

AUSTRALIAN

TRAVELLER

HONESTLY AUSTRALIAN

Going Guilt-free

*How to do good and feel good by travelling
consciously, responsibly and with heart*

**FINDING
BLISS
IN THE
DAINTREE***

*Charting a
bright future on
CHRISTMAS
ISLAND*

*Life in the
Slow Lane*

WALKING, DRIFTING, CYCLING
AND SOAKING IT ALL IN

This could be you
at Sticky Oaks Lodge



THE KIMBERLEY Outback NSW GEELONG & THE BELLARINE
CRUISING TASMANIA CLARE VALLEY K'gari (Fraser Island)

Take in rainforest and river views from your perch at the new-look Silky Oaks Lodge on the doorstep of the Daintree.

RAINFOREST RENEWAL

An enduring LUXURY rainforest *RETREAT* in Tropical North Queensland has RE-EMERGED greener than ever after a *STUNNING* transformation that sees it MESH with the very fabric of the *DAINTREE*.



WORDS IMOGEN EVESON



PHOTOGRAPHY: TOURISM AUSTRALIA (AERIAL IMAGE OF DAINTREE COASTLINE); GEORGE APOSTOLIDIS (RAINFOREST RETREAT SUITE)

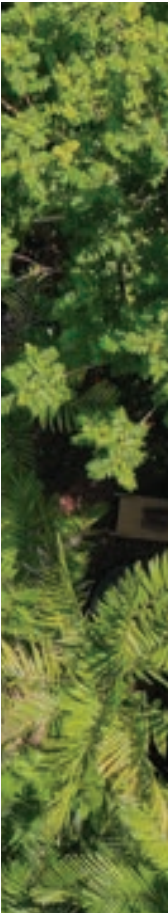


CLOCKWISE FROM MAIN: *A stay at Silky Oaks Lodge puts you in prime position for exploring the region's rainforest, rivers and reef; Listen to the soundtrack of birds and cicadas from the comfort of your stylish treehouse-style suite; The Treehouse Restaurant at the new-look lodge opens up to the treetops and Mossman River below.*

THERE'S A TRANSFORMATIVE MOMENT that happens for each guest during a stay at Silky Oaks Lodge. The moment they feel their shoulders soften and residual stress wash away. You might recognise it by their espousal of the 'river look' at pre-dinner cocktails: sun-dried hair still a little damp from a late-afternoon dip and teased by the humidity of the tropics. But you'll definitely know it by the easy and irrepressible smile that spreads across their face in a way that betrays pure relaxation and acclimatisation to this rainforest realm. A smile that says, categorically, "I live here now".

You can trace this to the DNA of the Baillie Lodges brand: its properties each bottle a distinctly Australian laid-back luxury that invites you to feel part of the fabric of the extraordinary environment they're stitched seamlessly into. And with its \$20 million architectural redesign and rebuild of an enduring retreat on the doorstep of the Daintree National Park, Baillie Lodges has taken this one step further. From the soaring ceilings of the central lodge that invite the outside in, to the 40 treehouse-style suites (including the deluxe Daintree Pavilion, complete with two separate bedroom wings and infinity pool) that each welcome in the sights and sounds of the rainforest, every element of the new-look Silky Oaks Lodge is designed to connect you to nature in stylish, contemporary luxury.

But that transformative moment can also be attributed to the lodge's location on the banks of the Mossman River: the pristine water source that grounds and renews all who come into contact with it, and from which everything here at Silky Oaks flows. Mesmerising, mercurial and ever-changing, the river wears many moods throughout the day. One moment you might glance down from your perch at the Treehouse Restaurant to see it shimmer softly a stewed and tannic khaki. But then the sun only needs to break through the trees to →





illuminate it a shocking emerald green. Guests bathe in the river. They jump in, float on their backs and loll around on lilos as the light works its colours on the water's surface and mist rolls around on nearby Manjal Dimbi (Mt Demi). This spot in the Mossman River is one of the few places in Tropical North Queensland that you can wild swim croc-free, safe in the knowledge that the water here is too cool and shaded for salties' constitution.

I stay connected to it all in my airy Riverhouse, where the soundtrack to my repose is a rainforest orchestra and the cascading of the river below. I can choose to let it wash over me from my cloud-like Baillie Bed (custom-made by AH Beard), steeped neck-deep in my outdoor bathtub or cocooned deck-side in my hammock. Or I can wind my way down to the Healing Waters Spa, where treatments are inspired by ancient Indigenous beliefs that the water in the river is a renewing and life-giving force. My visit coincides with the tail end of green season (November to March), and I find it quite blissful in the moments the heavens open for a routine 'restorative shower'. The frogs get louder and the scents are stronger. It's the best time of the year to see butterflies, like the giant cobalt-blue Ulysses, which flash like orbs in mid-air. The thrumming, pulsating, totally alive world of the ancient Daintree is amplified tenfold.

A tour of the kitchen garden reveals how Silky Oaks Lodge is green in more ways than one. Here on the site of the lodge's old tennis court, executive chef Mark Godbeer and his team have been cultivating 100 different types of plants and fruit-bearing trees including red dragon fruit, tamarind, galangal, rosella and mangosteen, which help shape a menu finely calibrated for the tropical surrounds. His team forage daily for leafy and flowering greens such as Vietnamese mint, basil, lemongrasses, moringa and cranberry hibiscus, which drop subtle flavour bombs into salads and garnishes. They pickle and ferment. They dehydrate jackfruit seeds and roast them to make praline. They blitz pandang into a bright-green oil, herbaceous and caramelly, to accompany the coconut flatbread that stops me and my fellow diners in our tracks every time it lands on the table pre-lunch.

Mark and his team are abuzz with ideas as their grassroots project grows and future guests might expect to sample teas and jams made from scratch on site; stocks, broths and soy sauces made from Silky Oaks mushrooms; and even a chef's table experience in this verdant space under the rainforest canopy. And, as well as growing such native ingredients as pepper vines, finger lime and Davidson's plum, the hope is

to understand and cultivate more in consultation with local Traditional Owners as the kitchen garden evolves.

It will evolve in a sustainable 'pick one, grow one' direction, Mark says, and the possibilities are endless. "We're in such a beautiful place. None of my team came here just to grab boxes off the truck. Everyone came here with the same ethos of zero food waste, to use every bit of every piece of protein, vegetable or fruit as much as we can. To learn together." Before joining Silky Oaks, the South African-born chef worked at Baillie Lodge's Uluru property, Longitude 131°. He enjoys the new palette he works with here in the tropics. "Where it was red, here it is green," he says of the contrast and, as the rain comes down around us, notes: "It's as majestic, but just wetter!" The leaves of all manner of things that might later end up on our plate glisten like glass.

Complemented by fresh ingredients harvested in Tropical North Queensland's rich food bowl, the resulting menu of refreshing and balanced fare is a highlight among many at Silky Oaks, running the gamut from feather-light coconut waffles with pawpaw, almonds, banana and honey at breakfast to chargrilled local palm hearts with quinoa, mango and avocado at lunch to a king brown pad Thai with peanut, lime, sawtooth coriander and sprouts at dinner. We dine each day in the theatre of the open-air Treehouse Restaurant, cool under the canopy of a soaring ceiling and in prime position to take in the drama of the rainforest and river below. We create our own rhythms and rituals in step with nature's cycles, such as sipping on a bright and crisp sundowner of local gin before padding across to dinner each evening.

The restaurant is housed in the architecturally show-stopping main lodge and diners are welcomed each time they step inside by exquisite design details that are a hallmark of all Baillie Lodges. Flanking the entry are 45 ceramic tiles made by artists at the nearby Yalanji Arts Centre; they hint at the Daintree Rainforest's unique flora and fauna, including the prehistoric cassowary, and further tie the property back to the local environment and culture. Throughout the lodge, including in each guest suite, Australian artist Catherine Nelson's specially commissioned digital collages further capture the life and colour of the region.

And while this Luxury Lodge of Australia is the ultimate retreat to hole yourself up in, its location sets it up as the ideal hub for exploring Tropical North Queensland. It's just upstream – and a 15-minute drive – from Mossman Gorge within Daintree National Park, and about →

PHOTOGRAPHY: TOURISM PORT DOUGLAS AND DAINTREE (MOSSMAN GORGE, DAINTREE)



Conscious traveller

From Longitude 131° at Uluru-Kata Tjuta to Capella Lodge on Lord Howe Island, each property in the Baillie Lodges portfolio of sustainable luxury retreats in unique wilderness destinations is designed to minimise its impact on the local environment and utilise the best available technology to reduce energy consumption and waste. It has a Travel for Good philosophy that considers the four touchstones of natural environment, local community, culture and heritage and people (staff development and wellbeing) in all its operations. This translates at Silky Oaks Lodge in numerous ways, ranging from the refillable water bottles you are issued on arrival for use on outdoor adventures to the free-range, organic produce that ends up on your plate

GETAWAYS | Daintree Rainforest



(and hasn't travelled far at all). And from the clever architectural design that minimises energy consumption (such as its guest treehouses being set high above the Mossman River and among the rainforest canopy, with deep verandahs and wide doors that invite cool breezes and reduce the need for air conditioning), to the connections fostered with Kuku Yalanji Country's Traditional Owners and the genuine passion for their job and environment conveyed by all staff members at the lodge.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Works by local artists add a real sense of place to a stay at Silky Oaks Lodge; Enjoy the natural theatre of the rainforest from the main lodge; Dine on just-picked ingredients from the kitchen garden; The lagoon-style swimming pool.





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Take a cruise along the Daintree River; Keep an eye out for cassowaries; Embark on a Kuku Yalanji Dreamtime Walk from Mossman Gorge Centre; Hear the rush of the river from your Billabong Suite; Relax after a treatment at the Healing Waters Spa; Hole up in your nature-adjacent Treehouse Retreat.



GETAWAYS | Daintree Rainforest



20 minutes inland from Port Douglas and the aquatic action of the Great Barrier Reef. Drive 30 minutes north and you'll reach the ferry stop, launching pad for both cruises down the Daintree River that hug the mangroves in search of crocodiles and adventures up the twisting Bloomfield Track to Cape Tribulation.

In December 2019, the Port Douglas Daintree region became the first destination to be awarded ECO Destination Certification from Ecotourism Australia, whose certification program is the world's oldest not-for-profit ecotourism accreditation program, with the aim of inspiring responsible tourism both environmentally and culturally. Three more regions across Australia – the Coffs Coast and Central Coast in NSW and the Margaret River Region in WA – have since joined the ranks, but the Port Douglas Daintree region's trailblazing path reflects a 40-year history of environmental commitment and protest.

At an estimated 180 million years old, the Daintree is the world's oldest living rainforest. It spans vast swathes of Kuku Yalanji Country and is home to some 3000 plant species including primitive cycads, ferns and mosses that tell the story of its own evolution. One third of Australia's 315 mammal species live here, too, including 13 found only here in Queensland's Wet Tropics such as the green ringtail possum and Boyd's forest dragon. A deep respect for this natural world and an intimate knowledge of its cycles is at the core of the culture, passed down through the generations, long fostered by the Kuku Yalanji people. But the fragile ecosystem of the rainforest that its Traditional Owners know so completely has been under threat since logging and pastoral activities imposed themselves on the landscape in the late 19th century. It took a watershed moment in 1984, when controversial plans to construct the Bloomfield Track sparked wildly publicised protests that became known as the Daintree Blockade, to put environmental protection on the government agenda.

The region became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1988 and, a decade later, the local council was the first to adopt a sustainable tourism strategy. Today, the ECO Destination certification signals

to travellers a region rich in high-calibre nature-based experiences and strong sustainable practices. The implementation of the Plastic Free movement in the Douglas Shire, for instance, aims to phase out single-use plastic, while Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority permits have been extended for eco-certified businesses operating on the reef. Ten years prior to World Heritage listing, large sections of the lowland rainforest were subdivided for residential development and today, the Daintree Buyback Scheme purchases plots for conservation. Silky Oaks itself sits on a 32-hectare pocket of land that had been heavily logged throughout the 19th and 20th centuries; today it is lush reclaimed rainforest that thrives under conscientious custodianship.

And, in September 2021, 160,213 hectares of Country stretching from Mossman to Cooktown – including the national park – was returned to the Eastern Kuku Yalanji in a historic handback ceremony that echoed the famous Uluru handback of 1985. It is a move that provides Traditional Owners with a say in the management of their land and cultural heritage, and inspires an opportunity to rewrite the tourism landscape by broadening the engagement travellers can have with traditional cultures in the region.

I gain my own insight into the ancient and continuing culture of the Kuku Yalanji during a Dreamtime Walk through Mossman Gorge. This Daintree gateway is flush with sun-dappled swimming holes, lush rainforest and walking tracks that curl through it. For shaman Harold Tayley, or Mooks (which means 'friend' in language), it is a pharmacy, supermarket and university. A consummate showman and guide with 30 years' experience who speaks 10 languages and led Hollywood filmmaker James Cameron through the rainforest here

before he made *Avatar*, he bestows members of our group with nicknames that reflect our surrounds. The tour begins with a Smoking Ceremony, fresh damper and Daintree tea and, as we tread past cycad palms once the foodstuff of dinosaurs and twisting trees that look anthropomorphic, it continues as an education into the traditional healing – and harming – properties of the plant life around us. With its antiseptic citrus scent, the leaves of the Daintree native nutmeg are good for treating sunburn; but eating its fleshy red centre will put you in a trance. Holding the skin together like superglue, the sap of the cassowary plum tree is used to treat cuts.

As if to emphasise the fine line that must be walked here in the rainforest, Mooks adds: "We have two different types of plums – the cassowary plum and the cassowary apple. You can eat that one but not the plum. Eat the wrong one, you die." He plucks some sarsaparilla out of the creek: "It's just one plant and you have three uses for it." Use its leaves to alleviate itches from mosquito bites; lather them up in water to create a bush shampoo; use its bark like deep heat for muscle pain.

Back at Silky Oaks the next day, I pick my way along one of the several hiking trails that wind through the rainforest from the lodge, and emerge at Melaleuca Island. I take a dip and share this resting spot in the river – fringed with the yellow blossom of flowering tea tree – with the cicadas and birds. And with the insects that seem beamed straight from *Avatar*: ants that look like pieces of intricate jewellery and an electric blue dragonfly that rests gently beside me. It's just me and these creatures recharging from the radiant heat of the time-softened boulders as the river rapids flow gently around. I think of what Mooks said to me at the end of our tour: "Bana Wanaree Manjalmun – spring water, that's your tribal name. Running from the mountain." In this magical part of the rainforest where everything flows from the river and people emerge anew, it couldn't feel more right. And it's here that I have my own transformative moment. **AT**

A traveller's checklist

Getting there

SILKY OAKS LODGE is 60 minutes' drive north of Cairns Airport along the Great Barrier Reef Drive. Plug into the *Luxury Redefined* podcast via Spotify for a virtually guided arrival experience, featuring an introduction to the destination via interviews with everyone from artist Catherine Nelson, Kuku Yalanji tour guide Juan Walker and Baillie Lodges founders James and Hayley Baillie, timed to align with the drive.

Staying there

Rates per person per night start from \$495 in a **RAINFOREST RETREAT** (minimum two-night stay) and include breakfast, sunset drinks and dinner; lodge-based experiences like yoga and use of kayaks, and scheduled daily transfers to Port Douglas.

Playing there

In addition to its signature experiences, Silky Oaks Lodge offers a selection of bespoke experiences via local tour operators at an additional cost and can tailor an itinerary incorporating anything from trips to the **GREAT BARRIER REEF**; driving safaris through rainforest or to **CAPE TRIBULATION**; helicopter rides, hot-air ballooning and horse rides; walks with Kuku Yalanji guides in **MOSSMAN GORGE** and further afield; to a visit to **JANBAL ABORIGINAL ART GALLERY**. silkyoakslodge.com.au



PHOTOGRAPHY: TOURISM AUSTRALIA (DAINTREE BOATMAN WILDLIFE CRUISES, MOSSMAN GORGE); TOURISM AND EVENTS QUEENSLAND (CASSOWARY, MOSSMAN GORGE CENTRE TOUR, DAINTREE RIVER DETAIL); GEORGE APOSTOLIDIS (BILLABONG SUITE BALCONY)