

travel

**HOT: \$1065****SOUTH PACIFIC**

Voyager of the Seas departs Sydney on February 10 and visits New Caledonia and Fiji. Priced from \$1065 for nine nights, including main meals and entertainment. On sale until November 30.

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THE SECRETS OF DAINTREE

A new community project is unveiling Mossman Gorge, in the state's far north, to the public, writes **Briar Jensen**

HOW do you protect the oldest rainforest in the world while still allowing public access?

How can the local indigenous people share their 135 million-year-old tribal land while still retaining some privacy?

These were the questions raised by the local Kuku (pronounced Gugu) Yalanji people of Mossman Gorge, in the World Heritage-listed Daintree

Rainforest, about 20km north of Port Douglas in the state's far north.

Concerned by the volume of traffic entering the gorge, they envisaged a gateway centre from where people could be transported into the gorge by eco-friendly shuttles. Escorted walks by indigenous guides could offer access to tribal lands and the centre would provide sustainable employment for the local community.

That vision is now reality, with the official opening of the Mossman Gorge Centre in August. The \$20 million project, developed by the Indigenous Land Corporation and managed by Voyages Indigenous Tourism, features an information centre, gift shop, cafe and art gallery.

Electric shuttle buses transport visitors into the gorge every 15 minutes.

TRAVEL MATE

GETTING THERE: Mossman Gorge is 20km north of Port Douglas and 77km north of Cairns. Qantas (qantas.com.au) has direct daily flights to Cairns from Brisbane.

STAYING THERE: Sea Temple Resort and Spa Port Douglas (accorhotels.com.au), Four Mile Beach, has accommodation ranging from studio spa rooms to three-bedroom apartments.

DOING THERE: Mossman Gorge Centre is about 2km from Mossman township. A daily transfer runs from Port Douglas. Eco-shuttles run from the car park to the gorge every 15 minutes. Take a self-guided walk or choose from one of two Dreamtime guided walks starting from \$45 a person. See mossmangorge.com.au. Flames of the Forest is in Mowbray Valley, 10 minutes from Port Douglas. The Rainforest Dining Experience on Saturday nights costs \$169 per person including return coach transfer from your accommodation.

MORE: See visitportdouglas.com.au or daintree.com for more information.

Landscaping includes endemic plants propagated from seeds and cuttings collected by the local Aboriginal community, many of which are significant to them because of their food, shelter and medicinal purposes.

The centre has 90 per cent Aboriginal employees – nearly all Kuku Yalanji people – and onsite facilities offer tourism and hospitality training to indigenous people from across Australia.

You can take self-guided walks through the gorge, but the indigenous escorted walks open a window into the world of the Kuku Yalanji people.

Our Dreamtime Legend Walk starts with a traditional smoking ceremony – a cleansing ritual that wards off bad spirits. Wood smoke fills our nostrils as our guide, Roy Gibson, invokes his ancestors to grant us safe passage.

We pause as he points out edible berry and nut trees, rocks indented by generations of nut-cracking and scars on the buttress roots of a red cedar from which a shield has been cut. We learn about luminous fungus, pass an 800-year-old cycad tree and view a sacred site identified by river stones.

The rhythmic tap of clap sticks suddenly reverberates through the forest.

Aboriginal singer Robbie materialises from the forest, grass skirt swaying from his hips.

He welcomes us to country beneath the power of Manjal Dimbi, also known as Mount Demi. We close our eyes and listen, encouraged to feel the power and energy of the mountain and forest.

Continuing the rainforest theme, we have dinner at Flames of the Forest. We're collected from Sea Temple Port Douglas and transported into another world. Flaming torches lead to a clearing in the trees where champagne and canapes are served around candelabra of Gothic proportions.

A bandicoot scuttles across the clearing in the moonlight as Robbie appears with his brother to tell stories around the fire. With didgeridoo, clap sticks and lyrical voices they transport us into another world – an enchanting evening in the rainforest.

The writer was a guest of Voyages Indigenous Tourism, Accor and Qantas.

GETAWAY BEST QUEENSLAND DEALS

**\$66****FRASER ISLAND**

Kingfisher Bay Resort's Chill Out package – for \$66 a person twin share in a hotel room or \$99 in a resort villa – includes return ferry transfers from Hervey Bay. Valid until December 20.

Phone 1800 372 737 or see kingfisherbay.com

**\$190****NOOSA**

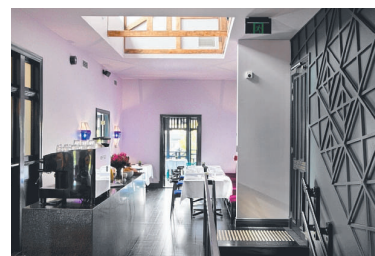
RACQ members can stay in a suite at the 5-star RACV Noosa Resort for \$190 a night for two people, including buffet breakfast. Subject to availability and valid to June 30.

Phone 1300 273 962 or see racv.com.au

**\$209****CAIRNS**

Pullman Reef Hotel Casino's Delicious Escapade package includes king room with spa bath, breakfast for two and a late check out from \$209 per night for a minimum two-night stay.

Phone 4030 8801 or see reefcasino.com.au

**\$249****BRISBANE**

Stay at Spicer's Balfour Hotel at New Farm from \$249 a room a night including parking, canapes and breakfast. Save \$110 on an executive room from December 17 to February 2.

Phone 1300 597 540 or see spicersgroup.com.au

**\$1398****HAMILTON ISLAND**

Pay four nights and stay five at the Reef View Hotel. Pay \$1398 for two in a garden-view room. Kids free. Includes breakfast. Valid January 28 to March 28, 2013. Black-out dates apply.

Phone 137 333 or see hamiltonisland.com.au