



Luxury's afoot at Palm Cove

Ros Reines checks out the compact tropical resort town's attractions.



ONE of the great bonuses of holidaying in Palm Cove, near Cairns, is that the entire area is accessible by foot.

Think of an Italian seaside village on the Amalfi coastline with chic restaurants, luxury hotels and beauty spas and you will understand a little more of what Palm Cove has to offer.

Unfortunately, I didn't have my bearings when we arrived in the middle of the evening at the Angsana Resort & Spa and requested a table in the very pleasant Horizons restaurant.

"Sorry, but it's full," said the receptionist. "Try room service or one of the local restaurants around 20 minutes away."

Imagine my surprise when the entire Palm Cove dining strip, The Esplanade, was just around the corner from the hotel. Twenty minutes? Try three.

And, in common with an Italian seaside resort, the small population of Palm Cove seemed to be out strolling along an ocean-front fringed with palm trees. It is such a relaxed setting that the first thing I did was ditched the heels for flat sandals.

An excellent range of restaurants includes stylish Asian (Spices), Italian (Bela Baci), Pan Asian (Nu Nu's) and grown up Med Oz, (the chic restaurant at The Reef House). We settled at a table at Vivo with its open-air pavilions and totally laid-back staff. (They only give you attitude if you leave too much food on your plate).

Vivo opens from breakfast to supper, but it is the dinner menu which really stars, courtesy of inventive seafood dishes with a strong Italian flavour.

During the following days, I gradually worked my way through the other eateries.

The Reef House restaurant would not look out of place in the south of France. You can dine inside or outside and enjoy extraordinary service. Many dishes are quite complex, including seared barramundi, potato pancake, remoulade, asparagus and tomato beurre blanc. Try a pineapple liquorice parfait dessert.

Unfortunately, the award-winning Nu Nu's, famed for its grazing menu including local oysters and Hanoi spring rolls stuffed with pork, carrots, herbs and vermicelli, was not such a hit with us.

The service, though pleasant, was so

slow that lunch seemed to go on forever, robbing us of valuable resort time. After all, I hadn't just visited Palm Cove to spend my time dining out in style. Hell, I can do that anywhere. I was there to feel the heat in utter, tropical luxury.

Before any major sightseeing, I needed to find that deckchair next to a glorious swimming pool with waiters tempting me with cocktails, while I worked my way through the stack of books I had brought.

There are three swimming pools at the five-star Angsana Resort & Spa, but the glamour is slightly faded, in that ageing film star way. None of the pools fulfilled my holiday fantasy, being either too small, too rocky or too popular with young children.

Angsana does have one great advantage — the beach is at its front door, great for an early morning head-clearing stroll.

There was a much more opulent pool at The Grand Mercure Rockford Esplanade, which is fringed with paperbark trees. Its disadvantage is that it is close to the hotel's reception and that diminishes its appeal.

I eventually fulfilled my holiday idyll at the shimmering Sea Temple Resort nearby. Not only did I find the right setting at the enormous swimming pool which even laps some of the accommodation (you may jump in from your own terrace if you take one of the ground-floor suites), but there were attentive waiters and an inspired poolside snack menu. I was set. The beach was also accessible through a garden path.

The accommodation at Sea Temple is in self-contained apartments or villas. Some have their own rooftop barbecue area with spa, and some have their own pool.

After a few days of hitting the local restaurant scene at Palm Cove, there is something quite appealing about going to the supermarket (about 10 minutes drive away) and buying the ingredients for your own meal in your private barbecue area.

Of course, the whole point of staying at Palm Cove, besides the stellar spa treatments available everywhere, is that it is an exotic destination in the far north of Australia, with so many natural attractions to offer, including the Great Barrier Reef and Daintree rainforest.



The helpful staff at all of the resorts can organise diving or snorkelling expeditions out to the reef, as well as many different ways to experience the rainforest.

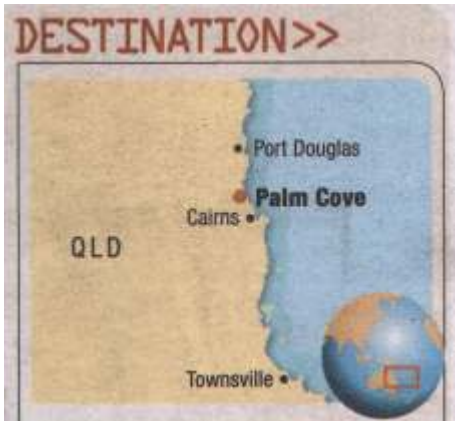
One of the most interesting is the Tjapukai Aboriginal National Park. The experience combines the latest in theatrics and technology with interactive activities with local Aborigines, featuring traditional customs and culture. Try booking into a dinner in the rainforest which is similar to the Red Centre's Dinner Underneath The Stars.

With so much on offer, it is easy to spend

a week or two in Palm Cove and not feel bored. Almost everything you need is here and, if not, Port Douglas is about 20 minutes away by car.

The local spa culture will eventually be taken up a notch or two with the opening of the Royal Palm Cove — already billed as the only seven-star resort in Australia.

Not that it needs much help, with the destination already popular with well-heeled European tourists and Australian families. It's worth a visit now before the whole place gets completely out of hand.



Palm Cove

Getting there: Fly from Sydney to Cairns. Palm Cove is about 25 minutes' drive from Cairns.

Stay: Angsana Resort & Spa, www.angsana.com; Grand Mercure Rockford Esplanade, www.rockfordhotels.com.au; Sea Temple Resort & Spa, www.seatemple.com.au/

More: www.palmcove.net



Charming Cove: Spa deck at Sea Temple Resort, the Palm Cove beachfront and (below) sumptuous Vivo fare

