

Great escapes

Natural wonders and thrilling adventures abound in North Queensland. Louise Murray takes us on a tour



Famously visible from the International Space Station, the Great Barrier Reef is on most people's To-Do list when visiting Australia. I've dived the planet as a working photojournalist, from the Arctic to the Antarctic, and last dived the largest underwater feature on the planet 15 years ago. I've returned to see how it is faring after two intense

tropical cyclones hit in 2011 and 2014. Fortunately, the storm damage was localised and the Great Reef is still very much worth exploring.

I boarded Mike Ball's *Spoilsport* in Cairns for a seven-day voyage to the Coral Sea, where some of the best underwater life and clearest waters can be found. A 29m catamaran, the twin-hulled superstructure offers much more stability in

the water than an equivalent monohull, and can turn on a dime. There is heaps of space in the saloon, the en-suite cabins, and all important back deck to comfortably accommodate diving guests and all their kit. Couple that with an extremely friendly and professional crew for whom no request seems too much, and a food offering that rivals the best onshore eateries, *Spoilsport* offers a

brilliant experience for divers and snorkellers alike.

An overnight steam finds us at the Cod Hole, a great introduction to diving the outer barrier reef. After a comprehensive briefing on all points of shipboard life from trip director Kerrin Jones, it's time to hit the water. Descending slowly, I come to rest on a patch of sand beside a huge fish as big as my desk, an outsized member of the



Opening spread: An aerial view of Cod Hole, a part of the Northern Great Barrier Reef.
This spread, from left: Divers in Cod Hole can get upclose to the 2m-long Potato Cod; dive with sharks in Osprey Reef; *Spoilsport* slices through the blue waters of the Great Barrier Reef



grouper family, a Potato Cod. The animal, one of a dozen or so, utterly ignores me. It has other things on its mind. Small cleaning fish are hovering its body, mouth and sensitive gills of parasites. No need for a dental hygienist here. The giant fish's preoccupation with a personal wash and scrub up means that I can get close enough to count its teeth.

With four to five dives a day, I fall into a relaxing rhythm of diving, eating, and sleeping. Another dawn finds us 130km beyond the Great Barrier Reef at Osprey Reef, a hard coral atoll ascending from the deep. Kerrin's

daily wake-up call offers the choice of leaping out of bed to dive at 7am, or simply rolling over in bed to await the breakfast bell at a more civilised hour. On most days I choose to dive. It's been a lifetime ambition of mine to find and photograph the rare, incredibly cryptic, and venomous leaf scorpionfish, an ugly superstar of the underwater reference books. The expert naturalists on the crew take up the challenge. Naturally, on the one morning that I decide on a lazy start to the day, the fabled fish is sighted by an eagle-eyed member of crew, so after some

detailed directions I swim off, camera in hand, to look for the 10cm fish. Kerrin has even left a marker for me. A slight movement reveals the camouflaged critter, as it uses its pectoral fins to adjust its position. This sneaky ambush predator captures passing prey up to half its body size by rapidly opening its impossibly large mouth and sucking them in.

Another highlight of our exploration is North Horn, a current-swept peninsula of Osprey Reef that plunges into the depths, where diving with sharks is the order of the day. Even the most experienced of divers find shark feeding a



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I listened to the pre-dive briefing with considerably more attention than usual, especially the bit about keeping hands and feet tucked in, because we will not be using cages. The sharks seem to know what is happening as there are quite a few already circling the boat as the captain moors up. Once I have swum into place, back against the coral cliff, the sharks' behaviour immediately changes as the bait of tuna heads is lowered into place by Kerrin. The calm

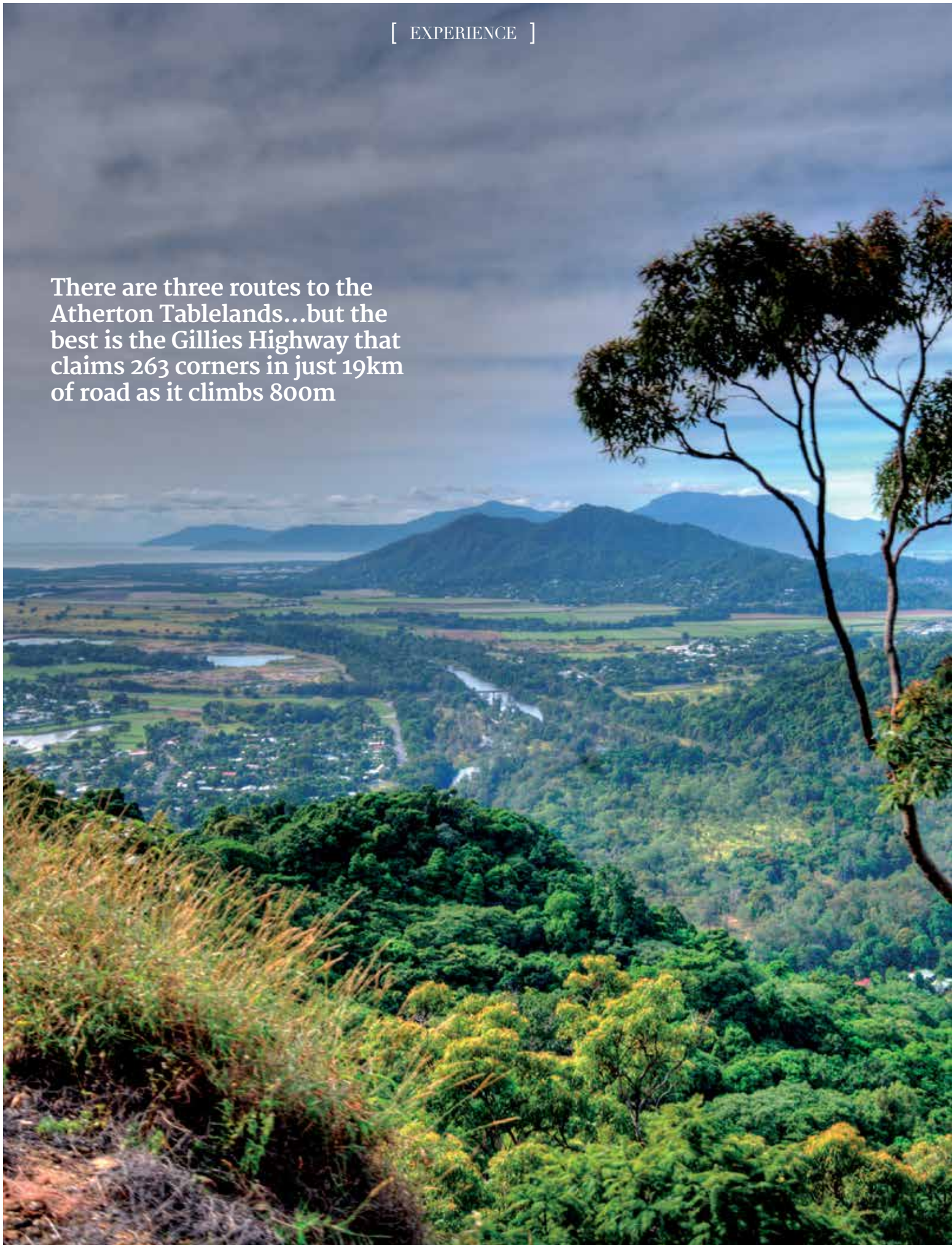
and orderly procession of grey reef sharks and smaller black tips is abandoned, and a maelstrom ensues, dominated by the larger animals tearing the bait apart. It's a feeding frenzy, but masterfully orchestrated by the *Spoilsport* crew. All my focus is on taking nice clean shots of these oceanic predators and just before the show has begun, it is over, and all that is left are a few scales glinting in the sunlight, and some cracking images as the grey shapes recede back into the blue.

Diving over, it's time to head inland to explore a much lesser-known part

of North Queensland, and another UNESCO-listed wonder. Most visitors to this part of Australia stick to the coastal forests, but with more rich and complex species, the high-altitude rainforests of the interior are much more rewarding. The Wet Tropics World Heritage Area includes some of the world's oldest rainforest dating back to the time when Australia was part of the supercontinent Gondwana. Its extreme age means that the animals that live in the interior are special, many endemic to the region. Australian wildlife is not just about koalas and kangaroos. This is the place to come

[EXPERIENCE]

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Rugged mountains and lush landscape in Kuranda, aptly called “The Village in the Rainforest”, located in the Atherton Tablelands

if you want to seek out tree-climbing marsupials, platypuses, and possums that fly.

From Cairns, there are three routes to the Atherton Tablelands, which constitute some parts of the Wet Tropics, but the best is the Gillies Highway that claims 263 corners in just 19km of road as it climbs 800m. The drive is spectacular, with precipitous views, though I recommend the passenger seat as no driver can take their eyes off the road for very long and hope to finish the journey.

What is really different about the rainforest here is that it is seasonally wet, and relatively cool, being above 700m in altitude. I’m used to sweating like I’m doing an aerobics class in a sauna when working in a rainforest. This is a really pleasant change, and one I was not expecting. Cool, certainly in comparison to Cairns, relatively low humidity – and best of all

– no leeches! At least none that I encountered. To get the most out of my stay I hired the services of Jonathan Munro, an expat Brit who arrived here in the 1990s and bought his own tract of rainforest. He is passionate and extremely knowledgeable about the unique ecosystem, and is often hired by wildlife cameramen. Jonathan took me on a customised night tour spotlighting for possums, and a less successful stakeout in a hide for the golden bowerbird, which could be heard calling like a scratchy ratchet; and seen in the surrounding trees, but disobligingly refused to perform on his bower for my camera.

Most of the rainforest animals are nocturnal, so days are free to wander through villages that seem frozen in time. Picturesque small towns built during the early 20th-century mining booms still have authentic galleried hotels, and bars with clapboarded



From left: See the sugar glider, a marsupial endemic to Australia, at Cairns Night Zoo; Lake Eacham Hotel is one of the historic structures in Yungaburra village

exteriors. Yungaburra is well worth a visit especially on a Saturday market day when an Aboriginal poet passionately addresses the gathered crowd, and archetypal Aussies – booted, gaitered, and wearing vests – come out of the bush looking like extras from a *Crocodile Dundee* film. I picked up a walking map from the local visitor’s centre, and just wandered around the back streets, stopping for a coffee and yummy homemade cake at the Whistle Stop Café. Even the café has a retro feel, with the ladies behind the counter vying to recommend their own culinary creations.

I also paid a visit to Tarzali Lakes Fishing area, where lakes have attracted four-legged fishermen, Australia’s iconic platypus, and where film crews from all over the world come for their natural history shoots. The platypuses love yabbies,

freshwater crayfish that live alongside the farmed fish. Almost 80 platypuses live here, and seeing these creatures involves the exact opposite of most wildlife viewing etiquette. I saw up to four at once, swimming and diving close by. Owner Peter Whiddett warned me against opening an umbrella. He says that it looks like a bird of prey to a short-sighted platypus, which will dive in fright.

The Tablelands have so much to offer in terms of wildlife experiences, hiking, and spectacular natural landscapes that I will be returning later this year to explore them further, and next time, that golden bowerbird will perform, fingers crossed. ■

SilkAir, the regional wing of Singapore Airlines, will fly three times weekly between Singapore and Cairns from 30 May 2015.

Reef and rainforest exploration

The *Spoilsport* is the premier liveaboard boat on the Great Barrier Reef. The twin-hulled catamaran is hugely spacious and can be boarded for six-night expeditions to the Coral Sea, or shorter Fly Dive packages, where passengers leave from Cairns by boat and fly back from Lizard Island (or vice versa), enjoying a low level flight over the reef. See upcoming trips at mikeball.com

Take a customised tour of the flora and fauna of the Wet Tropics rainforest with an expert guide, Jonathan Munro. Birdwatching trips are also available. wildwatch.com.au