

Port Douglas

SUN, SAND, RAINFOREST, REEF:
THE COASTAL GETAWAY IN FAR
NORTH QUEENSLAND HAS IT
ALL, WRITES JO MCKAY.



THE FIRST morning I am in Port Douglas, it's cloudy and wet – not exactly what I expected for my sunny Queensland getaway. But it's still decadently warm so, despite the drizzle, I pull on sneakers and head for the beach.

The sun is not quite up and I'm interested to see the ocean and environs in the bleary early-morning light. Strolling along a stretch of Four Mile Beach, I am passed by joggers, dog-walkers and fellow amblers, all immune to the overcast skies and showers. In turn, each person smiles and offers up a warm “good morning” or “hello”. A few minutes later the clouds part, the drizzle ceases and the sun, now just above the horizon, lights up the sea. The scene is magical and majestic; a glorious cliché.

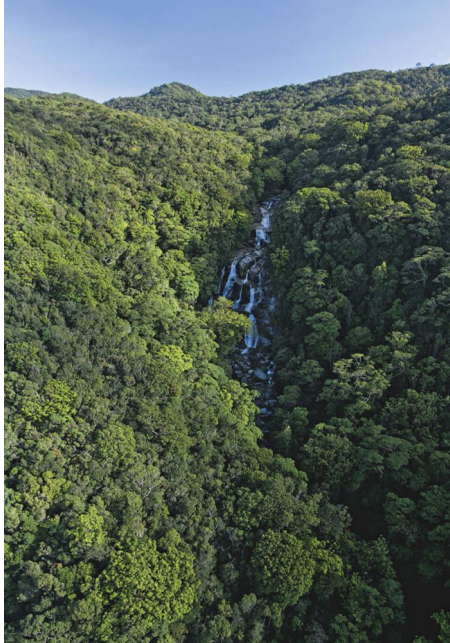
If I were a person looking for metaphors, I would say this tableau might represent an accurate analogy for Port Douglas itself. After all, this is a town that is used

to the vagaries of fortune. And whatever the highs and lows, the attitude remains upbeat and positive; there always seems to be sunlight on the horizon.

Founded in the late 1870s, Port, as the locals call it, was first a gold-rush town then an export hub for sugar cane. Both booms were followed by busts and for much of the middle of last century, it was little more than a fishing village. That all changed in the 1980s when tourism arrived – and one notable investor, Christopher Skase, opened an iconic hotel. The Sheraton Mirage was celebrated locally and internationally but Skase's demise brought more tough times, as did the GFC. Now, in 2017, the tide of fortune has changed again: tourism operators are noting record bookings, locals are buoyant, there's an influx of new investment and, overall, a palpable sense of excitement.

Before arriving, I'd heard the town described as a mix of Byron Bay and Noosa; it's close – there's a subtle bohemian vibe here as well as the cosmopolitan feel of Noosa's Hastings Street – but Port Douglas definitely has a charm all its own. From the pretty main street (Macrossan) to the newly bustling marina, from the thriving dining scene to the ever-friendly locals, the shining sun is on the horizon once more. Port Douglas also has the happy luck of having two World Heritage-listed drawcards on its doorstep: the Great Barrier Reef and the Daintree rainforest. No visit to this area is complete without experiencing them.

Mackay Cay, about
50 kilometres north
of Port Douglas



(From top left) Lush rainforest surrounds the Mossman River; Sheraton Grand Mirage Resort; smart Italian eatery Sassi Cucina e Bar

Stay

- A multimillion-dollar revamp has restored the Sheraton Grand Mirage Resort in Port Douglas (hotel.qantas.com.au/sheratonportdouglas) to its former glory. The décor has a contemporary coastal elegance; the 295 rooms feature plantation-style shutters, dark-wood accents, neutral furnishings and black-and-white photography on the walls. The exterior, once a candy-ish pink, is now an elegant pale-shell hue. In the vast lobby, tropical-print cushions sit on Deco-inspired chairs, while slick tech features – smartphone charging ports and keyless entry – provide a modern edge.
- Just as in its last heyday, the highlight of the Sheraton Grand Mirage remains: two hectares of saltwater swimming lagoons encircling the property. There are also eight freshwater pools; the largest has a requisite '80s swim-up bar that now serves modern cocktails such as Aperol Spritz and White Sangria. (The food menu, too, has had an au courant tweak, with dishes featuring quinoa and kimchi.)

Flight path

CNS

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Eat

- At Betty's Bohemian Beach Café (Shop 2, 56 Macrossan Street; 07 4099 6995), tables are dotted with posies, shell-filled glass jars and pristine white doilies, while the teal walls are adorned with dreamcatchers. This is shabby chic, tropical style. As for the menu, hipster juices, strong coffees, green breakfast bowls and harissa baked beans make it a favourite spot for brekkie.
- As the newest eatery in town, Hemingway's Brewery (hemingwaysbrewery.com) is getting all the buzz – and deservedly so. Feast on tasty burgers, slow-cooked beef ribs and wood-fired pizza. The marina location makes this an ideal place to spend a few hours, watching boats come and go.
- Sassi Cucina e Bar (sassi.com.au) is slick, chic and inviting. This smart Italian offers handmade pastas alongside daily specials featuring local produce. The flavours are clean and simple, just as Italian food should be, and the wine list is a savvy blend of Australia and Europe.
- Do**

 - Jump on board the Reef Sprinter (reefsprinter.com.au) for a zippy 2 ¼-hour boat excursion to the Low Isles to snorkel with myriad fish species and view coral formations.
 - Explore Indigenous heritage at Mossman Gorge (mossmangorge.com.au), part of the southern Daintree, on a Ngadiku Dreamtime Walk guided by a member of the Kuku Yalanji tribe.
 - Browse local arts and crafts at the Sunday-morning Port Douglas Market on Wharf Street before strolling up nearby Flagstaff Hill to enjoy the views of Four Mile Beach.
 - Get up close with wallabies, kangaroos, koalas, cassowaries and crocodiles at the Wildlife Habitat (wildlifehabitat.com.au) animal sanctuary. ●