

THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN Travel + LUXURY

FEBRUARY 12-13, 2022

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WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

EXCLUSIVE - A FIRST LOOK AT THE NEW SILKY OAKS LODGE IN THE DAINTREE

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Breakfast is being served in the open-sided Treehouse Restaurant at the newly reopened Silky Oaks Lodge, adjacent to the World Heritage-listed Daintree National Park about 75 minutes by road north of Cairns. Against a faint background chime of dishes, the slow stirring of ceiling fans and muted conversations of fellow guests on this astonishing belvedere, the ripple and rush of the Mossman River provides a hypnotic soundtrack. It is my third visit over two decades to this tucked-away property, which opened in 1985 as one of Australia's first true rainforest retreats. The latest incarnation by luxury operator Baillie Lodges has lifted the experience by many notches but what remains eternal are those views of a rock-rimmed waterway, the green shimmer of tall trees, the tracery of ferns as fragile as fine lace.

Clear air is sharpened with forest scents. Iridescent blue Ulysses butterflies flit past my ringside dining table. Studious observation of a patch of bark reveals the almost imperceptible movement of a lizard with exceptional camouflage credentials and a handsome crested nape. Later I will learn it's a Boyd's forest dragon. Ah, here comes a waiter with an artistic composition of tropical fruit and a bundle of warm pastries. The waft of dried apple and elderberry tea is soft and warming. Time to exhale.

The reinvented lodge sits gently on 32ha in the precious Kubirri-Warra country of the eastern Kuku Yalanji landowners beside the world's oldest living rainforest and, at 120,000ha, the largest tropical rainforest tract in Australia. That word "old" seems insubstantial, however, when the estimated age of the Daintree is 180 million years. It looks and feels primeval, a wonderland of mosses and cycads, gnarled vines and epiphytes, home to evolutionary relics such as the extravagantly large southern cassowary, thousands of tropical plant species and endangered and rare marvels of the likes of spotted-tail quolls.

Nature or nurture? Let's have both.

The \$20m Baillie Lodges' transformation provides a deep overlay of luxury with a lightness of touch. Existing chalets, elevated over the rich vegetation, have been transformed to stylish garden or treehouse retreats and river houses, named according to locale, and all feel like true habitats, earthed and at one with the rainforest, each retaining their original names of birds and critters.

During a visit last week, the river is in the full flow of "green season" and its rhythm can be heard from the broad deck of Bettong, my Billabong Suite abode, crouched beside Wallaroo and Ghost Bat. It's a companionable cluster near the free-form swimming pool and main facilities, reached by a winding path and boardwalk through an arcade of greenery. Later, in the entry pavilion of the main lodge, I spy the bettong's mouse-like image amid an art installation of ceramic discs, fashioned by artists at the nearby Yalanji Arts Centre, each representing the

name of the 40 individual lodgings.

The Daintree, of course, is more than just a backdrop. There's an immersion in the surroundings and true connections with the area through design and art.

Port Douglas-based architect Gary Hunt worked with local contractors on the redevelopment and Baillie Lodges' co-founder and creative director, Hayley Baillie, has ensured true relevance and unity in the artworks, including extraordinary digital "paintings" by photographer Catherine Nelson of Kuku Yalanji children frolicking in the Mossman River.



Billabong Suite at Silky Oaks Lodge, above; Treehouse Restaurant, below left; stone tubs are a next-to-nature feature, below right; Boyd's forest dragon and trop

MAGIC FARAWAY TREEHOUSES

New beginnings in the ancient Daintree

SUSAN KUROSAWA

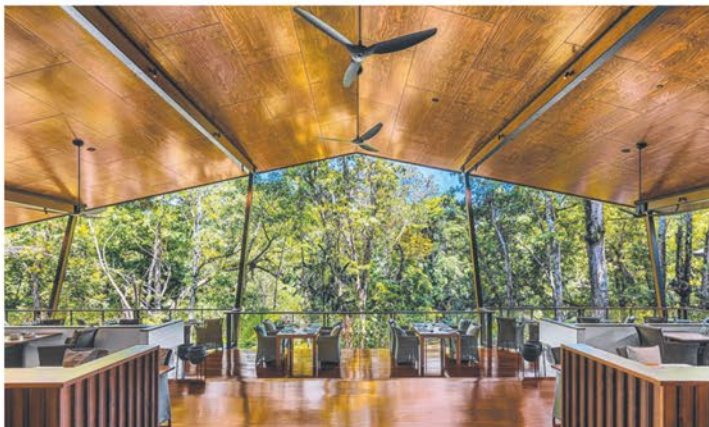


These variously appear across guest quarters and public areas as mandala-shaped representations and panels, joining an array of showcase pieces such as prints by National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award winner Danie Mellor.

Interior design firm Pike Withers has created airy and uncluttered spaces with an emphasis on polished timbers that ripple with reflected light, smart custom joinery, a palette that references the colours of the rainforest, plus bespoke accessories, from contemporary bedside lights with handblown glass shades to ceramics in organic forms. Stone bathtubs on

decks, all poised for privacy, are a dramatic new inclusion and the customised minibar is stocked with treats, including coffee, tea and cookies, from district suppliers. A little "Critter Alert" sign points out to keep doors closed and food packets sealed in case tiny ants with great powers of detection should drop by for a nocturnal nibble.

From every angle and nook at Silky Oaks Lodges there's a sense of landscape, whether viewed in full panorama or glimpsed through perfectly placed reveals. It's a rare feeling of integration with the environment and ecosystem. Step this way to the Healing Waters





ical cuisine, insets

PICTURES: TOBY STANLEY

MORE TO THE STORY

Silky Oaks Lodge is within easy reach of boat trips to the World Heritage-listed Great Barrier Reef but also consider excursions featuring a clear connection to Indigenous heritage. Late last year the Daintree was one of four national parks in Queensland formally returned to its traditional custodians to be jointly managed over a transition period with the state government. It's hoped more jobs for First Nations people and cultural tourism opportunities will emerge.

My four-hour group tour with long-established guide Juan Walker (pictured) of Walkabout Cultural Adventures eases (to the delight of all) into at least an extra 90 minutes. Walker is a powerhouse of knowledge of his Kuku Yalanji people and every moment of the excursion is enhanced by his animated storytelling, observations on local life and snippets of bush lore and practices. We throw bamboo hunting spears and make our way with Walker over bouldery beaches, through thickets tangled with vines and creepers, and learn in the process how the coastal scrub and forest are both pharmacy and pantry. Forget Panadol and pistachios when natural analgesics and sea almonds are in such abundance. Walker scoops up armloads of tropical fruit from a roadside farm stall and we create a picnic



with chunks of fresh damper cooked that morning by his schoolteacher mum.

Then we're off to Mossman Gorge to swim with jungle perch and learn of Dreamtime legends. Walker shows us how to dampen and foam up the leaves of red ash to

use as antiseptic soap and then casually spots a Boyd's forest dragon that just happens to be "hanging about".

Hello, old friend. My days of rainforest miracles have come full circle. walkaboutadventures.com.au



The Pavilion's pool deck, above, sleeping quarters, above right, and one of two bathrooms, below

Spa and be cocooned in earth ochre body mud or do a spot of forest bathing, complete with Ayurvedic herbs. Make an about-turn and take a guided snorkel drift on the Mossman River below the lodge or swim at its billabong beaches. Ask the gardening team for a walk on the lodge's outskirts to explore the vegetation, pushing aside the rough elbows of old trees and investigating bush medicine botanicals. Track down the exceptionally talented executive chef Mark Godbeer, a champion of regional produce and Indigenous flavours, and visit his kitchen garden on the site of a former tennis court. Plantings that include sapote, mangosteen, herbs, betel vines and oriental greens are flourishing like beanstalks, an outdoor cooking set-up has just been installed and sunset drinks and private dinners are planned.

But whether under the stars or in The Treehouse, expect cocktails made with wattleseed or lemon myrtle syrup, small-batch gin and other local spirits of the parish, some infused with the likes of Davidson plum.

Glasses may come garnished with sprigs of native thyme, bush peppercorns and blossoms. Menus change daily, with dishes often designed to share. The barramundi season has just started so the sweet fish could be



served tempura style or perked up with avocado, mango and coconut. House-made sorbets come in combos such as blackberry and yuzu or an intensely delicious papaya.

And so to bed in my Bettong burrow, where the oil burner has been lit by unseen hands and a fresh, leafy fragrance permeates the air. My freshly scrubbed skin smells of native wild peach and lime soap and body

lotion that wafts of lemongrass and almond oil. And then, a solid eight hours thereafter, I greet the rosy hush of dawn with a coffee aboard my deck's hammock to a chorus of unknown birds and the throaty tinkle-tonkle of frogs. On my feet are Seedling Sole biodegradable slippers that when discarded will be returned to the earth. I flip-flop to breakfast in The Treehouse, a venue of such buoyancy it feels tethered, cantilevered towards the rainforest, as if about to float into the heart of country and the very beginnings of time.

Susan Kurosawa was a guest of Baillie Lodges.



IN THE KNOW

Just unveiled is the property's Daintree Pavilion, a massive two-bedroom abode with floor-to-ceiling glass, dramatic skillion rooflines, tiered infinity-edge swimming pool, bathing atriums under the treetops, living and dining areas, a TV and entertainment room and oodles of relaxation space and privacy. The layout is ideal for two couples or a family and the overall feel could be likened to a sophisticated version of a safari "hide", poised within the environment to maximise wildlife sightings and natural views.

Other such top-drawer Baillie Lodges pavilions are available at Longitude 131, Uluru; Capella Lodge on Lord Howe Island, NSW; and in the pipeline for the reincarnation of Southern Ocean Lodge on Kangaroo Island, SA, reopening in 2023.

The top recommendation in other categories at Silky Oaks Lodge is a Billabong Suite with spacious lounge area, daybeds, covered double deck with ample seating, and a fresco stone bathtub nestled off the ensuite. From \$489 a person a night for a Garden Retreat. Rates in all categories include breakfast, sunset drinks with canapes at The Jungle Perch bar and lounge, dinner plus complimentary yoga sessions and lodge-based activities such as use of kayaks, snorkelling gear and mountain bikes; children 10 years and over are welcome. Lunch reservations are also available for non-guests. baillielodges.com.au luxurylodgesofaustralia.com.au