



Warm welcome

The Mission Beach/Innisfail area might have been lashed by Cyclone Larry earlier in the year, but the doors are now wide open for holiday-makers.

Story & photos **Jim Mathers**

A laid-back, friendly atmosphere is a good start if you're looking for a destination where you can relax on holidays. This is certainly what you'll find in the region around Mission Beach.

The people here are friendly and the pace is unhurried – just the ticket for recharging your batteries. One thing's for certain, the locals aren't going to let a temporary hiccup like Cyclone Larry rain on their parade.

There's a lot on offer in the area, including nature at its best.

The tranquil lure of the tropics hits you as soon as you encounter the warm sun and palm trees when alighting at Cairns airport.

From here, you can hire a car and venture south. It's almost 90 km to Innisfail, and a further 50 km to Mission Beach.

Innisfail is a pretty town. Stroll down the main street and pop into one

of the cafes.

Oliveri's Deli, for example, is a great spot. It looks, feels and smells like a real deli should – meats, cheeses, marinated this and that. Grab a fresh deli roll and a coffee and sit outside.

Nearby you'll find the Chinese Temple, Lit Sing Gung. Built in 1940, it's a small, brightly coloured building, filled with interesting symbols, decorative effects and information on local history.

The temple is a reflection of the strong, early Chinese heritage of the area – people who were lured by the promises of agriculture and the adventures of the goldfields.

It's open from 8am to 5pm. Entry is free.

It's a short drive from here to the Johnstone River Crocodile Farm.

Cyclone Larry gave the croc farm a fair lashing, knocking down trees and some of the enclosures, but apparently the crocs were too scared to do a runner, and it's business as usual now.

Run by the Tabones, Johnstone

River is the place to go if you want to see large crocodiles up close (the biggest is 5.2 m). While you're there, check out other fauna like cassowaries, kangaroos, wallabies and pythons.

Entry costs \$18 for adults, \$9 for children or \$49 for a family. Tag along on one of the regular tours or check out a feeding session (11am and 3pm).

The Innisfail Information Centre is a little further south, at Mourilyan.

Next door you'll find the Innisfail Sugar Museum (check with the information centre about opening times), where you can watch a film and wander through the museum to get a feel for the sugar industry. You'll see large-scale machinery, like harvesters and a steam-driven crushing engine, on display.

Just 10 minutes drive from Mourilyan is Etty Bay, a lovely seaside spot with a good beach, picnic tables, a shop, surf club and caravan park.

Further south, pop into Murdering Point Winery, near Silkwood.

Run by the Berryman family,

Murdering Point was developed to take advantage of fruit that was being thrown away simply because skin blemishes kept it out of the market.

The tropical fruit wine is made using the same processes as grape-based wine. With the potential to produce 250,000 bottles a year, the winery currently distributes its 12 or so varieties mainly in north Queensland.

A range of sweet and dry whites and reds, and two ports, are hand-prepared using fruit such as mango, passionfruit, lychee and lemon aspen. Wines are around the \$20 mark and make enjoyable drinking.

Your tastebuds can also be tempted at Paradise Wines, a tropical fruit winery at Mission Beach.

Mary Lankester's operation uses banana as the base for all of its wines, then blends in various fruit to develop a range of sweet and dry whites and reds.

Mango, dragon fruit, bush lime and Davidson plum find their way into various styles. Apparently, the Tropical Decadence dessert wine, with pineapple, coconut and mangosteen is popular.

Paradise wines range from \$18 to \$38 a bottle.

Mission Beach is a good spot to check into and chill out for a few days.

The beach itself is lovely and long. In the late afternoon, it becomes a popular place for relaxing walks. During the day, you're likely to spot sunbakers and tandem skydivers sharing the sandy strip.

There is accommodation in all shapes and sizes here.

Two options are the Bed & Beachfront B&B, at Wongaling Beach, and Sejala Beach Huts, near the village centre. Both are within metres of the beach.

Bed & Beachfront has two airconditioned, queen rooms, each with its own ensuite. The shared undercover area outside is good for meals, reading a book or lounging around the pool. Continental breakfast is supplied in the tariff. There are restaurants nearby.

Sejala has a beach house suitable for larger groups, plus three, queen-

sized 'beach huts'. Nicely furnished and distinctively designed with an indoor/outdoor bathroom, the airconditioned huts are very comfortable and well located. There's also a pool.

On the downside, while the huts have tea and coffee-making facilities, if you want milk of any kind, you'll need to supply your own.

A short walk away is Zestivales, at Castaways. It's a nice location for a late afternoon drink overlooking the beach. It's also an in-demand restaurant.

Blarney's by the Beach (licensed), at Wongaling Beach, also draws healthy crowds for dinner. The restaurant opens on three sides, which enhances the atmosphere, and the food is good.

The pick of the bunch for me was a relatively low-key, BYO establishment at Wongaling Beach called Nana Thai, which was a local recommendation.

Nana Thai has a casual, indoor/outdoor seating set-up, which suits the climate, and the dishes are very reasonably priced. The food is authentically prepared. In fact, I'd rate it as the best Thai food I've eaten.

While we're on the subject of food, bananas have been in the news a lot lately. Pop into the Mission Beach Information Centre and ask about tours of the Sellars Banana Farm nearby.

A hands-on tour of the 70 ha property will give you a feel for the effort that goes into banana farming.

And at Tully, 28 km away, you can sweeten your day with a guided tour of the Tully Sugar Mill.

Tours of this huge mill usually run twice daily, take about 1½ hours and provide an insight into the sugar industry. It's a good idea for something different, as well as being an all-weather option. Ask about tours at the information centre on

From top: Off the Rails cafe. Innisfail Sugar Museum. Paronella Park. Chinese Temple, Innisfail. Cane wagons, Tully Sugar Mill. Facing page: Mission Beach. Oliveri's Deli.

