



Home among the *Daintree*

It's hard to believe water is a problem when you travel to two eco resorts in north Queensland, writes JANE SOUTHWARD

They call it the oxygen factory of the world and, from the spa bath on my gauze-protected verandah high up in the canopy of the rainforest, I can believe it.

Apparently the Daintree is also home to the greatest number of rare or threatened animal species in the world, but of this I can't be sure. It's raining so hard — and has been for 30 hours — that the frogs, reptiles, butterflies and birds must be hiding. If they are making sounds from their hideouts in the trees, I simply can't hear them for the rain.

It rains 300 of every 365 days of the year in the Daintree and the downpours during my visit were torrential. Not that they really spoiled things. For starters, as a tributary of the Daintree River runs under my cottage at the Daintree Eco Lodge & Spa, the downpours create a soundtrack for relaxation.

The previous day at Silky Oaks, a more upmarket and larger resort 30 minutes drive south, the sound of the water of the Mossman River racing over granite boulders was almost deafening. You don't need new-age music when you are lolling around in the rainforest.

Driving to the Daintree, which was World Heritage-listed in 1988 for its diversity of flora and fauna, is part of the magic of being there. It takes 90 minutes from Cairns and the road winds around the coast past pretty bays and sandy inlets. There are warning signs for traffic accidents along about 30km of the trip and no wonder: the views are so striking, you really have to concentrate while driving.

Silky Oaks, run by Voyages, is just before the Daintree itself, but the 50 cottages are set in gardens packed with towering gums, canna lillies, palms and ferns. So-called treehouses are higher up the hill, while the more

Silky Oaks nestled in the rainforest.



expensive riverhouse cottages for two are on the Mossman River, where you can kayak, swim or skim stones surrounded by incredible forest. The resort does not cater for children under 12 and is really more a couples retreat than a family getaway.

Keeping with the eco theme, there are no televisions in the rooms, but the hammock on the verandah, deep spa bath with huge glass window offering views to the trees, and CDs of calming music should keep you amused. (There is a television on site, in the gym near the tennis courts.) Silky Oaks runs tours to Cape Tribulation and Port Douglas daily.

You can also do free walks through the



rainforest surrounding the resort with the resort guide or use the comprehensive maps of the walks you can do by yourself that take from one to two hours return.

At dawn or dusk, you can take a cruise on the Mossman River to spot crocodiles and admire the mangroves, birds and jumping fish, and the barramundi fishermen who earn their living in the shallow waters of the river. Book with the Barefoot Boatman, \$70, 07 4098 2066.

The spa at Silky Oaks uses Sodashi and Li'Tya products. It's the perfect place to let yourself unwind before dining in the open-air restaurant overlooking the river and the trees. The food is first class, but on the



Left: Daintree Eco Lodge & Spa. Above: Inside a villa at the Eco Lodge.

expensive side. Given the view and quality, the prices are acceptable.

Accommodation, a guided afternoon walk and breakfast with a selection of tropical fruit, fruit loaves and cooked smorgasbord costs from \$295 per person twin share.

Daintree Eco Resort & Spa is closer to the rainforest and promotes itself as personal and small (only 15 cottages). Its spa and guided tours are linked to the local Aboriginal Kuku Yalariji tribe. It's owned by the Maloney Family who bought the resort in 1995 and live locally.

The resort doesn't cater for children under six. If you do travel with older children, you could squeeze one or two into a treetop cabin, but you might want to book a second cabin if you want more room.

Aboriginal guide Juan Walker says about 1000 of his tribe live in the lower Daintree. He works full-time at the resort, taking guests on 90-minute walks (not hikes) to the waterfall

on the property and running Aboriginal art workshops. His explanation of the history of the place is enthralling and his knowledge of the plants and fauna is staggering. He communicates it so well it doesn't feel like a lecture.

The Aboriginal theme continues in the spa, one of the first in Australia when it was built in 1999, and in 2000 it was named by *Tatler* magazine in the UK as Best Nature Retreat in the World.

The spa's signature treatment is the Walbul-Walbul (butterfly) indulgence, which includes a body exfoliant, a wrap in warm mud, head massage and Vichy shower. It costs \$160 for an hour of bliss, during which you lie on an open-air massage table. The spa uses Li'Tya products and the resort's new product range includes ochre from the rocks around the waterfall on the property.

Meals at the open-air restaurant

overlooking a manmade pond are first class and less expensive than at Silky Oaks. Overnight accommodation, including full breakfast, costs \$300.

From both resorts, you can drive over the Daintree River (via a ferry, \$16 return) to Cape Tribulation, a spectacular point an hour north of the river where the rainforest meets the Great Barrier Reef.

Take the time to stop at the Daintree Discovery Centre, which has a 23-metre tower of steps you can walk up to experience the rainforest as well as elevated walkways. There are also walking tracks below with guided audio tours and information stations.

Even if you're lucky enough to stay at Silky Oaks or Daintree Eco Resort where you feel like you are among the rainforest, the Discovery Centre is a must-do. It's open every day except Christmas Day and entry is \$25 for adults and \$58 for a family.

As explained at the Discovery Centre, the Daintree contains 30 per cent of Australia's frog, marsupial and reptile species, 65 per cent of Australia's bat and butterfly species and 20 per cent of bird species; not to mention more than 1000 plants, some of them among the oldest in the world. It's even more incredible when you consider the area covers just 0.2 per cent of the country's land mass.

Now the downside. Be prepared for a crisis when you leave the Daintree. On my return, I couldn't sleep as I kept gasping for oxygen in my city home. My only suggested treatment is a return to the life-giving area. ■

The writer travelled as a guest of Tourism Queensland. For more information, visit www.tropicalaustralia.com.au.