

GET TROPICAL

TOWNSVILLE AND I HAVE BEEN HAVING A LOVE AFFAIR SINCE THE EARLY '80S. AND IT'S A RELATIONSHIP THAT HAS STOOD THE TEST OF TIME.

WORDS: FIONA HARPER

The first time Townsville and I met, I was a naive teenager fresh out of high school on my first solo travel adventure. Months earlier, I'd caught a Greyhound bus from Perth to Broome laden with little more than a sleeping bag and a backpack stuffed with sarongs, bikinis and thongs. With a head full of dreams, I had no job, little cash and no real plan beyond 'travelling around Australia'. Along the way I'd secured a ride on a yacht sailing through the Kimberley and earned some dollars pulling beers in a Darwin pub before hitching a lift with a truckie heading south through the Northern Territory and across Queensland's breadth to Townsville.

With her sunbaked streets lined with dusty four-wheel drives, classic Australian pubs with shady verandahs and pool tables and

a friendly vibe, Townsville wrapped me in her warm, welcoming, sweaty arms.

We loved one another immediately.

Back then, the 'Sugar Shaker' (the tallest building in Townsville) dominated the city. Torres Strait Islander Eddie Mabo's historic native title speech had just been delivered, a precursor to the 1993 Native Title Act. Reef HQ was underway and Jonathan Thurston would soon learn to walk, long before he would go on to co-captain the North Queensland Cowboys to an historic 2015 NRL Premiership and be unofficially anointed a Townsville legend.

Townsville and I have remained firm friends ever since, reuniting regularly. Each time I return, the city seems to have settled into her bones ever more gracefully. As my own well-travelled body bears the scars of adventures and mishaps further afield, I wish I could say the same...

Settled on the shores of the Coral Sea, Townsville has since made a name for itself as the research hub of the Great Barrier Reef. Reef HQ Great Barrier Reef Aquarium is the largest living coral reef exhibit in the world, showcasing 150 species of underwater inhabitants. The aquariums offer a ▶





mesmerising underwater window – without all that peskiness of getting wet – into soft corals sashaying and swirling in the current or bell-shaped jellyfish propelling themselves like free-falling skydivers in slow motion. Standing in the tunnel that bisects the main aquarium, you’ll see tropical fish, sharks and stingrays glide overhead. At the Turtle Hospital, sick and injured reptiles are rehabilitated before being released back to the wild. Elsewhere in Townsville, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, James Cook University and the Australian Institute of Marine Science contribute to management of the reef, too.

Just off the coast, the SS Yongala wreck is rated one of the best scuba dive sites in the world. One year before the *Titanic* foundered, steamship *Yongala* encountered cyclonic weather on a voyage from Melbourne to Cairns, sinking near Cape Bowling Green with the loss of 122 lives. The wreckage was not found until almost 50 years later. Laying in 28 metres of water and now home to immense marine fish and coral species, the 109-metre hull is the largest, most intact shipwreck in Australia, attracting divers from all over the world.

I missed visiting Magnetic Island on my first visit to Townsville, but made up for this omission many years later. Following a similar route to the SS *Yongala*, carefully avoiding the rocks where she came unstuck, I sailed into Horseshoe Bay on the island’s north coast and fell hopelessly in love. An official suburb of Townsville, Maggie (as the island is affectionately known) successfully balances a

Previous page: Wallaman Falls.
This page: Snorkelling off the coast of Townsville; Magnetic Island; Cruising around Magnetic Island.
Right: Radical Bay on Magnetic Island.



residential community skirting the boundary of a national park. The next time I returned, it was as a residential landowner with big plans to build the island home I lived in for four years.

With its sweeping crescent-shaped beach shaded by palm trees and bookended by granite boulders sprouting towering hoop pines, Horseshoe Bay is the poster child for an island blessed with abundant treasures. The intimate cove of Alma Bay is a serious contender for most-photographed beach as well as one of the top 10 Queensland beaches according to Surf Life Saving Queensland. Hiking trails that pass through koala habitats on the way to historic forts, affording stunning views, lure thousands of travellers to relax on Maggie each year.

The island’s hilly terrain is popular with adventure sports enthusiasts, too, attracting athletes to events like Magnetic Island Race Week, Magnetic Island Swim and the multisport Adventurethon races.

Back on the mainland, Townsville is no stranger to hosting big events either. Emerging from the banks of Ross Creek, North Queensland Stadium has secured Sir Elton John to open the state-of-the-art venue in early 2020. Local hero Johnathan Thurston (JT to his mates) is credited with giving the campaign for a new stadium some momentum. Sharing the stage with Prime Minister Turnbull after winning the 2015 NRL premiership, JT expressed his belief that Townsville deserved a new stadium in his victory speech. Within months the multi-million project was funded and the football hero was virtually given the keys to the city.

Blessed with 13 sun-kissed hours of daylight and daytime temperatures that rarely drop below mid-20s, it’s no surprise Townsville is just a little sports-obsessed. Reigniting my relationship with the city recently, I laced up my joggers pre-dawn alongside 2400 runners in the 47th Townsville Running Festival. As the sun’s rays tinted Castle Hill burnt orange, another annual festival tradition was getting underway. Air heavy with the aroma of bacon, sausages and eggs, mingling with runners’ sweat, the Hash House Harriers popped the champagne and cranked up the music.

For the past 16 years the ‘party house’ has hosted the Marathon Breakfast Party, supporting runners with beer and champagne-laced encouragement, dancing in onesies one kilometre from the finish line. For those of us who run with friends purely for fun, the enthusiasm and laughter radiating from the house is an absolute highlight. This unabandoned *joie de vivre* is just the sort of carefree cheekiness that underpins my 30-year-plus love affair with Townsville. **A**

