

## SNIPPETS FROM DOWN UNDER—THE DAINTREE RAINFOREST

We drove from Cairns on the Captain Cook Highway towards Port Douglas and Cape Tribulation—not quite to the North Cape but a northern part of Queensland. Most of the area around here is given over to sugar-cane farming, cattle and tourism. Once we



left the highway we were immediately in the back of beyond. We were heading for the Daintree Rainforest and staying at the Silky Oaks Hotel. The Northern Silky Oak—*Cardwellia sublimis*.

The hotel is something of a fantasy. In the middle of this rainforest there are 70 separate wooden cabins on very high stumps—obviously to try and avoid insects, snakes and other creepy crawlies.

There are several rock pools in which to swim with lots of overhanging foliage. The restaurant in the main reception area is

built, again on high stilts and completely open on all sides. From our table we can look down towards the river and all the surrounding gardens which are lovely when lit by lots of little lanterns at night.

A ‘Safari’ had been arranged for our first day and we were met by Murray, our guide. The group comprised a honeymoon couple from Aylesbury, Gayle and Dave from Philadelphia, three Scots, ourselves and Gary, a porter from the hotel learning the routine.

We set out for the Daintree River where we were met by Peter who runs the river cruise. I say ‘cruise’ but it was not on an elegant vessel. It was a small, primitive, flat-bottomed craft. Peter is an Englishman who emigrated to Australia many years ago, determined to get out of the rat race and he just loves his job on the river.

Murray had driven the 4WD (four wheel drive) alongside the river to cross separately on a ferry and would meet us later further down on the opposite side.



Peter was extremely knowledgeable about the flora and fauna and explained how the mangroves and other trees germinate and grow. The pods simply fall from the trees and some stick straight up in the mud at low tide. We saw butterflies, birds, fish and a 14ft Estuarino crocodile. When we embarked, Peter suggested we kept our hands inside the boat!

The crocodiles stay on the bottom for 2-3 hours then come up for 1.5 seconds to recharge. When they go to the bottom, they shut off a heart chamber.

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We rejoined the 4WD and were then going to stop for refreshments ‘somewhere in the forest’. Murray pointed out plants that were of interest and some that were extremely dangerous—like *Silica*. A deadly thing to make contact with as it has poisonous filaments of glass and can make you ill for over a year. We passed an old sawmill, opened on March 25th, 1930.



There are also many poisonous snakes around although, thankfully, we didn’t see any.

Our lunch venue was on the edge of Myall (pronounced Mile) Creek. We hadn’t anticipated seeing tents set up in a small clearing ahead of us and also hadn’t expected to find someone (Sheila!) cooking fresh fish, steak, and sausages for our meal, but it all smelt delicious. There was also salad, freshly

made damper (bread cooked in a pot in the ground in hot ash) and billy tea. Also masses of plantain, nachi pear, custard apple, persimmon, melon, mango, passion fruit and pineapple. A wonderful banquet enjoyed by everyone.

Suddenly, Sheila shouted at something rustling in the undergrowth and threw a saucepan at it. She missed, but it scared it away—whatever it was! We then saw two huge monitor lizards rushing around and trying to get at the food. They ran over our feet as we were sitting there and shinned up the trees. After our initial fright, we were able to see them more closely—about 5ft long with black, white and yellow skins and beautifully marked.

Murray thought we might like to swim in the billabong, so Gary jumped in to cool off. Murray then announced that “the ‘gators or crocs sometimes come up this far”. Gary was out like a shot!

Myall Beach is part of Cape Tribulation and it was extremely hot on the beach. We could see a large area of bright red moving down towards the sea and, once we were close enough, we could see thousands and thousands of Soldier Crabs making their way into the sea. We were warned not to go in the sea to swim because of the current invasion of ‘stingers’ (jellyfish).



We then drove up to a high point to view the coast of Cape Tribulation and the mouth of the Daintree River. It was wonderful to see the point where it meets the sea.

One thing I would say about being in the Forest is that the insects really are a pain. Despite being armed with ‘Rid’ we did suffer from very inflamed bites and, of course, being a rainforest—it does rain a lot. But—we loved it, the experience was just wonderful and we would go again if we had the chance!

***Jennifer Fidler***