

Camping & Glamping

in the
Atherton Tablelands

In the highlands west of Cairns, campers and glampers bask in a landscape rich with wildlife.

Words and images: Fiona Harper

The Atherton Tablelands lie westward of Cairns in tropical Far North Queensland. The area's rich volcanic soil makes it an attractive region for farming and grazing. Nature lovers and campers too are spoilt with lush rainforest, crater lakes and vast wetlands that attract migratory birds and wildlife.

There's a good reason that huntsman spiders are otherwise known as giant crab spiders. A crablike gait and daunting size earned them such a nickname. With males purported to reach a leg span up to 30 cm, they are seriously big spiders. They're

also one of Australia's least venomous so they actually pose little threat, despite their intimidating size.

Knowing this, however, is of little consolation when I return to my tent after dark to find a spider the size of my palm clinging to the canvas wall. I later learn that its distinct leg markings identify it as a banded huntsman. Somewhat inconveniently for an arachnophobia-suffering wimp it's taken up residence a few inches from my pillow.

What to do? The upside to sharing my tent with a huntsman is that I'm unlikely to be troubled by mosquitos or

cockroaches during the night: both are favoured delicacies. Clutching desperately at another straw of solace I tell myself that huntsman spiders are passive loners and unlikely to strike unless harassed. It's comforting behaviour that I can relate to, though supporting an affinity with one of Australia's largest spiders is an unexpected revelation.

Despite our newfound kinship I decide to yield ownership of the pillow, in fact the entire bed, allowing the huntsman free rein to hunt its little heart out undisturbed. Defeated, I retreat to the smaller bed, far enough away to dispel any fear of said

spider landing on my face while I sleep. I make a mental note to upend my hiking boots in the morning before dashing out for a dawn safari.

It's no real surprise to find myself sharing digs with a huntsman given that I'm camping within a nature reserve in North Queensland savannah land. Though when I say *camping* I really mean glamping. My canvas tent sits atop a timber floor on steel stumps (we're in termite country too: their nearby mounds are the size of a small car).

As well as a queen and single bed, the tent comes with a small fridge, kettle, toaster and a picnic basket full of essentials. But the real difference between camping and glamping lies beyond the zippered screen at the rear of the tent. Here, canvas walls give way to corrugated iron sheets that reach high enough for privacy but let in plenty of light (and critters). My ensuite is decked out with toilet, shower and vanity with hot and cold running water thanks very much.

At the tent entrance an elevated deck proves to be the perfect wildlife viewing spot, with a pair of curious emu constant visitors. They growl and groan like fervent lions adding to the African safari-feel of the place.

I've bunkered down at Jabiru Safari Lodge, which sits within savannah land known as the Mareeba Wetlands. A tented camp on the banks of Clancy's Lagoon, there are five permanently erected tents (two of which are entirely solar powered) as well as a central lodge that acts as a visitor centre for day-trippers. The Lodge is also where we enjoy meals with congenial host Marg, an affable cattle-country woman from Cape York who, by her own admission, stumbled into the tourism industry unintentionally.

Husband Greg is a savannah guide with a wealth of bird and wildlife knowledge he happily shares with guests. His eyes shaded from the harsh sun beneath his ubiquitous Akubra hat, he tells me that he's never lived in a city, grew up in the bush and never left. His affinity with the land and his environment is evident. His keen eye for spotting birds is highlighted when he takes us stomping through grass to view a majestic jabiru virtually concealed by waist-high grass.

About an hour west of Cairns in the highlands of the Atherton Tablelands, the park was established in 1996 by

the Wildlife Conservancy of Tropical Queensland. Originally earmarked as sugarcane farmland, conservationists led by Tim Nevard OAM in consultation with traditional owners, the Muluridji people, devised a clever alternative.

Their vision was to create a wetlands nature reserve, gravity fed by unused water from the Mareeba Dimbulah Irrigation System. The result is approximately 300 acres of open water within 5000 acres of nature reserve. The Mareeba Wetlands now attract resident and migratory birdlife while providing a sanctuary and water source for native wildlife. The park is one of the few places to spot majestic sarus cranes, brolgas and jabirus that can grow up to two metres tall. Twitchers and wildlife photographers can't get enough of the place.

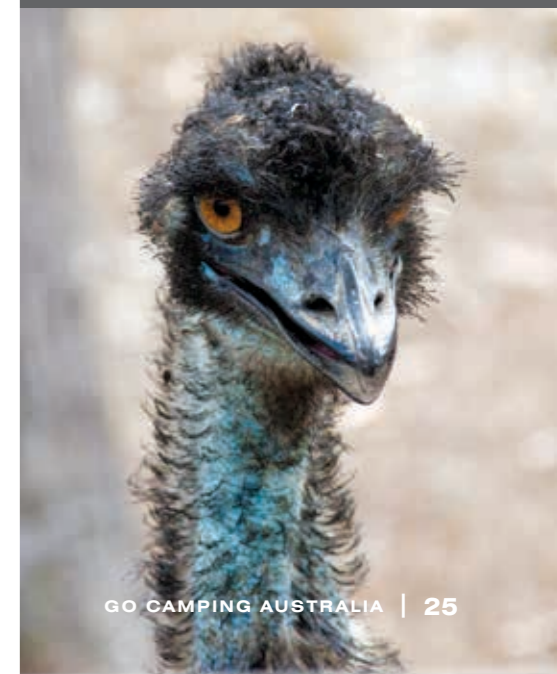
Other waterways on the Atherton Tablelands, like lakes Tinaroo, Barrine and Eacham are equally popular with campers and nature lovers. Lakes Barrine and Eacham are extinct volcanic craters filled with cool crystal clear water up to 60 metres deep. Lush rainforest surrounds both lakes, which can be circumnavigated via marked walking trails. Lake Eacham is a popular swimming hole with barbecues on its grassy banks and a swimming pontoon moored near the shore. The historic Tearooms at Lake Barrine are famous for Devonshire teas with mouth-watering fresh baked scones served with rich Tablelands cream.

Lake Tinaroo is a man-made reservoir, the result of damming the Barron River back in the 1950s. A massive lake three-quarters the capacity of Sydney Harbour, Lake Tinaroo is the source of the aforementioned irrigation scheme which Tablelands farmers rely upon.

Venture into a tranquil tributary on a kayak and you're likely to spot platypus and turtles. Other parts of the lake are more boisterous with areas designated for sailing, water-skiing and power boating. Fresh stocks of barramundi are released each year alongside resident catfish, sooty grunter, perch, crayfish and yabbies (fishing permits are required if you're that way inclined). The lake is mostly surrounded by Danbulla National Park and State Forest with five designated campgrounds. Most campsites are lakeside, shaded by lush



Clockwise from far left: Take a sunset safari on Clancy's Lagoon at Mareeba Wetlands. ❖ BIG4 Atherton Woodlands Tourist Park is one of the best on the Tablelands. ❖ Rock wallabies at Granite Gorge are ridiculously photogenic and obliging. ❖ Emu growl and groan like lions adding to the African safari-feel of Jabiru Safari Lodge.





Top to bottom:
Pop into Lake Barrine Teahouse for fresh baked scones and Devonshire tea. ❖ Red winged parrot.

forest and accessed via the road that circles the entire lake (campsites must be pre-booked).

While you're in the area pay a visit to the Avenue of Honour that sits lakeside on the Tinaburra Peninsula. An avenue of flame trees line this recently created national monument to honour servicemen and women in the Afghanistan war. The avenue follows the path of fallen Commando Ben Chuck's gun carriage, symbolising the final journey home of fallen soldiers. It's a tranquil setting that invites reflection and appreciation of this wonderfully free and open landscape cherished by those who visit this astonishing region.

Further afield, mountain bikers have free access to a purpose-built park in the Herberton Range adjacent to the town of Atherton. A network of trails that make up the Atherton Forest Mountain Bike Park attracts a huge following amongst riders.

Already a leader with eco-sensitive cabins, BIG4 Atherton Woodlands Tourist Park has embraced camping bike riders by installing a bike wash down bay.

Boulder-strewn Granite Gorge is the habitat for a large mob of docile rock wallabies. Accustomed to visitors, they'll pose and preen for the camera, before bouncing away over the boulders. Basic campsites on the river's edge are available if you find yourself unable to part from these delightful critters.

The Atherton Tablelands are dominated by a beautiful hilly landscape, whether farmland, pastures or native forest. While its more famous coastal cousins jostle for red carpet accolades thanks to the Great Barrier Reef, the Tablelands provide a beguiling high country contrast. Naturists who venture westwards into the temperate highlands won't be disappointed. Spiders and all. ❖

FACT FILE



Getting there

The Atherton Tablelands can be reached by three main roads heading west from Cairns. Take the Gillies Highway from Gordonvale, the Kennedy Highway from Cairns or the Mulligan Highway north of Port Douglas.



Where to camp

BIG4 Atherton Woodlands Tourist Park, Atherton.

One of the best parks on the Tablelands with a strong environmental focus. Fantastic facilities, friendly atmosphere and impeccably maintained.

www.woodlandscp.com.au

Jabiru Safari Lodge, Mareeba Wetlands, Mareeba. A unique glamping experience in a nature reserve inhabited by native birds and wildlife.

www.jabirusafarilodge.com.au

Lake Eacham Tourist Park, Lake Eacham. About a mile from the lakeside, open fireplaces encourage convivial gatherings.

www.lakeeachamtouristpark.com

Danbulla National Park & State Forest. The park is known for its crater lakes, rainforest and impressive strangler fig trees.

www.npsr.qld.gov.au

When to go

The Atherton Tablelands are a year round destination. Elevated almost 1000 metres above sea level, during summer (the wet season) humidity and temps are much milder than in Cairns. During winter expect cool nights and mostly sunny days.

Further information

Visit Atherton Tablelands for more information.

www.athertontablelands.com.au

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