

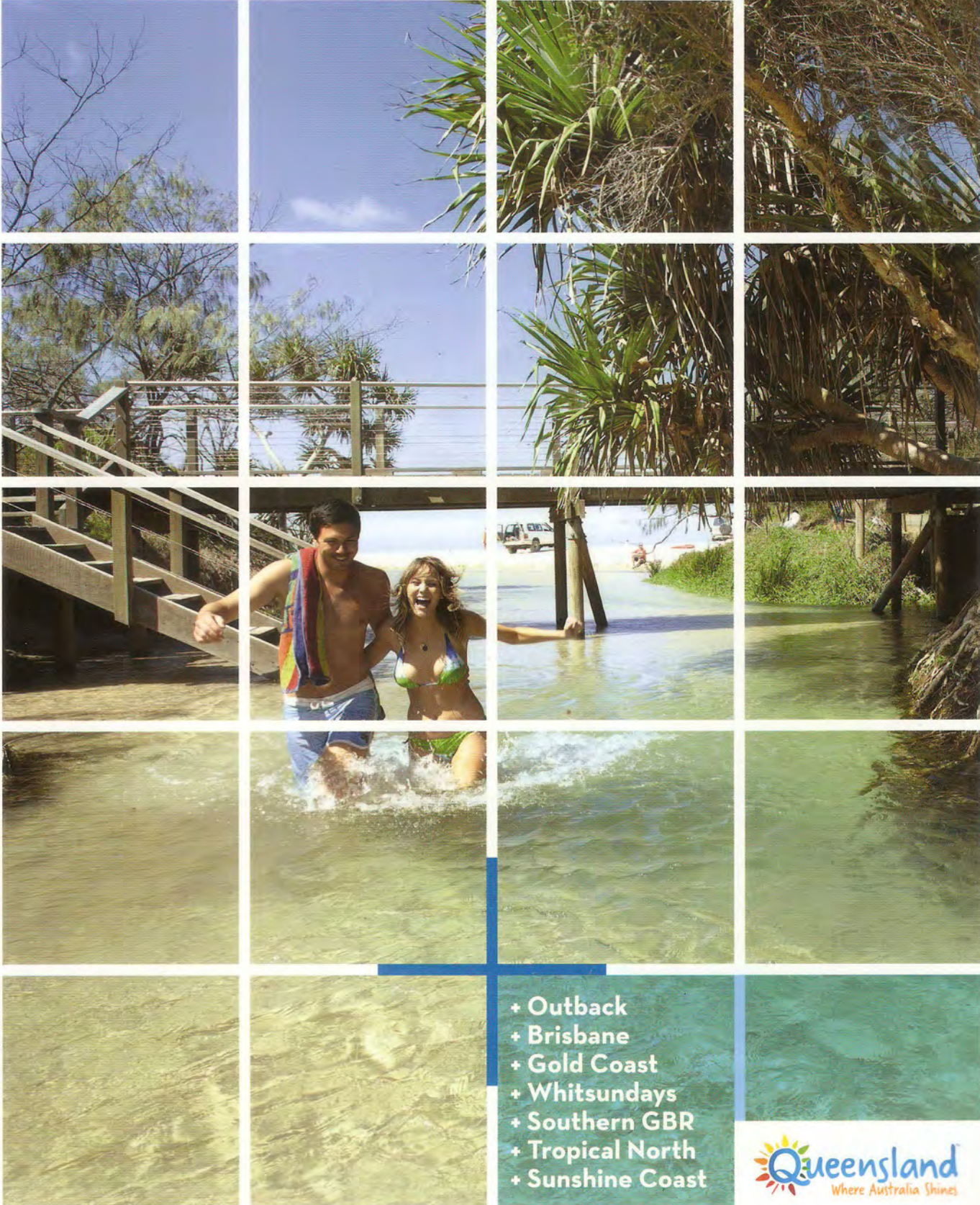
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TOWNSVILLE AND THE TROPICS

By Fiona Harper





Smack in the heart of some of north Queensland's most scenic country, tropical Townsville is often overshadowed by her more famous tourism cousins to the north and south. Cairns and Airlie Beach have long been on holidaymaker's radars: deservedly so, as they have much to offer. While Townsville's attractions have remained a closely guarded secret amongst locals and those in the know, the city is well known for warm sunny days year round with an annual maximum average of 29 degrees Celsius. Balmy night time temperatures mean it's the perfect environment for alfresco dining, as well as getting out into the great outdoors. Wide open spaces, good road infrastructure as well as regular reliable rail and air connections from Brisbane or Cairns make it a terrific holiday destination with much to offer. Offshore islands, coastal villages, vast national parks and rainforest-clad hinterland are enticing visitors to the area.

With a steady stream of awards rolling in for some of the region's tourism operators, Townsville is steadily building her tourism credentials. Major infrastructure upgrades such as a new cruise ship terminal along with a 700m long cantilevered coastal walkway on Magnetic Island are underway.

A tropical coastal city of almost 200,000 residents who know they're onto a good thing with their laid back lifestyle, the jewel in her crown is undoubtedly the foreshore park called The Strand. The 2.5km coastal strip is a magnet for both kids and adults looking to cool down at the water park, swimming pools or beaches, joggers and walkers at dawn and dusk as

well as others enjoying the shady parklands, BBQ's and nearby restaurants. Night markets are held on the fourth Friday of each month, plus the area is used for annual events such as New Years Eve fireworks and outdoor festivals. Palmer Street in the CBD has a terrific range of restaurants and bars, many of them offering alfresco dining to take advantage of balmy tropical nights. If you want to kick on late, Flinders Street East is the party strip with nightclubs and bars lining the road overlooking Ross Creek.

From The Strand, Magnetic Island dominates the seascape across Cleveland Bay. Designated as a suburb of Townsville, regular ferry services operate to both Magnetic and Palm Island further north. There are in fact 14 islands, most of them uninhabited, in Cleveland and Halifax Bay. Tropic Sail Yacht Charters has a fleet of bareboat sail and powerboats to explore these uncrowded, pristine cruising grounds. Rivalling the Whitsunday Islands for beauty with continental islands surrounded by fringing reef heavily populated with marine life, it's likely you'll have most anchorages entirely to yourself.

Significantly for marine tourism, it's also home to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, the body that manages the World Heritage listed reef. Reef HQ, the world's largest living reef coral aquarium, opened up their turtle hospital in 2009. Unfortunately the berths have been full ever since with sick and injured turtles being rehabilitated before being released back to the sea.

Get up close and personal with local wildlife at Billabong Sanctuary, 20 minutes drive south of the city. While most of the animals are contained in enclosures throughout the 11 hectares of natural bushland, many just roam free. Wander the walkways and, if you stand still long enough, you'll soon be surrounded by inquisitive eastern grey kangaroos. Visitors are encouraged to interact with the animals with plenty of opportunity to handle or feed iconic Australian creatures like koalas, wombats, reptiles, turtles, cockatoos & dingos. If you're brave you can even feed a frighteningly large and snappy 4m saltwater crocodile: being within a metre of snapping jaws is guaranteed to increase your blood pressure.

Somewhere a little less tactile, attracting coffee addicts from afar, is the Heritage Tearooms in Herveys Range, to the west of Townsville. Inducted into Queensland Tourism's Hall of Fame in 2009, at the top of the range this historic split log inn is the oldest known building in North Queensland. Previously a watering hole for bullock teams and Cobb and Co Coaches on their way to and from the gold fields, these days the verandas are a popular spot for morning tea and lunch.

Old photographs and memorabilia line the raw timber walls that date back to 1865. Caffeine connoisseurs travel from across the globe to experience rare Kopi Luwak coffee. Known rather unkindly as Cat Poo Coffee, coffee cherries are eaten then passed through the digestive tract of the cat-like Asian Palm Civet, resulting in beans that brew a creamy sweet coffee. Considered the Grange Hermitage of coffee, at \$50 per cup, including a personalised Certificate of Experience, you'll need to bring your card carrying caffeine aficionado credentials to justify the expense.

Most would agree the best time to visit Townsville is during

FACTS:

Townsville is 1,350km north of Brisbane, accessible by Jetstar, Qantas, Virgin Blue & Queensland Rail.

Townsville Holidays www.townsvilleholidays.info

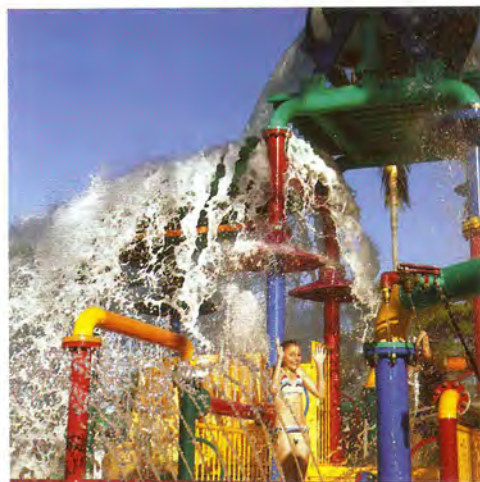
Stay: Jupiters Townsville www.jupitertownsville.com.au

Bareboat Yacht Charter; www.tropicsail.com.au

Getting Around: Kookaburra Tours
www.kookaburratours.com.au

the dry season between April and October. While the rest of the southern hemisphere is bunkering down for winter, Townsville is kicking up her heels in preparation for warm days, low humidity and cool starry nights. Conversely, the wet season, from December to March is often dismissed as being too wet and humid, and if you find humidity energy-sapping, you're best avoiding this time of year.

Though, in a sort of steamy tropical way, it's actually a pretty exciting time to visit. The rainforest comes alive with cascading waterfalls tumbling down granite formations into gin-clear rock pools. Pulsing to a cacophony of frogs and birds, the foliage turns an almost iridescent green, fed by warm tropical rain. Indeed, as locals flock to shaded rocky pools to cool down, it's the season they like to keep all to themselves. ❖



TOWNSVILLE THE ENTERTAINMENT CAPITAL



Claiming the unofficial title of Queensland's northern Capital, Townsville could also be known as the north's Entertainment Capital. No less than 80 official events are pegged for 2012. That's not including a host of 'non-official', no less significant, events held across the region. From sailing regattas and offshore super boat races, fuel-charged V8 supercars, outdoor cultural festivals, sporting carnivals through to music festivals and art exhibitions, from the classical to quirky, Townsville knows how to throw a damn good party.

Magnetic Island Race Week has grown to become one of the most popular sailing regattas in Queensland in just five years, with a fleet of 100 plus yachts expected in 2012. Raced over various courses on Cleveland Bay each September, the weeklong regatta takes in some of the island's most spectacular sights. Non-sailors are welcome to join in shore side revellery too at Magnetic Island Marina, or hop onboard a spectator boat to watch the sailing action.

The Townsville Cultural Fest celebrates the diversity of cultures that make up the community over three days in August. Dancing, music, performances, food and market stalls create a village atmosphere on The Strand parklands. Across Cleveland Bay, the weekend long Great Tropical Jazz Party, with award-winning international and national jazz artists, attracts jazz aficionados poolside beneath the palms at the Magnetic Island International Resort in late September.

Adrenaline-charged action is on offer when flashy V8 Supercars hit town for fuel-injected fun in early July. Part of an Australia-wide race series, 400km of street racing combines with two nights of live music concerts in Reid Park for the Sucrogen Townsville 400. It's loud, it's brash and it's hats off good fun. It's also not for those who

prefer to be entertained amid quietly sophisticated surroundings.

North Queensland Cowboys are one of 16 teams vying for National Rugby League honours, and have a madly proud and loyal Queensland-wide supporter base. The only team based north of Brisbane, home games are played regularly at Dairy Farmers Stadium. Filled to capacity with 30,000 devoted passionate fans, it's well worth a visit if only to soak up the atmosphere. The season runs from March to September.

Also playing on the national stage are the Townsville Crocodiles. The National Basketball League season runs from September through to March, with home games held at the Townsville Entertainment Centre, on the foreshore adjacent to Jupiters Hotel and Casino.

Music fans should head to Charters Towers during late April through to early May for three major events heavily influenced by a healthy dose of country music. The All Australian Jamboree, Ten Days in the Towers and the Charters Towers Country Music Festival attract foot stampers and boot scooters by the truckload. Streets ring to the sound of twanging guitars as buskers showcase their wares in preparation for the largest amateur country music talent quest in Australia.

The village of Innisfail, with its vibrant Italian migrant culture and heritage, permeates fine aromas amid tinkling glasses during March with the Feast of the Senses Festival. Created to showcase exotic tropical food and wine that thrive in the lush pastures of north Queensland, with 2012 being the Year of the Farmer, this year's theme is Farmers, Food and Fun.

Thrilling, quirky or just downright foot-stamping good fun, if you can't find a festival, sporting event or exhibition around Townsville that whets your whistle, well, you're really not trying. ❏

CASTAWAY ON MISSION BEACH

Midway between Townsville and Cairns, on what's known as the Cassowary Coast, Mission Beach is a lazy kind of laid back coastal town that implores one to 'relax, chill out and unwind'. Maybe it's the torpid tropical heat that sees both locals and visitors alike slowing down a notch or two. Perhaps too it's the long stretch of golden sand beach backed by rainforest and coconut palms, the horizon dotted with islands, which encourages long languid walks along the beach. In these parts even the wildlife seem to slow down, as witnessed by the seeming nonchalance of the famous flightless bird, the Cassowary, a relative of the emu and ostrich.

Considered nature's rainforest gardener, Cassowary dung is an important source of seed distribution as they forage and poop continuously over hectares of forest floor. As tall as a man, they have a peaked helmet, jet black plumage, a vibrant cobalt blue and purple neck with drooping red wattles dangling from their neck. Listed as endangered, the Southern Cassowary is found in the small pocket of wet tropics rainforest surrounding Mission Beach. Unfortunately they're not terribly street smart so that road accidents are a major cause of their demise. Perhaps this then is the real reason that conservation-inclined locals have adopted their 'go slow' lifestyle.

Being surrounded by World Heritage Listed Wet Tropics rainforest, the best way to get up close and personal with the forest is via the Mamu Rainforest Canopy Walkway. Elevated walkways, cantilevered viewing platforms and an observation tower allow visitors to immerse themselves in the sights, smells and sounds of the dense rainforest. Rising almost 40m above the forest floor, the canopy walkway passes through one of the largest stands of complex vine forest in the Wet Tropics. Take a while to pause and smell the richly composting aromas of a living breathing tropical forest, but don't stand still too long as forests in these parts flourish at astounding rates.

In the aftermath of Cyclone Yasi the forest quickly picked herself up, dusted off her skirts and got down to the business of regeneration. In the 'fight for light' that exists in the forest, some species, dormant in the darkness caused by the dense canopy are now thriving in the light now filtering through the thin cover.

Created by major geological events dating back 50 million years ago, Wallaman Falls in Girringun National Park is the largest single drop waterfall in Australia. The gorge that was created became



FACTS:

Mission Beach is 240km north of Townsville

Stay: Castaways Resort & Spa www.castaways.com.au

Camping permits: www.derm.wld.gov.au

known as Stoney Creek, a somewhat underwhelming name for a body of water that impresses with its sheer drop. The viewing platform at the top of the falls is a splendid spot for a picnic lunch.

Mission Beach is the logical jumping off point for forays offshore to the Family Group of Islands. But don't despair if you're looking for a castaway lifestyle on a deserted island populated only by birds. The Family Group may be just the ticket. Predominantly National Park islands, campers are welcome (with the relevant permit) to pitch a tent at campsites on Wheeler, Dunk and Coombes Islands. If it weren't for the lights onshore at Mission Beach, it's easy to imagine the real world doesn't exist in this little pocket of paradise. ❏

TOWNSVILLE

MAGNETIC ISLAND



Renowned navigator and sailor Captain James Cook made a rare error of navigational judgement when sailing past the island he named Magnetic in the 1770's, giving the boulder-strewn land he was sailing past a magnetic moniker. After noting that his compass was fluctuating wildly, he was later proven incorrect... there is no magnetic anomaly associated with Magnetic Island. Though there is a significant magnetic attraction to this lushly forested continental island 8km off the coast from Townsville. Mostly green space and national park creating a wildlife haven for koalas, wallabies and kangaroos and prolific birdlife including the bush stone curlew, around 3,000 residents also live on 'The Rock', which is classed as a Townsville suburb.

Though there are bitumen roads linking the main residential enclaves of Horseshoe, Arcadia, Nelly and Picnic Bays, it's the sort of place where traffic is limited to 60kmh and wildlife have right of way. Hire a Topless car to zip around the narrow winding road that skirts pretty beaches book-ended by towering granite boulders. A spider web of walking tracks meander across the island creating splendid wildlife viewing opportunities. The Forts Walk takes about an hour return, passing WW2 relics before rewarding hikers with a panoramic view northwards towards the Palm Group of Islands and beyond to mountainous Hinchinbrook Island. It's unusual not to spot a koala on this walk so keep your eyes peeled on the eucalypts. Though, if you really can't be bothered lacing up your hiking shoes, you'd do well to visit Bungalow Bay Koala Village for a Champagne Bush Tucker breakfast amongst the koalas, cockatoos, crocodiles and carpet pythons. Park rangers are on hand to keep the wildlife under control, and if you're feeling brave, you can even handle a snake and crocodile or cuddle a koala.

If reptiles don't get your heart pumping, perhaps a guided excursion with Adrenalin Jetski Tours is more your thing. Astride a powerful luxury jet ski, tours operate either across the northern bays or on an island circumnavigation. The tour combines slow cruising inshore to spot osprey nests atop boulders, and dugongs and stingrays in the shallows before opening up the throttle, heading offshore into deep water. Pete Smith has been guiding visitors around Horseshoe Bay for 13-odd years and runs a tight operation firmly focused on safety and flat out good fun.

The grass beneath the coconut palms and coastal almonds of Horseshoe Bay (with free public BBQ's) is a popular gathering spot for sundowners, but once the sun disappears, multi award winning Stagedoor Theatre Restaurant is one of the island's most popular attractions. Starring Bernadette Smith and Phil Stephens (also the Executive Chef), Stage Door performs a revolving door of fun-filled song and dance shows throughout the year. Gifted performers hailing from the bright lights of Sydney who know how to engage a crowd, Bernadette plays 'straight man' to Phil's bawdy rambunctious parodies. Bold, brash and not for shrinking violets, Stage Door offers splendid entertainment far north Queensland style. The food's not bad either. 🍷



FACTS:

Magnetic Island is 20 minutes by ferry from Townsville
www.sealink.com.au

Stay: Grand Mercure Apartments Magnetic Island
www.grandmercuremagneticisland.com.au

Play www.stagedoortheatre.com.au
www.bungalowbay.com.au

HIDDEN IN THE VALLEY



Image : Fiona Harper

Given that Queensland is the self-titled Sunshine State, it's surprising that solar-powered facilities are not more common. Bathed in glorious sunshine beneath an unpolluted sky year-round, it's the perfect climate for solar entrepreneurs to harness the sun's rays for power generation.

Deservedly finding themselves ensconced in the tourism Hall of Fame, Hidden Valley Cabins are the exception. A family-run eco-resort beneath the gum trees run entirely on solar power, Bonnie and Ian McLennan were quietly accruing carbon credits long before it became mainstream. Former tin miners, in the mid-1980s the McLennans bought a couple of cabins used by graziers and tin miners west of the Paluma Ranges. Conscious of preserving the environment using sustainable building materials, they rebuilt many of the cabins, adding a restaurant, swimming pool and homestead rooms, creating an intimate bush retreat known as Hidden Valley Cabins. Focusing on renewable energy while trying to limit their reliance upon diesel-generated power (Hidden Valley is not on the standard power grid), they initially installed 12-volt lighting so that guests could use lights in their rooms once the generator was shut down. Aiming to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, they eventually created Australia's first solar-powered resort, picking up a swag of awards in the process. Today the entire resort is run on solar power, harnessing solar energy via 90 x 130-watt panels feeding into 60 x 1660-amp batteries for use on the rare occasion when the sun doesn't shine.

This is kind of rare in these parts, the exception being between



November and March when the odd tropical storm lashes the landscape. Part of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area, the rainforest is significant for containing an almost complete record of the evolution of our planet's plant life. Besides that, the lushly vegetated forest is undeniably stunning. Walking tracks that end at waterfalls and picnic areas beside mountain streams are accessed by narrow winding roads that take visitors into the heart of the densely forested mountain range.

Paluma Rainforest Village is situated on the eastern ridge. A short walk from the Rainforest Inn takes you to a lookout point with views down the valley to the coast and the Palm Group of Island beyond. Little Crystal Creek, on the road up the mountain, is a popular spot to cool off in the clear pool beneath a tumbling waterfall. Often shrouded in misty cloud, most villagers use their homes for weekenders, the exception being potter Len Cook who creates unusual ash-glazed pots from four day long firings in his massive anagama kiln in the front of his home.

But perhaps the brightest stars of Hidden Valley are those concealed beneath the flowing waters of streams and creeks. Nocturnal and famously shy, the elusive platypus is one of Australia's oddest egg-laying mammals. Seemingly a combination of duck (webbed feet and bill), beaver (tail) and otter (body and fur), the region is one of the few places where platypus sightings are almost assured. Taking a Nocturnal Tour with Ross from Hidden Valley is a lesson in patience though. From the banks of Running River, if you can refrain from fidgeting long enough, keeping deathly silent, as dusk descends you'll most likely be rewarded with a sighting, joining a small eclectic group of fortunate souls who have spotted a wild platypus. ❖

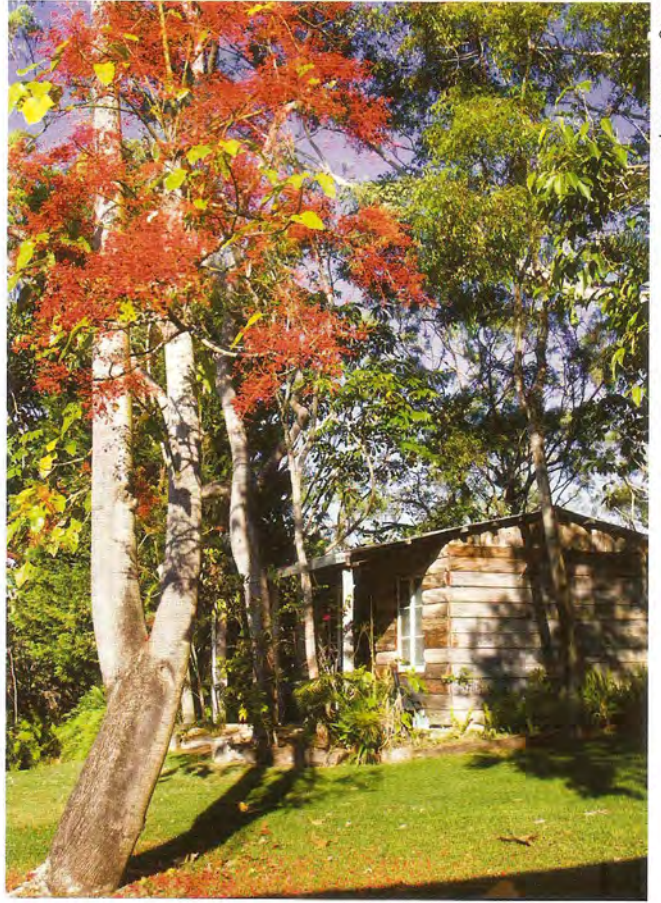


Image : Fiona Harper



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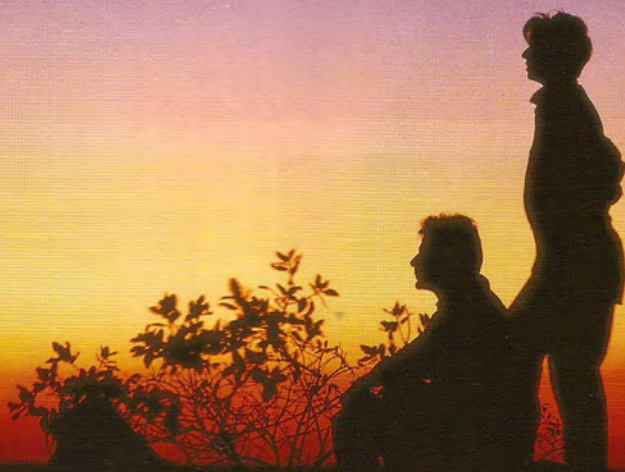
Hidden Valley is 90 minutes North West of Townsville in the Paluma Ranges.

Stay: Hidden Valley Cabins

www.hiddenvalleycabins.com.au

TOWNSVILLE

STAYING ON THE WAGON IN CHARTERS TOWERS



"If he lives to 15 years, heck, his horns will probably reach 10 foot," enthuses Michael Bethel from the driver's seat of his canvas covered horse drawn wagon. Riding shotgun alongside him as we bounce across the dusty paddocks of Leahton Park Ranch, it feels as though we've slipped back a century or two. With his bushy salt and pepper moustache concealing much of the cheeky grin that is never far away, Michael drives his two horsepower wagon, powered by the strapping strides of burly Percheron horses, Woodrow and Gus.

Tapping the butt of Woodrow, who, according to Michael is "so lazy he lets Gus take most of the load until the going gets tough", we crane our necks in anticipation as a herd of Texas Longhorn cattle appear over the ridge. Cattle roam across 1,100 acres of the ranch but rarely move far from the shady spot in the home paddock, seeking shelter from the blazing Queensland sun. Though the cattle are pretty good looking in a bovine sort of way, we're particularly seeking out the Guinness World Record winning horns atop prize bull JR's skull. Measuring 9ft 1in across the span, JR has become somewhat of a media tart since his impressive rack reached record breaking proportions recently. At just seven years old he has a few years left in him so Michael's prediction for further records is not unreasonable.

Besides offering traditional wagon tours and crafting horse saddles sent across the globe, Leahton Park Ranch is a working cattle stud, with Michael's wife, Lynda, in charge of artificial insemination. Horseshoe B Longhorn cattle have quite some following and Leahton Park is home to the largest purebred herd in Australia. Ten minutes drive from the historic gold mining town of Charters Towers, they've recently opened up their home as a ranch stay with a couple of plush bunkhouse rooms overlooking the paddocks near the homestead. A sort of home-style B & B, Leahton Park is a good base from which to explore the Charters Towers region.

The city developed after an Aboriginal horse boy named Jupiter spotted a vein of gold in 1871, creating an explosive rush to find valued nuggets. A city quickly sprouted out of the dusty scrubland, with Charters Towers eventually growing to become the second largest city in Queensland. Now well past its 19th century heyday, when broad dusty streets were filled with horse drawn carriages driven by prospectors enticed to the diggings, many buildings such as heritage listed Stock Exchange Arcade have been beautifully restored.

Follow the Ghosts of Gold Heritage trail across the city and discover some of the charismatic Aussie characters that once resided here. Some, it seems, never left town even after the gold ran out. Locals are kind of proud of the restless spirits that remain. A broken-hearted 29 year old woman at the Park Hotel, a murdered businessman at the World Theatre (complete with bloodstained table still insitu) along with the controversial Editor of the Northern Miner newspaper are just some of the 'other world' residents apparently still roaming through town.

Whether strolling beneath the bull nose verandas of Mosman Street, playing billiards on a 100 year old table, viewing the historical displays at the Zara Clark Museum or staying in a hotel room that is said to be haunted, much of the Towers charm lies in the preservation of its history. ❖



FACTS:

Charters Towers is 135km south west of Townsville

Visitor Info www.charterstowers.qld.gov.au

Leahton Park Ranch www.texaslonghorn.com.au