

Magic of the Daintree

- Alison Cotes
- From: *The Sunday Mail (Qld)*
- June 10, 2007 12:00AM
- <http://www.couriermail.com.au/travel/magic-of-the-daintree/story-e6freqwf-1111113698112>



SPLENDID ISOLATION: Crocodile-free swimming holes are just a few steps down from the veranda of the Daintree Secrets holiday house. *Source:* News Limited picture

FERALS still abound, and there are more Britz vans and beat-up utes in far north Queensland's Daintree than in your average country town these days.

But they all add to the unique character of the rainforest north of the Daintree River. Where would Cape Tribulation be without the locals, who love the wilderness with a passion and can tell you more than any biologist about the habits of the shy Boyd's Forest Dragon?

They're not the commercialised faces of the tourist industry but people who are happy to get their hands dirty.

Two of my favourite characters in this area are Ernie Dillon of Cape Tribulation Wilderness Cruises, and Prue Hewitt of Cooper Creek Wilderness.

Ernie has a bushy beard, a full-on personality and the loudest laugh on the Cape, and on his little boat in Cooper Creek you'll see more crocodiles in an hour than during a whole day on the Daintree River, on which tourist boats seem to outnumber saurians.

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Hewitt is a gentler type altogether, but as she takes you around her property, you will learn some of the secrets the ancient forest keeps hidden from the madding crowd, because you do it slowly, on foot, and with patience.

One of my memorable moments was happening upon an elusive Boyd's Forest Dragon sitting motionless on a tree trunk.

Prue will take you on a rainforest journey unlike any other, tailoring the walk to suit your interests.

I was up in the Daintree recently to check out some of the ways in which you can have a luxurious and private experience while appreciating the magic of the region.

Well, someone has to do it, so why shouldn't it be me? I found ways in which you can get the best of both worlds. You can chill out completely, avoid package tourists, eat five-star food and be lulled to sleep by a private river and the sound of birds.

The first surprise was Daintree Secrets, a private house at road's end where the house and property are yours alone, whether you're a honeymoon couple or a group of friends.

There are three bedrooms, sleeping up to seven people, and it's self-catering – buy your groceries on the way up from Cairns, cook yourself a feast, and eat it on the wrap-around veranda where a magnificent river rushes just below you.

It's only a few steps down to the paved surrounds of two safe swimming holes, one of which is home to turtles, eels and myriad fish.

You won't find another private pool quite like them – and they are guaranteed croc-free.

Daintree Secrets is not just for the well-heeled. Even in high season it costs only \$330 a night for four guests. That works out at \$82.50 a night each, and you'd pay that much in a decent motel.

I could happily live there forever, for just down the road is the Heritage Spa where, still in the depths of the rainforest, I was clay-wrapped and Vichy-showered and massaged and finally given a facial that sent me out looking almost as beautiful as the butterflies in the museum a few metres further along the same road. Well, that's a slight exaggeration.

After that I was ready for anything, especially the 15-minute drive to Cape Tribulation for a walk on the beach and then lunch at the wittily named Whet.

The cafe restaurant has been open only a few weeks but delivered a meal to rival anything the posher, pricier cafes of Port Douglas have to offer.

We ate sourdough with roasted garlic butter, sweet potato and pear soup, fresh figs with goats' cheese, and tequila-lime local prawns, and drank a delicious dry white from Margaret River in Western Australia.

Another secret retreat in this area is far from the river, but high on a hill, at Cockatoo Hill Retreat, where life and work partners Carmen Fabro and Gilles Germain have four beautiful little lodges that look out over the forest to the ocean.

The winds are always cool here, and the individual lodges have unique touches like tiny night lights under the bed, which send you to sleep in a subtle glow – although you can turn them off if you prefer the dark.

It's advisable to go to bed early, after you've sat outside watching the wildlife settle for the night.