



REEF HOUSE, PALM COVE, QLD

Pacific time

WIND BACK IN A TROPICAL COMFORT ZONE

The ancient, papery melaleucas of Reef House are alright. Snug in their bespoke cut-outs in the boutique hotel's big front deck, the grand old trees look robust enough to see out another century or three. Shade by day, fairy lights by night, and admiring looks from diners like me. At some point a carpenter will be called in to loosen their waistbands of decking, and at 10pm on a Saturday after another lovely three-course meal, I think I know exactly how good that would feel.

It's 13 years since my last stay in Palm Cove's most historic hotel and I'm happy to find that the right things have stayed the same and the right things have changed. Under the brand MGallery by Sofitel, which specialises in smaller hotels with character, Reef House has been refreshed with elegant new décor that places its plantation house vibe firmly in the South Pacific and sweeps away a certain tally-ho-in-the-tropics effect.

That was the admittedly not unpleasant legacy of Brigadier David Thomson, a future federal minister who in 1972 bought a 14-year-old house and pool at the centre of the sleepy village between Cairns and Port Douglas and opened it up to guests. While the property has been much expanded over the decades, its essence remains in the white colonnades and plantation shutters, and the Brigadier's personal touch endures: you can still help yourself to a drink from the honesty bar and gratis punch and canapes are served in the lounge from 5pm.

The 67 guest suites – studio, one or two bedroom – overlook the lush tropical gardens and pools at the centre of the property or, like ours, have balcony views of the Coral Sea. The new look is a lovely concoction



THE LAMP IS A GIFT FROM THE BRIGADIER



THE INTERIOR IS A GUEST OF THE OPERATOR.
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW WATSON



Relax: Palm Cove beach; Reef House pool; dinner on the deck; Verandah King suite. Opposite: plantation house vibe

of teak and rattan, sisal rugs on terracotta tiles, crisp white linens and plantation shutters. Our suite has a spa bath on the balcony; jacuzzis don't float my boat in the tropics but there are plenty of other ways to chill at Reef House: maybe a siesta on my pillowy white bed under a ceiling fan (there's aircon too), or a book or game of chess in the Brigadier's Lounge, with its library, board games and DVDs.

We opt for hard-core relaxation in the day spa, which sits prettily in the garden and has five treatment rooms; after a head-to-toe massage and facial I emerge into the sunshine feeling deliciously invertebrate. Sliding into the large mineral pool, which like the adults-only pool and Japanese-style spa is fringed with cushioned teak loungers, I feel grateful that our short visit to a pint-sized resort town means a full itinerary is out of the question.

There's time for a brisk walk on the beach; a visit to the jetty where an excited junior guest has caught *two actual fish* with a Reef House rod; lunch at Nu Nu, a standout local restaurant; and even a rifle through the racks of the village boutiques.

Next time, we'll make time: maybe a trip to the reef, the Daintree and Kuranda; maybe kayaking and

swimming in the sea. But this time the vibe at Reef House is FOMO-free, and that's alright with me.

❖ Perfect for: Sybarites.

❖ Must do: Borrow a house bike and tootle around town, drop a line off the jetty (Reef House has rods) or swim in the sea – a section of Palm Cove beach has stinger nets and is patrolled, but stinger suits are recommended November to May. Take a ride on the Skyrail Rainforest Cableway and/or Scenic Railway, both via Kuranda, a short drive from Palm Cove. Reef House's activities desk can organise anything from a kayak to a full-day reef excursion or chopper flight.

❖ Dining: The Reef House deck is hard to beat, especially at night – saltwater barramundi with coconut pilaf, red curry sauce and braised pineapple is a standout; also try the seafood taster of Queensland treats including prawns, scallops and reef fish. Nu Nu at the beach's south end is more experimental: dishes include a breakfast omelette of North Queensland mud crab; and slow-roasted beef short rib with finger lime, pickles and tamarind caramel. And for the best coffee, get in early at Espresso & Co and stay for breakfast.

❖ Getting there: Palm Cove is a 25-minute drive north of Cairns Airport; transfers available.

❖ Bottom line: Two-night Reef House Escape from \$689 (Brigadier Room) to \$889 (Verandah King Spa Suite) includes breakfast daily, spa credit, bottle of sparkling wine, dinner for two and late checkout. Dining and day spa packages available.