

JOURNEY TO THE NORTH



Carving a coastal swathe between Cairns and Cape Tribulation in north Queensland, the Great Barrier Reef Drive is one of Australia's most scenic road trips

Words by Fiona Harper Photos by Peter Tarasiuk

Australia's wide open expanses are a natural inspiration for adventurous road trips.



Some, like the Savannah Way, are of epic proportions – linking Cairns with Broome in Western Australia's Kimberley region – and covering almost 4,000km. Others, like the Great Barrier Reef Drive, stretching from Cairns to Cape Tribulation, are a mere 140km.

However, what the Great Barrier Reef Drive lacks in distance it makes up for in treasures aplenty. This scenic coastal journey is bookended by two Unesco World Heritage icons, the Great Barrier Reef and the Wet Tropics Rainforest. Along the way, road trippers can look forward to beachside villages buzzing with vibrant restaurants, treehouses atop a headland, wildlife habitats, scenic lookouts and boardwalks meandering through the world's oldest living rainforest.

As a native of Cairns, I've driven down this road dozens of times but each time unearth new surprises. One this trip, with the top down on a



Previous spread
Coconut tree plantation at Thala Beach Nature Reserve; the Great Barrier Reef Drive stretches 140km

This page, above
Palm Cove, overlooking the Macalister Range

ILLUSTRATION BY ELEN WINATA

ruby red Ford Mustang GT convertible, I'm checking out a new government initiative which sees the drive further enhanced with more than 140 new signs installed to highlight specific attractions along the way.

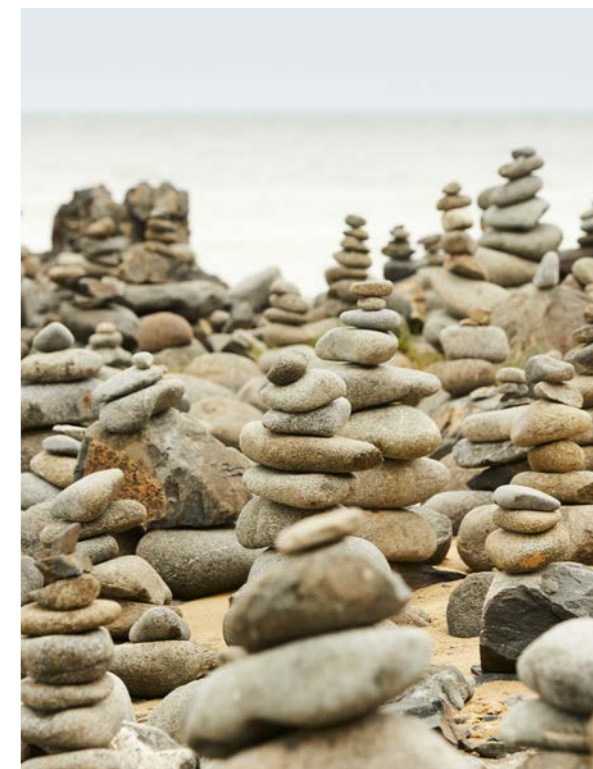
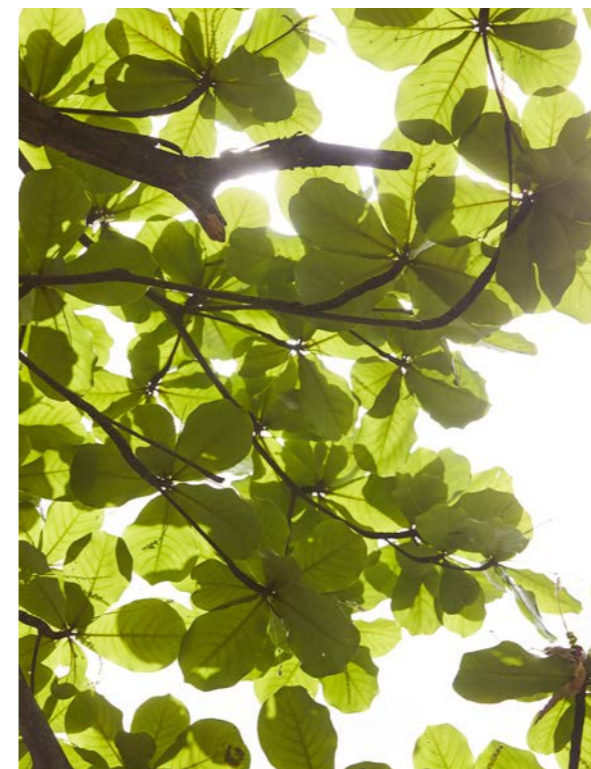
Day 1

My journey starts on a typically cloudless sunshine-kissed winter morning in Cairns. Over the past year, the once-sleepy city in Far North Queensland has been attracting significant infrastructure investment with the development of three new five-star hotels, a sophisticated performing arts centre, award-winning microbreweries, a burgeoning hipster bar scene as well as vibrant street art enlivening the laneways. Before setting off, I tuck into a hearty breakfast of muesli and Greek yoghurt at Paper Crane, located within one of those swanky new hotels, Riley.

Twenty minutes later, I detour to the beachside village of Palm Cove. Here, a boulevard of palm trees shades landscaped parklands and dissolves into one of Cairns' prettiest beaches. As I stroll along the jetty, holidaymakers swim in the Coral Sea and paddle out to Haycock Island, which takes about 15 minutes by kayak.

Ancient paperbark trees and coconut palms, offer shade for diners at the alfresco restaurants lined along the beachfront, with Nu Nu a stand-out option, making regular appearances on Queensland's best restaurant lists. But for breakfast or lunch, it's hard to go past Vivo with its whitewashed shutters, wide verandah, walls adorned with local art and a delicious menu where classic *nasi goreng* (fried rice) vies for attention with duck crêpes and spanner crab linguine, among other delights.

Leaving behind Palm Cove, a couple of twists and turns of the bitumen take me to Ellis »



**This spread,
from left**

A non-denominational church in Port Douglas; native trees near Rocky Point; an array of cairns on the way to Port Douglas

Beach to the north, where long stretches of sand unfurl as far as the eye can see. On this part of the Great Barrier Reef Drive, forest-clad mountains tumble down to the coastline-hugging road with its wild mango trees and palm-fringed beaches. Pulling over at Rex Lookout, I step out of my car and breathe in the salty scent of the ocean. Not for the first time, I marvel at mountain ranges covered in dense forest and the twinkling waters. I never tire of this view, no matter how many times I've seen it.

It's mid-afternoon by the time I pull up to a manicured coconut plantation, which heralds my arrival at Thala Beach Nature Reserve, an eco-retreat situated on 58ha of beachfront native forest. Thala sits on a headland that was once a degraded sugar plantation before being revegetated back to its natural state. Now, more than 21 years later after native reforestation began, the land is a habitat for wallabies, reptiles and prolific bird life, attracting nature lovers from across the globe.

After checking myself into a deluxe tree-house-style bungalow, I take a refreshing swim in the resort's pool, designed to look like a natural rockpool. Just before dinner, I curl myself into a hammock strung between palm trees on the beach and watch as the sun sinks behind the Macalister Range. Dinner is an open-air affair amid the treetops at Osprey's Restaurant, where I order chicken breast rolled in roasted

peanuts and chilli on a young coconut salad. With stomach and mind at peace, I fall asleep to the sound of ocean waves filtered by the forest and awake at dawn to birdsong.

Day 2

Setting off from Thala, I corner through sweeping coastal curves and divert slightly inland before reaching Port Douglas about 15 minutes later. This tranquil village has strict bylaws that limit development to no higher than the coconut palms that border Four Mile Beach. Additionally, the Port Douglas Daintree Council is currently in talks with Tourism Port Douglas Daintree (TPDD) and other supporters to implement green initiatives in the area, such as installing complimentary Electrical Vehicle (EV) charging stations at tourist attractions like the Mossman Gorge Centre and Hartley's Crocodile Adventures.

"We must be the custodians of our precious World Heritage sites because it is a huge incentive for visitors to know they are holidaying in a place that is cared for and protected," says Tara Bennett, executive officer at TPDD.

On the southern banks of the Daintree River, I board a boat at the Daintree River Cruise Centre for a leisurely croc-spotting adventure. Saltwater crocodiles can be seen sunning themselves on a sand bank or cooling down in the mud among mangrove roots. Seeing these »



Where to eat

Vivo, Palm Cove

At this buzzy restaurant, enjoy a hearty meal of seafood and local wine on the verandah with ocean views framed by palm trees. vivo.com.au

Salsa Bar & Grill, Port Douglas

The menu here offers the best of fresh local produce, including fruits and herbs from the Atherton Tablelands. salsaportdouglas.com.au

Daintree Ice Cream Company, Daintree

Tuck into ice cream house-made from exotic tropical fruits at this solar-powered farm. daintreeicecream.com.au

From top
Views from Thala Beach; the menu at Vivo in Palm Cove is inspired by international flavours

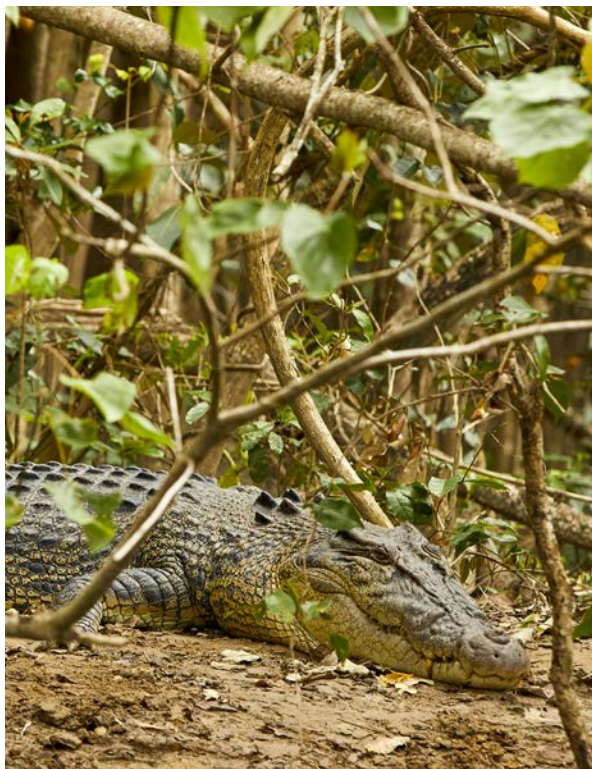
fearsome creatures in the wild is a reminder that swimming anywhere except a swimming pool or lifeguard-patrolled beach is not recommended in this part of the world.

Northwards of the Daintree River and its cable-driven car ferry is the Daintree Rainforest and Wet Tropics World Heritage area. I wind down my car windows and take a moment to breathe deeply, inhaling the clean crisp air. The Daintree is an important biodiversity hotspot, and in August this year, it saw the reopening of the 1.2km Marrdja Boardwalk after a restoration project completed in collaboration with the Indigenous Eastern Kuku Yalanji people.

After spending some time admiring the views at Alexandra Lookout, I make my way to the Daintree Discovery Centre to brush up on my geographical history. Grappling with a forest considered to be more than 150 million years old can be mind-boggling, but even if you don't care for facts, the aerial canopy walkways offer great vantage points for wildlife spotting.

As the asphalt twists and winds along the coast, I continue towards the remote headland that is Cape Tribulation (known simply as Cape Trib). Along the way, Thornton Beach, Noah Beach and Coconut Beach are all worth »





From left
Croc-spotting on the banks of the Daintree River; treehouse-style bungalows at Thala Beach Nature Reserve

stopping at. Passing these beaches, visit the Daintree Ice Cream Company for superb ice cream and sorbet made from exotic fruits.

“Today’s special combination is mango, chocolate sapote, coconut and wattle seed,” owner Dave Mainwaring says with a grin, reaching into a chest freezer and emerging with a cup containing four generous scoops. “We don’t serve vanilla,” the avuncular Mainwaring adds. “We are all about the weird and wonderful.”

Soon enough, I’ve reached the end of the drive and Cape Trib, a forested headland that cascades dramatically down onto a sweeping arc of beach. Stepping out of the forest and onto the beach, it’s easy to imagine that this landscape has remained unchanged for thousands of years.

As I unwind in my low-key timber bungalow at Cape Trib Beach House, I reflect on how in the past 48 hours, I’ve dipped my toes in the ocean, walked along pristine beaches, encountered traditional culture and enjoyed the wilds of the Daintree Rainforest. Packing in so much of what makes Queensland unique is what makes the Great Barrier Reef Drive so special and keeps people like me coming back.

The end of the tarmac road at Cape Tribulation is also the start of Bloomfield Track. If you have a 4WD, further road tripping adventures await on the way to Cooktown. But for most, there’s a simple pleasure in retracing your route back to Cairns. ■

Where to stay

Thala Beach Nature Reserve

As a member of the National Geographic Unique Lodges of the World, this resort in Port Douglas wears its green heart on its sleeve with treehouse-style bungalows amid 58ha of native forest. thalabeach.com.au

Riley, A Crystalbrook Collection Resort

This is one of the newest five-star hotels to open in Cairns and is built around a vast lagoon-style swimming pool. The luxe property also has an enviable waterfront location opposite The Lagoon parklands. crystalbrookcollection.com

Cape Trib Beach House

Surrounded by the world’s oldest living rainforest and just a few languid steps away from Cape Tribulation beach, this is the ideal hideaway to reconnect with nature. capetribbeach.com.au



SilkAir flies daily between Singapore and Cairns