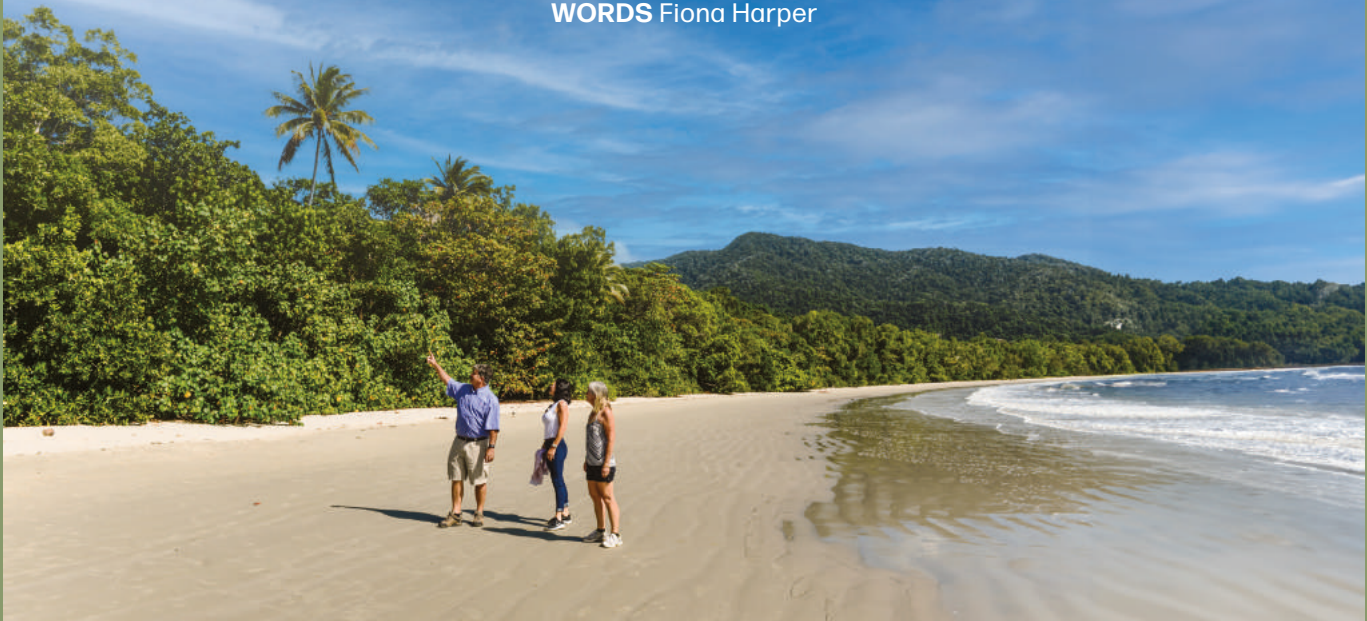


The Best of Cape York

WORDS Fiona Harper



The Cape York Peninsula's boundary is arbitrary, particularly at its south-eastern fringe. Some say it starts at Innisfail, others say its southernmost border is Cooktown. Its western boundary can safely be pinned at Normanton in the far south of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Despite the ambiguity, what's not in dispute is the Cape's mammoth size. Covering an expanse the size of Victoria, yet with less than 1% of Victoria's population, Cape York Peninsula is a lush wilderness area few are privileged to visit. The Cape is bounded by the Gulf of Carpentaria, with its sandbar-strewn waters, to the west; the Great Barrier Reef and the Coral Sea to the east; and to the north lies Torres Strait, where more than 200 islands pepper the narrow passage separating Australia from Papua New Guinea.



Bloomfield Track, QLD

Spot the rare and endangered southern cassowary in the Daintree

Dappled light and shadows filtered by an implausibly lush rainforest canopy dance upon the tarmac. Emerging from the shadows is a magnificent southern cassowary, all lustrous black plumage and scarlet-hued wattles swishing sideways from a cobalt-blue neck. Atop his head is a rigid, crown-like casque. As he steps into the middle of the road, two infant cassowaries follow confidently.

Despite there being fewer than 4,000 birds remaining in the wild, the Daintree Rainforest offers an almost assured sighting of the southern cassowary.

Drive the Bloomfield Track – one of Australia's most scenic off-road drives

The official name for the Bloomfield Track is the Cape Tribulation-Bloomfield Road, but most simply call it the Bloomfield (spend a little time in north Queensland and you'll soon realise that names are commonly shortened – is it something to do with ever-present heat?). The bitumen road from Cape Trib to Cooktown soon evolves into a dirt track, riven with rocks and gouged with potholes large enough to swallow a small city car, should you be foolish enough to attempt the road in anything but a sturdy well-equipped all-terrain vehicle.

Along the 10km route, you'll wind through ancient rainforest, skirting a tourmaline coastline. You probably won't see another human, although you may spot a crocodile sunning itself on the beach.

Don't miss taking a guided walk to Wujal Falls (Bloomfield). Slate your thirst at the historical Lions Den Hotel, where memorabilia lines the walls and ceiling and pub meals come with a side of Aussie characters propping up a bar stool.



Cooktown, QLD

History and culture collide at Cooktown

It's hard to ignore the history in a town that takes its name from a world famed explorer. Lieutenant (later Captain) James Cook's voyage on the HMB Endeavour is well-documented, none more so than at Cooktown, where he beached his ship in 1770 to effect repairs. 100 years later, the Palmer River Goldrush saw treasure hunters descend from around the world. But long before white man's appearance, Cape York was inhabited by 41 tribal nations. Cooktown lies within Guugu Yimithirr country, home to 30-plus clans or family groupings defined by geographical landmarks.

Make time for relaxing at Moreton Telegraph Station

Residents of Cape York have long felt disconnected from the rest of Australia, due to the geographical isolation and lack of infrastructure inherent in such remote places. As recent as WWII, mail was still being delivered to Cape communities by pack horse. Landline telephones (mobile cell service remains sporadic) were not installed until the 1980s. Up until then communication was via telegram, routed through outposts like Moreton Telegraph Station. Today, the fort-like station, which was originally built with turrets, gun ports and corrugated iron shutters, sits within Moreton Station on the banks of the Wenlock River.

Feast upon seafood at Bamaga

One of Cape York's most northerly towns, Bamaga, along with nearby Seisia and New Mapoon, is the last stop for travellers bound for The Tip, also serving as the main regional centre for outlying communities. The coastal port of Seisia, with its concrete pier, is favoured by fishermen angling for prized species like barramundi, coral trout and trevally. Local kids use the jetty as a platform for jumping into the waters, but swimming is definitely not recommended, as you're deep into crocodile country here and signs along the coast warn of the hazard.

Claim bragging rights at Pajinka, the northernmost tip of Australia

The ultimate goal for anyone travelling the Cape York Peninsula is walking the final few hundred metres to Pajinka, or The Tip, Australia's most northerly point. The Tip overlooks Torres Strait, with its 200-plus islands emerging from an azure sea that rises and falls with the tide. Just 5km of water separates Australia's northernmost islands from Papua New Guinea's mainland, although it's about 150km from mainland Australia to mainland Papua New Guinea.

Don't miss the ultimate bragging rights photo, taken near the sign proclaiming you've made it to Australia's most northerly point. If visiting around September and October, keep an eye skywards for the meteorological phenomenon known as Morning Glory Clouds, a spectacular horizontal wave of clouds that roll through, often around dawn.



Pajinka, Cape York Peninsula, QLD

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