



Aussie escape



Penny Watson finds a deserted white-sand beach on a Queensland island, goes snorkelling over colourful coral and dines out on kangaroo carpaccio.

On the rocks ... the boulders at the end of Nudey Beach (main photo); scenes from Fitzroy Island in Queensland, Australia.

My green, A4-size island information sheet is at pains to point out that Nudey Beach, where I'm headed on foot, is not a nudie beach or a nudist beach. "It was named after a captain with an unfortunate last name," it reads. And more sternly: "Public nudity is illegal in Queensland".

I'm happy about this. When I set out at the break of dawn, shorts and T-shirt on, running shoes laced, camera on shoulder, water in bag, it didn't occur to me that I might be removing said gear any time soon. Evidently other visitors did.

Alas, I don't have time to dwell on it. The tangle of tropical plants that have until now formed a moody canopy around me are clearing like clouds on a rainy day, and here I am in paradise, not a soul in sight. Bravo Captain Nudey!

Located on the south-east side of Fitzroy Island, tiny Nudey Beach is considered one of the most beautiful in the Great Barrier Reef, and has starred in Tourism Queensland's marketing as the quintessential tropical island. The white beach has been formed by waves crashing and crunching the reef coral over the years, and it is bookended by boulders, polished over time by wind, rain and waves, so that they look like fat grey seals resting in the water. Just being here feels like a big bucket-list tick.

The same can be said for Fitzroy Island as a whole. This unspoiled continental island, 29 kilometres south-east of Cairns in Australia's Far North Queensland, is covered in lush rainforest and woodlands, and surrounded by mangroves and the snorkel-tastic inner reefs of the Great Barrier Reef marine park.

The pristine rainforest-meets-reef environment is listed as a national park and much of it is protected. But there are four established hikes (one of them my 45-minute round-trip walk to Nudey Beach) and plenty of snorkelling and diving. Visitors who make the 45-minute, fast-catamaran ride from Cairns can immerse themselves in a natural world of uniquely Australian fauna and flora.

On my morning walk, I set eyes on dozens of the island's geckos and major skinks. The latter are big, shiny lizard-like creatures, and seeing the tail end of them disappearing under a rock brings snakes to mind. I don't come across the local pythons, non-venomous though they are, but I'm continually enchanted by an array of butterflies, birds and insects. Echidnas, bats and flying foxes call this place home too. And that's just on land.

Technically, you can walk from the beach straight into the coral reef, but it's worth heading a little further out to spot more diverse marine life. At the dive centre I sign up for a glass-bottom boat tour and hire a stinger suit, as much to avoid sunscreen as to avoid the jellyfish, found here from November to May.

On the boat we float over huge cauliflower-like coral known as bobbies, hosts to dozens of different coral species with visually suggestive names like staghorn, brain, spaghetti and elephant ear. They're a sign that the reef is healthy, according to our guide, and are sacred to the local Kobaburra indigenous people. At Shark's Fin Bay – named for the fin-shaped rock on the beach, not the inhabitants of the water – I step backwards overboard and immerse myself among flitting parrotfish, clownfish, moon wrasse and damselfish. ➤



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A blue-spotted stingray shuffles out of the sand below me and jellyfish float by in a dream-like reverie.

Heading back to shore, we stop at white rock, so-called because a yearly flock of migrating Asian terns have bleached it with their poo. This is the spot to see the local turtles, "big ones, like in the Nemo movie", says our guide. "Turtles like deep areas to swim, then shallow areas to eat algae, so the reef is the ideal habitat". We drift slowly, peering through the bottom of the boat, and then, up ahead, we spot the shell of a green sea turtle, bobbing on the water.

There's another way to get up close to these magical creatures. Fitzroy Island is home to a Turtle Rehabilitation Centre, and an afternoon visit is essential. It's a simple set-up, a shed with above-ground, circular swimming pools, but it's practical for treating turtles that have had propellers run over them or ingested plastic bags. Sadly, these are common occurrences, but the turtles look well cared for. Our tour guide feeds them lettuce leaves and we are warned not to put our fingers over the edge. Turtles bite!



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Daytrips are popular, but the resort, on the sheltered western side of the island, makes an overnighter almost essential. Close your mind to the 80s décor in the self-contained apartments and instead look through cockatoo-crowded trees to the water. There's also a pool, cinema and massage therapist on demand.

Sitting at Foxy's Bar & Grill in the evening, the sun going down and a cool beer in hand, it feels strangely like an Asian beach destination. ▶

LINK TO BRITISH PM

The first white man to spot Fitzroy Island was Captain James Cook in 1770. He named it after Augustus Fitzroy, who was the British Prime Minister when Cook's ship, the Endeavour, set sail. It has had various incarnations over the years as a quarantine zone (after an outbreak of smallpox in Asia), a mission for indigenous Australians, a military base during World War 2 and a lighthouse station.

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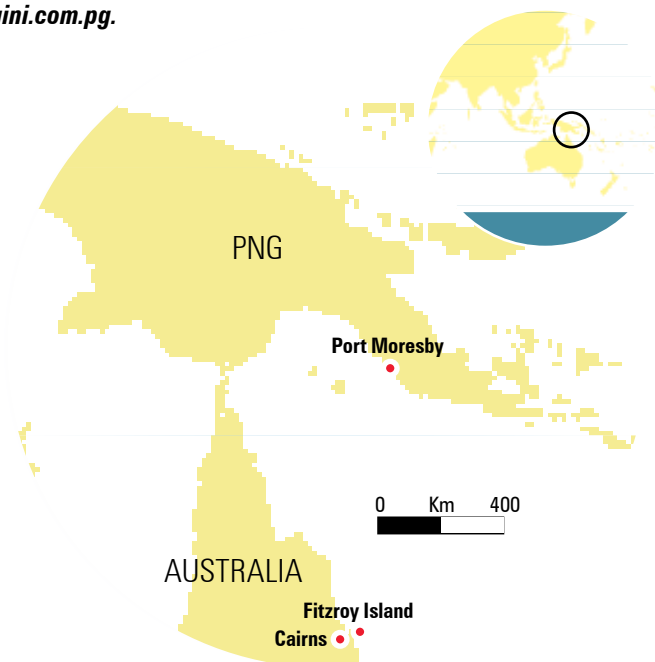


TRAVELLER

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That is, until dinner. The resort's fine dining Zephyr restaurant serves up dishes with ingredients even the keenest Aussie foodie (me) hasn't come across before, including kangaroo carpaccio with quandong (a wild peach) and eye fillet beef with muntrie berry (a native cranberry) jus. It doesn't get much more Australian than that. ■

 **Air Niugini flies between Port Moresby and Cairns daily.**
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NEED TO KNOW

STAY Fitzroy Island Resort includes beachfront cabins, a swim-up pool bar, and dive centre. Camping also available.

COST From PGK320 a night.

TO DO Hikes, kayaking, diving (including introductory pool dives), snorkelling, glass-bottom boat.

MORE INFORMATION fitzroyislandcairns.com

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