

DESTINATION: DAINTREE

TONI KRASICKI GOES BUSH IN A BID TO EXPERIENCE A REAL TASTE OF AUSSIE CULTURE.

TRYING TO GO TO SLEEP in a 135 million-year-old rainforest is actually more difficult than you think! The orchestra of frogs, cicadas and all manner of nightly critters takes some getting used to, but once you adapt to nature's nightly concert, you wonder why you haven't visited sooner.

The Daintree Eco Lodge and Spa, nestled in 30 acres of the World Heritage-Listed Daintree Rainforest and located adjacent to the mighty Daintree River, is a wonderful place to immerse yourself in the pristine natural beauty of the area while experiencing authentic Aboriginal culture. Take time to visit the multi-award-winning Daintree Wellness Spa and try a unique Aboriginal inspired spa treatment, the perfect way to rejuvenate a weary body.

Owners, Terry and Cathy Maloney, have created a tranquil environment offering 15 individual rainforest Bayans (most with spas), built high off the ground so you feel as though you are nestled in a true forest canopy. The Lodge is proud to have been included in Oprah's recent Ultimate Australian Adventure, with those guests raving about the magic of the rainforest setting and the chance to meet Aboriginal people.

In a world that is quickly losing its traditions and cultures, the Lodge works closely with the local Aboriginal community in Mossman, whose ancestors – the Kuku Yalanji rainforest Aboriginal people – were the original inhabitants of the site. By sharing and preserving their culture through interpretive tours and providing opportunities for employment and skill training, the Lodge endeavours to keep their traditions alive.

Aboriginal art and crafts features highly on the 'to do' list during our stay. Linda instructs us on the ins and outs of Aboriginal art and hands out a selection of watercolours, wooden skewers, brushes and a small canvas each. I leave the drawing to the skilled and choose to plot my story by a series of dots and x-ray pictures. I am chuffed at my artwork, although any expert would find it difficult to interpret my story. It's completely addictive, and manages to keep a group of women quiet for the afternoon, each lulled into relaxation by their own meditation and quiet creativity.

All these activities work up an appetite, so it's a good thing that Julaymba restaurant offers a tantalising menu. The signature dish is popular at our table; Kudi (pronounced 'goodie') is local barramundi, seasoned with native bush herbs and wrapped in paperbark. Kangaroo, gulf tiger prawns and crocodile also feature on the menu, as do an array of bush flowers, seeds, leaves, berries and nuts, adding a native twist to the dishes.

This nurturing environment goes hand-in-hand with the rejuvenating spa treatments the Eco-Lodge offers. Initially upon entering, the Spa seems underwhelming considering the multitude of accolades it has collected both in Australia and abroad. I am asked to choose my preferred scent for my treatment, from the selection of Daintree Essentials (the spa's signature organic face and body product range). The experience is sublime, beginning with a smoking ritual to calm the mind. It's not until I float back to my room after a delicious massage, body scrub and Vichy shower that I fully appreciate the significance of

those awards.

If you feel the need to leave the rainforest's canopy for a little adventure, you don't have to venture far. Hop across the road to Sunrise/Sunset Tours for a Daintree River cruise. On our sunset cruise we are lucky enough to spot a couple of crocodiles and tree snakes, perhaps a little too close for comfort. It's a magical time of day, and the Daintree River and the many creeks running into it, have come alive with birds and wildlife.

We head further afield to a property up the river for our one-hour Argo 8x8 tour, which turns out to be a vehicle that looks like it should be on the moon, holding three of us while we explore the, now, unused forestry tracks. When we reach the summit, the views across the Daintree rainforest and river are unrivalled.

With the wet season long gone, now is the perfect time to start thinking about a winter escape to Far North Queensland. If you are looking for a getaway that promises true harmony with nature, nurturing spa treatments, and an uncontrived brush with Aboriginal culture, then the Daintree Eco Lodge is just the place.

ACTIVITIES IN THE DAINTREE AREA INCLUDE:

- + Walkabout Cultural Adventures
– www.walkaboutadventures.com.au
- + Daintree ARGO 8x8 Rainforest Tours
– www.daintreeadventuretours.com
- + Sunrise/Sunset Tours
– www.daintreecruises.com.au

CHECK OUT THESE OTHER ECO ESCAPES:

- + At Ecobeach outside of Broome, go to see Flatback Turtles nest from October until January, and Humpback Whales pass by from July to October – www.ecobeach.com.au
- + The Great Ocean Ecolodge in Victoria is involved in Koala conservation efforts
– www.greatoceanecolodge.com
- + Corinna Wilderness Experience on Tasmania's remote west coast aims to have a zero carbon footprint
– www.corinna.com.au
- + O'Reilly's Rainforest Retreat, Villas and Lost World Spa in World Heritage Listed Lamington National Park
– www.oreillys.com.au

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