it's cold.

Port Douglas is a launch pad to the Great Barrier Reef. We boarded one of Quicksilver's brushed-steel boats for the 1.5-hour journey to its pontoon on the Outer Reef.

Having snorkelled the waters around Tahiti, I was sceptical that our reef could match up. I needn't have worried. From the moment a clownfish poked its head out of a crevice in the far-from-bleached coral, I understood how the reef got its reputation. Even if you're there in the wet season and have to don a

goofy lycra stinger suit, you must do the Great Barrier Reef.

Don't like snorkelling or scuba diving? A Quicksilver ticket lets you hop in one of its glass-walled semi-submersibles. Or, for an extra fee, you can take a helicopter flight and see green sea turtles and eagle rays as they flap across the coral.

Tropical North Queensland isn't just about the sea. Stay on the Captain Cook Highway and it turns inland, becoming the Mulligan and then Kennedy Highway. They thread through teeming rainforests and lush tablelands filled with sugar cane and banana trees. Also, you can't go 10km without finding a turn-off to something interesting (see page 62).

We joined Hot Air Cairns for a balloon ride over the tablelands near Mareeba. It's no wonder the hot air balloon didn't catch on as commercial transport: you're up at dawn and once aloft you're at the mercy of the wind. But for a serene way to survey the countryside, a

MAIN: Not the sort of thing you expect to find in a coastal city. **ABOVE:** Aloft in a giant balloon over the Mareeba tablelands (top); gorgeous Mossman Gorge is a safe place to cool off; the Great Barrier Reef doesn't disappoint.

GET MORE INFO
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balloon is unbeatable. Our pilot said Mareeba was the safest place in the world to take a balloon. It's also one of the most photogenic, with mountains and crops providing a mural of shapes, colours and textures.

We spent our last two nights east of Atherton at Rose Gums Wilderness Retreat, which has secluded cabins set in highland rainforest. Birdwatchers flock here and entomologists will find plenty to occupy them as well. Its creek is a good place to spot wild platypus.

Isolation is soothing until you feel like eating out. Then it's a pain. Not so at Rose Gums; it has fine dining on site. 'Reef and beef' tastes better when you're watching the sun dip behind the horizon in the whirring Australian jungle.

We returned our car to Cairns Airport. The main circuit proved a mere 375km, about five and a half hours in the saddle. Across a week, that's a languid pace indeed. And yet that little loop contained the best coast and country that tropical Queensland had to offer. 

INLAND LEG OF THE LOOP

- 1. MOSSMAN GORGE**
Head north from Port Douglas and you'll discover this beautiful rainforest waterway – which you can actually swim in!
- 2. DAINTREE RIVER**
Venture north from Mossman and you'll find this unspoiled mangrove environment. No swimming though. This is croc central.
- 3. GRANITE GORGE**
Not only can you clamber over its marvellous rock formations, you can get up close and personal with wild rock wallabies.
- 4. THE PEANUT PLACE**
It boasts local produce and you can get your photo taken with the giant peanut man. Cheesy (or rather, nutty) tourist heaven!
- 5. CURTAIN FIG TREE**
Situated in national park near the town of Yungaburra, this astonishing freak of nature is strikingly beautiful.
- 6. LAKE BARRINE**
Take the boat tour around this crater lake. It's chock full of wildlife including saw-shelled turtles and Australia's biggest snake – the amethystine python.
- 7. MILLAA MILLAA FALLS**
This waterfall doubles as a swimming hole that's croc and jellyfish free (although the catfish get niggly during breeding season).

