

TICK OFF THE TIP

You don't need your own four-wheel-drive to reach the northernmost tip of mainland Australia and its rich multicultural communities.

WORDS: BRIAR JENSEN

Like a black licorice strap, Bamaga Airstrip stands out incongruously against the orange dirt, a clearing edged by termite mounds in an expanse of green woodlands. Bamaga, a two-hour flight from Cairns, is part of Queensland's Northern Peninsula Area (NPA), and puts me within striking distance of the top of Cape York.

Outside the small terminal, Australian, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags flap languidly in the heat; inside, a detailed artwork depicts the diverse cultural mix of the region, of which I have only knotted threads of knowledge, something I aim to unravel during my visit.

The NPA encompasses five communities – three Aboriginal and two Saibai Islander. Of the Aboriginal communities, Injinoo is home to the area's traditional landowners; Umagico to those displaced from Lockhart ▶

Fast Facts

The Torres Strait Islands are part of Australia and stretch the 150km to Papua New Guinea, with Saibai Island just 5km from PNG.

Making rock pyramids at sites like The Tip is considered disrespectful by traditional landowners.

Removing a stone without permission will bring bad luck.



Images: Peter Luk

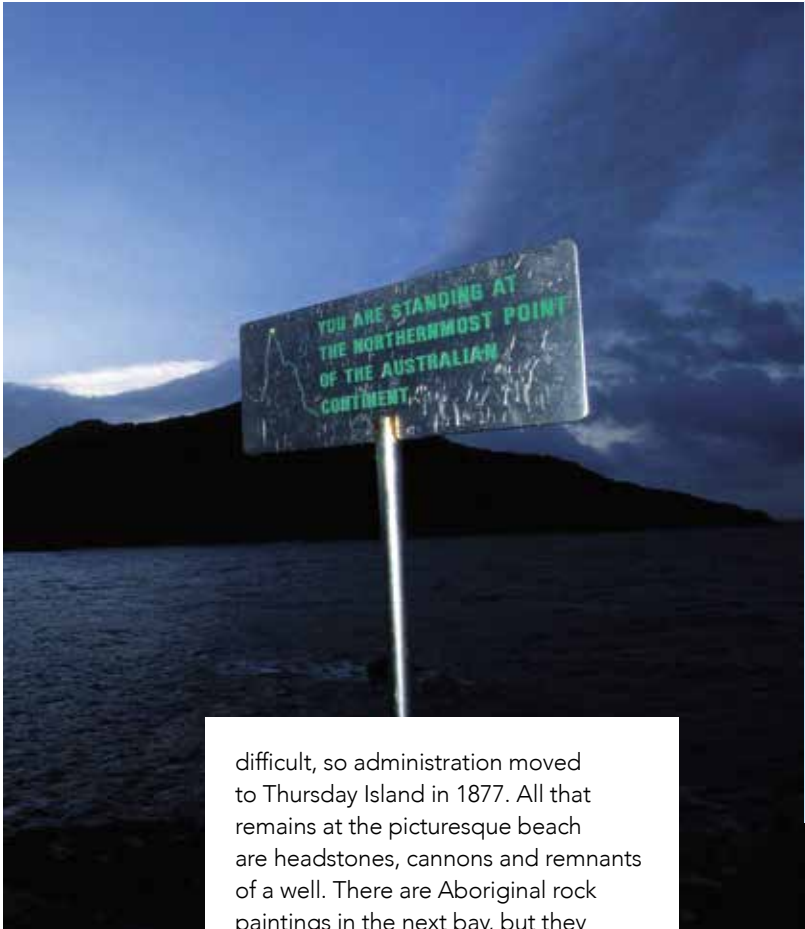
PREVIOUS PAGE:
Coconut Island in the Torres Strait.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Kids on Pajinka Beach; The northernmost point of Australia; Peninsula Developmental Road.



River; New Mapoon to those relocated due to bauxite mining near Weipa. Bamaga and Seisia are home to Saibai Islanders forced to flee their Torres Strait homeland in the 1940s due to flooding. Bamaga, about 30km from The Tip, is the service centre of the NPA, a laidback little town with mango trees shading the main street, where horses and dogs wander freely. I'm staying at Cape York Peninsula Lodge, beside Mosby Creek, which offers airport transfers. The recently refurbished, air-conditioned rooms have timber decks and a central swimming pool. The restaurant, decorated with traditional Torres Strait headdresses, is run by Craig Drew, previously of Walter's Lounge in Airlie Beach, and serves up artfully presented, city-styled dishes. The lodge is owned by Bamaga Enterprises Ltd (BEL), an Indigenous, community-owned, not-for-profit company that aims to raise the standard

of living of the area's Indigenous residents through infrastructure, grants, donations and scholarships. BEL's assets include Bamaga's service station, tavern and bakery, and in the past 10 years it has reinvested more than \$2.5 million into the NPA community. You can hire a four-wheel-drive from the lodge, but I opt for their escorted tours, first heading south, via the very expensive Jardine River Ferry, to Fruit Bat Falls. Named for their winged shape, the falls curve beckoningly across Eliot Creek like opened arms. Crystal-clear water tumbles over a wide, russet rock shelf into a green sandy-bottomed pool that's happily croc-free. Above the two-metre falls I soak in rock holes and lie in chiselled channels for a pummelling natural spa. Next day we strike out for The Tip, detouring to Somerset Beach, site of the first European settlement in the region in 1864. Established as a hub for the Torres Strait, the site proved



difficult, so administration moved to Thursday Island in 1877. All that remains at the picturesque beach are headstones, cannons and remnants of a well. There are Aboriginal rock paintings in the next bay, but they are only accessible at low tide.

The red dirt road to the top funnels through a dense tunnel of lush rainforest before arriving at Frangipani Beach. It's a 15-minute walk over a rocky headland to The Tip, and from the final crest we can see the Arafura Sea to the west, the Coral Sea to the east, and the current ripping through Endeavour Strait. And there it is, the sign declaring 'You are standing at the northernmost point of the Australian continent.' Only I can't stand right there, as high tide lashes the sign. I straddle the waves for an obligatory photo, gripping the sign lest I get washed away. It's thrilling to reach Pajinka, the Indigenous name for The Tip, but with York and Eborac Islands almost within spitting distance it's easy to imagine them once connected by a land bridge. Remembering the hand-drawn map at Bamaga Airport, where the Torres Strait Islands appear like stepping stones between mainland Australia and PNG, it's abundantly clear why the two



countries are inextricably linked. Bush-bashing nearby reveals the remains of Pajinka Wilderness Lodge, an up-market resort with a complicated history that closed 20 years ago after the generator caught fire. Back near Bamaga Airport we take in the WWII wrecks nearby, including the remains of a DC3 and Beaufort Mark VIII. Locals fish off Seisia Wharf as I depart on a tour to Roko Island Pearl Farm which, with its floating jetty over turquoise waters, looks like it belongs in the Pacific, aside from the resident croc. At a table overlooking the sea, family pearl technician Jason Tchen Pan demonstrates the intricate operation of seeding an oyster and harvesting a pearl, before a tour of the island. I'm keen to see local art, but apart from that on Thursday Island, it's hard to uncover. Aboriginal elder Rusty Williams tells me much of their storytelling is through dance rather than art, which can be seen at the Laura Dance Festival. The 93-year-old also explains their culture suffered when they were banned from speaking their language at school and by the dispersal of menfolk working

on pastoral properties. Thupmul Espresso Coffee Bar in Umagico has a selection of Indigenous art for sale, along with great coffee. The NPA Arts Centre at New Mapoon, a humble Colorbond building which has been closed for months due to staffing issues, is reopening thanks to newly appointed Art Development Co-ordinator John Tabuai. An artist himself, he plans on liaising with the communities and sourcing funding to showcase more local works. While I've managed to separate some threads from my tangled knowledge of the region, others remain firmly snagged by the complexity of multi-layered bureaucracy, politics, funding and native title. I'm far from weaving my metaphorical basket of understanding but this trip has brought a deeper appreciation of the rich tapestry of Cape York. **TB**

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Aboriginal guide 'Rusty'; Jason Tchen Pan at Roko Pearls; fishing on Pajinka Beach.



Fact File

- Cape York Peninsula Lodge
cyp.l.com.au
- Roko Pearls
rokopearls.com.au
- Thupmul Coffee Espresso Bar
facebook.com/Thupmul-Coffee-Espresso-Bar-1402980159916855
- New Mapoon Art Centre
nparc.qld.gov.au/our-community/arts-culture