

OPEN ROAD

YOUR NRMA MAGAZINE

January/February 2022

WIN! A week in an EV
See page 19 for details

BEYOND BORDERS

Stretch out in Queensland's tropical paradise



GOING TROPPO

A road trip through tropical north Queensland delivers a feast for the senses, with lush landscapes and an amazing array of wildlife

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The picture-perfect Mission Beach, 139km south of Cairns.



Aqua therapy at Millaa Millaa Falls.



Wagons waiting to be filled with harvested sugar cane.



The rainforest is slowly reclaiming Paronella Park's extraordinary buildings.



I'M OFF ON a north Queensland road-trip adventure to national parks, waterfalls and ancient volcanoes. My springboard is Cairns, custodian of two World Heritage sites: the Great Barrier Reef and the Wet Tropics rainforests that are 80 million years older than those of the Amazon.

But I'm curious to discover the alter ego of this area's personality. Leaving the sultry Cairns coast, I turn my tyres south towards a blissful landscape. There are rows of banana palms, signs for Bowen (Kensington Pride) mangoes and flat, wooden trestles dangling with baubles of passionfruit. With the forested slopes of the Misty Mountains in the distance, I drive through kilometres of flat, green sugarcane fields. Railway tracks run parallel to the road, leading to the nearby sugar cane refinery with its steam-pluming chimneys.

A slippery walk through the rainforest leads to Josephine Falls, which are beautiful to behold and seem a favourite spot to cool down. Leisure-seekers relax on the shaded, lichened boulders, while others enjoy the waterfall's swimming hole with a breaststroke through its dappled jade water.

Further along, tucked away in the rainforest at Mena Creek, is one man's labour of love, Paronella Park. With grandiose dreams, José Paronella emigrated from Catalonia in northern Spain after reading there were fortunes to be made in Australia. He arrived at the cane fields in 1913 and laboured in the elements for years, finally buying 13 acres so he could build his castle in the forest.

José fell in love with the picturesque swimming hole at Mena Creek Falls. Not only did he build his castle, but he also added an ice cream parlour, a ballroom, a tunnel of love and a tennis court made from crushed termite mounds.

The quirks and eccentricities of José's castle are fascinating. I meander along its creek of snapping turtles and stroll the avenue of kauris towering above like cathedral

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spires. The castle has been ravaged by fire, flood and cyclones and is in the process of being reclaimed by the rainforest, so it feels like you're Indiana Jones trekking through the jungle to discover an ancient Mayan ruin.

It's time to call it a day and I spend the night on the Cassowary Coast at Castaways Resort & Spa Mission Beach, with its view across the Coral Sea to Dunk Island. There's another first for me when I sight a cassowary wandering close to the beach. I keep a safe distance, respecting its powerful claws and horned head while admiring its majesty, although its glossy black plumage reminds me of a striding bearskin hat of the Queen's Guard.

The next morning, I hit the Palmerston Highway and ascend 800 metres to the Atherton Tablelands, where I find lush, rolling hills dotted with dairy and beef cattle and never-ending fields of crops. I stop at the honesty box beside the undulations of a Nucifora tea plantation and buy a few 100-gram pouches.

Needing sustenance, I pull in for a ploughman's lunch at one of the many organic paddock-to-plate cafés. Mungalli Biodynamic café, with its backdrop of Queensland's tallest mountain, Mount Bartle Frere, does the trick. Welcoming me at the entrance is 'Mooriel' - a dairy cow statue painted with scenes of the distant Misty Mountains.

The café occupies the original farmhouse. The Watson family's farm is a national market leader in biodynamic and organic dairy products. They consider the farm to be one big living organism working in harmony with nature, emulating the practice developed nearly a century ago by scientist,



From top to bottom: the turquoise water view from Mission Beach over to Dunk Island; guests enjoy a proper bush breakfast at Ringers Camp in Undara Volcanic National Park; one of the Cassowary Coast's prehistoric-looking residents.



philosopher and creator of biodynamics, Rudolf Steiner. While I check out the cheesecakes in the cabinet (kaffir lime and coconut, pecan and maple with ricotta, and Sicilian), Michelle Bell-Turner of the Mungalli Biodynamic team shares an anecdote on their popularity: "A French family were climbing Mount Bartle Frere. They stopped here for cheesecake years ago and were back for a second climb. They wanted half a cheesecake to take with them to give them the energy to climb again."

The nearby town of Millaa Millaa is the gateway to Atherton's waterfall circuit. The tablelands are the result of several periods of volcanic activity when lava flowed into ancient valleys. Volcanic basalt columns frame the magnificent Millaa Millaa Falls, which derives its name of 'many waters' from the language of the local Mamu people.

It's another rainforest walk to reach the falls and I search for the famous Ulysses butterfly and Lumholtz's tree-kangaroo. It's no wonder they're able to elude me - the foliage is so dense I feel like I've been dropped into *Jurassic Park*.

Millaa Millaa Falls are a pin-up among waterfalls. Black boulders sprouting luminous ferns border its base, while ropey lianas tumble from the top, accentuating the crystal beauty of the tulle-like waterfall. It cascades over basalt columns into the plunge pool beneath where swimmers indulge in its aqua therapy.

A short while later the tropical paradise recedes and I'm driving the Savannah Way to walk the path of a volcano. The sudden contrast is like living an M.C. Escher sketch, where one image morphs into another. Smatterings of black-bottomed grass trees intersperse with legions of ochre termite mounds. Dry sclerophyll eucalypt forests are now the norm as red granite tors and outcrops of black lava burst through long, silver grass. Nature is immersing me in her story as I enter the epoch when volcanoes lorded over this land.



Some of the gorgeous scenery surrounding Mission Beach.

I arrive at Undara Volcanic National Park to a hearty “G’day!” from Bram Collins - Savannah guide, laconic bushman and owner of the Undara Experience. Bram stands tall and tanned in his khaki shorts and shirt, with an iconic Akubra fixed firmly on his head. His dusty boots are collared with brown gaiters. “They protect me from the sharp spear grass,” he explains.

Undara is a shield volcano that began with sinuous, gushing rivers of lava and not the bang of a violent cone eruption. As the lava surged along ancient riverbeds, the outside layer cooled to form dark, crusty pipelines, while it continued to flow inside. Once the lava drained it left behind a labyrinth of majestic tubes. In recent geology, no single volcano on Earth has a longer lava flow than Undara.

When Bram was a boy, his father took him exploring. “How many kids do you know grew up with volcanoes in their backyard?” Bram asks. “Well, I had a hundred and sixty-four in mine!”

Descending the wooden stairs that cleave the pockmarked savannah, I enter the rift of another world. Thousands of yellow butterflies flit amid the verdant flow of pandanus, strangler figs and ferns. I’m lost in time walking beneath the multicoloured lava arch; its heat-scarred walls pitted with gas-popped basalt and nipples of cave coral. Entering Stevenson Cave through a tangle of vines and thickets, it’s as awe-inspiring as the Sistine Chapel, yet was created nearly 200,000 years earlier.

It’s almost dark when I trek into Barkers Cave - a maternity cave for microbats. As I witness the nightly foraging migration of tens of thousands of the creatures pinballing out of the cave, I also notice it’s a fast-food feast for the snakes that drape the branches of a tree at the cave’s mouth.

After spending the night in a refurbished vintage Queensland Railway carriage decked out in silky oak, red cedar and brass, I join other travellers for a bush breakfast at Ringers Camp.

Thousands of yellow butterflies flit amid the verdant flow of pandanus, strangler figs and ferns

With billy tea and slabs of bread toasted over the campfire, I sit on a stump and shoo kookaburras divebombing my bacon.

It’s then time to make tracks for Cairns. Back on the Atherton Tablelands, I stop at Gallo Dairyland in East Barron for a tasty cheese platter and grab a box of handcrafted chocolates for a late-night snack.

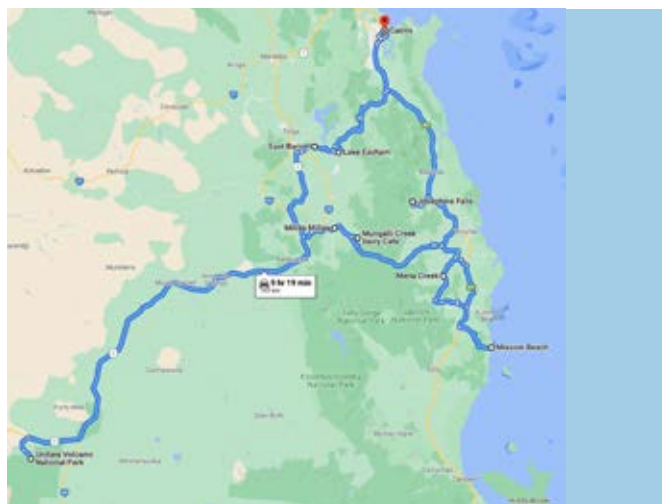
Detouring cross-country, I’m curious to see Lake Eacham, an ancient crater lake formed thousands of years ago from massive explosions of superheating groundwater. There are a lot of people swimming here, but I wimp out when I spot the ‘Stay Clear of the Crocodile’ sign, apparently referring to a freshwater croc that lives on the other side of the lake. I decide to stretch my legs instead by exploring the 3km rainforest track that circumnavigates the lake.

I’ve always dreamed of sleeping in a treehouse, so my last night before returning to Cairns is spent at The Canopy in Tarzali. Its treehouses are set in a 40-hectare wildlife sanctuary of ancient rainforest on the banks of the Ithaca River. My A-frame timber and glass treehouse is like an eyrie high in the canopy. Its verandah becomes my observation platform, although I’m not entirely comforted by a page in the information folder that says snakes never come into the accommodation. “If a snake climbs it is a tree snake and is non-venomous.”

Snake fears aside, this treehouse is an overload for the senses as dusk approaches, with the meowing call of catbirds, screech of rifle birds and the syncopated sounds of frogs. After taking a walk along the riverbank to Platypus Rocks, where



From top to bottom: the cooling waters of the Ithaca River at Platypus Rocks; guide Bram Collins points to the volcanic peaks in Undara National Park; vintage railway sleeping carriages at Undara; the treehouse accommodation at The Canopy.



Credit: Getty Images



saw-shelled turtles paddle through the water and pop their mini-dinosaur heads out to look at me, I delve into the rainforest home of pademelons, echidnas and brush turkeys.

I hear scratching in the bush and peer into the undergrowth to see the peacock blue head of Tui, the resident cassowary, parenting his two chicks and foraging for dropped forest fruits. He’s quite the rainforest warrior and a vital part of the ecosystem as many plants rely on their seeds passing through the cassowary’s digestive tract in order to germinate.

Leaving the little family in peace, I turn back towards my treehouse. While I’m busy looking out for creepy crawlies, I grab my legs in pain. There’s blood dripping and it looks like I’ve been lassoed by barbed wire. My cries for help are answered by Clay Baird, the manager, who is luckily close by.

“Wait a while!” he calls out to me.

“Wait a while for what?” I cry in pain.

“No, you’re tangled in wait-a-while. Stop moving, wait a while, and disentangle yourself.” He helps me pull the barbed vine from my legs and I retreat to my treehouse, a bit worse for wear.

I lie in bed with the shutters open, letting in the night noises of the animals scratching in the leaf litter and calling out to each other. My thoughts turn to leaving this tropical paradise and I’m reminded of the Queensland tourism slogan, ‘Beautiful one day, perfect the next’. Apart from my still-stinging legs, they pretty much got it right. 📷

DID YOU KNOW?

The NRMA has three holiday parks in Queensland’s stunning tropical north. Members can take advantage of benefits at BIG4 NRMA Atherton Tablelands Holiday Park, NRMA Cairns Holiday Park and NRMA Palm Cove Holiday Park. Head to nrmaparksandresorts.com.au for more information.