



Trail blazing

The beauty of the Whitsundays is not limited to Whitehaven Beach and diving the reef. If you look inland, tracks like the Conway Circuit offer tall rainforest canopies, creek crossings and killer views from Mount Haywood. **Fiona Harper** looks at this Whitsunday adventure and more...

PHOTO TOURISM WHITSUNDAYS

WHITSUNDAY ADVENTURES



DON'T FORGET TO
CALL INTO AIRLIE
BEACH FOR A NIGHT
OUT, AND A REST

of the colour wheel. It's like something out of a scene from *Avatar*, only without Sam Worthington.

A short, steep ascent cannot dampen my spirits as I march determinedly, bike by my side, up the trail towards the final peak. From Honeyeater Lookout the sky has cleared above Cannonvale and the Dryander Range beyond, now a shade not unlike the Ulysses Butterfly. With Airlie Beach appearing at the bottom of the final descent I'm suddenly reluctant to return to civilisation. Emerging from the forest into a suburban street, I feel as though I've conquered Everest. In reality Mount Hayward is little more than 400 metres above sea level. It doesn't matter. I still have no clue about mountain biking, but I do have some insight into the Conway Circuit. And I like what I've seen.

For more information,
nprsr.qld.gov.au/parks/conway-circuit



Camping and kayaking the Whitsundays

Unleash your inner Robinson Crusoe by hiring a sea-going kayak and camping out on a deserted Whitsunday Island. For about the same price as a cup of coffee you can bed down in a national park campsite on one of 16 islands. Some, like Whitsunday Island, are well-known, thanks to limelight-hogging Whitehaven Beach with all its look-at-me beauty. Pitch a tent in the campsite at the southern end and come late afternoon you'll likely have the magnificent beach all to yourself.

I figure I need it to ride back to my car when I finally reach the end of the trail. Thirsty, hungry and feeling defeated, I'm seriously questioning the sense of this little adventure.

But things quickly improve at the summit of Mount Hayward when a view across Molle Channel appears in a window framed by trees. Catching the late afternoon sunlight, Daydream and South Molle Island look inviting. The south-east trade winds cool my sweat-soaked skin. By this time I've got streaks of mud up my legs, I'm rain-bedraggled and tired. I'm keen to find a spot to pitch my tent and rest my weary legs. Riding up and down along the ridge with more splendid views to perk me up, I soon reach Bloodwood Camp, a pleasing patch of soft, level grass surrounded by rainforest.

It's almost dark by the time I pitch the tent and fall into it gratefully. Exhausted, yet oddly elated at overcoming the challenging climb, I peel back the lid from the can of

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TREKKING BY THE SEA

Battling uphill is part of the fun when you take a trek in the mountains around Airlie Beach in the Whitsundays.

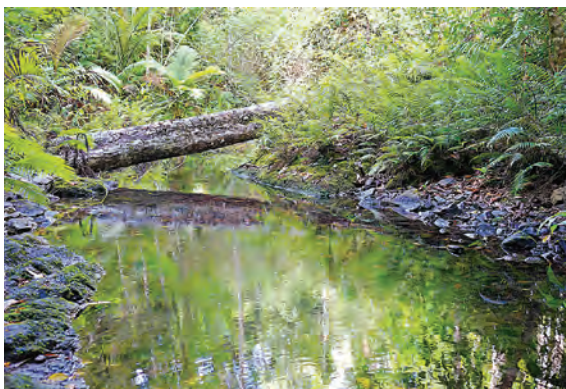


tuna and devour its contents. Dessert is a muesli bar and a swig of precious water before I fall into fatigued slumber.

Next morning I'm up early (it's still raining!), stash my soaked tent back into my pack and ride along the ridge-top trail. Tree roots and mud make it a little slippery, but it's a fine ride. On my right, early-morning sunshine pierces the forest canopy creating mystical shards of sunlight. Insects dance in the light, while raindrops glisten on the leaves. To the left, bright orange fungi cling to tree trunks wrapped with intertwining vines. The aromas of a healthy forest are rich and pungent. Green comes in every shade ▶



“Lured by mountain trails that wind through rainforest-clad hills, it’s hard to resist an off-road adventure so close to Airlie Beach”



Beach and Proserpine, the first 8km of trail is all easy undulations beneath a rainforest canopy interrupted by gentle creek crossings. Bright-blue Ulysses butterflies flutter past a forest of tulip oak trees hosting woody vines that wind around their trunks.

So far, so good. Making good time, I arrive at the first campsite at Repulse Creek and decide to carry on to the Bloodwood Campsite a little further along the trail.

“It’s only 11km, it shouldn’t take long,” I tell myself optimistically. By the time I eventually arrive the sun is on its way to the western hemisphere and I’m learning a lesson in the “rain” part of rainforest. The pleasant mist reverts to precipitation long before I encounter the first serious uphill section on the way to Haywards Lookout.

A couple of hours later I’m still pushing the bike uphill. I’m seriously considering dumping the bike in the forest and continuing on foot; I’m a marathon runner, so my feet work pretty well bike or not. The only reason I don’t is that

Whitsunday events to wet your whistle

Keen for some more Whitsunday adventures? Visit during these events that take place in some of the area’s prettiest locations.



WHITSUNDAY REEF FESTIVAL

Airlie Beach is a good-time town with locals and visitors making any excuse to kick up their thongs and have a good time. Festival time offers plenty for families with Family Fun Day, street parades and fireworks, while the party crowd boogie with live music, pop-up beach bars and a street party.

August 5-14;
whitsundayreeffestival.com.au

AIRLIE BEACH RACE WEEK FESTIVAL OF SAILING

Once known as a drinking town with a sailing problem, Airlie’s race week is world-class, attracting sailors and their fancy yachts from across the globe. It matters not whether you know the sharp end from the pointy end of a boat; the town is in full party mode all week.

August 11-18; abrww.com.au

AIRLIE BEACH FESTIVAL OF MUSIC

Bringing some of Australia’s best-loved musicians to beachside stages throughout Airlie Beach, the 2016 line-up includes Tim Finn from Split Enz and Crowded House, Richie Ramone from the Ramones, Troy Cassar-Daly and Eighties party band GANgajang.

November 3-6;
airliebeachfestivalofmusic.com.au

WHITEHAVEN BEACH OCEAN SWIM

Founded by former Olympian and Ironman Ky Hurst, there’s a 350-metre junior swim through to a gruelling 2km swim along the shore of glorious Whitehaven Beach.

November 13;
hamiltonisland.com.au

CLASH OF THE PADDLES

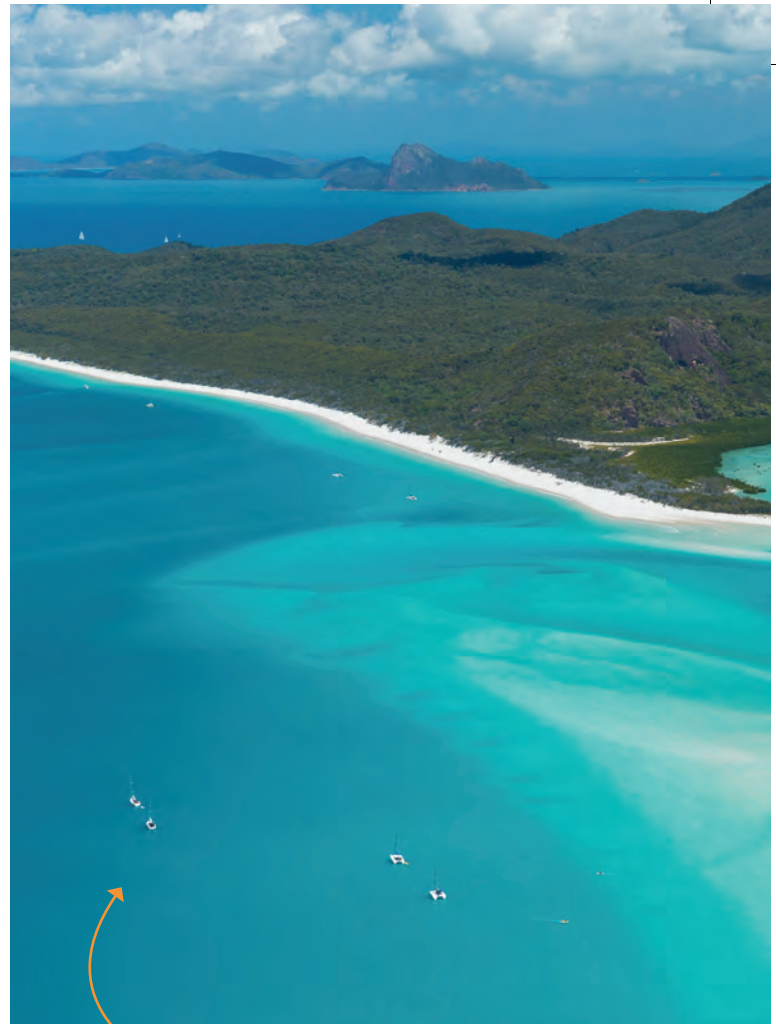
Considered one of the world’s toughest outrigger, canoe and paddling events, competitors from novice to world-class test themselves in the challenging currents and waters around the Whitsunday Islands. It’s quite the spectator sport.

July 2017; hamiltonisland.com.au

WHITSUNDAY ADVENTURES

Setting out to ride the Conway Circuit (formerly known as the Whitsunday Great Walk) on a mountain bike, I'm the first to admit I have little clue about what I'm doing. A complete newbie riding a bike that has seen better days, what I lack in skills or experience I'm hoping to make up for with enthusiasm. Lured by mountain trails that wind through rainforest-clad hills, it's hard to resist an off-road adventure so close to Airlie Beach.

Had I done my research I would have known in advance that the Whitsunday



THE BEACHES ARE AMAZING, BUT DON'T FORGET TO LOOK INLAND

Mountain Bike Club rates this 27km trail as Difficult Black Grade. To quote them: "Conway Circuit trail is quickly garnering a reputation for being one of Queensland's most difficult trails to ride." They go on to say that navigation and personal survival skills are highly desirable. Also, that riders should take a snack or two, three litres of water, insect repellent, and spare tubes and tools to do an emergency tyre change.

I had none of that. But I did have a tent, 1.5 litres of water, a torch, a tin of tuna and some muesli bars – oh, and loads of that enthusiasm I mentioned.

The trailhead finishes (or starts, depending on which direction you take) within a whisper of downtown Airlie Beach. Leaving my car at the Brandy Creek Road end, midway between Airlie



