

An aerial photograph of a tropical beach. The water is a vibrant turquoise color, transitioning to a deeper blue further out. The beach is a mix of light and dark sand, with gentle waves lapping at the shore. A red helicopter is parked on the left side of the beach, and a small white boat is in the water to the right. The overall scene is serene and idyllic.

# REEF RELIEF

From exclusive heli-tours to luxurious palm-laced villas, Tropical North Queensland is the ultimate playground for those looking to holiday in style, writes Lee Mylne.

From the bubble of a small red helicopter, the Great Barrier Reef comes into sharp relief beneath the clear blue water of the Coral Sea. It's the best introduction to the wonders of this World Heritage-listed site, and to life in the tropics, that I can imagine.

Exclusivity is the watchword for travellers looking to social distance in style, and Tropical North Queensland delivers in spades. Private tours and luxury getaways are easy to arrange in Cairns and its northern neighbours of Palm Cove and Port Douglas.

Over the space of a few days, I see parts of this vast expanse of coral reef system – which stretches 2,300 kilometres along the Queensland coast – from above and below as I explore the best this pocket of Australia has to offer.

## Bird's-eye perspective

Nautilus Aviation's heli-flights leave The Pier on Cairns' waterfront to fly over Green Island and land on sandy Vlasoff Cay or a private mainland beach, depending on conditions, with a gourmet picnic set up for the ultimate private lunch. Despite the stunning setting, there's no one else around.

After this exhilarating introduction, it's time for some land-based attractions. From my base at Crystalbrook Collection's cool Riley – set alongside its siblings, the waterfront Flynn and nearby Bailey, the newest hotels in Cairns – I set out with Cairns Discovery Tours to see more of the city and surrounds. Owner Maryanne Jacques delivers bespoke tours, tailored to your

interests, which can include a city tour in a luxury SUV taking in highlights such as the Cairns Art Gallery, Cairns Museum and Cairns Botanic Gardens, all well worth a visit. Further afield, we venture to the waterfalls of lower Barron Gorge National Park and the curve of sand that fringes the enchanting enclave of Palm Cove.

Nature lovers looking for connection with the tropical north's wild places should go no further than a private tour with FNQ Nature Tours. Owner James Boettcher knows the best untamed places around the Atherton Tablelands; I spot rare Lumholtz's tree-kangaroos, track an elusive platypus from a creek bank near Yungaburra, and marvel at the bright markings of a forest dragon on a bush track beside Lake Barrine. As a bonus, the birdlife is bountiful. If your timing is right, there's also a chance to spend time with the Australian Quoll Conservancy researchers, learning about, and helping with, their work.

#### A wild life

Getting up close with more creatures – at a safe distance – is one of the thrills of a visit to Hartley's Crocodile Adventures, located between Cairns and Port Douglas. Take a boat tour on the lagoon to spot some of the many crocodiles that inhabit the waters, with abundant birdlife overhead. A guided walk through the rest of the wildlife park also brings you close to cassowaries, wombats, koalas, snakes and other native species.

A tour of the crocodile farm offers fascinating insights into other aspects of the business, then head to the gift shop to browse the high-quality crocodile leather handbags, designed by co-owner Angela Freeman – they can be yours for a fraction of the price you'd pay for similar items in Europe.

While you may be tempted by the novelty of the dishes on the menu at Hartley's – think Japanese-style *karaage* croc, or salt-and-pepper crocodile – Cairns and its surrounds offer fine dining wherever you go. In the city, head for Ochre Restaurant overlooking the marina, for dishes that hero native and local ingredients. And in Palm Cove, don't go past idyllic Nu Nu, serving up Asian/Australian-fusion fare with views of the beach and palm groves.

#### Dusk diversions

Sunset signals cocktail hour at Palm Cove's legendary Reef House, as 'Brigadier's rum punch' is served to guests at the bar, following a tradition established back in the 1970s when this colonial-style grande dame of hotels was a

retreat for the rich and famous. Under towering paperbark trees, the beachfront dining deck catches ocean breezes and wonderful views of the swaying palms. Don't leave without putting yourself in the hands of Isabelle at the tranquil Reef House Spa, where Phytomer marine products from northern France are used alongside botanical and organic products from Australian company, Waterlily.

From Port Douglas, I board Sailaway's elegant 25-metre catamaran to set course for Mackay and Undine cays for a day's sailing and snorkelling; all around, green turtles pop their heads up, seemingly unconcerned by their human company in the turquoise water. A tender takes us ashore to sink our toes into the pure white sand of the cay, our footsteps soon washed away by the lapping waves. For environmentally minded travellers, Sailaway's tours are completely carbon offset.

Back on land, the doors to my private retreat at Niramaya Villas & Spa at Port Douglas open onto a lush tropical courtyard garden with gushing fountains and exotic jade vines blooming overhead. A plunge pool sparkles beyond the Balinese-style pavilions.

I arrived in Cairns needing warmth and stimulation. Having wandered, explored, savoured and learned, I am leaving feeling soothed and restored, salt in my hair and dreams in my head. It's that kind of place. ♦

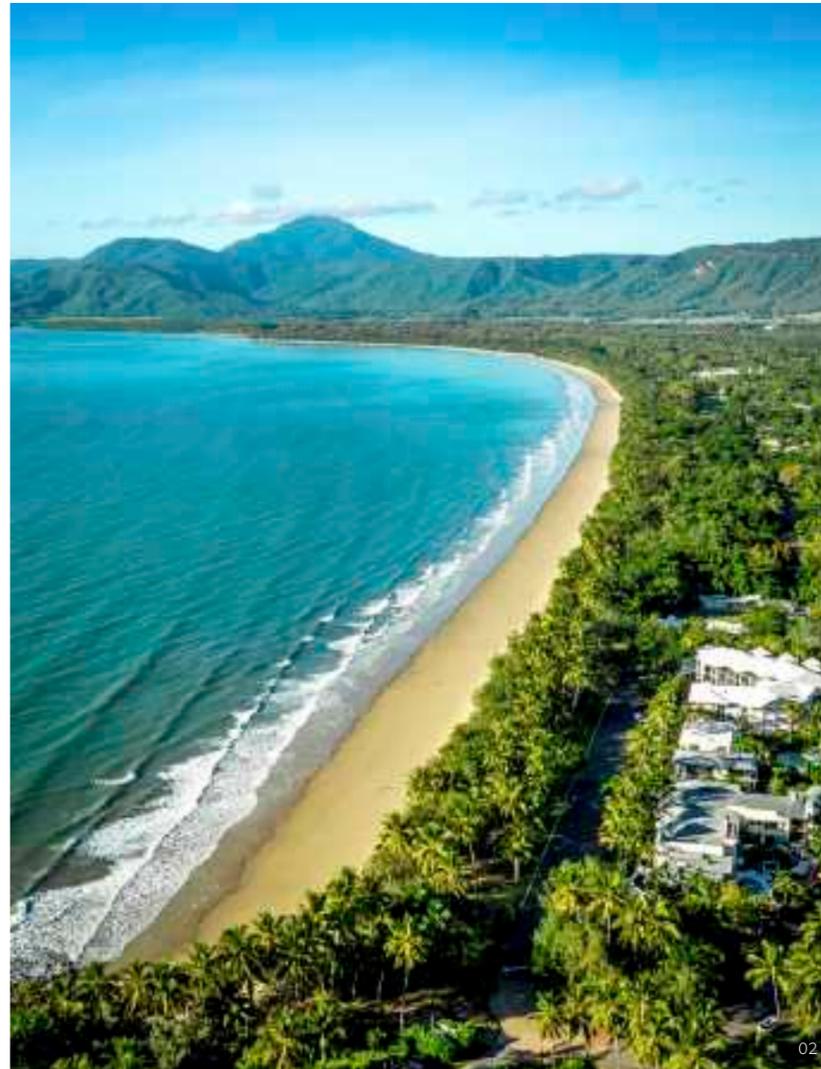
#### Travel file

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[niramaya.com.au](http://niramaya.com.au)  
[crystalbrookcollection.com](http://crystalbrookcollection.com)  
[reefhouse.com.au](http://reefhouse.com.au)

**Dining**  
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