

Snorkelling during
a reef tour to Lady
Musgrave Island.

TROPICAL VOYAGE

Step back in time for a slower-paced Queensland holiday of yore

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I FIND THE placename 1770 intriguing. According to the Queensland government, officially it's Seventeen Seventy and not Town of Seventeen Seventy or Town of 1770, as it sometimes calls itself. While it's unusual to name a place with a number, it's perhaps more relevant than naming it after some colonial explorer's birthplace back in Blighty. For the Gooreng Gooreng language group, it's always been known as Gooragan, or 'sandy loam country'.

Seventeen Seventy is where Lieutenant James Cook stepped ashore from the *Endeavour* on May 24, 1770 in his second landing after Botany Bay. It's now a sleepy seaside hamlet wedged on the creek side of a headland, up the beach from the coastal surfing village Agnes Water. The two communities are often referred to as one, Agnes Water & 1770, and retain a laidback holiday atmosphere with excellent cafés and restaurants, winning them the Queensland Top Small Tourism Town award in 2021.

The closest airport is Gladstone and flying in you can see why the city is dubbed Queensland's 'engine room of industry'. Refineries and smelters create an earthy mosaic of orange ore, coal black and pumice grey between hinterland greens and ocean blues.

We hire a car for the 120km drive south to our accommodation at Sandcastles 1770 Motel & Resort in Agnes Water. It has direct access to the 6km-long Main Beach, is close to eateries at Endeavour Plaza, and is near the cute Here & There Espresso van on the cycle path to 1770. After dropping our luggage, we head to Codie's Place in Agnes Water for a Mexican-inspired lunch while watching barefoot beachgoers come and go across the road.

Then we're off to 1770. I'm instantly smitten, and not just because of the waterfront bar tables or Insta-worthy seat beneath a cutesy sign. It overlooks Round Hill Creek, whose sand-swirled aquamarine waters could rival the Whitsundays' Hill Inlet. Across the creek is Eurimbula National Park and expansive Bustard Bay.

Keen to get on the water, we join Simon Speck of 1770 Liquid Adventures on his sunset kayak tour. As we push off from the bank in double kayaks, he tells us to keep an eye out for estuarine dolphins that often cruise through the mangroves. We manoeuvre between moored boats, stopping to feed a yacht cat and keeping an eye out for turtles and eagle rays.

"Paddle the kayak like you stole it," urges Simon as we attempt wave jumping at the channel entrance. My bum bounces clean out of my seat as we slap down off a small wave. We watch dolphins breach beneath a squabble of seagulls, before surfing in for a beach picnic of wine, homemade Anzac biscuits, and popcorn and watermelon from Simon's garden. As we paddle for home, the clouds blush baby pink and the sun sets over the water, allegedly one of the few places on Queensland's east coast where this occurs.

Credit: Tourism and Events Queensland



Enjoying a sunset from the 1770 marina.



Strolling along Agnes Water Main Beach.



From left to right: overlooking Bustard Bay from 1770; Neil Mergard and one of his cherished LARCs; no surprise what type of trees you'll see along Paperbark Walk; Simon Speck of 1770 Liquid Adventures shares his in-depth knowledge of the area.

We celebrate our wave-surfing prowess over a Drift & Wood Restaurant dinner at our digs. I'm ravenous and tuck into prawn and chorizo pappardelle, but the seafood risotto looks equally delicious and we declare the 'special chips' award-winning.

Its proximity to the southern Great Barrier Reef makes 1770 the closest access point to Lady Musgrave Island, so we take a day trip with 1770 Reef. It's only their second day back after wild winds and huge swells kept them harbour-bound for two weeks. Skipper Issac Ashton warns us there'll still be a bit of 'ocean motion' on the 90-minute trip. Tour times vary depending on the tide and we've scored a chilly 7am departure, but we make a beeline for the outside seats on the upper deck, grateful for the refreshing air.

Lady Musgrave Island is named after the wife of Queensland colonial governor, Sir Anthony Musgrave, but the Aboriginal name Wallaginji is more fitting, meaning 'beautiful reef'. Its lagoon looks like a turquoise swimming pool in the vast indigo ocean and its reef edge is scalloped by white wave-foam.

Once moored inside the reef, we cycle through the activities of snorkelling, riding a glass-bottomed boat and island walking. Though the water is warm, I rent a wetsuit to ward off the wind chill and I'm soon floating over a bommie festooned with staghorn and plate corals, home to parrotfish, angelfish, Moorish idols and evocatively-named harlequin sweetlips. The glass-bottomed boat drifts over slug-like sea cucumbers and a hawksbill turtle at a 'day spa' where cleaner fish exfoliate its shell.

On the island walk, guide 'Sugar' Kain Mackenzie fascinates us with facts about the 300,000 black noddies that nest here. These little black darts arrow through the Pisonia trees to ragged nests that dribble down the branches like upended mops. It's also home to wedge-tailed shearwaters and flightless buff-banded rails. Sugar is so engaging we're still talking about his enthusiasm over dinner at Round Hill Road Pizza & Bar. This is followed by

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macadamia and ginger ice cream from popular 1770 Gelato Co.

The Discovery Coast is renowned for its fishing south of Gladstone and it hosts the Boyne Tannum HookUp, Australia's largest family fishing competition, named after the twin towns of Boyne Island and Tannum Sands. After fuelling up on pastries from cute little Coffee & Cake Agnes Water, we decide to check it out, rocking up at Bray Park to find it decked out like a country fairground with carnival rides, food trucks and pop-up stalls selling colourful fishing merchandise.

Hundreds of vacant beach chairs and picnic blankets secure spots on the grass facing the riverfront stage while their owners are off fishing. It turns out much of the action happens here at night when a whopping \$400,000 prize pool (including nine boats) is awarded over the three evenings and winners of promotional prizes are given only two minutes to race to the stage, making it a hoot.

Karen Windress, event coordinator, explains how they encourage kids to get off the Xbox and into the tackle box with free fishing clinics and gear, lure-throwing competitions, live fish release and a generous junior prize pool. HookUp president Andrew Davis smiles as he describes everyone's delight when a six-year-old boy won a boat the previous night.

Bray Park is just a short hop from Gladstone, so we head to East Shores Parklands for lunch at Auckland House. The Port of Gladstone is Queensland's largest multi-commodity port and it's a big investor in community facilities such as East Shores Parklands, which includes a cruise terminal, children's

playground, water park and foreshore cycling track.

We pop into the Gladstone Fish Market for a stickybeak at local mud crabs and notice a flurry of activity next door at the community ARTmatters Gallery. President Jenny Hansen explains they're setting up for their three-monthly market with a garden bar and live music. A teacher from Cornwall in the UK, Jenny came to Gladstone for love, which didn't work out, but she stayed and now travels the country teaching moulded glass art (and has found new love). She explains there are lots of local creatives and the gallery features paintings, pottery, weaving, felting and metalwork from around 40 artists.

Back at 1770, we head out for an afternoon joyride with Neil Mergard who you could say is a bit of a lark. In fact, he's the owner-operator of 1770 LARC! Tours and his number plate is LARCMAN, which refers to the Lighter Amphibious Resupply Cargo (LARC) vehicles used by the family business he set up with his parents in 1994 when he was 21.

Developed in the 1950s for the US Navy to use, the lipstick-pink aluminium LARCs are a low-impact way of exploring Bustard Bay. Sticking below the highwater mark doesn't disturb ground-nesting birds or turtles and tracks are erased by the tide. Sand plovers scurry busily across the beach as we bounce along and birdwatch, spotting pied oyster catchers, beach stone-curlews and whistling kites, before exploring the beach where sand bubbler crabs have rolled a field of sand marbles.

Well clear of any birds, Neil spins a couple of donuts before plunging off a sandbank and into the sea in a swoosh of white water. He's an impassioned environmentalist and we would've loved to do his full-day tour to Bustard Head Lightstation.

We round off our fish-themed day at a poolside table in Plantation Bar & Restaurant within Lagoons 1770 Central Resort, where my friend orders a seafood platter that looks like it could feed the four of us.



Marine Rescue fundraising at the Boyne Tannum HookUp.

FISHING FESTIVITIES

Now in its 28th year, the three-day Boyne Tannum HookUp is Australia's largest family fishing competition and takes place on Queensland's Labour Day long weekend (the first Monday in May).

Established to showcase the region and stimulate the local economy, the volunteer-run not-for-profit event promotes community involvement, from high school business studies students to artists and businesses, and provides an opportunity for local charities to raise money.

Sustainable family fishing is encouraged, with events for both juniors and seniors. Even if you don't want to fish, buying a ticket enters you into promotional draws for prizes like pushbikes, motorbikes and boats. Visit boynetannumhookup.com.au for more details.

Credit: Tourism and Events Queensland



Clockwise from far left: kayaking is a great way to experience 1770; the 1770 marina is your jump point for joining aquatic tours; Shazza is the adorable mascot of the Here & There Espresso van.

During autumn, huge swarms of migrating blue tiger butterflies congregate here

Next day at beachfront Holidays Café, within the NRMA Agnes Water Holiday Park, passionate locals Susie and Daryl Jones enthusiastically spruik their local community celebrations. These include the Blues, Roots & Rock Festival every February (you can volunteer in exchange for tickets) and the 1770 Festival in May, which has a re-enactment of Cook's landing along with showcasing Gooreng Gooreng culture in an action-packed weekend of workshops, surfing comps, markets and music.

Needing to walk off brunch, we tackle a few of the local tracks. The 1770 Butterfly and Headland walks are within Joseph Banks Regional Park, so-named as Banks accompanied Cook ashore here and collected 33 plant specimens. Starting at Cook's monument, a cairn marking his landing spot, it follows the foreshore through coastal woodlands of eucalypts, pandanus and Alexandria palms that frame views over sand-sculpted Round Hill Creek.

During autumn, huge swarms of migrating blue tiger butterflies congregate here. We're too early, but we know from our previous guide, Simon, that the sheer numbers in some years are astounding and the Gooreng Gooreng people have a dance dedicated to the butterfly. At the headland, lookouts offer panoramic views up and down the coast and over pocket-sided bays cocooned by rocky cliffs.

The short 400-metre Paperbark Walk near Reedy Creek loops through ethereally quiet melaleuca trees. Their powder-

grey bark curls like the corners of sun-parched book pages as climbing ferns weave leafy-green skirts around their trunks. The forest floor is dry, but stepping-stones hint it's also a wetland, which explains the marauding mozzies.

Up the road is 1770 Distillery, owned by John and Debra Richards who moved here from Hobart after retiring. Having helped Bill and Lyn Lark set up Lark whiskey distillery in Tassie, John's retirement dream included his own distillery. He uses fresh fruit, herbs and spices to create piquant liqueurs like citrus Sunset, orange-based Daybreak and plum, apple and ginger Pink Dawn. My favourite is Strawberry Flash, which can be frozen to shave over desserts. His other passion is plants, with a tropical nursery off the tasting room.

The Agnes Water Museum is our final destination and was established in 1952 by local historian Arthur Jeffrey. He was an avid collector and the museum punches well above its weight thanks to a large collection of Aboriginal artefacts, as well as maritime displays featuring Cook and the wreck of the schooner *Agnes*, after which the town is named. There's much more here than first meets the eye and the same can be said for all of Agnes Water & 1770. It turns out these retro holiday hamlets are as charming as their names. I just hope they stay that way. ☑

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