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T H E D A I N T R E E



IN THE ANCIENT EMERALD RAINFOREST OF
FAR NORTH QUEENSLAND, A NEWLY REVAMPED LUXURY RESORT
FEELS RIGHT AT HOME, WRITES KIRSTEN GALLIOTT.



(Clockwise from above) Treehouse Restaurant; yuzu curd tart with nasturtium sponge, mango sorbet and Davidson plum; ceramic tile artworks by local Indigenous artists from Yalanji Arts





On a short walk through reclaimed rainforest dense with ash trees succumbing to strangler figs, my city brain kicks in. I think I'm hearing traffic but it's actually the roar of a waterfall. Then I see an enormous rock that looks like an elephant's back rising out of the clearest, greenest water. Within seconds, I'm swimming in Mossman River. There is not another soul around – just me, floating on my back, letting the current push me downstream and looking up at the sunny flowers of the golden penda that hugs the bank.

Wave Rock, as it is known, is about a half-hour stroll from Silky Oaks Lodge (hotel.qantas.com.au/silkyoakslodge), which in itself is something of a surprise. James and Hayley Baillie have an enviable track record of creating sensitive-but-sensational resorts in unrivalled locations – including Uluru's Longitude 131° and Capella Lodge on Lord Howe Island – and now the Baillie Lodges duo have waved their multi-million-dollar magic wand over this 37-year-old retreat in a laid-back corner of Far North Queensland.

Port Douglas gets most of the headlines for its proximity to the Great Barrier Reef, restaurant scene and resort vibe but venture 30 clicks west, past the manicured town of Mossman, and you'll find another world in the Daintree. In this part of Australia, deadly saltwater crocodiles glide unseen and ghost trees glow as night takes hold in the oldest rainforest in the world.

Set on the banks of Mossman River – one of the few croc-free swimming spots in the Daintree – Silky Oaks is a luxury eco retreat made up of 40 treehouses (including one two-bedroom mega pavilion that comes at a mega price), clustered around an open-air dining pavilion and bar. The rainforest it's sited in gets star billing. The restaurant and bar overlook the river and every treehouse has a verandah – many with

an outdoor bath – so you can immerse yourself in the canopy and the soundtrack of the animals who inhabit it.

The resort offers a mix of signature (free) and bespoke (paid) experiences. Stay close to the retreat and kayak in the river, ride a bike to nearby Mossman or take a pre-breakfast yoga class. Explore more of the region by signing up with a local operator to get out on the reef, ride a horse at Cape Tribulation or indulge in a cellar door experience at a local brewery or distillery.

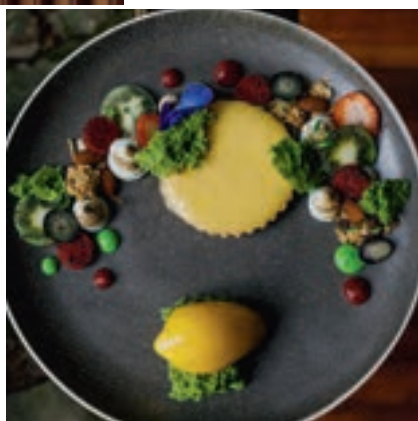
To gain a deeper understanding of the rainforest that's estimated to be 180 million years old, the Ngadiku Dreamtime Walk (mossmangorge.com.au) offers the opportunity to explore it with an Aboriginal guide. Mooks is a Yalanji man who grew up on the land in Laura, on Cape York Peninsula, with his grandparents. "There are a lot of plants here that can save people's lives and I know every one of them," he says proudly.

This is an environment that gives and takes in equal measure. Mooks crushes a native nutmeg in his hand. "It's good for sunburn," he says, before rounding another corner and pointing to a native fig tree. "There are seven different types of wild fig fruit but only one of them isn't poisonous."

There are two rules on the 90-minute walk, he says. "Don't touch anything unless I say so. And stay on the track." We learn about plants that paralyse, fruit that blinds and vines that slice through skin. We marvel at a bird's nest made of ferns that look like giant feathers, a cycad whose leaves were once eaten by dinosaurs and the yellow sap tree, which offers both fruit (akin to a mangosteen) and medicine (the sap can be used in place of stitches).

Mooks, which means "friend" in the Kuku Yulanji language, is a wildly engaging host, happy to share his life story in this storied rainforest. "We lived on kangaroo meat," he says, as the cicada orchestra in the background plays on. "We had no fridge so Grandad would put it in the water [to keep it cool] and we'd cook it the next day."

For tales of another iconic animal, we have to get out on the water. "Crocodiles can hold their breath for hours – seven is the record," says David White, the owner of Solar Whisper Wildlife Cruises (solarwhisper.com), who offers tours on Julaymba (the Daintree River). "So on a one-hour cruise,





One of the two bedrooms in the luxe Daintree Pavilion (above); the Kubirri Lounge (below)



it can be tricky. We might need someone to volunteer to go in for a swim.”

No thanks. The salties up here are among the biggest in the world, with the current alpha male clocking in at 500 kilograms and almost five metres long. Despite popular belief, the river isn't infested with them but, says David, “You only need one to spoil your day.”

We're visiting in high summer, when the brackish water is warm and the crocs are happy below the surface. “When they're underwater, you can't tell,” says David. “There are no bubbles, no ripples. But they know where you are.” Winter is your best bet to see them sunning themselves on the banks or, if you're lucky, lurking beneath a colony of flying foxes, hoping one will fall in. “Their best weapon is patience.”

It's easy to be lulled into a soporific state in the Daintree. The air is thick and warm, the wet season bringing bursts of rain and a sweetness to the atmosphere. Everything is a heady shade of green, from the rainforest to the mangroves to the sugar cane that overtakes the fields.

It's the colour that executive chef Mark Godbeer noticed first, when he moved here from steering the Longitude 131° dining room in Uluru. “Where there was red, there is green,” says Godbeer, agog at the ingredients he has to play with in the tropical north. “The pandan is my new favourite,” he says, as he wanders through the kitchen garden full of everything from river mint to tamarind. “It has replaced the kaffir lime leaf for me.”

Breakfast includes vibrant papaya, spiky dragonfruit and fresh coconut. “The heroes up here are the fruit and vegetables,” says Godbeer, who is supplementing his plantings with local food suppliers. Dinner – which is included in the nightly tariff, along with wine matches and pre-dinner drinks – takes things up a notch with dishes such as baby barramundi with miso and native honey, sugar snap peas with togarashi, and blackberry yuzu sorbet with macadamia.

As I sit in the dining room, watching the emerald trees fade to black, I'm not hearing traffic anymore. Just the breeze dancing in the rainforest and the Daintree singing to me. ●



Scan the QR code to discover more of the best things to do when visiting the Daintree.