

IT'S GREAT UP NORTH

From rainforests, to the Great Barrier Reef, to walking tours with the Aboriginal elders of Uluru, responsible holidays in the Northern Territory and Queensland come in all shapes and sizes

Frogs are croaking, the cicadas have struck up a chorus and raindrops are pattering on large, resonant leaves. Like our ancestors, indigenous people the world over (and C-list celebs), I am sleeping in the rainforest. Species of trees and ferns which have remained unchanged for millions of years are just inches away. Creatures rustle in the undergrowth; heavy seeds occasionally bash through the canopies of leaves to fall to the ground with a thud; palm fronds and twisty vines make menacing shapes in the dark and an amethyst python curls itself around the branch of a tree.

Thank goodness, then, that I am tucked up in a king-size bed between crisp, white cotton sheets. Nature (well, most of it) is safely at bay the other side of fly-screen, wooden walls and electric lights. My wooden cabin in the jungle has hot and cold water and a mini-bar.

Queensland's rainforests are wild. Thankfully, they can be experienced in varying degrees of comfort. Those who wish to rough it most surely can.

Queensland and the Northern Territory are home to two natural wonders which have become icons of Australia – the Great Barrier Reef and Uluru (formerly Ayers Rock). The world's largest marine park and the world's largest monolith are two must-sees in the world's largest island continent. It's not surprising then that there are more than a thousand tour operators offering nature-based tours in this northeastern part of the country.

As well as the renowned Great Barrier Reef, Queensland is home to Australia's most pristine lowland rainforest – the Daintree National Park. The Wet Tropics of North Queensland, at 15 degrees south of the equator, are only just inside the band where tropical moist rainforest can grow. Here, in Cape Tribulation, 'the rainforest meets the reef' (as the tourism authorities like to say). For here, the Great Barrier Reef, a World Heritage Site (as is the Daintree), is just 13 nautical miles or so off-shore, (a lot nearer than it is further south).

Coconut Beach Resort is one of a few places to stay in Cape Tribulation – a far better option than making a day-trip up from Cairns. The resort, with its cabins surrounded by forest, has recently been refurbished and, due to its position in such a delicate environment, is 'greening' its credentials. I left my mark on the rainforest by planting a native tree. The resort's Green Guardians



An aboriginal boy and his elders preparing for a ceremony

programme aims to reforest areas of land which were cleared before today's enlightened days of conservation. One aim of reforestation is to provide essential 'corridors' for the endangered cassowary, a relative of the ostrich. We were lucky and saw two by the side of the road before we'd even arrived at the resort. They are BIG and beautiful, with bright blue heads and red wattles.

The resort is also helping with scientific research in the forest. Tourists can join scientists in a crane's gondola as it rises into the forest canopy.

The pockets of pristine rainforest that have survived are real gems. A walking tour in an area of forest which has been recreating itself for 135 million years – where giant fan palms form a ceiling of overlapping green circles, like some abstract stained-glass ceiling – was a holiday highlight, perhaps more so as I was ankle-deep in water at times. (The local Kuku-Yalanji people name December to March 'kambar', meaning 'wet time'.) A walk on a boardwalk through mangroves was easier and had a refreshment stop: licking a green ant's bum. (A tangy, citrus taste. A bar in nearby Port Douglas serves a European version of a traditional Aboriginal drink: a Green Ant martini. Five ants a day is enough for your daily vitamin C dose.)

Then of course, there is the Reef. The Great Barrier Reef,

which is off-shore and demands a boat trip to get to, is a collection of nearly 3,000 individual reefs. People like to say that it is the only living thing you can see from space, but I guess that depends how powerful your telescope is. Snorkelling or diving on the Reef reveals a magical dream-world where the creator splashed out on bright colours. Giant clams with vivid blue, green and purple mantles; fish of all shapes, some in lavish mardi gras outfits; and corals – hard and purple-tipped or soft, feathery and shades of sunrise. The importance of the reef for tourism ensures that operators stick to strict guidelines to minimise damage.

Queensland also boasts many islands, including the largest sand island in the world – Fraser Island. Australia's largest island national park is Hinchinbrook covering 245 square miles with some dense rainforest and bush walks.

Queensland has more Aboriginal residents than any other state. Sometimes, local indigenous people are involved with ecotourism, such as guided rainforest walks with traditional owners from the Kuku Yalanji language group. As well as green ants and other delicacies, you'll learn about medicines and magic from the forest and thousands of years of history and stories. (The Walker family in Wujal Wujal run

a tour that can be arranged by Coconut Beach Resort.)

However, it is the Northern Territory which has the largest proportion (25 per cent) of Aboriginal residents. Fifty per cent of the land here is owned by Aboriginal groups. There are various opportunities to experience Aboriginal culture through an increasing number of tours and cultural centres. Australia's largest National Park, Kakadu, has more than 5,000 sites of ancient rock art with exquisite depictions of Aboriginal gods, such as Namarrgon, the lightning man. His children – the grasshoppers – come looking for him during the early storm season. Interpretation of the paintings is offered by Park Rangers, some of whom are local Jawoyn people.

Within the 8,000 square miles of Kakadu are many flood-plains, waterfalls, billabongs and rivers. It is a watery place, which varies greatly from wet (December to April) to dry (May to September) season.

Yellow Water wetlands is the place to see crocodiles in their natural habitat. An early morning sunrise boat tour is a mistily ethereal experience. As the sun rises through the fog hovering over the river and grasslands, you could imagine you were in the English countryside. It's just there aren't many four metre-plus long crocodiles sinisterly submerging along under the

A walk through mangroves had a refreshment stop: licking a green ant's bum. It had a tangy, citrus taste



A keeper holding a male koala bear



Cape Tribulation 'where the rainforest meets the reef'



Aboriginal elder from the Northern Territory

surface of the Avon. The bird life is plentiful too – cranes, geese, kookaburras. It is estimated that about 10 per cent of the birds in Kakadu are endemic. Flooded paperbark forests are not like any landscape you will find in Britain: floating towards them in the dawn as a guide points out a white bellied sea eagle perching on a branch is akin to an African safari moment.

The thin bark from paperbark trees is still used by Aboriginal people to wrap food before cooking. Learning more about traditional uses of plants and animals is fascinating. One tour that is available from the excellent operator Odyssey Tours and Safaris is to a community called Cave Hill, 100 kilometres down rust coloured sand roads from Uluru. The landscape of mulga, desert oak and spinifex poking through red sand and the occasional rock formation make the journey alone a treat, especially when you are travelling in one of Odyssey's comfortable four-wheel-drive buses and you stop in the middle of the desert for smoked salmon canapés. Odyssey is a member of 'Savannah Guides', an award-winning network of expert guides, specialising in the Gulf Savannah areas of the north of Australia. Members are described by the Northern Territory Tourist Commission as 'the cream of the crop'. Their tours have an emphasis on Aboriginal culture and nature. (www.savannah-guides.com.au)

At Cave Hill, an Aboriginal elder and Yungajarra speaker named Stanley Douglas, will take

you on a walking tour to look for rocks suitable to be hewn into knives and to taste wild 'bush tomatoes' and figs. As we wander, he tells the dream-time story of the 'seven sisters' and their escape from a mythical and interestingly endowed man called Wati Nuri. Eventually we end up at a low-roofed cave where Stanley's clan have been keeping their family history – in the form of rock paintings – for tens of thousands of years. The palimpsest of ochres, yellows and reds: concentric circles, hand stencils and the occasional animal, is still vivid. This is a living history.

To the southwest of Kakadu, is Katherine where a series of thirteen sandstone gorges forms Nitmiluk National Park. In the wet season, rapids form waves up to two metres high, yet you can still go part-way up the deep chasms in fast boats with expert drivers. Canoeing, camping and swimming are also possible in the dry season. A visitors' centre explains about the local fauna and flora and the history of the area: the land was only returned to the Aboriginal owners in 1989.

Further south, in the dry Red Centre, it is the enormous monolith of Uluru which draws the crowds. This sacred rock rises for 348 metres from the desert floor. The traditional owners would rather tourists didn't climb it but, unfortunately, some irresponsible tour operators still include a climb in itineraries. A better option is to walk around the base, or just venture into one of the



The Great Barrier Reef



Aboriginal bark painting



Looking across the rainforest

'gorges' of the rock, its literally rusting walls (formed from a unique rock: Uluru arkose) changing colour in the morning or evening sun.

There are many stories about Uluru and the traditional Anangu owners at the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. Here you can learn about 'tjukurpa' – the complex system of beliefs and rules which order Aboriginal life. Kata Tjuta (formerly called the Olgas) is another rock formation nearby. These towering, rounded orange rocks form a giant's sculptural garden, where you can walk through peaceful shady valleys. You should definitely spend a few days near Uluru. Those who think it can be done in a day from Alice Springs are mistaken: it is a five-hour drive or an expensive flight, and warrants staying at least one night.

Kata Tjuta and Uluru can both be seen clearly in the distance from Longitude 131, an African-style tented camp with uninterrupted views across the spinifex

NOW... DO IT YOURSELF

Odyssey's five-day Kakadu Discovery Tented Safari (with all meals), plus two nights at Longitude 131 (with all meals, beverages and unique touring) and three nights at Coconut Beach Rainforest Lodge in a Daintree Retreat (with return transfers from Cairns) can be booked through Australian specialist Turquoise Holidays (01494 678 400 www.turquoise-holidays.co.uk) and costs from £2399* per person including return international flights in Economy Class with BA, Qantas and Australian Airlines from Heathrow to Darwin and out from Cairns. (Taxes and domestic flights between Darwin, Ayers Rock and Cairns are also included).

*Based on travel between 16 Apr and 30 Jun 2004 and includes a bonus free night at Coconut Beach. Optional touring costs per person include the Cave Hill Tour from £80, Green Guardians from £19 per tree planting, Canopy Crane Tour from £52 and Odyssey's H2o cruise from £54.