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Forget the backpack. Queensland has a swathe of luxury properties, so there's no barrier to travelling in style, says Lisa Grainger

If I close my eyes and think of Australia's north-east region, what floods into my brain is colour. The lurid greens of the Daintree: one of the world's oldest living rainforests, carpeted with lime ferns and emerald mosses. The rich reds and rusts of the Outback, fringed with hard spikes of golden grass rising into burning skies. And the blues of the Great Barrier Reef: a giant necklace of coral-and-sand beads in emeralds and turquoises.

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Flying over Queensland in a helicopter, one can't help but be bowled over by the brilliance of nature. This is a place in which you can still drive for hours and see only dust, grass and sky; where in the rainforest you can breathe in oxygen that's been generated here for more than 135million years; where on the reef you can swim alone, surrounded by fish, swirling like rainbow glitter in a child's kaleidoscope.

What one also gets, however, is a sense of the pace of change. Any Queenslander will tell you how quickly foreign investors are buying up cattle ranches, sugar plantations, and refineries – as well as land just outside Cairns to build the country's biggest mega-resort costing \$4.2billion (£23billion). They will tell you how quickly the cost of living has risen (a Coke at many resorts costs £5.50). Aboriginals will tell you how difficult it is to find once-common creatures such as the cassowary in the forest, or a dugong out at sea. Most shocking of all, fishermen and divers will tell you that the Great Barrier Reef is dying.

When I first dived in Australia in 1988, I remember being dazzled by the reef's lurid neon surfaces. But since it was listed by Unesco as a World Heritage **Site** in 1981, our planet's greatest reef has lost more than half of its coral, and there is talk of it going on the Sites in Danger list in 2015. Warmer oceans, poor water quality and the impact of coastal development have made the ocean more acidic, preventing the reef's growth. Cyclones have battered it and invasive species such as crown-of-thorns starfish have proliferated, breaking it down. Parts are still pristine, no doubt, but around them are acres of brown.

Which is why, if you're going to go and witness this still-extraordinary natural wonder, it's worth getting there soon: before the expansion of Abbot Point near the Whitsunday Islands into the world's biggest **coal** port; before the **Chinese** start building their nine-**hotel** megaresort; and before farming practices become more intensive.

Although there are several large **hotel** chains along the coast, the finest here are small, often familyowned, and linked to community projects and nature initiatives, whether it is helping Aboriginal artists to make a living from small-scale businesses rather than fishing, or employing local businessmen to provide sustainable seafood, install **solar** power and recycle rainwater.

In the past year, four new luxury properties have opened – on islands, beside the Daintree Rainforest and in the Outback. Here, we give our verdict on them.

The resort

## HAYMAN ISLAND

The news that Sol Kerzner's One&Only had taken over management of this iconic Australian resort created a frisson among both fans of his polished brand and upmarket visitors to the Barrier Reef. Since the first Royal Hayman Hotel opened in 1950 on the most northerly of the Whitsunday Islands, it had become the place to stay.

Although marketed as a "private island", what Hayman will always be is a large, 160-bedroom three-storey resort – albeit one that has had an \$80million (£44million) refurbishment after being hit by cyclones in 2006 and 2011.

Flying on to Hayman by helicopter (there are three ways in from the Great Barrier Reef airport on Hamilton Island: by chopper, seaplane or 60ft yacht), the long white building is strung along the shore between a mile of creamy beach and hills dotted with eucalyptus forest. To the left, as you fly in, a lake-sized pool is edged with loungers, four minimalist white-louvred cabanas and a bar that pumps out club music. To the right (the quieter wing), lawns lead to the resort's brand new familyfriendly restaurant, Aquazure, surrounded by manicured grass and architectural pools.

If, from the outside, the hotel looks slightly like a set from Dr No, inside the rooms are contemporary, cool and extremely comfortable. Rooms and suites now have bathrooms lined in pale marble, with power-showers and baths big enough for two, as well as minibar, TVs, sitting room and sharp-lined furnishings. The nicest rooms – six chic studio-style villas – have private plunge-pools at their heart and direct beach access. On the top floor, three penthouses (including one designed by Diane von Furstenberg and the £5,500-a-night three-bedroom Owner's Penthouse) offer bird's-eye views of the sea.

As at most One&Only resorts, money hasn't just been invested in rooms, but on experiences. As general manager Guenter Gebhard explains, this is a place where you could lie on a lounge from dawn to dusk, or be busy all day learning new skills or exploring the island's reefs and its 726-acre interior. On the beach is a watersports centre, with toys ranging from catamarans to snorkels; at the marina and dive centre, guests can watch a 250kg (550lb) grouper being fed, go fishing, diving or jet-skiing, or speed over to a sand-spit for the day. Hidden in the trees are tennis and squash courts, a driving range and croquet lawns, and a children's club (where smiley women entertain all ages, from babies to teenagers).

There's an adequate if not terribly inspiring spa (with modern treatment rooms, a tired steam room and extremely capable therapists, from strong masseuses to a fastidious Bastien Gonzalez podiatrist) alongside a light, glasswalled Technogym fitness centre, where those keen to stay trim on holiday can embark on James Duigan's highly regarded Bodyism regime, taking part in daily classes or personal training, and eating from "Clean&Lean" menu options.

On the food front there's no shortage of choice: there are seven restaurants, run by the effervescent South African Grant Murray, who oversaw the food offering at Atlantis, The Palm, in Dubai and has brought several of its top chefs with him. The food is the star of the resort, whether it is a seafood feast conjured up on the beach under the stars, a seven-course gourmet tasting menu featuring such treats as salt-baked Wagyu beef, a lobster curry from the Pan-Asian restaurant Bamboo, a carpaccio platter with cocktails by the pool or a fresh breakfast buffet.

The verdict The food, activities and comfortable suites make up for the hard Seventies architecture and big-resort feel. Highlights include a heli-trip to the Great Barrier Reef, a 20-minute flight away, with a stop-off at Whitehaven Beach, a spectacular 2.5-mile stretch of white sand, often voted one of the best in the world. On the downside, much of the coral around the island has been damaged by cyclones, resulting in bleaching; so snorkelling is pretty but unspectacular. Prices, for European and American visitors, are steep; the smallest doubles cost from £440 b&b, and everything else is extra, from babysitting at £25 an hour and airport transfers by boat from £193 per person return. A serious gourmet experience might cost an extra £220 a day. Most of the 500 staff are young and friendly, if not tremendously experienced, so service can be patchy. The "private island" moniker is slightly misleading, too; not shown in the resort's brochures or on its website are two enormous new private homes on the island's point, overlooking the beach, alongside 10 residential lots for sale.

The details Hayman Island (0061 7 4940 1234; oneandonlyhaymanisland.com.au; doubles from £440 to £5,500 for the three-bedroom Owner's Penthouse, b&b). The best time to go is March to November; after that, Queensland's waters have lethal stingers – ranging from bluebottles to deadly box jellyfish and irukandji.

The island retreat

BEDARRA

Cruising up on to the soft creamy beach of this little hilly **island**, half an hour's speedboat ride from Mission Beach, it becomes immediately apparent that the star of Bedarra isn't the **hotel** or anything man-made. It's the **island** itself.

Covered by thick tropical forest, littered with great piles of balancing granite boulders reminiscent of those in the Seychelles, and surrounded by long stretches of latte-coloured sand, this little patch of green was known to the Aboriginals as Biagurra – or "place of natural water" – long before Captain Cook claimed it for the British Empire in 1770.

Its lushness is thanks to six springs that supply its showers, its pools and its gardens with soft fresh water. While other islands nearby might be slightly dry, here forests are illuminated with butterflies that flit between frangipani, wild hibiscus and red ginger lilies, green lawns and enormous old trees.

When its current owners, Sam and Kerri-Ann Charlton, bought the **island** in December 2011, the resort, like Hayman **Island**, had been run down, hurt not only by the three-month pilots' strike that devastated tourism in Queensland at that time, but also battered by Cyclone Yasi.

After 18 months of renovation work, the former 16-room resort was reopened as an eight-villa barefoot-luxury retreat, attracting the likes of Russell Crowe and Sarah Ferguson. According to general manager Jason Cooley, it's a place "where people could have a totally personalised experience – where they could sip champagne all day by the pool, if that's what they wanted; or be left in total seclusion; or go for romantic picnics; or hang out on a hammock. It's somewhere they could treat like their own **island**."

The eight villas all overlook the beach and are enveloped by forest. To add character, each was designed to be slightly different: one double-storey, set above the sand; another located high in the forest; and one, The Point, built on the edge of enormous granite rocks by the sea. All have polished wooden floors, king-size beds with soft white cotton throws, and quiet **solar**-powered Haiku ceiling fans. Other features include big white bathrooms with Aveda products; an integral iPod and TV system; plunge-pools set on generous decks furnished with outsized wicker chairs; a minibar; a coffee station; and a fridge filled with personalised snacks and drinks, from G&T with cashew nuts to mango juice with macadamia cookies.

What's more, all of it is sustainable: diesel generators and a desalination plant have been replaced by **solar** panels, rainwater tanks, LED lighting, louvred walls and water-waste recycling – so it's quiet, as well as green.

At full capacity, the **island** sleeps 16 but guests seldom see each other. On most days, they are out snorkelling in the clear waters, exploring other islands by boat and taking a beach picnic, kayaking around the **island's** shoreline, hiking to lookout points where chairs have been strategically placed to take in views, or just swinging in hammocks between palm trees.

In the evenings, some guests might converge: mixing their own cocktails at the honesty bar, going on a sunset jaunt on **board** the Seadog RIB (a boat with wheels that launches itself up beaches so you don't have to get your feet wet), or chatting over dinner, served by the irrepressibly cheerful waiters, Jody Lockman and Jeffrey Sharp. The chef, Jimmy Ward, has been conjuring up delicious set meals here for more than six years – knockout crab lasagne, for instance, or slow-cooked pork with corn and basil purée, followed by vanilla panna cotta with sesame-seed fairy floss.

While most guests are content to live out their Fantasy **Island** dreams on Bedarra, it is worth exploring further afield with local boat-owner Jason Shearer, of Mission Beach Charters ([missionbeachcharters.com.au](http://missionbeachcharters.com.au)), who grew up in the area. Having taken people on snorkelling trips since from the age of 14, the nature-lover knows all the best spots on the reefs and in half a day can stop at three very different underwater areas – and serve a splendid lunch of organic salad, seafood and tropical fruit, while bringing alive the area's history, nature and characters.

The verdict If your idea of heaven is having simple but comfortable rooms (not as luxurious as Hayman but more private), beautiful beaches and delicious food, with no fuss, this is the perfect **island**. There's no turndown or room service, but you have lots of freedom to do what you like – at an all-inclusive rate. Highlights include the Seadog RIB, a boat with wheels; meeting staff who clearly love their jobs and go out of their way to make guests happy; the fact that they sweep one beach clean for barefoot joggers; trails cut through the forest, so guests can explore; fast boats for exploring the National Parks islands nearby; seafood picnics, packed to take to lunch wherever you want; and ceiling fans rather than aircon, so you can go to sleep cool, with the sound of crashing waves audible through mesh windows.

On the downside, like Hayman, much of the coral nearby has been harmed by Cyclone Yasi (in the aftermath, 30 tons of debris was removed from the **island**), so you have to take a boat out to see good

coral. Nor will everyone like the fact that breakfast, lunch and dinner are at set times, for one hour only; or that, as on Hayman **Island**, a handful of private homes overlook the beach.

The details Bedarra (4068 8233; bedarra.com.au; doubles from £600 to £930 for The Point, including all food, drinks and non-motorised activities; plus £218 return boat transfer per couple from Mission Beach). The **island** also has a helipad for heli-transfers from Cairns. Closed from January to April.

The Outback retreat

#### CRYSTALBROOK

It's a three-hour drive from the coast to the dry, red-soiled Outback, through the pretty Atherton Tablelands, lined with fruit farms, and past the town of Mareeba, whose main event is an annual wheelbarrow race. Here inland, cattle farms can extend to more than a **million** hectares and you can drive through towns without spotting a single person.

Here, 86-year-old **millionaire property** developer John Morris and his business partner Jim Noli have turned an old cattle farmhouse into a comfortable guesthouse. It overlooks a small, calm billabong populated by freshwater crocodiles, pairs of fish eagles, farmed barramundi and dozens of varieties of glorious bird, from screeching cockatoos and pale-headed rosellas to tiny peacock-hued sunbirds.

The luxury of this place is the space. There are just five en-suite bedrooms, each with a private canvas-walled garden courtyard – and 85,000 acres of cattle ranch surrounding them, in which Brahman cows and Brangus bulls wander freely. Out front is a magnesium pool that softens the skin while offering a cool place to spot birds. There are loungers in the garden, a veranda, an uninspiring living room and media room (with interiors more airport lounge than luxury lodge) and a contemporary shaded deck. Binoculars and folders of useful information are provided by the manager, Nadia.

Food – at which Australians excel, thanks to good local produce from seafood and organic beef to sun-ripened vegetables – is beautifully prepared by 31-year-old chef Dominik Uhlig. Dishes range from barramundi with mango and salmon-filled Vietnamese rolls to decadent chocolate mousse.

As nothing much happens here, this is a spot in which to unwind and take it all in. Guests are encouraged to take the electric boat out on to the dam, fish for barramundi, go birdwatching by kayak, and walk through the dry bush, watching out for remnants of old tin mines. The friendly manager Andrew Simpson also takes expeditions to nearby Chillagoe (recommended to experience a local Outback pub and meet the stars of the village's own naked Calendar Girls-style wall diary) and to the ancient Mungana Caves National **Park**, where there are more than 15 square miles of underground caverns as vast as a cathedral.

Best of all are the heli-trips with Noli, who uses his flying machine to muster cattle twice a year, but takes guests swooping over brumbies (wild horses), creeks filled with crocodiles, and miles of eucalyptus bushland. You might end up at the Queenslander bungalow where his daughter lives, and serves tea and scones on the veranda while wallabies hop on the lawn.

The verdict A comfortable retreat for a couple of days, to experience real Outback life, absolute quiet and miles of nothing. The highlights include flying in a helicopter over hundreds of miles of Outback (£550 an hour for up to three passengers), spotting brumbies, crocodiles, red kangaroos and wallabies from the air; fishing at dawn, with nothing but a fish eagle for **company**; lying by the pool, soaking up those typical Australian colours: the vivid blues of the sky, the **iron**-rich reds of the soil; and meeting the tough seventysomething Tom Prior, who has a multimillion-dollar collection of 22 classic Fords in his garden in the Outback.

On the downside, although Crystalbrook is a member of the Luxury Lodges of Australia, it is more comfortable guesthouse than luxury lodge, with simple décor and a homely feel.

The details Double rooms at Crystalbrook Lodge (crystalbrookcollection.com.au) cost from £500, including all drinks, food and non-motorised activities. For those who want to combine the Outback with a reef experience, John Morris offers excursions to sea on his six-berth Bahama yacht, from £3,300 a day for up to six people, allinclusive, and a 10-day Outback, reef and rainforest trip for £5,237 per person.

The villa

#### MALI MALI

This is the villa used by X-factor judges when coaching wannabes in Australia – and you can see why. The modern foursuite Balinese-style private house, designed by well-known Australian architect Chris

Vandyke – is a 20-minute drive from Port Douglas (for restaurants and excursions), and five minutes from Mossman Gorge (for rainforest walks) and from the nearest long white beach. It is spacious enough to suit four couples, or a large family – and of course, like all other highend Australia properties, it has a heliport.

Set in 20 acres, Mali Mali has its own tennis court and a pretty mosaic-tiled semicircular pool from which one can look out over the surrounding sugar farms, and tropical gardens squawking with cockatoos and aflutter with jewelcoloured sunbirds. The **property** has four large bedrooms, each with its own patio, a big open-plan kitchen/living area that opens on to a vast dining patio with views, and a hitech media room for those who prefer indoor pursuits.

Like all the 70 properties offered by the Queensland **company** Executive Retreats, owned by Wendy and Hans van der Wolf, the house can be as fully staffed or private as you wish; they can provide masseuses, cleaners, drivers (recommended is the affable Coral from Cairns Limousine Service) and a chef, David Boon, whose Chef in House **company** serves up sensational local food. A six-course feast might feature Japanese scallop with pear, kangaroo carpaccio with juniper, and sesame-crusted quail, for instance.

The verdict This is a hugely comfortable home for those who value their privacy. Highlights include the painting classes with Aboriginal artist Brian "Binna" Swinley, who explains the basics of dot-painting and then encourages you to paint your own at his Janbal gallery in the shade of a tree. On the downside, it's a 14-minute drive to the nearest bar or restaurant, so this is either for self-caterers or those whose budgets extend to a private chef. It's too far to walk to the beach, so Mali Mali is more a forest home than a beach house.

The details Mali Mali ([executiveretreats.com.au](http://executiveretreats.com.au)) costs from £524 a night for up to six guests. The best time of year to go is from April to December; from January to March the climate is hot and humid, and there are potentially lethal jellyfish at sea.

#### Queensland essentials

Getting there **China** Southern ([csair.com](http://csair.com)), **China** Airlines ([airchina.com.au](http://airchina.com.au)), Cathay Pacific ([cathaypacific.com](http://cathaypacific.com)), Etihad ([etihad.com](http://etihad.com)), Qantas ([qantas.com.au](http://qantas.com.au)), Emirates ([emirates.com](http://emirates.com)), Thai Airways ([thaiairways.com.au](http://thaiairways.com.au)) and Singapore Airlines ([singaporeair.com](http://singaporeair.com)) all offer connections from Heathrow via the Middle East or Asia to Brisbane. Flying time is around 22 hours. Brisbane Airport ([bne.com.au](http://bne.com.au)) has an excellent rail connection into the city. Airtrain ([airtrain.com.au](http://airtrain.com.au)) operates daily, with travel time to the city 22 minutes.

Visitors to the Great Barrier Reef and the Daintree Rainforest can also fly directly to Cairns in the far north of Queensland. Fly from London Heathrow to Cairns Airport via Dubai or Singapore. Flying time is around 34 hours. Cairns Airport ([cairnsairport.com](http://cairnsairport.com)) has a shuttle service, plentiful taxis and private limousine transfers to the city.

Given the range of options, it is often worth turning to companies such as Austravel ([austravel.com](http://austravel.com)), Flight Centre ([flightcentre.co.uk](http://flightcentre.co.uk)), Netflights ([netflights.com](http://netflights.com)), Trailfinders ([trailfinders.com](http://trailfinders.com)), Travelbag ([travelbag.co.uk](http://travelbag.co.uk)) and Wexas ([wexas.com](http://wexas.com)), which are among the best points of call for more advice and the latest fares.

Trailfinders, Austravel, Bridge & Wickers ([bridgeandwickers.co.uk](http://bridgeandwickers.co.uk)) and Abercrombie & Kent ([abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://abercrombiekent.co.uk)) all offer touring packages to Brisbane, Noosa, the Great Barrier Reef, the Whitsunday Islands, Fraser **Island** and the Daintree National **Park**.

#### Getting around

The fastest way to travel around this vast state is by plane with Qantas ([qantas.com.au](http://qantas.com.au)), Virgin Australia ([virginaustralia.com](http://virginaustralia.com)) or Jetstar ([jetstar.com.au](http://jetstar.com.au)). Greyhound buses ([greyhound.com.au](http://greyhound.com.au)) run between all major centres in Queensland, and there are two train services that travel the Queensland coast between Brisbane and Cairns ([queenslandrail.com.au](http://queenslandrail.com.au)).

#### More information

[australia.com](http://australia.com)

#### Reader offer

A 20-day premium escorted tour of Australia, costs from £4,295 per person. Includes all flights, sightseeing and meals. Valid for departure between January 2015 and March 2016 (0844 873 0311; [telegraph.co.uk/collectionaustralia](http://telegraph.co.uk/collectionaustralia)).

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