



DESTINATION QUEENSLAND

Noisy by nature

A forest soundtrack and the spooling of fishing reels accompany **Jacqueline Maley's** retreat to a remote Daintree lodge.

It is only when you remove yourself from civilisation that you can appreciate how powerfully noisy nature is. To throb with life is to throb with sound and nowhere does life throb more loudly than in the Daintree Rainforest, where crowds of intricate ecosystems trip over each other and where biologists can spend years getting happily lost.

As Captain James Cook discovered when he ran aground off the coast of Bloomfield in far north Queensland, to associate forests with calm, or the wilderness with peace, is a thoroughly European notion.

It doesn't extend to the Antipodes, where beauty and danger are co-dependent.

Bloomfield Lodge, nestled in the north of the Daintree on the shores of Weary Bay, north of Cape Tribulation, is utterly remote and suitably raucous. It has no mobile-phone reception, no road access and its own water supply. There is little distinction between outdoors and in, between you and the elements. Frogs, crickets, bugs and birds provide the backdrop to your days and you constantly feel the tropics on your skin.

At Bloomfield, crocodiles stud the river mouth and fish are plentiful out on the reef. Captain Cook is routinely referred to as "poor old Cooky", post-breakfast naps are possible and stress isn't.

When the papers do arrive, they are a few days late, which takes the sting out of the news somewhat. But then the longer you spend here, the less the outside world seems relevant.

We should have known this holiday would be different when we were weighed at the airport. After an evening of jetty gazing at the Shangri-La Hotel in Cairns, we are driven to catch our light plane. The plane is so light, we discover, that not only are we restricted to a mere seven kilograms of luggage, we are put on the scales, too. We're assured we will be heavier on the way back. The lodge's chefs will see to that.

In a plane the size of a petite minibus, we fly, gobsmacked and awestruck, over the jewel-green Daintree Rainforest, Cape Tribulation, Port Douglas, Batt Reef (where Steve Irwin died), Bloomfield Falls and the snaking Bloomfield River, which eventually empties into Weary Bay.

The plane lands at an airstrip beside a corrugated-tin shed in the middle of the 1200-hectare Mount Louis cattle station and we're taken by four-wheel-drive through the town of Ayton to the wharf, then motored across the river mouth to Weary Bay.

On the way, we encounter Bruiser, one of the local crocodiles. Bruiser is enormous, terrifying and the closest thing to a dinosaur I have ever seen. But he is not the alpha male of the river, our captain, Paul, says. That's Brutus.

Soon Brutus will push Bruiser out of this part



of the river, because he likes to have the full smorgasbord of female crocs to himself.

We also learn, among other interesting croc facts, that when they wish to conserve energy or just chill out, these oversized reptiles descend to the bottom of the river and sit there quietly for hours. So relaxed do they become, they are able to slow their pulses to two heartbeats a minute.

When we arrive at the Bloomfield Lodge jetty, our pulses slow to a comparable level and remain there for the duration of our stay.

We're met by Ben Morley and Courtenay Greer-Morley, the couple that manages the lodge. Greer-Morley takes us to the main dining and bar area, an enormous open terrace with a well-stocked open bar, tables and couches, all of which look on to a saltwater pool fringed by forest.

The property used to belong to the Federated Painters and Dockers Union, from 1978 until the early '80s, and was ostensibly its holiday lodge but really formed the headquarters of various black-market businesses, including a marijuana

plantation in what are now the beautiful tropical gardens of the property.

The lodge's grounds and building were spared the brunt of cyclone Yasi, being well protected by the hinterland.

Accommodation is in 17 freestanding cottages and ours is named the Hideaway, a short wander across a plank bridge and along a path cut through the gardens.

It is a half-deck/half-hotel room, with its ocean-facing side completely open. Its main feature is an enormous netted bed from which you can observe Weary Bay while propped on white pillows. We also have a private spa.

In her introduction, Greer-Morley explains the rhythm of life at the lodge. All meals are served in the dining area. Breakfast is a buffet and a cooked a la carte menu, lunch is two courses and dinner is three. Guests eat communally and the bar operates on an honesty system. Day trips to the reef, rainforest and river are on offer and staff are on hand for anything you need.



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Secluded ... (from far left) lodge cuisine; an aerial view of Bloomfield Lodge; the Daintree rainforest; Hideaway cottage; the resort's jetty.

out, we attach fishing rods with enormous jewel-like lures to the back of our boat and when the reel on one starts spooling rapidly, I volunteer to wrestle the fish in. OK, so Craig helps substantially and I squeal a lot.

All that matters is that, after a valiant struggle, a 10-kilogram, 40-centimetre Spanish mackerel emerges, flipping from the ocean. The entire lodge feasts on it that night (in a herb crust with aioli on the side) and the smile stays on my face for days.

When we anchor the boat on the reef, we fish for coral trout, a smaller and more beautiful fish with moist white flesh.

Craig demonstrates expertly how to bait the hook with squid and then trail the line along the reef bed as you stay alert for twinges. Once you have a bite, some dexterity and skill is required to

Likewise, the rainforest is beautiful but has its own brutality, as our guide, Jamie, points out the next day when he takes us for an hour-long walk through the bush of Wongabadja, the wild forest that backs on to the lodge's grounds.

There has been rainforest vegetation in this area for at least 135 million years and of the 19 primitive plant families on Earth, 12 are found here. Jamie points out kapok trees, bumpy satin ash and grey figs. There are also strangler figs and stinger trees, and more recent destroyers in the form of feral pigs.

Jamie tells us about the tree kangaroos and they soon become our favourite rainforest beast. Tree kangaroos are Darwinian dunces ill-suited to life in the wild. They live up trees and are generally safe from predators such as feral pigs.

But when predators approach, tree kangaroos have a poor fight-flight response – they panic and drop to the ground, where they remain winded and paralysed for several minutes before recovering and bounding off, unless they are attacked first by the predator from which they meant to escape in the first place.

Our third trip is into the saltwater crocodile's lair – the mouth of the Bloomfield River, which is flanked by mangrove swamps and the occasional human residence. Up the river is the local Aboriginal community, Wujal Wujal, which means "lots of water".

Our last blissful afternoon is spent at the lodge, making like an off-duty crocodile or a stunned tree kangaroo. By which I mean doing absolutely nothing – so relaxed are we after three days here that we have acquired the skill of sitting for hours, watching the forest and the sea and listening to the noises of nature.

Jacqueline Maley travelled courtesy of Bloomfield Lodge.



FAST FACTS

Getting there Qantas, Virgin Blue and Jetstar fly non-stop to Cairns from Sydney (3hr) and Melbourne (3hr 30min); Tiger flies from Melbourne only. The cheapest fare is with Tiger at \$99 and Virgin from Sydney at \$158. Qantas has a fare for about \$295 from Melbourne and \$255 from Sydney. All fares are one way, including tax.

Staying there Rooms at Bloomfield Lodge cost from \$1076 a person, twin share, for two nights during low season. The tariff includes all meals, return scenic flight transfers from Cairns, car and boat transfers to the lodge, transfers to and from your Cairns hotel or airport, a guided rainforest walk, croc spotting and a cruise on the Bloomfield River. Phone Trailfinders on 1300 725 807, see trailfinders.com.au/bloomfield.

The Shangri-La Hotel in Cairns, in the Pier complex and overlooking the Marlin Marina, has rooms from \$180, see shangri-la.com/en/property/cairns/shangrila.

In the ensuing days we find the service friendly but never overbearing.

All our food whims are taken care of by the chefs and if it weren't for all the activities we sign up for, we would indeed have stacked on the kilograms. The food is exquisite: fresh, abundant and sourced locally.

In 1770, Captain Cook's ship, the Endeavour, ran aground on a reef now named after the ship. The crew dumped 40 tonnes of guns, supplies and fresh water overboard and took turns at the water pumps in a vain attempt to free the ship.

They were dark days for Cook and it shows in the names he gave the topography that tyrannised him: Cape Tribulation, Weary Bay, the Hope Islands. Poor old Cooky discovered the hard way that the reef is bountiful but treacherous. On our reef trip, organised by the lodge, we see only the bountiful part.

Guides Shayne and Craig usher us into the lodge's large fishing boat and motor us to the reef, about 50 minutes from Weary Bay. On the way

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reel it in. At this I fail but others succeed and the catch makes magnificent eating that night.

Later, we snorkel down a large bombora, lounge in the sun on the sea pigeon-inhabited East Hope Island and forensically examine the reef for its fire scallops, starfish, sea cucumbers, parrotfish, moray eels and teddy bear crabs. There are no mammals on this island, only birds.

As we head home from the reef, we see turtles and someone thinks they spot a reef shark, although it could easily have been one of the Spanish mackerels lucky enough to have evaded my deathly fishing line.

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