

# The Daintree

QUEENSLAND

Port Douglas is a gateway to reef and rainforest on Queensland's Far North Coast – making it, as **Jo McKay** finds, an irresistible tropical getaway.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **LUKE SHADBOLT**



Four Mile Beach from Flagstaff Hill lookout

SINCE ITS establishment in the late 1870s, Port Douglas has had many incarnations: gold-rush port, sugar-export hub, quiet fishing village. It was in the late 1970s that tourism developers began to realise the potential of this long strip of beach, lush green mountains and expanse of blue ocean. Yes, nature has been kind to this region, placing two natural wonders on its doorstep: the Great Barrier Reef and the Daintree rainforest. When both gained World Heritage status in the '80s, Port's status as a must-visit destination was confirmed. Today, this seaside town is a hive of revamped resorts and eateries, with myriad excursions running daily – plus that stunning backdrop. Here are 12 ways to get the most out of your visit.

The Reef Marina, Port Douglas (right); Hemingway's serves brisket, burgers and boutique beers



### 1. UNDERWATER WORLD

“Paradise” might seem an overstatement but the rich ecosystem of coral, plant and marine life on the Great Barrier Reef is unsurpassed anywhere on Earth – and it’s beautiful. Quicksilver Cruises ([quicksilvercruises.com](http://quicksilvercruises.com)) – which has been running reef exploration tours for more than 35 years – offers excellent daylong excursions to the outer reef, near the edge of the continental shelf, about 70 kilometres north-east of the Port Douglas township. After the 90-minute cruise to the mooring pontoon, you can explore the reef at leisure. Expect to see countless species of fish, plenty of staghorn and boulder coral, crustaceans, starfish, sea turtles and more – basically, the entire cast of *Finding Nemo* (minus the big shark, thankfully). Marine-biologist-guided snorkelling tours are an interactive way to learn about the reef’s biodiversity but if swimming isn’t your strong point, try a semi-submersible tour or go “ocean

walking” (with an air-filled helmet). The cruise includes fish-feeding demonstrations and a hearty smorgasbord lunch.

### 2. INDIGENOUS CULTURE

Combining regionally inspired food with Indigenous storytelling, Flames of the Forest’s ([flamesoftheforest.com.au](http://flamesoftheforest.com.au)) Aboriginal Cultural Experience is a unique and exceptional evening out.

The arrival is pure theatre: there’s a trench of fire as you disembark

from the shuttle (you can’t drive to Flames; they collect you from your hotel) and a candle- and fairy-light-illuminated pathway through bushland. Apéritifs and canapés precede a convivial banquet-style dinner; throughout, two local Kuku Yalanji brothers chat about Aboriginal heritage, charm with didgeridu demos and, at the end of the night, share a Dreamtime story.

### 3. REEF FLYOVER

The Great Barrier Reef is not a single mass but rather some 2900 individual reefs extending 2300 kilometres. It’s difficult to grasp the sheer size of it while on (or in) the water. A thrilling 10-minute joy ride with GBR Helicopters ([gbr.com.au](http://gbr.com.au)) from a helipad moored on Agincourt Reef, near the Quicksilver Cruises pontoon, takes care of that. You’ll not only better understand the magnitude of this natural wonder, you will also have the chance to see reef sharks, dolphins, sea turtles and, possibly, whales.

### 4. ANCIENT RAINFOREST

World Heritage-listed since 1988, the Daintree rainforest is thought to be between 110 and 180 million years old (at least 50 million years older than the Amazon). Some plant species here even coexisted with dinosaurs. One of the most unusual and exhilarating ways to experience its biodiversity is with Jungle Surfing ([junglesurfing.com.au](http://junglesurfing.com.au)), on a 357-metre zip-line through the forest, led by enthusiastic and knowledgeable guides. While up in the canopy (the highest point is 22.5 metres above Mason Creek), they’ll tell you about milky pines, Bennett’s tree kangaroos, spurwood mahogany, Hope’s Cycads, cassowaries, primitive flowering plants, umbrella palms and more – as you whoosh from tree to tree.

### 5. SUNSET SAILING

The perfect antidote to all this hectic reef and rainforest exploration? A sunset sail, naturally. Simply board the 62-foot catamaran *Aquarius* ([tropicaljourneys.com](http://tropicaljourneys.com)) then recline on the upper deck for 90 minutes of bliss. Sample canapés, sip a glass of something chilled (you can bring your own alcohol), listen to the ocean lap against the hull and take in the coastline views in the waning light of day.

### 6. THE MARINA

After an arduous twilight sail, kick back at The Reef Marina, where two spots are making waves. Barbados ([barbadosportdouglas.com.au](http://barbadosportdouglas.com.au)) is a stylish cocktail bar,

complete with driftwood tables, day beds and chic blue-and-white striped umbrellas. The sashimi platter is perfect for sharing; the signature Caribbean Mojito you should keep for yourself. Nearby, Hemingway's Brewery ([hemingwaysbrewery.com](http://hemingwaysbrewery.com)) is a fun place to settle in for the night. Open since last June, this well-run brewery/eatery has an easygoing vibe. The menu tempts with more-ish fare such as wood-fired pizza, juicy burgers and slow-cooked brisket and ribs. The beers are pretty good, too.

#### 7. WILDLIFE HABITAT

Crocodiles, cassowaries, pademelons, myriad bird species... This region is teeming with wildlife. But many of these creatures are either notoriously shy or, frankly, a bit frightening face to face in the wild. Enter Wildlife Habitat ([wildlifehabitat.com.au](http://wildlifehabitat.com.au)). Here, you can handfeed wallabies and kangaroos, cuddle koalas and stroke an infant crocodile (whose skin is surprisingly soft), as well as observe crocodile- and cassowary-feeding demonstrations. The sanctuary operates breeding programs for threatened species (it has the only captive breeding pair of black-necked storks, or jabirus, in the world) and also rehabilitates animals that have been hurt in the wild.

#### 8. CROC-SPOTTING

No-one wants to encounter a crocodile up close (at Wildlife Habitat, they tape the baby croc's jaw before you stroke its skin) but it's another thing to observe them from the safety of a boat. On the Daintree River, Crocodile Express ([crocodileexpress.com](http://crocodileexpress.com)) runs surprisingly relaxing tours. As the vessel motors gently upstream, you can expect to see one bigger, older crocodile. If you're lucky, that'll be 4.5-metre Scarface, the dominant male in the region.



## Stay

Tranquil and secluded, Silky Oaks Lodge ([hotel.qantas.com.au/silkyoakslodge](http://hotel.qantas.com.au/silkyoakslodge)), near Mossman Gorge, is the perfect place to base yourself during a Tropical North Queensland escape. The 36 chic tree-house villas offer views of lush vegetation, some with glimpses of the Daintree River. On your balcony you'll find a hammock for afternoon naps; in the bathrooms, deep soaking baths for added relaxation.

The main lodge has an open-air restaurant and bar overlooking the river, while the adjacent lounge offers books and, for those who choose not to disconnect, wi-fi.

Silky Oaks can arrange an array of off-site excursions (including many listed here) but leave time to enjoy the facilities and surrounding area: partake in an early-morning yoga session, kayak the billabong, play tennis or take a dip in the swimming pool.

Be sure to indulge in a relaxing treatment at the Healing Waters spa or explore the property's exclusive walking trails; if you let reception know in advance, they'll send you off with a picnic hamper to enjoy en route. Afterwards, float about in the cool waters of the river, right outside the main lodge.

#### 9. ALFRESCO DINING

No resort town is complete without great restaurants and Port Douglas has plenty to offer. Upscale establishments include Bistro H by Harrisons ([bistroh.pagecloud.com](http://bistroh.pagecloud.com)), where the whole market fish for two is a must-have. Other notables include 2 Fish Restaurant ([2fishrestaurant.com.au](http://2fishrestaurant.com.au)), with tasty barramundi and bug dishes, plus a standout starter of coconut crumbed tiger prawns; and Sassi Cucina e Bar ([sassi.com.au](http://sassi.com.au)), a smart Italian with a menu that includes an impressive zuppa di pesce (fish soup) and a pleasing wine list. All offer outdoor dining; after all, this is an alfresco town.

#### 10. GORGE DREAMING

Part of Daintree National Park, Mossman Gorge ([mossmangorge.com.au](http://mossmangorge.com.au)) is renowned for its clean river, peaceful swimming holes and lush rainforest. But before you hike its trails, learn a little about the landscape. From the Mossman Gorge Centre, the Kuku Yalanji people, whose history dates back some 50,000 years, run Ngadiku Dreamtime Walks, covering their longstanding connection with the rainforest. Each guide shares something different, from medicine and healing to bush food and stories of cultural significance – and it's a privilege to hear first hand from the traditional owners of this land.

#### 11. TROPICAL FAIRWAYS

Warm winters make this area a golfing utopia. Mirage Country Club ([miragecountryclub.com.au](http://miragecountryclub.com.au); part of the Sheraton complex) is manicured and inviting, while Palmer Sea Reef ([palmerseareef.com.au](http://palmerseareef.com.au)) has the rare distinction of being a tropical links course – perhaps the only one of its kind in the world. It's rightly lauded as the best course in the region. Both Mirage and Sea Reef offer unexpected croc-watching opportunities while playing – but note the warning on the card: do not approach the reptiles.

#### 12. A DRIVE WITH VIEWS

The Great Barrier Reef Drive is a spectacular 140-kilometre stretch of road that extends from Cairns to Cape Tribulation. On one side are mountains, dense with greenery, while on the other, the Coral Sea beckons. This is the main route to Port Douglas from Cairns so leave time for a pit stop at Rex Lookout, about 24 kilometres south on Captain Cook Highway, to gaze over the shimmering waters of Trinity Bay. ●

### Flight path

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