





Fitzroy Island

Amanda Cranston meets Jennie Gilbert, the marine biologist who co-founded the Turtle Rehabilitation centre on Fitzroy Island.

Built on one of Australia's most beautiful tropical islands, the Cairns Turtle Rehabilitation Centre is an added drawcard for tourists visiting Fitzroy Island and one which also aims to educate visitors to the region about the turtles and the dangers they face. The Great Barrier Reef is actually home to six of the world's marine turtle species so rehabilitating injured turtles is an important task. As I sat back and relaxed on the 45 minute ferry over to the island from Cairns, I contemplated my weekend on Fitzroy and meeting up with Jennie Gilbert.

The island's four-star resort is built along the water front just back from the beach; it has 101 rooms, with plans to add another 75, and all have spectacular water views. My room is a smartly furnished one-bedroom self-contained apartment with kitchen, bathroom and balcony, but there is too much to do on the island to stay indoors. There is also a campground on the island and plans underway to build a safari camp with permanent tents on raised platforms. Fitzroy Island owner Doug Gamble purchased the 329h island, which is predominantly a protected national park fringed by coral reef, back in 2010 and is hoping to expand the resort to provide more accommodation options for travellers on different budgets. Fitzroy Island has worked hard over the last couple of years to shake off its image as a party island, now catering for couples, families and genuine travellers in search of paradise.

I go in search of one of the most photographed beaches in Queensland, Nudey Beach. Unlike its name, it isn't full of naked sunbathers but is a picturesque oasis of squeaky white sand, large smooth boulders and clear, aqua blue water. The 1.2km trek through the rainforest requires some rock-hopping and steep ►



PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN MILLER 2011

steps but is definitely worth it. This beautiful spot attracts many snorkellers as it is quite sheltered, but we are lucky enough to have the beach to ourselves so skip the 3.6km walk to the lighthouse. As evening creeps in, we opt for Foxy's Bar on the beach for dinner with its laid-back atmosphere, live band and a glass of wine.

Turtle Rehabilitation Centre

I'm up early to watch the sunrise from the pier and enjoy a buffet breakfast before meeting Jennie. Right on time I am greeted by a vivacious, cheerful woman who introduces herself as Jennie and talks animatedly as she leads me along the beachfront path for a private tour of the centre. I am excited and honoured to meet this passionate and dedicated woman who so selflessly dedicates her time to saving turtles. The Turtle Rehabilitation Centre on Fitzroy Island was built to support the Cairns turtle hospital, giving turtles somewhere to recover after treatment before being released back into the wild. I am lucky enough to meet a few of them and feed one while there. Jennie says the centre was inundated after Cyclone Yasi and the Queensland floods as seagrass beds were washed away. This cut off most of the food supply for the turtles and they started eating things they shouldn't, causing constipation and illness. She says other common causes of injuries include human interference, crocodile attacks, being hit by boats, getting caught in discarded fishing lines and nets, chemicals being washed down the sink and entering the ocean and carelessly discarded plastic bags floating in the water. "When an injured turtle is brought in it is usually sent to the Marlin Coast Vet Hospital first for bloods, x-rays and a check-

up and then transported into town for intensive care before coming to us. We are the fattening-up farm, the last part of rehabilitation for them," Jennie laughs. But running the centre isn't cheap as the food bill alone for the turtles is almost \$2500 a month and the centre receives no government funding at all so is run by a team of dedicated volunteers, vet students and donations. However, Jennie remains optimistic and her passion and enthusiasm for the turtles is infectious. The centre now runs public tours for anyone interested in seeing the work Jennie and her team do and Jennie says donations are always gratefully accepted. •

The writer was a guest of Fitzroy Island

FACT FILE

Getting there

Fitzroy Island Fast Cat Ferry departs Cairns Reef Fleet Terminal three times a day – 8am, 11am and 1.30pm.

Things to do

- Visit Nudey Beach
 - Snorkelling and Diving
 - Kayaking and fishing
 - Walk to the Lighthouse (two hour steep walk and 3.6km round trip)
 - Island walks to the Summit and the Secret Garden
 - Tour of the Turtle Rehabilitation Centre
- Stay at: [\[@\] www.fitzroyisland.com](http://www.fitzroyisland.com)