

FOREST *dreaming*



As the traditional custodians of the world's oldest rainforest, the Kuku Yulanji people of Tropical North Queensland are preserving this ancient landscape by keeping their culture alive. »

WORDS: RICHARD FRANKS



It's

low tide in the gnarled tangle of mangroves and the mud crabs are out to play. Armed with a long, sharp bamboo spear

and an unnerving dose of adrenaline, I'm searching for lunch on Cooya Beach in remote Tropical North Queensland. "You'll usually see their shadows in the water, but we're also looking for any kind of disturbance in the sand," says my Indigenous Kuku Yalanji guide, Chaseley Walker, from Walkabout Cultural Adventures. Wading through the calf-high waters, I feel something moving around my toes, so I plunge my spear into the sand. A murky cloud plumes the sea like an ink spill as my lunch seemingly escapes, but Chaseley is on the case, raising an eight-inch mud crab on the end of her spear. "My grandparents live across the street, so we've been coming down here since we were kids," she smiles, before telling me that her Aboriginal name, Yindili, translates to Kingfisher: an exceptional hunting bird with lightning-fast reactions and a razor-sharp beak. Living up to her namesake, she skewers another crab onto the same spear as easily as sliding a marshmallow down a stick.

"As traditional Kuku Yalanji people, we feel a responsibility to educate people on how to use our natural resources for good," Chaseley explains, as we head for her grandparents' house to sample our bounty. "We have everything we need on our doorstep, from the wildlife in the sea, to the medicinal plants like bush hibiscus (used as a dehydration aid) which line the beaches, and the macadamia nuts foraged from the trees around us," she adds. "We never take more than we need and we never disturb endangered species."

Queensland's Wet Tropics is the only place in the world where two UNESCO World Heritage sites meet: the Daintree Rainforest and the Great Barrier Reef. At an estimated 180 million years old, the Daintree is believed to be the world's oldest rainforest. It's also been home to the Kuku Yalanji people for some 50,000 years.

Chaseley's grandparents' house is a two-minute, barefoot stroll from the sand, where her family takes care of lunch while we visit their Aladdin's Cave of a basement. A huge



shell from a 200-kg green turtle, lengthy sawfish rostrums (the flat, jagged snouts of the fish), a hefty saltwater crocodile skull and a collection of seashells sprawl across a table in a room framed by newspaper clippings and Indigenous artwork.

"Australian law allows Aboriginal traditional land owners to hunt certain wildlife for ceremonial purposes," says Chaseley, holding up the shell of the turtle, which was caught to serve 220 members of the community at a Kuku Yalanji wedding. "These hunts are reserved for special occasions," she says, adding that some animals are strictly off the menu due to conservation concerns, including endangered hawksbill turtles and dugongs (known as sea cows).

Lunch is soon ready and we head out to the timber verandah, where we crack open our mud crabs to the chuckle of a kookaburra, carried on the salty breeze from nearby eucalyptus trees. The crab's sweet, meaty flesh is worth the inevitable mess. We also enjoy Chaseley's grandmother's homemade damper bread and native Daintree fruits, like tangy white soursop and tart green starfruit, collected from a roadside stall earlier that morning.

PREVIOUS SPREAD, FROM LEFT: Tropical rainforest canopy; A guided tour of the mudflats.

OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM THE TOP: Cooya Beach; Catching mud crabs along Cooya Beach; Hunting for bush tucker in the mangroves.

THIS PAGE: Traditional medicines and foods.



WE CRACK OPEN OUR MUD CRABS TO THE CHUCKLE OF A KOOKABURRA



OPPOSITE PAGE: A guided walk through one of the world's oldest rainforests.

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Silky Oaks Lodge; A cassowary; The Billabong Suite at Silky Oaks Lodge; The poisonous heart-shaped gympie-gympie plant.



Tropical North Queensland's Aboriginal tours lend themselves to sustainable practices, as do the region's landscapes. I'm staying at the luxury, eco-certified Silky Oaks Lodge resort: a forest hideaway with self-contained hillside suites immersed in the treetops. Mine includes its own hammock, where I can swing alongside an outdoor rainfall shower and stone bath, gazing out on some of the oldest trees on Earth: a world away from Cooya Beach, yet intrinsically connected through nature.

After dinner on Silky Oaks' outdoor terrace, where a meal of locally sourced glazed quail, grade 5* Wagyu sirloin and liquorice cake is backed by the hum of tree frogs and crickets, I fall asleep on my king-sized bed, with nothing but a net between me and the trees. The following day begins as slowly as the last night ended, with tropical fruits and avocado toast on the terrace, and daylight revealing the gin-clear Mossman River below, where freshwater

turtles bask on the banks.

Silky Oaks provides the perfect base for visiting Mossman Gorge, known for its *Ngadiku* (meaning 'stories and legends from long ago') Dreamtime Walks.

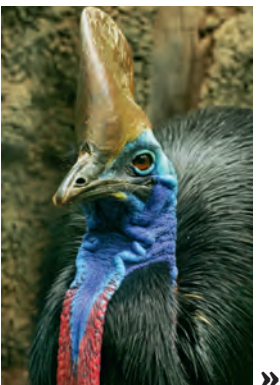
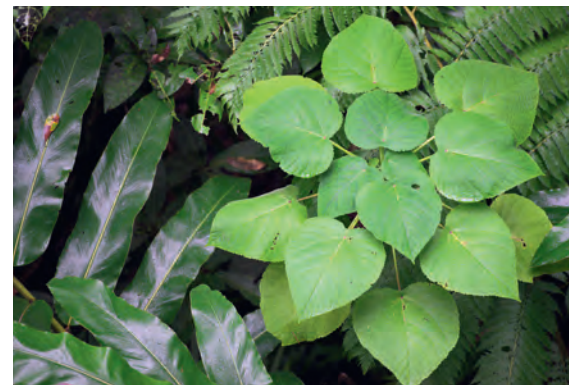
My Indigenous guide, Levi Williams, was born in the rainforest and welcomes me to his traditional homeland with a bush tea. A smoking ceremony follows, to cleanse us of bad spirits and provide protection during the walk. Levi lights several eucalyptus tree leaves beneath a corrugated iron sheet, propped up by four thick, five-foot-tall branches. We walk anti-clockwise around the smoke, as he repeats a passage in his native language, requesting our safe passage into the rainforest.

Levi's Dreamtime Walk teaches me how to find native foods and medicines, and includes tales of life in the Daintree – including risky encounters with the prehistoric-looking cassowary, the second-heaviest bird on earth.

"Apparently, they don't like you if you're wearing navy," he laughs, before warning me about the 'wait-a-while vine', which has razor-sharp hooks that cling to clothes and skin, unless you 'wait a while' to detach them. "Do not try to be Tarzan," he smiles.

Living in the rainforest, it's essential to learn from a young age which plants to avoid. "This is the gympie-gympie plant, also known as the 'suicide tree'," says Levi, pointing at a low-lying shrub with large, heart-shaped, velvety leaves. "They may look soft, but the 'fur' is actually microscopic needles," explains my guide. "Touch this and you'll feel the burn for months."

After a crash course in what to do if we see a cassowary ("never turn your back on it and never run away"), we arrive at a bubbling creek, where Levi soaks his hands and rubs a cluster of long, green leaves together to form a soapy lather. "This is the red ash, also known as the soap plant," he says. "It's good for washing and treating insect bites. Lazy





fishermen also like to use the leaves and berries to stun fish," he explains. "The plant's saponins (foam-forming phytochemicals) makes them float to the surface."

Nothing in the rainforest is wasted, and that includes the earth itself. Ochre, a naturally occurring substance in the soil, is found all over the Daintree Rainforest. "This is how we keep kids interested in nature," says Levi, using a coconut shell to mix pigments into shades of mustard, grey and off-white. "We use ochre as body paint, but it's also a natural sunscreen."

After Levi's tour, I head back to Silky Oaks for another peaceful night among the treetops, where bush turkeys gobble at dusk

and the rhythmic patter of rain provides the perfect forest soundtrack to lull me to sleep. The next morning brings a visit to Kuranda via the Skyrail Rainforest Cableway. The world's first tourism operator to receive EarthCheck Certification, Skyrail's reduction in greenhouse gas emissions is equivalent to taking 299 cars off the road. From my glass-bottomed gondola, I soar more than 1,500ft above sea level for a bird's eye view of wallabies bouncing in the meadows below and colourful wompoo fruit doves, flitting through the canopy.

I'm heading for the Kuranda Scenic Railway, a historic train with 100-year-old vintage timber carriages, which climb uphill, navigating narrow mountainside tracks, for breathtaking views over Barron Gorge National Park. From my window seat, I sample more local delights, including Queensland macadamia nuts and a cheeseboard from Gallo Dairyland, a family-owned dairy farm just 58 miles from Kuranda.

The train snakes across the wooden Stoney Creek Bridge and creeps to a halt, just as an electric-blue kingfisher lands on the fence beyond my window. It lingers briefly before darting away; a small reminder of Chaseley, the Kuku Yulanji and the delicate balance of this special place, where people and nature can continue to thrive, if humans take no more than they need.

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM THE TOP: Mossman Gorge in Daintree National Park; The Skyrail Rainforest Cableway in Kuranda; Traditional ochre paint.

Need to Know

GETTING THERE

Qantas (qantas.com) and Singapore Airlines (singaporeair.com) fly from London Heathrow to Sydney with layovers. Virgin Australia (virginaustralia.com) and Jetstar (jetstar.com) fly to Cairns.

GETTING AROUND

Walkabout Adventure Tours (walkaboutadventures.com.au) offers tours with travel and lunch from £99. Skyrail and Kuranda Scenic Railway tickets can be purchased as a package (skyrail.com.au). For travelling north beyond Cairns, hire a car from Mini Car Rentals (minicarrentals.com.au), a 10-minute walk from the city esplanade. The Spirit of Queensland (queenslandrailtravel.com.au) high-speed sleeper train connects the coastal cities of Cairns and Brisbane in around 25 hours.

BEST TIME TO GO

Dry season runs from May to October, with average temperatures between 17°C and 26°C. The cooler months from June to August are best for whale watching.

WHERE TO EAT

Cairns' Ochre Restaurant at Harbour Lights (ochrerestaurant.com.au) offers contemporary Australian cuisine, infused with native ingredients.

WHERE TO STAY

Silky Oaks Lodge (silkyoakslodge.com.au) has suites from £750/night. For a stay closer to Cairns and Kuranda, consider the adults-only Reef House (reefhouse.com.au) on idyllic Palm Cove Beach, with rooms from £469 B&B.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The writer was hosted by Tropical North Queensland (tropicalnorthqueensland.org.au). Read more: queensland.com.australia.com

Photos: Dreamstime, Tourism and Events Queensland, Walkabout Cultural Adventures, George Apostolidis

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