

Fodor's Choice Queensland

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In tropical Far North Queensland, with its hot weather, stunning nature, and fascinating wildlife, you'll find wallabies and grey kangaroos in the savannah, endangered spotted-tailed quoll and tree kangaroos in the rain forest, as well as hundreds of bird species year round, including the impressive six-foot-tall flightless cassowary. The people are warm and friendly, the sights spectacular, and the beachside lounging world-class.

WORD OF MOUTH

"Cairns is in Far North Queensland, and there are many attractions in addition to the Reef, including pristine rain forests. You would need 3-4 full days, and your time could be divided between Cairns and Port Douglas." – lcls

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A maze of 3,000 individual reefs and 900 islands stretching for 2,600 kilometers (1,616 miles), Queensland's Great Barrier Reef is one of the world's most spectacular natural attractions. Known as Australia's "Blue Outback," the reef's designation as a World Heritage Site in 1981 underscored its status as an indispensable treasure. Also on the World Heritage list, Daintree National Park is one of the world's most culturally significant tracts of rain forest, still home to a panoply of unique wildlife, and accessed and managed by the Kuku Yalanji, the area's traditional owners.

Tourism is the lifeblood of Cairns—the unofficial capital of Far North Queensland—and this laid-back tropical city is a destination in itself. However, many come here to prepare for adventures into the Daintree or Great Barrier Reef.

EXPLORING AND LEARNING IN CAIRNS

Tens of thousands of international travelers use it as a jumping-off point for activities such as scuba diving and snorkeling trips to the Barrier Reef, as well as rain-forest treks, boating, and parasailing. Before you jet off to your next Queensland adventure, though, don't miss these nearby activities. They'll get you excited for the rest of your trip and even teach you a thing or two.

The 10-acre **Cairns Tropical Zoo** (✉ *Captain Cook Hwy.* 4879 ☎ 07/4055-3669 🌐 www.cairnstropicalzoo.com.au 📧 A\$32, night zoo A\$95, coach transfers A\$13-A\$40 🕒 Daily 8:30-5, night zoo Mon.-Thurs. and Sat. 6:50-10) is home to many

species of Australian wildlife, including kangaroos, wombats, echidnas, emus, cassowaries, and reptiles including saltwater crocodiles. Most distinguished among its residents is Sarge, a 17-foot, 660-pound centenarian croc. The sanctuary incorporates **Cairns Night Zoo**, where, five evenings a week, up to 100 guests get close-up glimpses of Australia's fascinating nocturnal creatures on a guided tour, then tuck into a big barbecue dinner (reservations essential).

From the remarkable **Skyrail Rainforest Cableway** (✉ *Captain Cook Hwy. and Cairns Western Arterial Rd., Smithfield* 4878 ☎ 07/4038-1555 🌐 www.skyrail.com.au 📧 1-way A\$41, round-trip A\$59 🕒 Daily 8:15-5:15, last round-trip boards at 2:45; last 1-way trip at 3:30), six-person cable cars carry you on an 8-kilometer (5-mile) journey across the rain-forest canopy to the highland village of Kuranda, where you can visit local attractions and shop for Aboriginal art. At two stations along the way you can explore (Skyrail ticket price includes a short, ranger-guided rain-forest tour at Red Peak, and there's an information center and lookout at Barron Falls). The cableway base station is 14 kilometers (9 miles) north of Cairns. Many visitors take the Scenic Railway to Kuranda, the cableway on the return trip.

Located at the base of the Skyrail Rainforest Cableway, **Tjapukai Aboriginal Culture Park** (✉ *Western Arterial Rd., Cavaronica* 4878 ⇄ 14 km [9 mi] north of Cairns ☎ 07/4042-9900 🌐 www.tjapukai.com.au 🕒 Daily 9-5, show 7:30 PM) offers many opportunities to learn about the history and lifestyle of the indigenous Djabugay people. One of Australia's

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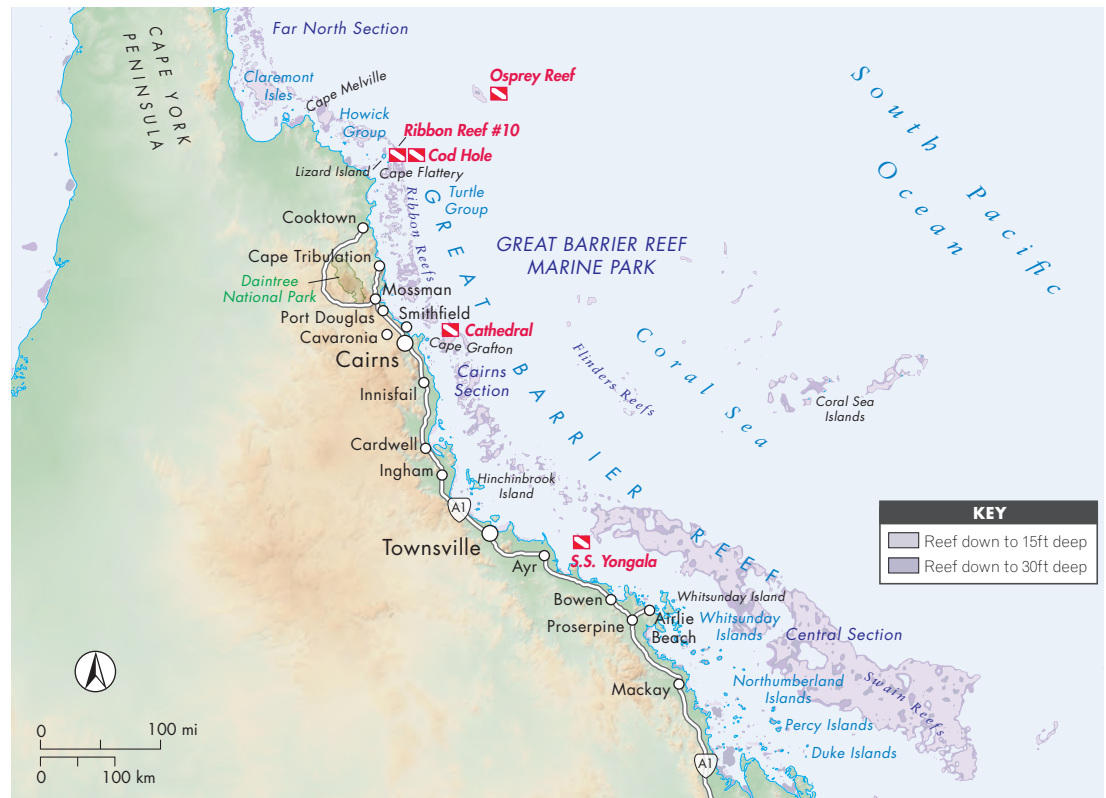
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ADVENTURE TOURS

Cairns is chockablock with adventure-tour companies and activities, and there's no shortage of tourist offices, booking agents, and tour desks around the Esplanade to help you choose what to do and whom to do it with.

Raging Thunder (☎ 52-54 Fearnley St., CBD, ☎ 07/4030-7990, 🌐 www.ragingthunder.com.au) has a variety of adventure packages: dive and snorkel on the Barrier Reef; glide over the scenic Atherton Tablelands in one of the world's largest hot-air balloons; or white-water raft through the hinterland's rugged gorges. Some tours can be combined with a visit to Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park.

R 'n' R Rafting (☎ 278 Hartley St., CBD, ☎ 07/4041-9444, 🌐 www.raft.com.au) runs white-water expeditions on the North Johnstone River and Tully River for adults of all skill levels.



most informative cultural attractions, it's also one of the few that returns profits to the indigenous community. Watch a dance performance, learn traditional songs, throw a spear or boomerang, have a didgeridoo lesson, or learn about bush "tucker" and medicines from friendly, knowledgeable staff. There are also Aboriginal artworks for sale. One ticket option incorporates Tjapukai by Night, a daily buffet-dinner-and-performance package.

Ocean Spirit Cruises (☎ 07/4031-2920, 🌐 www.oceanspirit.com.au) does streamlined four-hour and full-day tours aboard the *Ocean Spirit I*, a large catamaran, and the smaller *Ocean Spirit II* and *III*. *Ocean Spirit IV* takes up to 100 guests on a nightly, four-hour dinner cruise along Trinity Inlet.

THE GREAT BARRIER REEF'S WHITSUNDAY ISLANDS

Most visitors explore the Great Barrier Reef from one of the resorts in the Whitsunday Islands group. Although most Barrier Reef islands are closer to the mainland than to the more spectacular outer reef, almost all the resorts can organize trips to where you'd like to go.

The Whitsundays are a favorite sailing destination with easy access to the midsection of the Great Barrier Reef. These 74 islands are situated within 161 kilometers (100 miles) of each other and 50 kilometers (31 miles) from Shute Harbour and Airlie Beach.

Some of the islands' beaches—notably, famous Whitehaven Beach—are picture-postcard gorgeous, though vegetation on the islands themselves looks more scrubby than tropical. In fact the entire region is subtropical, making for moderate air and water temperatures year-round.

Most of the Whitsunday Islands are national parks, and birds are plentiful: more than 150 species make their homes here. Only a few of the islands—Hayman, Hamilton, Daydream, South Molle, South Long, Lindeman, and Brampton—have resorts. The others serve as destinations for day trips, beach time, and bushwalks or simply as scenic backdrops for boat moorings.

You needn't get your hair wet to partake in adventure here, either: a semi-submersible coral-viewing tour, guided reef walk, and scenic heli-flight are all fun options. Hamilton Island has a particularly robust program; contact the Tour Booking Desk (☎ 07/4946-8305, 🌐 www.hamiltonisland.com.au) to find the right trip for you.

DIVING: BEST DAY TRIPS AND LIVE-ABOARDS

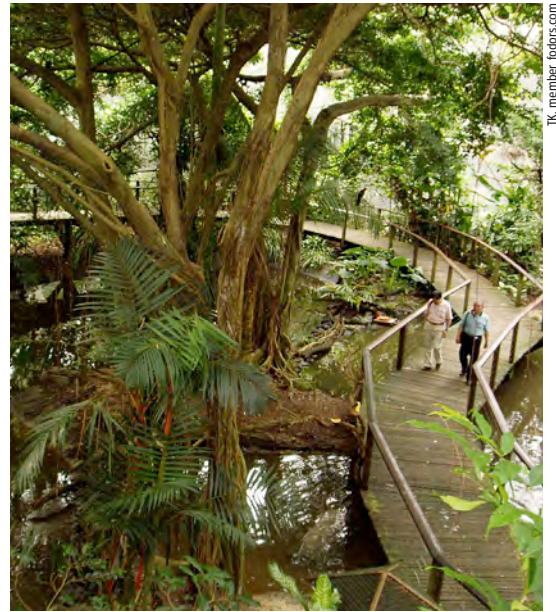
Most Whitsundays resorts have dedicated dive shops offering scuba and snorkeling lessons and gear hire; all either run or can organize day trips to nearby dive and snorkeling spots. Highlights include **Heart Reef** and vast **Knuckle Reef Lagoon**, where a purpose-

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built pontoon floats in sheltered waters teeming with tropical fish, turtles, and rays.

The shallow, pristine waters surrounding **Lady Elliot Island** are particularly full of manta rays. The best spot for seeing these fantastic creatures (some of which have a wingspan of 12 feet) is the **Light-house Bommies** site, just off the island's northwestern coast. You'll also see green sea turtles, leopard sharks, moray eels, and schooling barracuda. The dive center at the Lady Elliot Island resort (www.ladyelliott.com.au) runs dives to the Bommies several times daily.

The Ribbon Reefs, which begin about 100 kilometers (60 miles) off the Cairns coast and extend north to the Torres Strait, are home to some of the Reef's most popular dive spots. Perhaps most famous of all is the far-northerly Cod Hole, on Ribbon Reef #10, where for decades divers have been able to hand-feed enormous (60- to 70-pound) resident potato cod. While some Reef experts have expressed concern about the adverse effects of human contact on these fish, thousands of divers find the amazing photo ops—and the fun of being nudged for food by creatures almost as big as they are—too good to pass up. Multiday live-aboard trips to the Ribbon Reefs out of Cairns are run by Mike Ball Expeditions (www.mikeball.com), Spirit of Freedom (www.spiritoffreedom.com.au), and ProDive Cairns (www.prodiv Cairns.com).

DAINTREE NATIONAL PARK

The Daintree, and Cape Tribulation (“Cape Trib”) in particular, is an ecological wonderland. Here you'll find several of the world's most ancient plants and some of Australia's rarest creatures. The Daintree's

traditional owners, the Eastern Kuku Yalanji, have protected this place for thousands of years.

The park extends over approximately 22,000 acres, although the entire Wet Tropics region—which stretches from Townsville to Cooktown and covers 12,000 square kilometers (4,633 square miles)—was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1988. Within it, experts have identified several species of angiosperms, the most primitive flowering plants in existence, many of which are found nowhere else on the planet.

THE DAINTREE'S KUKU YALANJI

The Daintree's indigenous inhabitants believe many of the area's natural sites have spiritual significance, attributing particular power to Wundu (Thornton Peak), Manjal Dimbi (Mount Demi), Wurrmbu (The Bluff), and Kulki (Cape Tribulation). Dozens of places in the rain forest—waterfalls, crags, peaks, and creeks—are deemed by the Kuku Yalanji to have spiritual, healing, or regenerative powers. Take a walk with one of the area's traditional custodians for an intimate, intriguing perspective on this extraordinary terrain.

Several top-notch tours, primarily in the Mossman Gorge area of Daintree National Park, are run through **Kuku Yalanji Tours** (www.yalanji.com.au). **The Bama Way** (www.bamaway.com.au) incorporates site-specific Aboriginal-led walking tours with an overland driving route from the Daintree north to Cooktown and Cape Bedford.

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