

RETURNING TURTLE POWER

ANGELA SAURINE discovers an affordable, family-friendly resort fringed by the Great Barrier Reef, just 45 minutes off the coast of Cairns



A turtle swimming off Fitzroy Island



Left: Foxy's Bar on Fitzroy Island
Right: Angela and Oliver, in his turtle t-shirt, on the ferry to Fitzroy Island



Turtle was one of my son, Oliver's, first words. It's not surprising, really. Every time I put him in his car seat, I would hand him a soft turtle toy he was given, and he would clutch it tightly and grin. At night, he would giggle as he watched a wind-up mechanical toy turtle swim around in the bath. Another has pride of place on the bathmat, and we have accumulated several children's books about the reptiles. Now here he is, peering over a tank, watching wide-eyed as a real life green sea turtle paddles around in circles, occasionally poking her head out of the water to take a breath. Bit by bit, he is learning about the world and its creatures, and it's magical to see.

There's plenty to learn here at the Cairns Turtle Rehabilitation Centre on Fitzroy Island – not just for toddlers. The facility, our marine biologist guide Azri Saparwan says, is not a centre for alcoholic turtles. Rather it is a place where turtles like Julz come to rest as they are cared for and fed before being returned to the wild. Azri points out a puncture wound she has on the back of her shell, likely the result of a speargun or similar weapon. Then he points to another, as well as a wound on her neck, which is also slowly healing. Azri says sick and injured turtles are usually found by tourists and taken by rangers to a sister

centre on the mainland, which is more like the intensive care unit. Nicknamed 'the fat farm', this is the last place they go before they are released. On average, turtles spend 18 months here. Julz weighed just 12kg when she arrived, but is now back up to 34kg, and will be leaving soon.

There are six turtles at the centre when we visit, each costing between \$3,000 and \$8,000 to rehabilitate. Unlike Crush and his pals in the animated movie *Finding Nemo*, Azri says turtles are solitary animals, so there is only one per tank. They include shy Shelby, whose shell was damaged by a boat propeller that also left her back flippers paralysed; Portia, who was found in Port Douglas suffering from floater syndrome after ingesting plastic; and Lou, who lost two flippers after getting caught in a discarded fishing net.

Azri has also named many of the wild turtles that have made their home around the island – of which there are

many. "I still feel every encounter with a turtle is very special," he says. "When they first hatch they have a one in 1,000 chance of surviving until they get to the ocean."

While it's hard to say exactly how many turtles there are on the Great Barrier Reef due to migration patterns, numbers are believed to be growing. But the gender ratio is uneven, thanks to climate change. A turtle's sex is determined by temperature. According to the WWF, recent research has found that the northern Great Barrier Reef's green sea turtle hatchlings are almost all female, with males outnumbered by at least 116 to one. If the trend continues, they could become extinct.

Azri also works with the Reef Restoration Foundation to harvest coral to help regenerate the reef. Outside the centre, he points in the direction of some rocks near a nursery of 20 'trees' with 100 pieces of baby coral ready to be replanted. Azri has also worked ►




Left: Nudey Beach
Right: Oliver loved climbing on the laundry bags on the ferry to Fitzroy Island

room, table tennis and a playroom. You can also hire kayaks and stand-up paddleboards from the Dive and Adventure Centre, hike to lookouts and do glass bottom boat tours, cruises to the Outer Great Barrier Reef and enjoy scenic and sunset sailing trips.

There are only two places to dine, which is just as I like it. The main restaurant, Zephyr, is open for breakfast and dinner. Executive chef Mohamed Abdell serves modern Australian dishes influenced by his Egyptian background and travels around the world, including stints in the kitchens of several Four Seasons hotels. The beachfront Foxy's Bar & Grill is a more casual option, ideal for families, with bingo nights, trivia and live music throughout the week.

Without doubt, the island's most Instagrammable spot is Nudey Beach, around 20 minutes' walk from the resort. The path isn't pram-friendly, so I leave Oliver to swim in the pool with his dad while I make the trek through the rainforest. Seconds after catching sight of the small white beach, I am diving into the refreshingly cool water. "I don't want to leave!" I find myself crying aloud, as I affix my snorkel and mask. That feeling is only magnified as I float above the colourful coral and tropical fish reassured that, while it is undoubtedly under pressure from climate change, the reef is still alive and well in many places.

On the final morning, as we are standing at the jetty waiting for our return ferry to Cairns, we spot another turtle gliding along in the clear turquoise ocean below. It lifts its flipper out of the water fleetingly, giving us what feels like a perfectly timed goodbye wave.

The writer was a guest of Fitzroy Island Resort and Tourism Tropical North Queensland. 

as a volunteer on similar projects in Singapore and the Maldives. Fitzroy Island Resort was a pioneer in Australia when it started the project in 2017, with plans to get guests involved in planting coral in early 2020. "If you want to conserve something you need to love it," Azri says. "To love it you need to understand it; to understand it you need to do it."

After our tour, we wander back along the shady path to our home for the night, Fitzroy Island Resort, which is the only resort on the island. Just a 45-minute ferry ride from Marlin Marina in Cairns, with studio rooms from \$145 per night, it feels like a bit of a find. This is the place where locals go for weekend camping trips, or to take visitors when they're in town. It's not just possible, but common, to swim with turtles just off the beach in front of the resort, metres from your room.

There's plenty to keep kids entertained, with a movie theatre, games



STAYING THERE

There are 99 guest rooms and suites at Fitzroy Island Resort, ranging from studios to a luxurious four-bedroom penthouse. The six 3-star Butterfly Bungalows are great for families, accommodating up to two adults and three children with a queen bed, bunk beds and a sofa bed. Book the return ferry at the time of booking.

MORE
fitzroyisland.com

Baby to Toddler Show

The event for your pregnancy,
baby and toddler



The Baby to Toddler Show is Australia's newest consumer parenting event featuring everything to do with pregnancy and baby, through to the toddler years, providing new and expectant parents with the very best products and advice to help them on their journey into parenthood.

Event Dates:

20-22 March 2020, Brisbane Convention & Exhibition Centre

17-19 July 2020, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne

18-20 September 2020, ICC Sydney, Darling Harbour

babytotoddlershow.com.au

Calling all baby and toddler brands!

If you're in the business of all things baby or toddler we'd love to hear from you. Join us to showcase your brand and retail your products and be part of Australia's most exciting new parenting event.

Email Mabel Vallario at mabel.vallario@talk2.media or contact 0403 873 747.

