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Fitzroy Island: Cairns' other island paradise

Catherine Best Jun 22 2016



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Snorkellers enjoy the waters around Fitzroy Island that teem with fish, soft corals and the occasional turtle.

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The glass-bottom boat slides over the water like a spatula smoothing cerulean icing. Forests of staghorn, brain and spaghetti corals wash underneath us, and colourful angelfish poke through the shallows. The motor slows to a sputter as we pull up alongside a large white-topped granite boulder that looks like a frosted Christmas pudding floating in the water.

Dozens of nesting terns with scissored tails take flight, squawking maniacally at the intrusion.

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"They just poo all over the rock for about a month and turn it into this lovely glowing white," our skipper says. "It glows in the moonlight; you should see it, it lights up like Big Ben." It doesn't quite have the same prestige as London's famous landmark, but Bird Rock is something of an icon on Fitzroy Island. Sitting only a few hundred metres from the jetty in Welcome Bay, where catamarans pull up after making the 45-minute voyage from

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Cairns, the rock is a drawcard for snorkellers, who flap around it like hummingbirds to nectar at high tide.

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Boat to Fitzroy Island. Photo: Tourism and Events Queensland

Fitzroy, about 30 kilometres east of Cairns, is a large continental island of white-washed coral beaches, rainforest and rocky peaks, skirted by fringing reef. While nearby Green Island, a coral cay located in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, has long been a tourist hot spot – attracting about 320,000 visitors a year, of which most are day trippers – Fitzroy's charms are decidedly understated.

The island is much bigger than Green (339 hectares – 97 per cent of which is national park – versus 12), yet it attracts fewer than one-third the number of visitors, most of whom are guests and enjoy exclusive access to the resort facilities. With an intriguing history, striking beaches, marine life-rich waters and bush trails, this lesser-known isle, a stone's throw from the mainland, is a delightful find that appeals to both the active traveller and the flop-and-drop holiday set.

Once considered a backpackers' lair, Fitzroy has undergone a renaissance since bankrupt entrepreneur Joshua Hunt's failed attempt to launch the island as a high-end destination in 2008. Today Fitzroy Island Resort – opened in 2010 – is billed as the only Australian-owned private island resort in the country (part of the Gamble family portfolio) and is marketed as a 4.5-star, affordable destination for families, couples and corporate guests.

On my visit I fit into the couples' category, having left the little ones at home for an indulgent child-free escape. Our second-floor ocean suite overlooks the water and we wake to the sound of gently lapping waves, a chorus of white cockatoos and orange-footed scrubfowl foraging in the gardens. The resort has 99 guest rooms spread over three levels inconspicuously tucked between palm-fringed beach and rainforest, which climbs into the hillside at our back door.

Soon we are face down in the sea, snorkelling around Bird Rock in tepid water teeming with fish and soft corals that jitter in the current. We've arrived at the start of the stinger season and are dressed in full-body condoms made of nylon (think Cathy Freeman circa Sydney 2000); they're cumbersome in the tropics, but unfortunately essential during North Queensland's warmer months. We're on the lookout for turtles (in three years, resident

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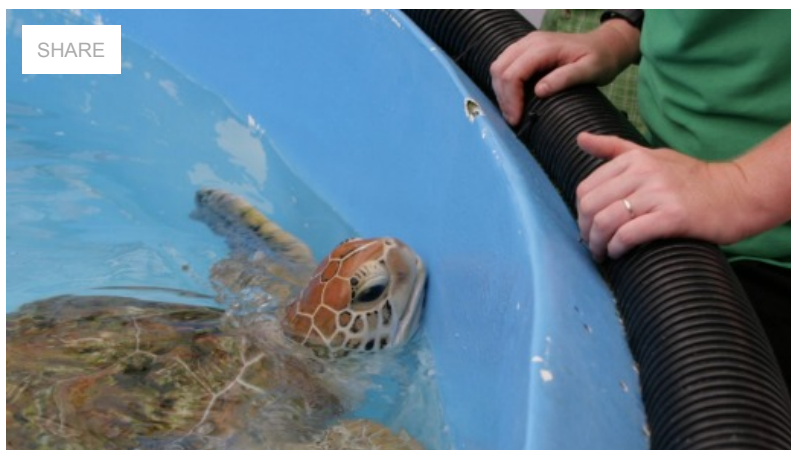
marine biologist Jen Moloney has yet to snorkel here without sighting one), but our eyes obviously aren't so finely tuned and we have to contend with trumpetfish and curious horned unicornfish.

Our turtle encounter will come later – on dry land, minus the stinger suits. Fitzroy Island is home to a Turtle Rehabilitation Centre, where the sick and injured reptiles come to recuperate. Jen leads tours of the facility, which is funded by donations and staffed by volunteers, most days (although the day after we arrived was a TDO – Turtles' Day Off).

We meet Ella, a 15-year-old green sea turtle who came to the centre three years ago after coming off second best in a run in with a boat propeller. There are nine turtles being rehabilitated here but Ella is the only one well enough to be on public display. She laps up the attention, poking her beak out of the water to size up the gawping spectators, but we are warned to keep our distance: turtles like to bite and one of the volunteers has the battle scars to prove it – she once lost a thumb (fortunately it was reattached).



An aerial of the shore. Photo: Tourism and Events Queensland



Ella at Turtle Rehab. Photo: Catherine Best

Near the rehabilitation centre is a camping ground, managed by the resort, which marks the start of the Lighthouse and Summit tracks. One morning we rise just before 6am to tackle the 3.6-kilometre circuit before the heat of the day. The path climbs unrelentingly through rainforest and open woodland, before emerging above windswept casuarina trees and granite outcrops at the summit, 269 metres above sea level.

Continuing north-east, the track descends 600 metres through woodland and past World War II-era ruins to an old lighthouse tower and light keeper's residence. During the war Fitzroy Island

was used as a radar station to monitor shipping and air traffic approaching Cairns. It was also an important navigation site for vessels passing through the surrounding reefs, which are littered with wrecks.

More than a century earlier, Fitzroy was used as a small pox quarantine station to screen Chinese immigrants descending on the Queensland gold fields, and later as an Aboriginal mission. Many Chinese graves are said to remain on the island today (victims of poor conditions rather than disease) and it's hard to imagine a more idyllic resting place.



The summit rises above the beach. Photo: Catherine Best

When it's time to find a place to rest our legs, there's none better than Nudey Beach, a shimmering stretch of powder sand and anaemic fingers of smooth dead coral, which just happens to be one of Australia's most acclaimed beaches. A 20-minute walk through rainforest from the resort, Nudey is the island's top pick for sunbathing and swimming – just don't be tempted to get your gear off. Skinny dipping is frowned upon, and a footnote in the room compendium warns visitors thus: "Nudey Beach in name only: public nudity is ILLEGAL in Queensland. Offenders will be prosecuted."

For those in the know, there is another, more secluded beach accessible by kayak. This time the name doesn't lie: Hidden Beach is only exposed during king low tides, consequently it's only the most impeccably timed visitors who get to sink their toes into the sand here.

As the ocean makes its retreat at the end of the day, taking with it the day trippers and a fair portion of the staff, Fitzroy is enveloped by a twilight tranquillity. A century and a half ago the Chinese were desperate to get off this island. In this setting I can't imagine why.

TRIP NOTES

MORE INFORMATION

queensland.com

GETTING THERE

Qantas, Jetstar and Virgin Australia fly to Cairns from Sydney and Melbourne from about \$400 return. See qantas.com.au, jetstar.com.au, virginaustralia.com.au. Return ferry transfers cost

\$75 for adults and \$38 for children aged three to 14.

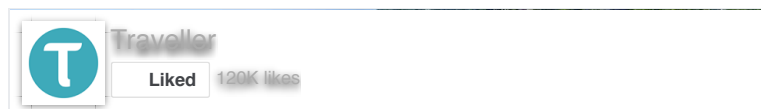
STAYING THERE

Fitzroy Island Resort is the only resort on the island, and has a range of accommodation options, from studio rooms to self-contained ocean suites and two-bedroom beachfront cabins. Base-level studio rooms start at \$155 a night, room only. See fitzroyisland.com.

Catherine Best was a guest of Fitzroy Island Resort.



Dusk at the beach. Photo: Catherine Best



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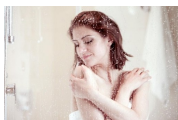


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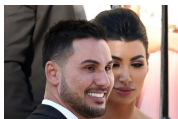


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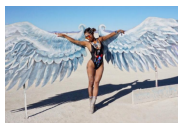


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