

SIR DAVID ATTENBOROUGH called it one of the most extraordinary places on the planet. Stretching 2300km and boasting almost 3000 individual coral reefs and more than 1000 islands, the Great Barrier Reef has earned its rightful place on travel wish-lists the world over.

This diver’s paradise is home to myriad marine creatures and, above the surface,

increasing environmental awareness is inspiring efforts to protect the reef and its surrounds.

THE GATEWAY CITY

Cairns, a great base from which to explore the Reef, is young in terms of tourism years. The sugar-cane industry was its driving force until the opening of the

international airport in 1984, which ushered in a fresh appreciation of this gateway to the tropics.

Today, the Tropical North Queensland hub in the north-east of Australia is having another moment. There has been a surge of new dining and bar launches in the past five years, as well as the first five-star hotel opening in two decades: Riley,

# GREAT EXPECTATIONS

There are many ways to enjoy the jewel of Tropical North Queensland, the world-famous Great Barrier Reef.

STORY **SAMERA KAMALEDDINE**



This page from top: Vlasoff Cay; a turtle in the clear waters. Opposite: Kuranda Range Road cuts through the lush rainforest, near Cairns.





a Crystalbrook Collection resort, takes cues from the “responsible luxury” travel trend. It’s the perfect blend of indulgence and playfulness, with a nod to environmental kindness through paperless check-in, recycled wooden room-keys and the absence of plastic drinking bottles and straws.

But perhaps its most applauded offering is its rooftop bar, Rocco with a big splash of Mediterranean and a little nip of Moroccan, the share-style menu is every bit as good as the 270-degree views.

Beef is sourced from Crystalbrook’s own cattle station, about 220km west of Cairns, and features in Rocco’s signature beef brisket with mustard, caramelised onion and garlic bread. But don’t limit yourself – you’ll also find Moroccan meatballs in spiced tomato sauce, scallops with cauliflower puree and sliced pork sausage, and sumac calamari with caramelised limes. Washing it down with a Greenfields Spritz (vodka, elderflower, soda and sprigs of fresh rosemary) is a very good idea.

SO MUCH TO SEA

Tour boats are lined up at Cairns Marlin Marina, and one of the newest operators to join the ranks is Dreamtime Dive & Snorkel. Run by indigenous rangers – traditional custodians of the Great Barrier Reef – this trip takes you to two outer reef sites, and weaves indigenous story-telling into the eco-certified experience.

Dreamtime’s creation story of the reef has been passed down for tens of thousands of



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years, and there’s no better place to hear it. You’ll see demonstrations of traditional musical instruments, go snorkelling and diving (with turtles and reef sharks, if you’re lucky) and feed red snapper.

For an experience that takes in reef and rainforest, take a 45-minute ferry ride from Cairns to Fitzroy Island. Go for the day or stay overnight at the family-friendly Fitzroy Island Resort, but whatever you do, take your hiking shoes.



Dense canopies of eucalypt, ferns and vines line bush-walking tracks that lead you to the lighthouse or down to the famous Nudey Beach (known for being one of Australia’s most picturesque beaches, not for nudity).

A tour of the Turtle Rehabilitation Centre is an inspiring addition to the Fitzroy itinerary. The close-up look at the work local marine biologists and volunteers have been doing for the past 19 years is eye-opening.

At this self-dubbed ‘fat farm’, injured and malnourished sea turtles from the region spend up to 18 months recovering from, predominantly, plastic ingestion. The centre, in turn, raises much-needed awareness about plastic disposal.

Back on the mainland, the marina accommodates more than just super-yachts and tour operators. You can also sample fresh delicacies at a Cairns foodie institution: the docked fishing-trawler-come-restaurant, *Prawn Star*. Order from a

Clockwise from top: Welcome Bay on Fitzroy Island; Prawn Star docked at Cairns; Nudey Beach on Fitzroy Island.



simple menu of fresh prawns, oysters, crab and crayfish.

THE ROAD TO PARADISE

From Cairns, head along the Bruce Highway, towards Mission Beach, and take in views of lush rainforest, cane fields and mountains along the way.

An hour in, Josephine Falls is the unexpected attraction hiding in a turn-off. Park the car and follow the sounds of gushing water, through a picture-book forest. An easy 700m walk lands you at the waterfall that tumbles from Queensland’s highest peak, Mount Bartle Frere, and the popular swimming hole beneath it.

Keep an eye out for cassowaries on the final leg of this road trip, which takes you to Bedarra Island’s helicopter pad in the coastal village of Mission Beach. Then it’s time to leave the mainland for a stay in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

The island is less than 10km offshore, so the helicopter ride is short and sweet. Then you’re at the Bedarra resort, owned by husband-and-wife team Kerri-Ann and Sam Charlton, who bought the 45ha retreat after it was devastated by Cyclone Yasi in 2011.

Having lived on Bedarra as a child, Sam knew the secrets of the island, including the



Clockwise from top left: Cottage Cafe at Mission Beach; checking out Mission Beach; a starfish on the Great Barrier Reef; a diver explores the reef sea life.

freshwater spring, which is now used for the showers and to fill the pools.

The Charltons aim to run the resort with sustainably in mind. There’s an emphasis on waste reduction, recycling and power consumption, and the number of villas has been reduced from 16 to 10.

It’s five-star luxury without the pretence, says the couple, and it definitely feels like it – from the Ministry of Sound *Chillout Sessions* on the sound system in my villa, to the all-inclusive treats (help yourself to a bottle of champagne or a cheese platter and take it back to your own private plunge

pool or deck area, no bar tab required).

Access to the glorious Great Barrier Reef is easy from the resort’s private beach. For up-close-and-personal encounters with the fringing reef, use of sea kayaks and stand-up paddleboards is complimentary. Half- or full-day charters to explore the outer Great Barrier Reef – about 37km away – can be organised, and come complete with a gourmet hamper.

It’ll be a struggle to say goodbye to this magical, luxurious place – and to the natural wonders of the Great Barrier Reef. [tropicalnorthqueensland.org.au](http://tropicalnorthqueensland.org.au)



## Eat

### OCHRE RESTAURANT

On the south end of the Cairns marina your taste buds will be treated to a menu centred on Australian ingredients. Think black mussels in lemon-myrtle sauce, and emu wontons. [ochrerestaurant.com.au](http://ochrerestaurant.com.au)

### SALT HOUSE

This Cairns restaurant serves up a taste of the tropics through local and seasonal produce, with a side of mountain and ocean views. Choose from aged beef or flavour-packed seafood. [salthouse.com.au](http://salthouse.com.au)

### NU NU

For a top beachfront culinary experience, head to the cool vibes of Palm Cove, a 30-minute drive from Cairns. Nu Nu's four-course degustation menu, matched with wines, is modern Australian cuisine at its sunniest. [nunu.com.au](http://nunu.com.au)

## Sleep

### RILEY

Hamptons-feel styling, chic lagoon pool, three delicious on-site restaurants and an easy walk to Cairns' main attractions make this the ultimate base for a reef adventure. [crystalbrookcollection.com/riley](http://crystalbrookcollection.com/riley)

## Play

### ELEME DAY SPA

All that heat and adventure calls for rest and recovery. Try the Curative Crystalus meditative massage that incorporates healing stones. [crystalbrookcollection.com/eleme-spa](http://crystalbrookcollection.com/eleme-spa)

### HELI PICNIC AT VLASSOFF CAY

You'll fly over the reef before descending onto your own private cay for a champagne breakfast and swim. [gbrhelicopters.com.au](http://gbrhelicopters.com.au)



From top: Bedarra Island's resort; Fitzroy Island; Nu Nu Restaurant in Palm Cove.



## Getting there

Air New Zealand offers seasonal non-stop flights to Cairns from Auckland, between late March and October, with connections across the domestic network.



- Contact Centre  
0800 737 000
- Holidays Travel Brokers  
0800 737 767
- [airnewzealand.co.nz](http://airnewzealand.co.nz)

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