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# A Weekend Getaway to Tropical 'Carnivale Festival'

by Fiona Harper

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**Totally revamped with world-class acts, Port Douglas' Carnivale Festival plays host to the Wonderland Spiegelent for the first time. Local travel writer Fiona Harper puts some festival activities through their paces.**

There's a fresh 20 knot south-easterly kicking up sharp waves as we round the headland. The sky is as dark as the sea and the heavens threaten a drenching. Jolly laughter emanating from the top deck is snatched by the wind and tossed upon the white water in our wake. One lady's recalcitrant skirt flutters upwards Marilyn Monroe-like while the weak-stomached are ruing earlier champagne-laced enthusiasm. At the helm of 62 ft luxury catamaran Aquarius, seasoned sailor and Skipper Alicia couldn't look happier as Port Douglas falls behind our stern.

Ostensibly, the weather gods didn't get that memo about our relaxing cruise, so we retreat to the serenity of mangrove-lined Dickson Inlet. It's a bit of a tradition in Port Douglas (known simply as Port by locals) that patrons at waterfront bars and restaurants wave vigorously as yachts glide past. This friendly gesture is typical throughout this small beachfront north Queensland town whose fortunes ebb and flow along with tourism booms and busts.



Image: Supplied - Tropical Journeys

The entire region is on the cusp of boom times with Port's streets skipping to a lively beat once more. New bars, restaurants and tourism activities are popping up everywhere. Disembarking from Aquarius we call into *Barbados*, a new uber funky alfresco bar dockside where the tunes are as cool as the cocktails. At the other end of the pier micro-brewery *Hemingway's Brewery* is scheduled to open in May. Nearby *Sheraton Mirage* is undergoing major refurbishment, while *Hartley's Crocodile Adventures*, one of the best wildlife parks in the area, are upgrading visitor facilities.

But festival goers are the real beneficiaries of Port's reinvigorated upbeat vibe. Celebrating its 22nd year, the annual Port Douglas Carnivale festival has been totally revamped. This year promises to be something special under the direction of renowned Melbourne event director, Melissa Head, from Knockout Events. Melissa's company owns one of the historic Spiegelents. *The Wonderland Spiegelent*, with its 20th century decor including stained glass windows, velvet drops and warm wood furnishings, will be the star attraction of the festival.



Image: Supplied - Carnivale

"We're absolutely thrilled to be bringing the Spiegelent to Port Douglas for the first time", Melissa gushes, her eyes sparkling as she outlines stand-up comedy, burlesque, music and circus cabaret acts to perform in the Spiegelent.

Feisty, free-spirited international actress Diane Cilento's private art collection will be publicly displayed for the first time in the Container Art Park. Cilento was well known locally for founding *Karnak Playhouse* (though her marriage to Sean Connery is more widely known). Already the biggest event on the social calendar for this small town of around 3,000 residents, Carnivale 2016 looks set to cement its place amongst Australia's 'must do' festivals.



Image: Supplied - Carnivale

It's not all about high faluting culture in the tropical north though. Between jaw-dropping stage shows, art exhibitions, sand castle competitions, street parades and long lunches that morph into longer dinners, it's worth leaving Port behind temporarily to explore some of the region's treasures.

Mossman Gorge is an Indigenous tourism success story set in a tropical rainforest that would be quite at home on an Avatar film shoot. Boyd's forest dragons cling to vines that snake wildly around tree trunks hundreds of years old. Clap sticks strike a pleasing rhythm while aromatic smoke which has cleansed our spirit wafts skyward through the dense canopy.



Image: Supplied - Carnivale

No visit to the tropics is complete without a visit to the world famous Great Barrier Reef. If Sir David Attenborough recommends it you'd be wise to follow this environmental champion. At Agincourt Reef, Quicksilver have a permanently moored pontoon that offers a multitude of opportunities to view the reef in all its kick-butt glory. From full immersion, like scuba diving and helmet walking, to a glass bottom semi-submersible where you don't even get your hair wet, you'll get up close and personal with the underwater world. Unaffected by coral bleaching elsewhere on the Great Barrier Reef, Agincourt Reef is truly spectacular for both coral and fish species.



Stand Up Paddleboarding (or simply SUPing, which sounds a bit awkward) is a delightful way to spend an hour or two on Four Mile Beach before breakfast. If you're a bit of an adrenalin junkie wait for the sea breeze to kick in and hook yourself up to a kite surfer. Either way Four Mile offers near perfect conditions. Pick up some local artworks or craft from Port's famous Sunday markets before pulling up a table at nearby Salsa Restaurant with its tropical plantation style ambience. Lunch or dinner, you won't go wrong at one of Port's most seasoned culinary performers.

Unwind after all that exertion, (let's face it holidaying can be exhausting!) with a relaxing massage at *SpaQ*. A glammed-up day spa kitted out with faux fur throws & slingback chairs, chill out while gipped champagne and munching of fresh fruit while perusing the treatment menu. Better still, check in to *QT Port Douglas* overnight and lap up QT's quirky take on tropical bliss. The unofficial HQ for Carnivale aficionados, you'll feel the festival vibe long after the lights have dimmed. Actually, come to think of it, perhaps a long weekend in Port Douglas is not really long enough after all - why not make it a week!

*Wonderland Spiegelent runs from 12 - 22 May & Carnivale Festival runs from 20 - 22 May 2016.*

*Fiona Harper is a travel writer specialising in cruising, active and soft adventures. Follow her at Travel Boating Lifestyle*

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