



# SPLENDOUR *in the* RAINFOREST

Enveloping nature, tropical humidity and drippings of luxury... the newly reawakened Silky Oaks Lodge is suspended in a Daintree wonderland, writes **MICHAEL HARDEN**.

Photography **PARKER BLAIN**









As first impressions go, it's right up there. It starts with the overture of driving into the edges of the magnificent Daintree, the world's oldest living rainforest at 180 million years old, as the sun sets. We're in Far North Queensland, so the sunset's one of those rapid tropical ones, light then dark, like someone flipped a switch. And so we drive through the gates of Silky Oaks Lodge in darkness with only a few soft spots illuminating the driveway or flaring up into sections of the lush forest behind which, apparently, is the resort.

The density of the foliage and the canopy overhead engulf you, like some kind of enchanted jungle. And then just as we park, it begins to rain, sudden and steady in the humidity, like another switch has been flipped. And while the rain is apt, given that we're in an ancient rainforest, it also poses the logistical problem of finding and getting ourselves and our luggage to wherever reception is without getting drenched.

Then, in the manner you come to expect after a couple of nights at Silky Oaks, two smiling members of staff materialise beside the car holding large umbrellas. Freed of all logistics, luggage taken care of, dry under umbrellas, we're guided down a winding timber-decked path through a forest of palms and cycads, ferns and vines to where a magnificent open-sided timber pavilion with seven-metre ceilings and a cantilevered roof reveals itself in the forest. This building, all soft golden lighting and polished New Guinea rosewood is known as The Lodge and is home to reception, where the walls are decorated with ceramic art by artists from Yalanji Arts Centre depicting local flora and fauna of the rainforest, of which the Kuku Yalanji are the traditional custodians. The rest of the building houses a sprawling bar and lounge area, a yoga pavilion and the aptly named Treehouse Restaurant.

As we check in at reception, the rain eases then stops but the sound of water continues. It's the sound of the clear, cool, fast-running Mossman River which Silky Oaks Lodge has been sharing this part of the forest with for more than 30 years. Clear water rushing over granite rocks and the constant chorus of birds and insects is the soundtrack here; the sense of being thoroughly immersed in both nature and luxury immediate, intense and quite magical. Even on arrival, you know you'll be sorry to leave. Not a bad first impression

Silky Oaks Lodge may have been here at the edge of the Daintree National Park for more than three decades but it's a very different place now to the one that opened with six basic chalets and an animal sanctuary in 1985.

Under several different owners, the property has moved steadily upmarket. It was managed by P&O Resorts for a decade and during that time, the number of chalets was expanded to 60 and the Healing Waters Spa was added to the property. The expansion was overseen by manager, James Baillie, the same James Baillie who, with his wife Hayley, now owns luxury lodge group Baillie Lodges. The group's portfolio includes properties in New Zealand and Canada as well as Longitude 131° at Uluru, Capella Lodge on Lord Howe Island and Kangaroo Island's Southern Ocean Lodge, currently under reconstruction after the island's savage 2019 bushfires. ►







Clockwise from left: the Lodge bar and lounge; sweet and sour pork belly; a rainforest boardwalk.







Kingfish pastrami.  
Below: executive chef  
Mark Godbeer.  
Opposite: alfresco dining  
at the Treehouse  
Restaurant.



Baillie Lodges acquired Silky Oaks in 2019 with a plan, even before Covid arrived, to close the property for two years for refurbishment. Twenty million dollars later there's a new, sharpened focus that has elevated the lodge to the end of the market more commonly associated with companies like Aman.

The main building has been almost completely rebuilt, including that raised ceiling and cantilevered roof that work to get the structure out of the way and bring the sights, sounds and smells (but, miraculously, few insects) of the rainforest into the public spaces.

Whether you're eating dinner in the Treehouse Restaurant or having a cocktail (with different Australian gins featured every night) and canapés in the Kubirri Lounge or – best seats in the house – the Jungle Perch which appears to hover directly over the river, you're immersed in the rainforest, part of nature even as you kick back on a comfortable banquette, in a large wicker armchair or on a sleek couch, glass of well-chilled Leeuwin Estate Riesling in hand, tucking into freshly caught coral trout crudo flecked with glossy pink pearls of finger lime or scattered with salmon roe.

Silky Oaks' kitchen has been gutted and expanded under the direction of executive chef, Mark Godbeer. Godbeer was most recently at Baillie's Longitude property following a multi-year stint cooking on luxury yachts. He's turned Silky Oaks underutilised tennis court into a kitchen garden that supplies the kitchen with everything from vanilla, rosella, Thai basil and muntries to ingredients like purple yams and lotus roots, arranging the landscaping so guests can dine in the garden, feasting on the produce that's thriving all around them.

He's also changed the focus of Silky Oak's food program. It's now centred on local ingredients and producers that find expression in a climate-appropriate Asian-inspired palate with menus changing every night on a four-day cycle. Godbeer's also had state of the art cooling systems installed in the kitchen so that baked items like bread and pastry – always a challenge in high humidity – are as en pointe as the fresh greens sitting under the crisp-skinned Asian-style pork belly.

Godbeer is on a mission to make the kitchen as self-sufficient and waste-free as possible. He already hangs ducks, cures meats, makes his own ferments and bakes his own bread. Anything that he needs to source almost entirely comes from local producers. He has fishermen who go out each day just to supply the Treehouse and dairy products from bio-dynamic dairy farm Mungalli in the Atherton Tablelands (worth a day trip for those interested in magnificent scenery and produce) that not only produces amazing milk but does a great line in cheese, including an incredible fresh ricotta. A small organic orchard just kilometres from Silky Oaks is the source of the fresh fruit in the daily breakfast bowl – everything from passionfruit and limes to mandarins and jackfruit. ►

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The attention to detail in the kitchen is mirrored across the property. For starters, the number of chalets has been reduced to 40, providing a greater degree of privacy and a more concentrated level of service. Buried in and elevated above the rainforest and reached by winding (sometimes steep) paths, each dark-painted residence has been expanded and revamped in line with the new luxury attitude (and price tag). Part of the advantage of Silky Oaks having some age on it is that even with the recent building and renovation works, the forest is well-established, up close and personal, the greenery as much a part of the décor as the joinery.

There are various levels of accommodation across the 35-hectare property, but simple, spacious luxury is common to them all. White walls, large sliding glass doors, timber and stone floors cool underfoot, beautiful joinery, a muted palette of greens and greys and sizeable verandahs, some with firepits and daybeds, all with comfortable furniture, ceiling fans and hammocks. Even non-hammock people should give these soft and embracing beauties a go. Being gently rocked to sleep under a ceiling fan as a massed insect chorus serenades you from the trees is a rare and beautiful experience.

Oversized bathrooms, most with an outdoor tub or shower, are common to all the retreats. There are both ceiling fans and air-conditioning, original art by photographer Kathryn Nelson, a gratis minibar that includes chocolates by local makers alongside Australian wine, beer and gin, kombucha and coconut water, binoculars for bird watching, bespoke insect repellent that's more Aesop than Aerogard and no television. Come back after dinner to find lanterns on your verandah and an oil burner wafting subtle notes of Australian indigenous flora.

For those who want to splurge, the brand-new Daintree Pavilion is a self-contained top-of-the-line two-bedroom, three-bathroom chalet at the far end of the property. ►







Clockwise from left:  
Healing Waters Spa;  
inside a River Retreat  
room. Opposite: the  
Daintree Pavillion  
outdoor lounge and  
Rainforest Retreat.







### ✈️ Getting there

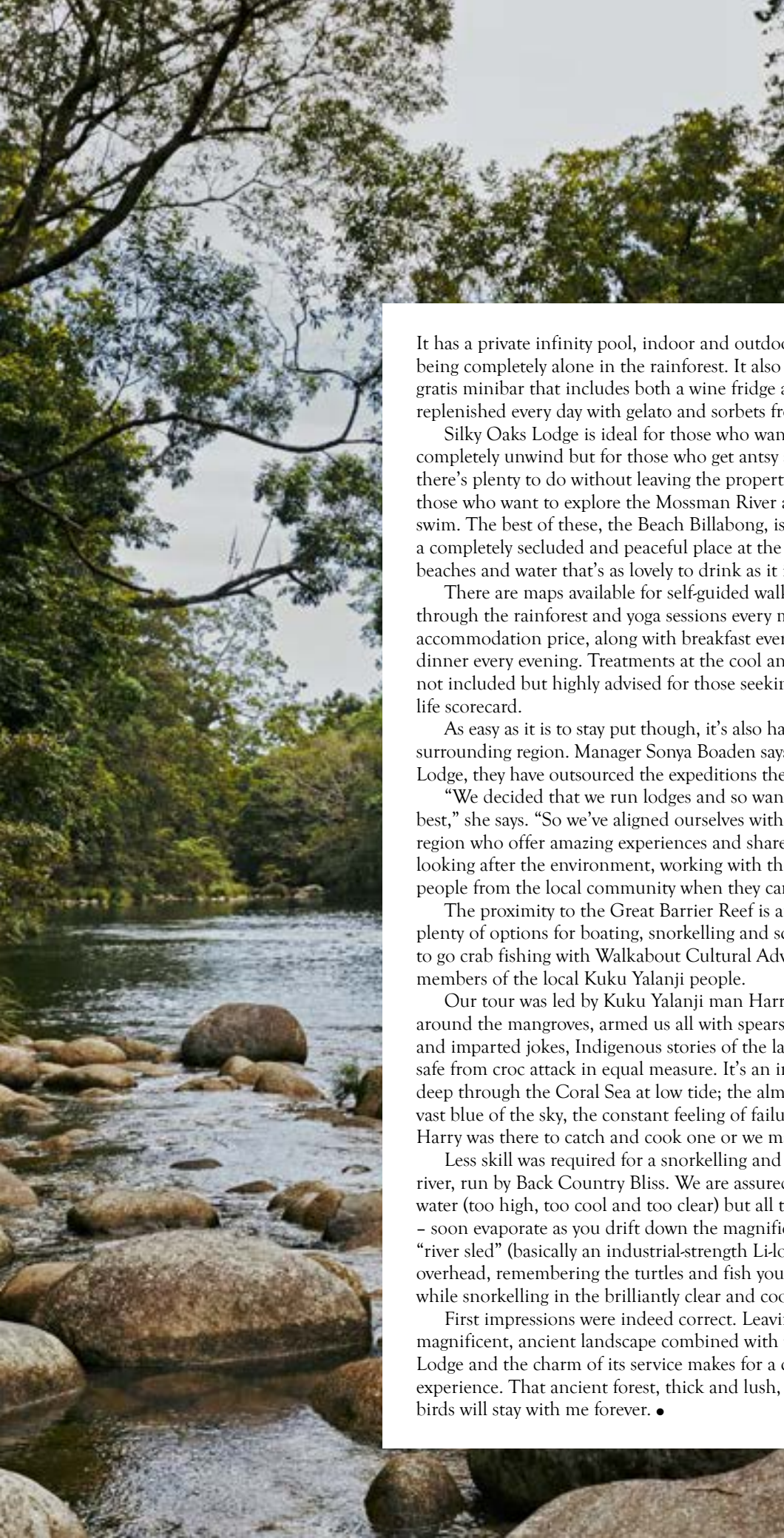
All major airlines fly direct to Cairns from all major centres. Silky Oaks Lodge is 78 kilometres north of Cairns Airport. Private airport transfers can be arranged though self-driving is a good option for those wanting to explore surrounding areas. Rates for Silky Oaks Lodge start from \$1000 a night for two people with a minimum two-night stay. The rate is inclusive of dinner, breakfast, canapés and minibar.



Clockwise from above: mangrove flats in the Coral Sea; a mud crab at Cooya Beach; river sled drift guide Elliot Ryan at Mossman River.







It has a private infinity pool, indoor and outdoor lounge areas, kitchen and a sense of being completely alone in the rainforest. It also features a turbo-charged version of the gratis minibar that includes both a wine fridge and a refrigerated drawer that's replenished every day with gelato and sorbets from the kitchen.

Silky Oaks Lodge is ideal for those who want to plant themselves for a few days to completely unwind but for those who get antsy at the thought of sitting still for too long there's plenty to do without leaving the property. Kayaks and canoes are available for those who want to explore the Mossman River and there are three different places to swim. The best of these, the Beach Billabong, is at the far end of the property, a completely secluded and peaceful place at the end of a rough track that has sandy beaches and water that's as lovely to drink as it is to swim in.

There are maps available for self-guided walks of varying length and difficulty through the rainforest and yoga sessions every morning. They're included in the accommodation price, along with breakfast every morning and drinks, canapés and dinner every evening. Treatments at the cool and tranquil Healing Waters Spa are not included but highly advised for those seeking to tick all the boxes on the lush life scorecard.

As easy as it is to stay put though, it's also hard to resist the lure of some of the surrounding region. Manager Sonya Boaden says that as part of the changes to Silky Oaks Lodge, they have outsourced the expeditions the lodge used to run to local experts.

"We decided that we run lodges and so wanted to concentrate on doing what we do best," she says. "So we've aligned ourselves with some of the amazing operators in the region who offer amazing experiences and share the same values of our company: looking after the environment, working with the local community and who always hire people from the local community when they can."

The proximity to the Great Barrier Reef is an obvious choice for a day trip with plenty of options for boating, snorkelling and scuba diving. There's also the opportunity to go crab fishing with Walkabout Cultural Adventures, a local cultural business run by members of the local Kuku Yalanji people.

Our tour was led by Kuku Yalanji man Harry Cobb, who guided us through and around the mangroves, armed us all with spears, told us how to spot a crab in the sand and imparted jokes, Indigenous stories of the landscape and reassurance that we were safe from croc attack in equal measure. It's an intense, unique experience wading knee deep through the Coral Sea at low tide; the almost unsettling warmth of the water, the vast blue of the sky, the constant feeling of failure at not being able to find a crab. Lucky Harry was there to catch and cook one or we may all have starved.

Less skill was required for a snorkelling and river sled drift tour down the Mossman river, run by Back Country Bliss. We are assured that there are no crocodiles in the water (too high, too cool and too clear) but all thoughts of danger – and stress generally – soon evaporate as you drift down the magnificent river, lying on your back on your "river sled" (basically an industrial-strength Li-lo) watching the canopy that meets overhead, remembering the turtles and fish you saw and the platypus that eluded you while snorkelling in the brilliantly clear and cool waters of the Mossman.

First impressions were indeed correct. Leaving Silky Oaks Lodge is a wrench. The magnificent, ancient landscape combined with the generous, relaxed luxury of the Lodge and the charm of its service makes for a completely unique and uplifting experience. That ancient forest, thick and lush, with no sounds but river, insects and birds will stay with me forever. ●