

Wild THING

Y&YW's Hannah Davies goes on an Australian adventure, with animal encounters, rainforest treks and off-roading – but there's some serious chill time, too



Fraser Island

“Are you starting in Sydney or Melbourne?” This is the question I am asked most often when I tell people I’m going on my first-ever trip to Australia. Neither, I explain, approximately 90 times. I’m going to Queensland – starting in Brisbane, and then making my way to the Fraser and Sunshine Coasts. By some, this is met by puzzlement. All they know about Brisbane is that it’s where Scott and Charlene moved to when their *Neighbours* story arcs finished. Fraser Island might be familiar from Instagram, and as somewhere Harry and Meghan were snapped on their Royal tour. And Queensland in general might ring a bell as the location of the jungle in *I’m A Celebrity*... But a friend who’s actually been there breaks into a grin when he hears my travel plans. “Oh,” he says, “you’ll have the best time. It’s going to be wild!”

TOUCHDOWN

With the prospect of 21 hours in the air to get there, I hope he’s right. Luckily, the first flight is on one of Singapore Airlines’ newest planes, and even in economy there’s surprisingly good leg room. I get comfy, and begin a snacks-and-films marathon. After a brief stop in Singapore, followed by another eight-hour flight, we touch down. I have

over-bought on the snacks front in the UK, and am dismayed to discover I have to jettison the remaining packs of my favourite roasted pea and bean mix, which I was hoping would get me through the flights back home – there are, of course, very strict restrictions on bringing food into Australia. But arriving at the W Brisbane soon sorts out my snack- and long-flight-induced grumpiness. It doesn’t have the most prepossessing of exteriors, but my room is incredible. I have views of the river from a massive window opposite the bed, Bliss products aplenty, and a beautiful bathroom with the most enticing metallic bath.

The next day, after a perfect night’s sleep, I find myself eating an eight-course brunch in the W’s Three Blue Ducks restaurant – the buffet is so varied and delicious that I can’t stop myself returning for plateful after plateful. It’s sunny and bright, and everyone is lovely, and I’m pleasantly full, and then it occurs to me that I’d quite happily spend the entire trip like this: waddling back and forth to the buffet in my increasingly tight clothes; snoozing in my ice-cream-soft bed. But that’s not the plan – the plan is to get wild!



W Hotel's Three Blue Ducks restaurant

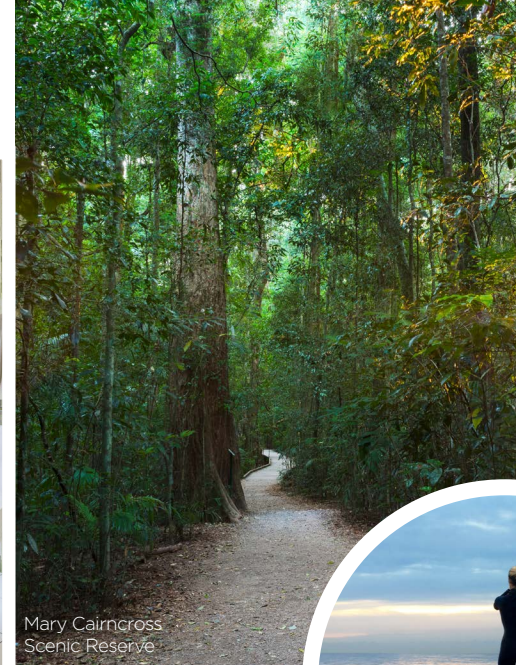
Brisbane's skyline



River views at W Brisbane



A Luxury Forest Villa at Spicers Tamarind Retreat



Mary Cairncross Scenic Reserve



The pool at Sofitel Hotel



The Fraser Island shipwreck

DAY 1: The birds

Well, wild-ish, to start. A 90-minute drive gets me to the Sunshine Coast Hinterland, with a stop at the Mary Cairncross Scenic Reserve, where I am due for a guided rainforest walk. For some reason, I had imagined that this would be a hardcore trek, so I’m kitted out ready to scale the Eiger, but in fact it’s a pleasant, gentle stroll to a soundtrack of birdsong. I spot my first kookaburra, and the excitement makes me forget my foolish look. Then it’s on to the Maleny Botanic Gardens

“I slather myself in factor 50 and head to the glorious golden sands”

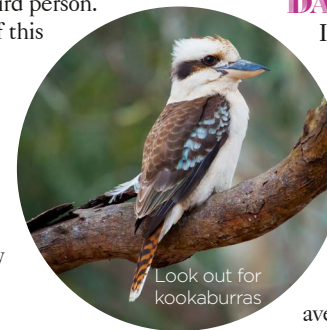
for another pleasant stroll through verdant grounds. Everything so far has been rather laid-back and lovely, and then I go to the on-site aviary where a large cockatoo is placed on me, and suddenly it’s a different game. I think: “My, what a big beak you have.” I am not, I discover, having never had occasion to ponder the matter before, a bird person. It’s strange that in the light of this newly acquired knowledge, I agree to enter a large aviary filled with swooping parrots. Even though I am given a blue feather duster that will apparently keep the birds away from me, two colourful specimens quickly land on my shoulders. I wave the feather duster weakly and wonder whether it’s possible to expire from fear. Luckily, I’m overnighing at the tranquil Spicers Tamarind Retreat, and in the calming surroundings of my luxurious, Asian-inspired villa, I manage to relax.

DAYS 2-3: Trek, shop, chill

Another day, another trek, this time guided by naturalist Steve Grainger of Tropical Treks through a national park. It’s more challenging than the previous day, but definitely worth it for some magnificent waterfalls, and for

Steve’s in-depth knowledge of the local flora and fauna. My next stop is a private viewing of the gallery of renowned British pop artist Peter Phillips, built beside his incredible house in the foothills. Peter himself is there, and he is basically Mick Jagger, but cooler; it’s fascinating to hear him talk about his riotous canvases and collages. After a refreshing night’s sleep at the beach-chic Sofitel Noosa Pacific Resort, I head to Eumundi Markets. Filled with everything from gourmet food stalls to locally made crafts, this is a delightful place to spend a morning, wandering and buying. The afternoon is spent exploring Noosa, a beautiful resort town. I say “exploring”: after a quick look at the designer boutiques, I slather myself in factor 50 and head to the glorious golden sands of the main beach. All too soon, I’m retiring to my spacious apartment at Seahaven Noosa, to pack a day bag for my next adventure.

DAY 4: Fraser Island



Look out for kookaburras

If you know someone who did a gap year in Australia, chances are they’ll have made their way to this, the world’s largest sand island, which features freshwater lakes, rainforest and, naturally, some spectacular beaches. I suspect my experience is somewhat more luxe than the average student-in-waiting’s. For starters, I arrive not by ferry, but by plane – a tiny little plane, yes, but still a plane, which lands directly on the sand. And then I’m transported around in a 4x4 Hummer from Fraser Experience Tours. This is good, because it rains. A lot. A shame, as it’s the only miserable day in an otherwise blue-skies-and-sunshine-filled trip. It’s still an incredible experience, though, bumping along off-road tracks through the rainforest, taking a dip in Lake McKenzie and cruising along the beach highway with its eerie shipwreck. It’s not the

total desert-island experience – the other tour groups see to that – but it’s still a fantastic back-to-nature day. Afterwards, I head to Hervey Bay, and the delightful Oaks Resort & Spa, for a laid-back evening on my generously sized balcony, with a glass of something cold and delicious I’ve picked up from the local bottle store – you can’t buy alcohol in most Australian supermarkets, it turns out.

DAYS 5-6: From sea to city

“Are there sharks?” I shout, clinging to the netting at the back of a moving boat. After yesterday’s off-road excitement, a relaxing, luxury boat trip seemed like a good idea. But for some reason, I followed the captain’s suggestion that I climb into the sea and hang on to an (admittedly sturdy) net while being pulled along. And now the *Jaws* theme tune is playing in my head. I climb back in. Clearly, however, I’m less rattled by sharks than parrots – after the trip, I rent a paddle board and head back to the waves. I should probably have rented an instructor, too, because it turns out I am awful at it, but I get into an oddly enjoyable rhythm of briefly standing, wobbling, shouting and falling. The following day, a brief internal flight brings me back to where I started: Brisbane. My home for the next two nights is The Calile Hotel. Set on buzzing James Street, this is a design-lovers’

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GETTY IMAGES

Australia



Pared-back elegance at The Calile Hotel

paradise, with a soothing sorbet colour palette, hints of gold and lots of natural marble, there's something very Palm Springs about it. My room is a pleasant size, and I'm rather taken with the daybed. The service isn't quite as "we're-instant-best-mates" friendly as it has been throughout the rest of the trip, but staff are efficient. After exclaiming over the cool Grown Alchemist toiletries in my bathroom, I get horizontal by the hotel's rooftop pool.

DAYS 7-9: Urban playground

I love Brisbane. In fact, I can actually imagine myself living here. If I did, I probably wouldn't be able to afford to live near James Street, though. This is a very well-heeled thoroughfare in the city's sophisticated Fortitude Valley area, and is a delightful place for a wander, with elegant cafes, fine-dining

"I love Brisbane. In fact, I can actually imagine myself living here"

restaurants and an array of wallet-frightening shops, including luxe Australian beauty brand Aesop. Away from there, I highly recommend taking a river cruise, to get a sense of the city. It's also worth visiting The Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art, or QAGOMA (what an acronym), whose collections include works by Indigenous artists. From here, it's a simple stroll to my last-night hotel, The Westin, a stylish and comfortable option in the Central Business District, with its excellent going-out options.

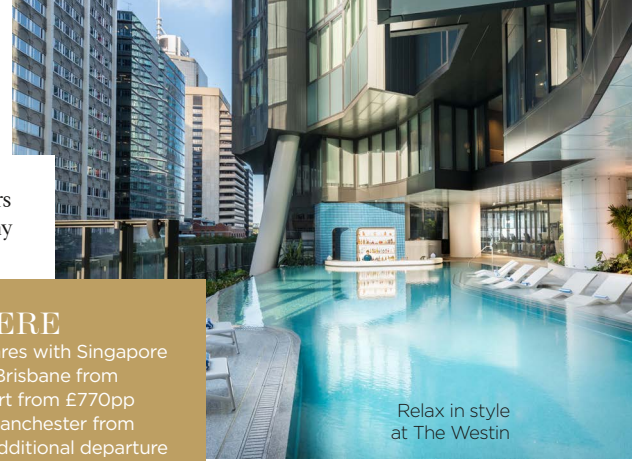
Brisbane has a thriving nightlife – and not surprisingly, given the climate, there are plenty

of outdoor bars, from glamorous rooftop affairs to more relaxed beer gardens. But perhaps my most memorable experience takes place

outside the city, at the Lone Pine Koala Sanctuary. The name is somewhat misleading, because there's lots of other wildlife to marvel at, too. I know as soon as I see a duck-billed platypus frolicking in a tank that I'm going to tell everyone I've seen one, and hand-feeding kangaroos is a magical experience. Admittedly, however, the koalas are the stars of the show, and after marvelling at hordes of the dozing marsupials, I'm given the chance to hold one. You have to get a special ticket, but it's definitely worth it. The koala seems unbothered; I am thrilled, amazed and exhilarated – a perfect summary of my trip to Queensland.

GO THERE

Standard fares with Singapore Airlines to Brisbane from London start from £770pp and from Manchester from £745pp*. Additional departure points are available throughout the UK.



Relax in style at The Westin



A culinary ADVENTURE



Noosa Beach House Peter Kuruvita



The Spirit House

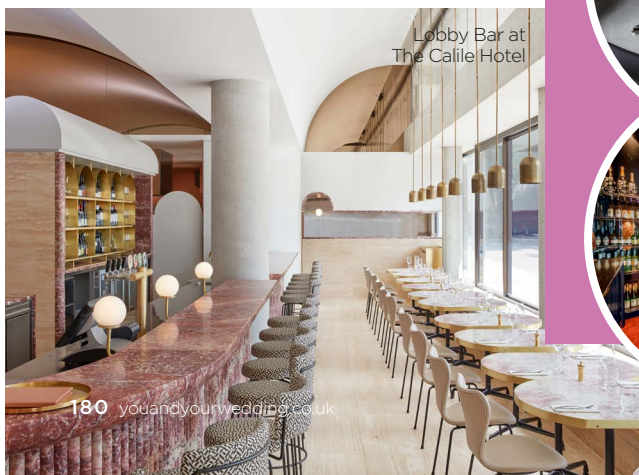


Spicers Tamarind Retreat



Heritij

I knew about Australian coffee's excellent reputation – and this is fully justified. If you're a caffeine fiend like me, I strongly recommend stocking up on beans from one of the many amazing roasters in Brisbane. What I didn't know was how excellent the food is. Must-try restaurants in Noosa include **Noosa Beach House Peter Kuruvita**, with internationally inspired dishes from the famous Australian chef, and **Rickys River Bar & Restaurant** for epic seafood. In Hervey Bay, **Salt Café** does hearty yet healthy brunches, while **The Vinyard** wine bar and restaurant is great for fine-dining delights and wine pairings. Fans of Asian cuisine will adore the **Spirit House** restaurant and cooking school, and **Spicers Tamarind Retreat**. Brisbane has some wonderful dining options. The Greek sharing food at **Hellenika at The Calile** was among the best I've tried, including meltingly soft lamb, while Indian restaurant **Heritij** serves gourmet treats. There are lots of riverside restaurants at the newly renovated Howard Smith Wharves, but by far my favourite is **Felons Brewing Co**, with its just-one-more-slice pizzas and zingy salads. **Harveys** on James Street is a good option for a classic brunch, and for a long lunch, **Restaurant Lurleen's at Sirromet Winery** has divine views and a menu of modern Australian dishes.



Lobby Bar at The Calile Hotel