

# Queensland Cairns

AUSTRALIA'S NORTHEAST COAST IS THE ONLY PLACE ON THE PLANET WHERE TWO WORLD HERITAGE SITES—THE LUSH RAIN FORESTS OF THE DAINTREE REGION AND THE GREAT BARRIER REEF—MEET, GIVING TRAVELERS THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS  
**BY CLAIRE SCOBIE**  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL DYMOND



LUSH LIFE The Wawu-karra waterfall on the grounds of the Daintree Eco Lodge is a sacred site to the Kuku Yalanji people.

STRETCHING FROM THE CORAL SEA DEEP INTO QUEENSLAND'S HINTERLAND, THE DAINTREE IS THE WORLD'S OLDEST TROPICAL RAIN FOREST, DATING BACK MORE THAN 135 MILLION YEARS



WILD THINGS Clockwise from above: A Boyd's forest dragon; Cape Tribulation scenery; a native guide at the Daintree Eco Lodge. Opposite: On the banks of the Mossman River.

cuscus) as well as half of its bird species and 58 percent of its butterflies, among them the spangled metallic-blue Ulysses butterfly, the region's icon.

These creatures also come with comforts, in the form of two acclaimed resorts: Silky Oaks Lodge in the Mossman Gorge,

had half expected my first taste of tropical Queensland to involve licking the rear end of an ant. And why not? One reads a lot about this curious culinary staple of treks through Daintree National Park—the ants' gooey green bottoms apparently leave a sour, lemony tang on the tongue, not to mention a hefty dose of Vitamin C. But my introduction to the region came in the form of an entirely less palatable creature—a *minjin*.

Aboriginal lore speaks of a feral, catlike animal that once roamed these hills. Today's *minjin* is certainly a terrifying beast: a jungle swing created by bungee-jumping pioneer A. J. Hackett that sees you strapped to a harness and hoisted 45 meters in the air for a heart-stopping whoosh down a steel cable. Why I subjected myself to the Minjin Swing, located off the Captain Cook Highway just outside Cairns, I can't say for sure—I suppose Queensland's far north just has a way of bringing out your adventurous side. But I can report that, once my ride was over and my screams had subsided, solid ground had never felt so good.

Not that the dark, moist forest floor of the nearby Daintree is without its own hazards. If wait-a-while vines can catch on clothing or rip skin, they're nothing compared to the *gympie-gympie* tree, said to be the world's most painful stinging plant. It's a wonder that for at least 30,000 years the area's Aboriginal inhabitants—the Kuku Yalanji—survived when 75 percent of the rain forest's fruits are toxic. Plus, the dark waters of the mangrove-fringed Daintree River and its creeks are filled with crocodiles, and if they don't get you—I'm exaggerating here, but attacks do happen—there's always the chance you'll be head-butted by a cassowary.

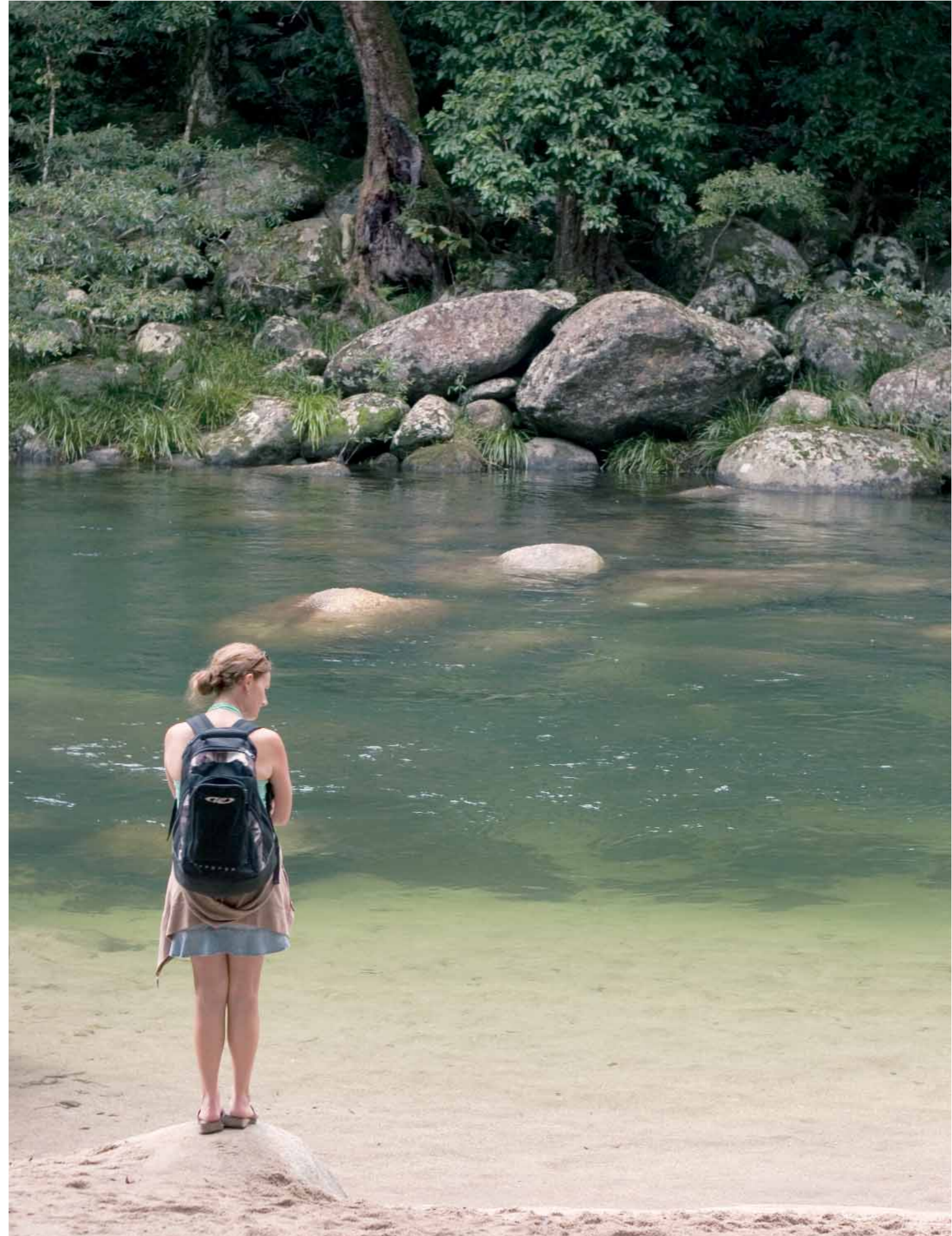
So yes, the Daintree's primeval beauty has a fearful element; but it also fills visitors with a profound respect and awe. Stretching from the Coral Sea deep into Queensland's hinterland, the national preserve encompasses the world's oldest tropical rain forest, a vast Jurassic Park that dates back more than 135 million years. It is home to at least 390 species of rare or endangered flora, including the world's biggest collection of primitive ferns and flowering plants, some of which predate *Tyrannosaurus rex*. And while the Daintree takes up less than one percent of the

Australian landmass, it harbors a third of the continent's marsupials (my favorites are the Lumholtz tree kangaroo and the slothlike spotted

and the Daintree Eco Lodge, a family-run affair set well into the rain forest, just south of the Daintree River. My partner Aden and I checked into the latter; when we arrived, rain was falling like a soft silver mist. As I crossed the wooden walkways connecting the 15 tree-house-style villas, a wompoo fruit dove sounded above like an operatic tenor. These brightly colored birds are attracted to the blossoms of the ylang-ylang trees that at night engulf the property with a sweet, heady perfume. As the signature scent of the lodge, ylang-ylang also burns in the rooms and infuses massage oils.

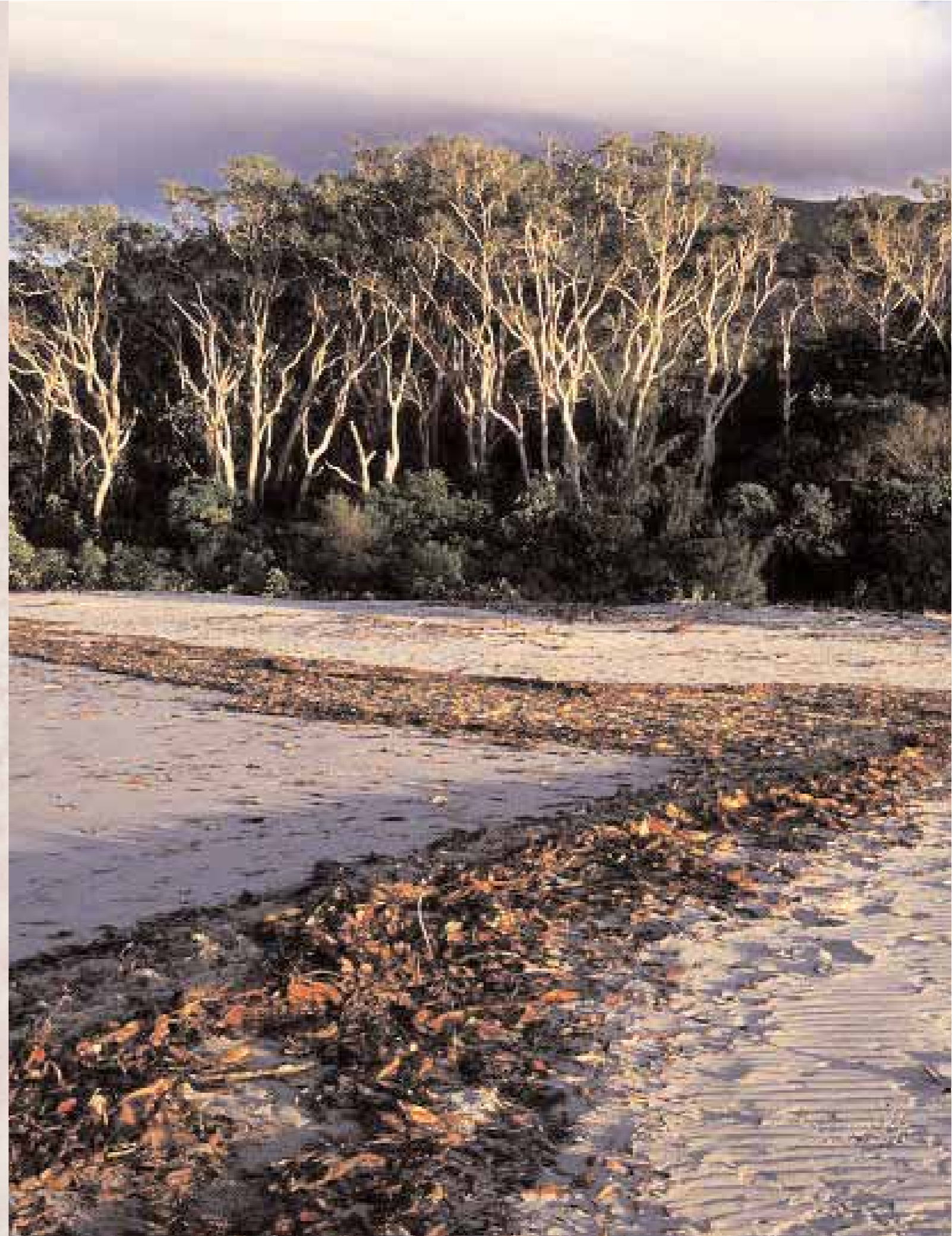
On site is a small but enchanting waterfall that is sacred to the local Aborigines, who call it Wawu-karrba—"healing of the spirit." It adds to the lodge's palpable sense of indigenous culture, something that could have come across as artificial, but here proves authentic and seamless. Tribal elders have blessed and named each of the villas; ours, a spa villa with a Jacuzzi on the balcony, was called Bakamu, after the wompoo fruit dove. A dazzling display of Aboriginal pointillist art fills the cavernous restaurant, and you're as likely to find the *quandong* (a native plum) in your exotic "rainforest" salad as you are to have it rubbed on your scalp during a spa treatment.

When Terry and Cathy Maloney bought the property in 1995, they were unaware of the significance of the waterfall. After stumbling across ancient markers on some of their trees—indicating that an Aboriginal trail had once passed through—Terry started to make inquiries. "At first, no one would say anything," he recalls. "Then a trust developed as we got to know the Walkers." The Walkers are a prominent Kuku Yalanji family; Wilma Walker, the clan's matriarch, first met the Maloneys when she came to the lodge to sell some of her dilly bags, or *balji*, which are handspun from palm fibers and traditionally used for gathering bush tucker or carrying babies. Since then, Terry and





BLISS IN THE BUSH  
Stones painted  
with aboriginal  
motifs, at the  
Daintree Eco  
Lodge's spa.  
Opposite: A beach  
on Cow Bay  
offers a tranquil  
picnic spot with  
views across the  
Coral Sea.





AS WE CLIMBED UP TO THE SACRED WATERFALL, OUR GUIDE, JUAN, TOLD US, "I USED TO SING OUT AND TELL THE SPIRITS I WAS COMING. NOW THEY KNOW MY SMELL, I DON'T NEED TO SING"

Cathy have worked hard to forge close links with the local community; a picture of Wilma Walker now hangs in each of their guest rooms, and her 27-year-old grandson, Juan, works for the lodge, guiding rain-forest walks and teaching Aboriginal art classes.

**LOCAL COLOR** Clockwise from above: A flower bowl at the Daintree Eco Lodge's spa; Nana Walker; be cautious of cassowaries. Opposite: Villas at the Daintree Eco Lodge.

BORN AROUND 1929 TO A KUKU YALANJI woman and an Indian laborer brought over to work on the sugar-cane plantations of Mossman, "Nana" Walker, as she's affectionately known, remembers the Daintree before Europeans settled here in any number. As a young girl she ran around naked, sleeping on bark under a *gunyah* (shelter) fashioned from saplings and thatch.

I met her at a gourmet barbecue held to mark the launch of the lodge's first CD, which combines the didgeridoo with the sounds of the rain forest. On some tracks you can hear Nana's voice speaking in her native tongue. Tonight, she was dressed in cherry-red, her hair flecked with gray and eyes darting like a bird; she exuded a great generosity of spirit. Taking my hand in hers, she began talking about her childhood.

"There were no cars then. No drinking or smoking. Life was very free—nothing to worry about and plenty of food." Nana's chores included foraging for cycad fruits and berries in the forest; using her dilly bag as a sieve, she would leech out the toxins in the waterfall. It was painstaking work and could take up to a day to make a hairy yam edible and ready for the cooking fire.

When she was about seven, Nana's life changed dramatically with the arrival of Mossman's first missionary, Sister Hetherington from England. In full habit, the nun walked the 70 kilometers from Cairns through thick jungle; not long afterward, a box of clothes arrived. "They dress us kids up first, and then the ladies," Nana recalled.

Its isolation and inhospitable terrain had spared the Daintree from the first wave of white settlers. By the 1870s, however, British colonists had begun to scout the area, hoping to find gold in the wide mouth of the Daintree River. They were to be disappointed, but soon timber-getters had moved in and started

large-scale felling. As towns built up, Catholic and Lutheran missionaries followed. During the 1900s much of the coastal rain forest was cleared, replaced by the monoculture of sugar cane, still a thriving industry.

Until 1967, Australian Aborigines were wards of the state. In line with the assimilation policies of the time, children with fairer skin were taken from their darker mothers and brought up in government-run foster homes or orphanages. These children, who would famously become known as the Stolen Generation, were denied contact with their families and forbidden to speak their own language.

Nana was a light-skinned baby, but when the *bullyman* (police) came looking for her, her mother hid her in a dilly bag.

Had she been taken, Nana would never have sat among her elders listening to ancient stories or learning the lore of the rain forest. Nor would she have married Norman Walker, to whom she was promised in a traditional smoking ceremony. Together they raised 12 children on the Daintree Mission. Their backyard was the creek up to the Wawu-karriba waterfall. As a sacred site forbidden to men—a transgression once punishable by spearing—this waterfall is where Kuku Yalanji women collected medicinal plants and bathed to cure fertility problems.

I visited the falls the next morning with Juan Walker, Nana's grandson. As he drew us deeper into the forest, he explained that he had to ask permission from both his living elders and ancestral guardians before taking guests to the site.

In his hand he carried one of his grandmother's satchel-sized dilly bags. "This one took her 10 days to make," he said. "They take a lot of work—and patience." Intimately familiar with the forest, Juan then reeled off a list of extraordinary facts about every epiphyte, orchid, and creature we passed, including a Boyd's forest dragon, perched motionless on a low branch. At one point he crouched down a safe distance from a wait-a-while vine. "These can catch crayfish or pull witchetty grubs out of tree trunks," he paused, chuckling. "They also make great straps. Granddad used to flog us with one."

As we climbed up to the waterfall, Juan said, "I used to sing out and tell the spirits I was coming. Now they know my smell, I don't need to sing."

Still today only women are allowed into the pool at the base of the cascade. All around natural ocher seeped from the rocks. (Continued on page 121)

## ASSAM

*(Continued from page 83)* After smearing a palette of colour—orange, chestnut, and cinnamon-red—on my forearm I sat on a large boulder for some moments of reflection. When I descended back down to the lodge, I felt curiously calm from the inside out.

The Maloney's daughter, Kelda, who runs the lodge's spa, has no doubts about the potency of the falls. "You go up there and time doesn't exist," she told me. The same could be said of her signature treatment, the Walbul-Walbul ("butterfly"). This two-hour massage and hydrotherapy session takes place in one of the spa's four treatment rooms. After I lay down on a polished wooden table in the shape of an ylang-ylang leaf, a cloth infused with an essential-oil blend was placed over my eyes and the room was "smudged" with lemon wardnee leaf, a ritual said to cleanse the spirit. I was gently pummelled for an hour, before being scrubbed with fine granules of wattle seed and coated in warm, sticky clay. Left to ferment in a cocoon of warm towels, I was eventually rinsed off under a six-headed Vichy shower. "Blissful" doesn't even come close to describing the experience. You could have whipped me with a wait-a-while vine, and I don't think I would have noticed.

**IF GOING ON A SUNSET CRUISE ON** the Daintree River for some croc-spotting doesn't get you close enough to northern Queensland's abundant wildlife, it's less than an hour to Port Douglas, where a score of charter boats leave daily for the Great Barrier Reef—Queensland's other World Heritage Site. So with bags stuffed with Aboriginal-inspired spa products, I joined up with my friend Julia and relocated to P.D., as the locals call it.

Once a sleepy fishing village, P.D. is now a low-rise bohemian-chic town devoted to tourism, sailing, and fine dining. You drive in past dozens of resorts with manicured lawns and smart white entrances, only to walk down a main street filled with shops selling resort wear and hemp clothes, massage centers, and fish restaurants. Yet for all this—and the half-million visitors Port Douglas attracts each year—Four Mile Beach was virtually empty, the sand covered with natural dot-paintings made by a colony of tiny sand crabs.

Swimming here may be delicious in

Australian's winter months, but during the summer wet season—anywhere from November to May, when the humidity thickens the air to syrup—the box jellyfish swim closer to shore. On every beach north of Cairns are prominent signs warning tourists about the dangers, together with emergency bottles of vinegar: one of the few things that neutralizes the jellyfishes' venomous sting.

Yet getting acquainted with most other marine life is a delight, as I discovered on a lazy snorkel over Opal Reef. This was the third and farthest offshore reef on our day trip with Calypso Cruises—and the most pristine. We chose Calypso for its boats, which had spacious decks and carried a maximum of 60 passengers; after joining an expertly guided scuba diving group in the morning, I opted for snorkeling in the afternoon. As I floated above trees of coral in indigo and electric blue, I came face to face with a clownfish that could have been Nemo's double before nearly colliding with the pouting lips of a giant grouper. "Oh, you met Wally," the dive master informed me afterward. "He's a regular here."

Our final day in Port Douglas was spent at the Sunday markets held on the grassy lawns of Anzac Park, followed by a cool beer at the nearby Court House hotel. These craft markets and the jumble of buildings at the jetty—reminiscent of a Jamaican port—give this resort town a laidback village atmosphere. Stalls selling organic macadamias jostled for space among local woodturners, tables of woven jewelry, and homespun Indian skirts and saris. Didgeeridoo players and a wandering bush poet provided the entertainment. And when the midday heat sizzled like a firecracker, the palm trees overlooking the ocean provided a cool respite for a homemade mango ice cream.

P.D. is also the ideal base from which to join a guided safari group up to Cape Tribulation National Park. With up to 70 vehicles a day, some resembling small tanks bespattered with red dust, the road gets busy, especially at the cable-ferry crossing over the Daintree River. This antiquated affair takes around 20 minutes but serves as an important psychological barrier between the tame south and wild north. After the paved road runs out at Cape Tribulation, you're on the Bloomfield Track, a rugged, 4WD-

## DAINTREE

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Rather than join a group, Julia and I decided to hire our own car and pack a picnic lunch. We ended up at a tranquil

spot on Cow Bay, not far from the ferry crossing. It overlooked the Coral Sea, where Captain James Cook, aboard the *Endeavour*, ran aground on the reef one starry night in 1770, an event that inspired him to name the area Cape Tribulation. Watched over by the mist-wreathed Thornton Peak and Mount Sorrow, this 17,000-hectare preserve is home to the rare blue-necked cassowary, a flightless bird standing up to two meters tall and a crucial link in the ecosystem, dispersing the seeds of more than 70 species of trees. There's also a smattering of B&Bs, cafés, and rain-forest boardwalks.

On the way back we stopped at the Mossman Gorge, a few kilometers from the sugar town where Nana Walker was born. Back then she would no doubt have scrambled over the large boulders and swum in the icy river. These days, tourists are advised not to test the waters, as strong currents have claimed more than one life in recent years.

## Fact File

Northern Queensland

### GETTING THERE

Qantas's budget carrier, **Jetstar** ([jetstar.com](http://jetstar.com)), flies twice daily between Singapore and Cairns; from there, it's a two-hour drive to Daintree National Park along the Captain Cook Highway. **Cathay Pacific** ([cathaypacific.com](http://cathaypacific.com)) operates a Hong Kong-Cairns service (either via Brisbane or nonstop) every day except Sundays. Cairns-based **Sugarland Car Rentals** ([sugarland.com.au](http://sugarland.com.au)) has a range of vehicles for hire.



### WHERE TO STAY

**Daintree Eco Lodge & Spa** (20 Daintree Rd., Daintree; 61-7/4098-6100; [daintree-ecolodge.com.au](http://daintree-ecolodge.com.au); doubles from US\$###) lives up to its name with 15 eco-friendly villas set on stilts amid the rain forest. At the acclaimed **Silky Oaks Lodge** (Finlayale Rd., Mossman; 61-7/4098-1666; [silkyoakslodge.com.au](http://silkyoakslodge.com.au); doubles from US\$###), 50 well-appointed "treehouses" and riverside cottages set the stage for tropical luxury.

Right on the water, **Thirty-one Degrees** (61-2/9332-2011; Oak Beach; [contemporaryhotels.com.au](http://contemporaryhotels.com.au); about US\$510 a night) is a fisherman's cottage turned sleek two-bedroom beach house.

### TOURS

**Tony's Tropical Tours** (61-7/4099-3230; [tropicaltours.com.au](http://tropicaltours.com.au)) offers treks designed by veteran Daintree guide Tony Healey. For Great Barrier Reef excursions, contact Port Douglas's family-owned **Calypso Reef Charters** (61-7/4099-6999; [calypsocharters.com.au](http://calypsocharters.com.au)).

As I followed a paved footpath among moss-clad umbrella and fig trees, I reflected on how much—and how little—had changed. This wet, sensual, dizzyingly green swath of biodiversity is a living connection to the time when dinosaurs roamed the earth. Its ancient mystery and life-nurturing potency still have the ability to touch and transform.

Even Hollywood thinks so. As we were leaving the gorge, we were told Tom Hanks was floating around between takes of *The Pacific*, a big-budget HBO miniseries about three U.S. marines fighting the Japanese in World War II. The Queensland rain forest was apparently as close as the producers could get to the impenetrable jungles of Guadalcanal.

I wonder what Nana Walker would have thought about that. Probably much the same as her view on tourists who flock to the Daintree. "They a nuisance. They ask too much questions, they wanna know everything." ☺