



So where's the croc?

John Wright finds a croc-spotting ramble not quite what he had expected

IN TERMS of marketing, it's a matter of making people want to cross the river," says Shannon Search.

"So many people come to Cairns or Kuranda or Cooktown, but they say, 'What is there to do in Cape Tribulation?', or 'Where is it?' The reality is, there's a lot to do here."

To press home the point, Search, the manager of Cape Tribulation's Coconut Beach Resort in tropical north Queensland, ticks off the local Great Barrier Reef boat trips, rainforest tours, river cruises, wildlife-spotting, beach-walking, ocean kayaking, horse-riding and the simple pleasures of relaxing amid tropical surroundings in a four-star resort.

And he's used to seeing well-heeled Europeans and Australians arrive to do just those things.

Like the many foreign backpackers who see Cape Tribulation as a northern terminus for their Australian adventures, they pass the speed bumps and cassowary warning signs on the coastal drive north of the Daintree in wonder, and they arrive, you'd have to assume, with a keen sense of anticipation.

All of them want to experience wild nature. In particular, they want to see saltwater crocodiles, which is why crocodile-spotting river tours are such an established fixture on the Daintree tourism inventory.

Add exotic birds, potentially dangerous snakes and other reptiles to the mix and the prospect of seeing them safely at close range and you have an irresistible attraction.

So, I'm thinking, this \$38, two-hour "Croc-Spotting Nightwalk" offered by Mason's Tours, a Cape Tribulation operator of long standing, seems just the thing. Real jungle trails. No crowds. And, as the brochure had pointed out, a search for "sometimes elusive Birds, Forest Dragons, Snakes, Bandicoots, Frogs, Native Rats and of course crocodiles".

Is there a clue in the last, lower-case "c"? I don't know, but a young female guide is delivering, in rather strident tones, a melodramatic speech about the potential dangers of our night

walk. There are some English tourists in the group, some Germans, a Frenchman and a couple of Aussies.

We set off with torches after being given a list of rules for the walk, such as don't wander off into the scrub or touch any creatures, and what to do in an emergency. The ground is dry underfoot and a glorious full moon is trying to penetrate the jungle canopy. Deep inside, the rainforest is warm like a womb, and beautiful.

Well into the walk, we spot the first forest creatures: a mouse; a tent spider's nest; a small stick insect; a medium-sized huntsman. The guide carefully points them out, makes sure everyone sees them.

A while later — perhaps an hour into the walk — there's a commotion up front. Someone has found a Boyd's Forest Dragon on a tree trunk. It's a small, insect-eating lizard about 15cm long and looks frozen to the bark.

"If he bites you, he can crush your finger," the guide says. No one draws back. "We can all go home now that we've found this," she adds. Silence. Was that a joke or not?

Just then, someone spots a brown cricket. "OK, we're going to take this opportunity to examine the rainforest in its natural state. Turn off your lights." We turn them off.

"Who finds it noisy in the forest now we've done that?"

Silence, broken by a question in a German voice. "We will see crocodiles, yes?"

If there's an answer, I can't hear it. The lights go on and the walk continues. We uncover some more treasures: a prickly bug in a leaf; a peppermint stick insect on a pandanus; a massive cane toad; and a bush cockroach in a fallen log.

"OK, that wasn't too bad," the guide says. "We saw quite a lot tonight, quite a few bonuses."

Another joke, maybe?

I'm looking at a koala backpack carried by one of the tour group — a girl from Oxford. It's the most dangerous animal I've seen all night, but ahead of us I can hear the murmuring of a watercourse. Are the crocs up

ahead? We reach Myall Creek, a small section of which we can see through a break in the vegetation.

This is it! The guide warms us up with a cautionary "Crocodiles eat people, so stand behind me if you don't want to be eaten" speech.

"There are plenty of crocodiles in here, but I've never actually seen one from this spot," she says, playing the narrow arc of her torch light across the water. Then she starts talking about how crocodiles grow to 5m in this part of north Queensland, and about death rolls, and how a tourist had walked into Myall Creek last year and been bitten. The group is silent, listless, evidently unimpressed.

"Oh, there we go, a jumping mullet," the guide says, responding to a splash in the creek. A minute or two flies by. "All right, it doesn't look like we're going to spot a crocodile tonight, guys. A jumping mullet is about as good as it's going to get."

We start back for the minibus in something of a stunned silence. I can't see their faces, but I wonder are they thinking what I'm thinking? Was that a croc, or not?

OK, there's never a guarantee you'll spot anything on a jungle walk, even at night. Tour operators are usually careful to warn their customers about that, so you pay your money and you take your chances. Fair enough.

But does a "Croc-Spotting Nightwalk" promoted as "An Exciting Adventure" suggest a sporting chance of seeing a crocodile, or a remotely possible sighting as a bonus after the bush cockroaches, crickets and other exciting wildlife?

On reflection, the tour might have been acceptable had the young guide been a trained zoologist, a botanist or some other natural history specialist. Enthusiasm is one thing, but in 2007 tourists expect more than enthusiasm to get their money's worth, even if there's no guarantee that they'll see what they want to.

John Wright travelled to Cape Tribulation with the help of Tourism Queensland.



WILDLIFE wonderland a group of tourists on a guided walk, and a Boyd's Forest Dragon.

