

Magnetic north

By LEISA SCOTT

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Page 18 | Section: General

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Syndications:

- ✓ Cairns Post
- ✓ Gold Coast Bulletin
- ✓ The Chronicle
- ✓ The Courier Mail
- ✓ The NT News
- ✓ Townsville Bulletin



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It's not just a jumping-off point to the reef and rainforest - Cairns offers fine hotels, restaurants and unexpected activities

By LEISA SCOTT

Diners are kicking back at their tables on the Cairns waterfront boardwalk, radiating that post-long-lunch glow of the holiday-maker.

It's 4pm, but the distinct vibe I get while passing by is: "Hey, we're on holidays, it's a beautiful day, we've got nowhere pressing to be, let's order another cocktail."

The temptation is understandable because Cairns is turning it on this afternoon, that's for sure. Yachts swing at anchor in Trinity Inlet as the blue-green mountains rise up behind, seemingly etched into the strikingly bright sky. A sea breeze flits across the restaurant precinct's boardwalk, home to nosheries such as Dundee's, a veteran of the Cairns dining scene; Ollie's Italian Steakhouse; and Ochre, which specialises in native tucker.

Tourists tend to regard Cairns as the launchpad to the reef or rainforest but the city itself has much to offer. The Cairns Esplanade lagoon with its giant fish sculptures elevated above the water is a hugely popular area for locals and tourists and nearby is the Reef Eye, a Ferris wheel offering 360-degree views from fully-enclosed gondolas. Just behind the RSL on the Esplanade is the Cairns Aquarium, which boasts more than 16,000 fish, plants and animals and includes a deep reef exhibit, giving the chance to experience a coral reef drop-off without getting wet. But if you want to pull on the scuba gear, "swim with the sharks" dives are available.

And the rainforest comes to the city at the Reef Hotel Casino's Wildlife Dome, where cockatoos, parrots and lorikeets fly around the 20m-high dome filled with lush, tropical vegetation, which is also home to wallabies, bettongs and other critters. For even more fun, take the Zoom challenge ropes course, with the option of dangling over the top of Goliath, a 4m saltwater crocodile.

I'm staying opposite Goliath's home at the Pullman Cairns International Hotel, the Raffles-esque grand old dame of the city with its colonial-style architecture and imposing driveway and foyer. The rooms have recently undergone a rejuvenation and the result is a fresh, modern look, taking full advantage of the larger-sized rooms of days gone by.

My balcony looks out over the hotel's lagoon-style swimming pool, with glimpses of Trinity Inlet. Inside, there's a funky lounge, a king-size bed in front of a work desk and wall-mounted television, and a spacious bathroom. Breakfast is buffet-style and enjoyed in Coco's Kitchen and Bar at ground level.

It's just a short stroll along the boardwalk to the Marlin Marina where I board a Reef Magic Cruise bound for the company's, three-level pontoon on Moore Reef, about 50km away in the Coral Sea. There's much excitement on board about plans to go scuba diving, snorkelling or reef viewing from a glass-bottomed boat but about 30 minutes into the 90-minute trip,

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the crew alert us to an unexpected delight: whales. We watch as a mother and calf swim along, their big, majestic bodies rising and falling in the ocean.

On arrival at the pontoon, there's a flurry of activity as tourists gather wetsuits and flippers or head to a sun lounge. I've opted for the adventure snorkel safari (\$50 extra), a guided tour with a marine biologist that lasts about 50 minutes.

Our group boards a tender to be taken to a drop-off site, where we jump in one-by-one, gather around our guide, and set off to explore the wonderland.

This part of the reef has rebounded well after the assault of Cyclone Yasi in 2011, offering all kinds of vibrant coral, from plate to brain to branching, and the fish are loving it. I single out a parrotfish, following it as it nips in and out of crevasses and valleys, before I pop back up to listen to the biologist. Her commentary adds an extra dimension to the experience, explaining

how currents affect reef growth, the formation of corals and the types of fish, pointing out a damselfish here and a mushroom coral there. Between the education and exhilaration of swimming in this stunning environment, time flies, and I'm surprised when it's time to return to the pontoon.

Back at Cairns, I book into Crystalbrook Riley, a five-star hotel on the Esplanade that oozes coastal-chic charm. Guests can be seen enjoying a late-afternoon swim in the sand-fringed lagoon pool that snakes around the resort. Others have opted for a cocktail on the pool deck. The resort's centrepiece is an Olympic torch-style tower housing a bar, restaurant, spa and some rooms, but most accommodation is in the revamped building of its previous incarnation, Rydges Tradewinds. My Sea King room has had a stylish refurb. The balcony offers a great view of the tower, swimming pool and Esplanade.

I head to Paper Crane, the hotel's Asian-inspired restaurant on the Esplanade. The menu flits around Asia, offering Singaporean chilli mudcrab, Chinese braised duck legs, salmon sashimi tokasu, and eggplant samosas.

It's a beautiful evening, so, before heading back to my room, I stroll across to the waterfront and wander back towards the Reef Eye, watching as the gondolas light up the night sky as they go round.

The writer was a guest of Tourism and Events Queensland