



Cooktown Lighthouse



COOKTOWN & CAPE YORK PENINSULA

Imagine ... Australia's last frontier. It is the place for the adventurous traveller with its rich history, diverse scenery and wide open spaces appealing to the explorer within. Follow the footsteps of the early pioneers in your own four-wheel-drive adventure or join an air, land or sea tour for a more comfortable look at the vast wilderness and its raw, untamed beauty.

Captain James Cook may have discovered Australia from the north way back in 1770, but Cape York Peninsula was the last place on the continent to succumb to development.

The Peninsula's earliest inhabitants were the Aborigines who roamed the length and breadth of the northern-most tip of Australia, leaving behind a legacy of ancient cave paintings to pass on their Dreamtime stories.

In the late 1800s it was the gold-obsessed prospectors followed by the stockmen and women who sought to tame the wilderness, leaving in their wake the remnants of mining equipment and the old telegraph line that first brought modern communication to the remote area.

Cape York Peninsula remains a wilderness. Even today you can discover deserted beaches with giant sea shells, long tracks where you never pass another vehicle and refreshing waterfalls hidden in thick bush.

Of course, the modern world has not completely forgotten the Peninsula and its unofficial capital — historic Cooktown — combines the old and the new with a charm of its own.

COOKTOWN

Established on the banks of the Endeavour River where Captain Cook came ashore after grounding the HMS Endeavour on the reef, the once mighty port of Cooktown boomed during the gold rush days when its population swelled to more than 30,000 with 90 pubs to quench the mighty thirst of the diggers. Each Queen's Birthday long weekend in June, 3000 visitors share in the town's colourful history at the Cooktown Discovery Festival which includes a fully costumed re-enactment of Captain Cook's landing.

While the timber shanties of the late 1800s succumbed to the elements, many historic buildings such as the James Cook Historical Museum — built in 1889 as a convent — still stand. The National Trust museum houses significant collections from the Cape York region including the original anchor and cannons from the bark Endeavour, plus modern interactive displays on maritime, pastoral, mining, indigenous and Chinese history.

Cooktown's historical buildings and monuments are the focus of a walk around the town and down to the waterfront where boats leave on reef and river fishing tours. Nearby, Grassy Hill and its lighthouse offer panoramic views of the town, river and the Coral Sea.

History buffs will enjoy the Cooktown Ceme-

tery and Chinese Shrine, while nature lovers will be enthralled by the Botanic Gardens and Nature's Powerhouse with its priceless collection of botanical illustrations.

With accommodation ranging from camping to four-star hotels, a supermarket and various supply stores, Cooktown is the perfect place to set out for a self-drive tour to the Tip of Australia. Shorter trips also are possible as the town has an airstrip serviced by several airlines and charter operators, while many extended four-wheel-drive tours of Cape York Peninsula include Cooktown in their itinerary.

ABORIGINAL CULTURE

Aboriginal art dating back 32,000 years can be seen in caves near Laura, one of the first towns encountered on the Peninsula Developmental Road. Known as Quinkan country after the painted stick-like beings which were the Aboriginal equivalent of the bogeyman, the ancient art can be seen not far from the road at Split Rock or you can venture further afield to remote painted rock shelters.

Every two years in June the different Aboriginal groups on Cape York Peninsula attend the Laura Aboriginal Dance and Cultural Festival. The next festival will be in 2005 featuring dancing, music, song, traditional and contemporary Aboriginal arts and crafts plus workshops in traditional cultural skills.

FOUR-WHEEL-DRIVING

Cape York Peninsula and the trip to The Tip is the dream of many a four-wheel-driving enthusiast. You can stick to the main thoroughfare of the Peninsula Developmental Road or head off the beaten track to find some of the more exciting creek crossings to test your skills.

Campgrounds can be found along the way and there are plenty of bush camping sites, particularly in the national parks. Small townships including Coen and homesteads such as Musgrave sell limited supplies, while the major centres of Cooktown and Weipa are the best places to stock up.

The very last part of the trip north involves walking across a rocky outcrop where a sign proclaims you are at the northern-most point of the Australian continent, from which you can see the islands of the Torres Strait.

NATIONAL PARKS

With 14 national parks in Cape York Peninsula, the region has a diverse landscape that is home



take time to...

- Admire the massive granite boulders of Black Mountain National Park (above) where the Wet Tropics end and the drier savannah woodland begins. The imposing formation is the source of many Aboriginal dreaming stories and is used as a refuge by numerous rare species of wildlife.
- Be blinded by Shelburne Bay's spectacular white sand dunes as you fly north to the Torres Strait to experience the rich Islander culture.
- Discover the remnants of the gold rush era at Maytown where the rusty mining equipment stands as a monument to its glory days.
- Watch for the red flash as the red-tailed black cockatoos screech over Lakeland Downs.
- Marvel at the simplicity of life on the land in the early 1900s with a visit to Old Laura Homestead, part of the spectacular Lakefield National Park.
- Learn about the Russian invasion scare of the 1890s with a visit to Thursday Island's Green Hill (below) to see the relics of its military past.





GO FISHING

Whether you're into launching lures, bobbing baits or flicking flies, Cape York Peninsula is the ultimate sportsfishing location in Australia — if not the world. With its massive river systems, waterholes, uninhabited islands and deserted beaches, the wilderness area offers opportunities for the most jaded angler to catch "the big one". Unusual species such as saratoga (above) are sought after. While the Peninsula is known as the barramundi capital of Australia, most of Australia's tropical sportfish call its waters home. Mangrove jack, tuna, trevally, queenfish, and cod inhabit the tough-on-lures snags and these fish plus many others also hungrily patrol off shore. The near-shore reefs, sand flats and rocky headlands produce brilliant sight-fishing — the latest sportsfishing craze — for tuna, giant herring, queenies and GTs. Black marlin abound in the waters around Lizard Island where many world record fish have been caught. Being Australia's "last frontier", it's still possible to fish areas in Cape York Peninsula untouched by the hand — or rod — of man.



Clockwise from above: Enjoy a coldie at the Lion's Den on the way to Cooktown; Poruma Island Resort in the Torres Strait; Seisia jetty near Bamaga.



to some rare and unusual species of flora and fauna.

Cedar Bay National Park (Mangkal-Mangkal-ba), 40km south of Cooktown in the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area boasts sandy beaches and fringing reefs with a backdrop of dense tropical rainforest. Home to the elusive Bennet's tree kangaroo and cassowaries, most of the rainforest has never been logged.

In contrast, Black Mountain (Kalkajaka), 25km south of Cooktown, is an imposing formation of massive dark granite boulders that is the source of numerous Aboriginal dreaming stories. Many rare species of wildlife use the mountain as a refuge and it marks the point where the Wet Tropics end

and the drier savannah woodland begins.

Lakefield, north of Laura, is Queensland's second largest National Park. Drained by large rivers and spectacular wetlands rich with birdlife, barramundi and crocodiles, the park is a wildlife refuge for several threatened animals. Bush camping is allowed at a number of sites near rivers and waterholes.

Iron Range in the far north-east of Cape York Peninsula has some of the most colourful of the region's wildlife such as the eclectus parrot and palm cockatoo.

Jardine River at the remote northern tip of Queensland is the State's largest perennial stream. The national park has almost 40,000 hectares of true wilderness and its pristine water-

falls are icons of Cape York Peninsula's scenery.

There are four offshore national parks including Lizard Island which has spectacular scenery both on the land and in the fringing coral reefs.

WILDLIFE

Brightly coloured birds such as yellow-breasted sunbirds and mangrove kingfishers flash among the Peninsula's foliage, while water birds including the brolga and sarus crane delight with their antics. The sheer diversity of birdlife will keep the avid watcher enthralled for weeks.

Look for the rare spectacled hare-wallaby, the spiny knob-tailed gecko, goannas, rainbow skinks and lace monitors along the bush tracks. Both freshwater and saltwater crocodiles inhab-



Clockwise from above: Fruit Bat Falls near The Tip of Cape York; Saltwater crocodiles inhabit the waterways of Cape York Peninsula; The Laura Dance Festival.



take time to...

- Conquer Cape York and celebrate with a well-earned drink as you admire the view from Australia's most northerly point — The Tip (above).
- Stand in the footsteps of the first white people to walk on Australian soil at Duyfken Point, where the Dutch ship Duyfken became the first European ship to land on the mainland back in 1606.
- Catch a prehistoric saratoga, the ancient fighting fish which are found in Cape York Peninsula's lagoons.
- Measure your height against a giant termite mound which can house the queen and up to two million workers. The mounds are a common sight along the Peninsula Developmental Road to The Tip.
- Look for a break in the Great Barrier Reef as Captain Cook did on Cooktown's Grassy Hill.
- Admire the architecture of the late 1880s with a visit to Cooktown's Bank building, constructed in 1886.
- Marvel at the grace of the long-legged jabiru as it scoops insects from the Peninsula's waterholes.
- Wash the dust away with a dip in the cool waters of Eliot Falls before you cross the mighty Jardine River.

it the Peninsula's waterways, while nightspotting may reveal a spotted cuscus in the bush or a turtle laying its eggs on a beach.

PIONEERING HISTORY

Whether your interest is in mining, grazing or World War II, Cape York Peninsula has a wealth of sites capturing those eras. The Peninsula Telegraph Line (1886) can still be seen in places, while homesteads from the early 1900s illustrate the harsh life grazing pioneers faced.

Maytown and the Palmer River is a National Heritage site rich with relics of the once busy gold mining town and the legacy of its Chinese inhabitants who numbered 17,000 in 1877. Some of the mines have the remains of their

battery equipment and steam engines intact.

The rubble of World War II aircraft, radar systems and machine gun turrets are scattered around the Peninsula, with some of the best examples around Bamaga near The Tip.

TORRES STRAIT

Four-wheel-drivers wanting to venture even further north than The Tip can catch a Peddells Ferry to Thursday Island. The company also offers tours of the island, which is the administrative centre of the Torres Strait. There you can learn about the island's rich culture, colonial days, pearling plus its maritime and military importance.

The culture of the Torres Strait Islanders also

can be experienced at Poruma Island further north towards Papua New Guinea. Poruma's Polynesian-style resort was awarded prestigious Queensland Tourism and Tourism Tropical North Queensland Awards in 2003. Built to generate an alternate income for the island's community, guests at the resort can interact with residents by joining a basket weaving class, visiting the local school or being shown traditional fishing techniques.

The Torres Strait can be reached by air from Cairns and Bamaga with scheduled and charter flights landing on Horn Island, only a short boat ride from Thursday Island. Light aircraft are used to land on the dozen or so islands, including Poruma, which have airstrips. ■