



ROAD TRIP TO THE TIP

Cape York Peninsula doesn't get nearly enough press, says **Alissa Jenkins** but it's a quintessential Aussie destination. Here are her top 10 tips for the journey

Australia's most northerly point – the tip of Cape York, looking across to York Island

Visit any Australian landmark, be it Uluru or the Great Ocean Road, and you can expect a few consistencies. Tour buses packed with snap-happy tourists, overpriced souvenirs and queues for the bathroom... but not at Australia's northernmost tip. No, here at Cape York, the roads are too rough for most tour buses, the closest shop is a general store 30 kilometres south, and as for bathrooms, well, there are plenty of trees around.

Arriving at the actual tip – a rocky platform jutting out into the Torres Strait, with the Coral Sea to the east and the Arafura Sea and beginnings of the Gulf of Carpentaria to the west – isn't so, shall we say, momentous in the traditional sense. Marked by a rusted signpost, there's no security roping or uniformed personnel ensuring visitors make an orderly line – rather, a smattering of families, friends and grey-haired couples are spread across the headland, relaxing in the sun.

Singlets and shorts seem to be the dress code today... and bare feet after a boy hops past, bellowing "aw Dad, I've busted me thong!" Another family's pet dog has come along for the ride, now cooling off in a rockpool beside the signpost. He's not the only unexpected visitor – a group of 20-somethings, taking a road trip around the country, are prancing around in animal-themed onesies – apparently a ritual they've practised at every landmark. And although it all looks like more of a zoo than an icon, there's something that connects us all – we're all indubitably Aussie. Without an international tourist in sight, it seems Cape York is the Vegemite of landmarks – an Australian icon that only Australians appreciate. And a bloody good one at that – about 20,000 visitors travel to the tip every year.

There's a sense of accomplishment in the air; it's little wonder when you consider the lengths people go to to get here. From the 'carpark' (aka, wherever you can park your 4WD off the red dirt road), it's a good 20-minute climb over sunbaked boulders to the tip (although at low tide you can just walk around from the beach). However, the real journey starts down in Cairns – at the gateway to Queensland's tropics, the Great Barrier Reef and Cape York Peninsula. From there it's over a 1500-kilometre stretch to this unassuming landmark. Made up of dirt tracks and croc-infested river crossings, to ancient rock art and five-star stays, here we reveal the top ten pitstops to make on your trip to the tip.



01 BREAKFAST WITH THE BIRDS

As any seasoned road tripper will tell you, driving is hungry business and a great place to kick start your roadtrip is at Port Douglas Wildlife Habitat, where you can breakfast with the birds. The self-serve spread has everything from tropical fruits to bain-marie classics, but that's not what people come for. The enclosed wetlands property is home to over 80 bird species that flutter about and occasionally try to sneak a crumb or two off your plate. If feathers and food are too close for your liking, skip brekkie and check out the rest of the wildlife rescue centre, where you can pat koalas, hand-feed wallabies and see very rare (but very cute) tree kangaroos. There's also a Behind the Scenes Tour to see how the centre cares for their injured or orphaned animals. wildlifehabitat.com.au



03 UNWIND AT A BEST-KEPT SECRET HIDEAWAY

Over the Daintree River Crossing onboard a 4WD ferry, continue to Weary Bay where you can leave your car for the night and get a free boat transfer across to Bloomfield Lodge. This unexpected gem is tucked away amongst the rainforest atop Wongabadga Point, just beyond the mouth of the Bloomfield River. It's arguably one of Australia's best-kept secrets, but there have been some particularly travel-savvy guests here before – Bloomfield Lodge is a member of Small Luxury Hotels of the World and was ranked number one for 'World's Best Remote Hotels' by *Forbes Magazine*. You can expect first-class service with water views from every room, and the requisite for any high-star stay: an infinity pool and spa, if you tire of the rainforest walks and fishing (though we doubt you will). bloomfieldlodge.com.au



02 WALK AMONG A WORLD HERITAGE TREASURE

Continuing north, the Daintree Rainforest begins to creep in until the road is encased in a green tunnel framed by fan palms, ferns and fig trees. As the largest rainforest in Australia, this is the only place on earth where two World Heritage sites exist side by side (Daintree is bordered by the Great Barrier Reef). For true appreciation, take a rainforest walk like the popular trail to Mossman Gorge. Or for the road less-travelled, continue along the Bloomfield Track to the small Indigenous community of Wujal Wujal, home to an impressive waterfall... just keep an eye out for crocs. Along the way stop in at the Daintree Ice Cream Company, churning out homemade ice-cream, made with tropical fruits from their own orchid. nprs.qld.gov.au/parks/daintree



04 SNEAK INTO THE LION'S DEN

About 30 kilometres south of Cooktown stands one of Australia's most recognised pubs, the Lions Den Hotel. Built in 1875 on the banks of the Little Annan River, you'll be greeted by the pub's lion statue and century-old mango trees. However its real claim to fame is inside, where there's a quirky collection of bottled snakes, walls signed by guests, cattle skulls and a mishmash of articles left behind by patrons. Ah, only in regional Australia. There's also a great menu that's served in plate-filling portions. Indulge in one too many beers? There's a campground at the rear by the river with safari-style lodges. While there, take a quick detour to Black Mountain National Park (five kilometres north), home to a bizarre heap of large black rocks, said to spontaneously combust on occasion, when rain hits their hot surface. lionsdenhotel.com.au

The 2013 Bucket List



05 STEP BACK TO THE FIRST MEETING James Cook Museum covers Cooktown's rich past: Cook's arrival, the once-flourishing gold mining industry and its role as a base for Aussie and US troops during WWII. But most interesting is Cook's first meeting with Indigenous people. The story goes Cook arrived on a strip of land deemed neutral territory by local clans. The crew stayed for weeks repairing their ship, while Cook and his team of naturalists spent time with the Guugu Yimithirr people, recording their language (including the word 'gangurru', wrongly noted as 'kangaroo'). Conflict only ensued when the crew refused to share turtle meat with the clan. But not for long – spears were soon laid down due to the neutral ground. A plaque at Reconciliation Rocks commemorates this moment. nationaltrust.org.au/qlld/james-cook-museum



06 SEE THOUSANDS OF YEARS OF HISTORY IN A DAY You can see one of Australia's most significant archaeological sites, the Quinkan art galleries, about 140 kilometres west of Cooktown near the township of Laura. This dramatic collection of rock art is thought to be up to 30,000 years old, and has been listed by UNESCO as one of the top 10 rock art sites in the world. The well-preserved paintings reveal stories from the traditional land owners, featuring local spirits as well as nearby food sources. Take a guide with you, though – they have some fascinating information to share, and the sites themselves can be in some pretty precarious places; hiding amongst the local scrub and under sandstone boulders. Tours run between late March and early December and must be booked in advance. quinkancc.com.au



07 GET AWAY FROM IT ALL Heading north again, make time to spend a few days camping in one of Queensland's largest parks – Lakefield (also known as Rinyirru) National Park. There are many postcard-perfect riverside spots to pitch a tent (must be booked ahead online, over phone or at a booking office), as well as some impressive scenery to take in, varying from wetlands, mudflats and coastal estuaries, through to grasslands and sandstone escarpments. These varied waterways are home to an abundance of birdlife, especially at White Lily Lagoon and Low Lake. There's also plenty of places to cast a reel in with recreational fishing allowed at all camping areas. Barramundi and catfish are your most likely catches, but do be aware of crocs in certain signposted areas. nprsr.qld.gov.au/parks/rinyirru-lakefield



08 CAST A REEL IN On the western side of the cape, surrounding the bauxite mining town of Weipa, is a haven for fish and fishing enthusiasts alike. From Spanish mackerel and barramundi to coral trout and giant trevally, it's hard to walk away empty handed, especially at Red and Pennefather beaches. First-timers can book a tour with a local operator. If you don't feel like camping while in the area, drive down to Merluna Station for a night (yes, 120 kilometres south-east is considered local), situated on a 416,000-acre cattle station. There's a range of air-conditioned room types (including a shaded campground), all within walking distance to lagoons, creeks and pockets of rainforest. Along with your usual farmyard locals – cattle, horses and chooks – you might see grazing wallabies, flocks of migrating birds, and sunbaking lizards. merlunastation.com.au



09 REFRESH WITH A DIP AT THE WATERFALLS No Cape York adventure would be complete without a visit to Fruitbat Falls on Eliot Creek – a vast wall of clear, flowing water. Visuals aside, it's also a popular pitstop because it's one of very few waterholes towards the tip that travellers can actually swim in (pesky crocs!). It's welcome relief after what can be a long and dusty journey. Better still, it's easily accessed being just off the Southern Bypass Road (or for 4WD enthusiasts, you can also get there along the Telegraph Road from Bramwell Junction). But if it's too crowded here for your liking, there's also Eliot and Twin Falls just down the road, where camping is also allowed. Eliot Falls also has several walking tracks if you want to explore the area. nprsr.qld.gov.au/parks/jardine-river/about.html



10 LAP UP LUXURY ON LIZARD ISLAND Admittedly, it's pretty hard to get here by car, but it'd be remiss of us not to feature this internationally-renowned resort for your dream itinerary to the tip. We suggest you make it a post-tip detour, taking the 60-minute scenic flight there from Cairns (which covers 240 kilometres). The island itself is predominately national park aside from the resort, which means it's just you, powder-white beaches, five-star eating and 40 uber-luxurious villas. Unsurprisingly, Lizard Island has earned its fair share of hotel awards from around the globe – consistently ranking as one of the world's best resorts in 'top lists'. And with the Great Barrier Reef at your finger tips, days can be filled with snorkelling, diving and boating. Or simply loll about on the beach after a lush spa treatment. Whoever said a trip to the tip wasn't momentous? lizardisland.com.au ■

THE DETAILS

FLIGHTS

If you're against the clock, Skytrans Airways fly from Cairns to Cooktown four times daily. They also fly to and from Coen, Lockhart River and Bamaga, among other destinations en route to the tip. skytrans.com.au

TOURS

For the leg between Cape Tribulation and Cooktown, you can't beat D'Arcy of Daintree 4WD Tours (darcyofdaintree.com.au). However there are only a couple of tour operators that will take you from end-to-end of the peninsula. Among them is Cape York Tours (capeyorktour.com) and Oz Tours (oztours.com.au), which offer various packages covering land, sea and air, ranging from five to 16-day itineraries.

DRIVING

CAIRNS TO COOKTOWN

- **THE COASTAL ROUTE**
This 4WD route runs via Cape Tribulation, the Daintree Rainforest and the Bloomfield Track to Cooktown.

- **THE INLAND ROUTE**
This route runs via the fully sealed Mulligan Highway. There are several lookouts with vistas of lush valleys. Beware of wildlife and livestock as some sections are unfenced.

- *If hiring a car, check you're allowed to drive on dirt roads before booking – many operators won't allow it.*

DRIVING

COOKTOWN TO THE TIP

This route is suitable for 4WDs only. There are two main tracks from here; one is the Development Road and the other is the Telegraph Line – the latter starts after Bramwell Junction and is an iconic drive for hardcore 4WD enthusiasts. It's only 110 kilometres long but takes at least one full day to complete, including several creek crossings.

SAILING

(IF YOU'RE REALLY KEEN)

Check out Sea Swift – a cargo ship that services the far north and allows travellers to cruise onboard between Cairns and Bamaga. You can also put your vehicle onboard so you can drive one way and sail the other. seaswift.com.au/cruises

