

# PARADISE FOUND

FRASER ISLAND IS WELL-KNOWN FOR CAMPING, FISHING AND FOUR-WHEEL DRIVE ADVENTURES, BUT IT'S ALSO A REALLY FUN PLACE FOR FAMILIES TOO...

WORDS: Karen Bleakley



“Do you think we’ll see any dolphins or whales on our way over?” asks one of my six-year-old twins eagerly as we board the ferry at River Heads, just south of Hervey Bay. We find seats on the top deck and scan the calm water for marine life for the entire 50-minute crossing. Fraser Island – the world’s largest sand island – is where Aussies go off-grid for some wild outdoor experiences. It conjures up images of dingoes roaming free, wind-swept beaches, fishing for your supper and off-road adventures. All of those are great reasons to visit, but the sub-tropical island off the coast of >>

Main image: 75 Mile Beach and the Maheno Shipwreck





“You won’t believe what we did!” exclaims Lincoln when we collect them at the end of the evening, carrying a sleeping Evangeline in our arms.

“We had a campfire and toasted marshmallows,” butts in Reuben. “And we learnt about plants, and we had dinner in a restaurant.”

Lincoln continues: “And they told us Aboriginal stories and we got to learn about the stars.” They bounce all the way back to our villa, sharing stories of their night’s adventure.

## UP THE CREEK

Next morning, I sneak out at first light ready for the Beauty Spots Tour, excited at the prospect of some me-time. Children and babies are welcome on the tours, but we’d decided Matt and the kids would have more fun exploring the beach and the resort without an itinerary.

A bumpy drive in the four-wheel drive bus takes us beyond the resort’s dingo fence and into the dense forest. “Logging took place on Fraser from 1863 to 1991,” explains our driver, Gary. “Everything you can see here is growing on sand and these trees grow tall to reach the sunlight which is why they were so attractive to loggers.”

We emerge from the tall trees straight onto 75 Mile Beach. “Two cars were lost here last week,” Gary explains as we watch cars with fishing rods and tents strapped to their roofs zoom past. “One person came to tow their friend out and they got bogged too!”

We pull in at Eli Creek for the obligatory beach-wade. I walk inland along the creek and get into the water to follow the current back to the beach. In places I tip toe along the sandy creek bed and almost manage to keep my shorts dry. The water is so clear and refreshing, so I don’t mind getting wet.

Queensland offers much more than that. Located at the southern end of the Great Barrier Reef, this 123 kilometre by 22 kilometre World Heritage-listed island also has luxury accommodation, family retreats and everything in between.

## CHILD’S PLAY

With its gin-coloured lakes edged with squeaky white sand, its turquoise rolling waves and its luscious interior, combined with spa facilities, lagoon-shaped swimming pools, fine dining and a full programme of activities, it’s the perfect destination for families looking to unwind.

Once settled into our villa at Kingfisher Bay Resort, we head to reception and leave our boys with the ranger who is running the Junior Eco Rangers kids’ club for the evening.

My husband Matt and I take our three-year-old, Evangeline, with us to dinner as she’s too young for camp fire adventures. We settle on the fine dining restaurant so we can try out the fusion of modern cuisine and traditional bush tucker.

While we taste sensations like lemon myrtle oil and bush-spiced butter on freshly baked breads, and steaks drizzled with quandong jus (a tart-tasting fruit similar to apricot and peach), she eats her home-made fish and chip dinner then curls up on a chair and goes to sleep, contented.

**Left:** A lagoon pool at Kingfisher Bay Resort; and (images above) bathers enjoy cooling off at Eli Creek

“With its gin-coloured lakes edged with squeaky white sand it’s the perfect destination for families”

Gary magically creates an impressive spread of coffee and biscuits from the side of the bus while we all dry off. “If anyone would like to take a scenic flight, there are planes that take off from the beach and give you a great view of the island,” he explains while offering me a second biscuit.

I’m not a lover of flying, let alone in a plane that isn’t much bigger than my car, but I know it’s a once in a lifetime experience, so I put my hand up.

I strap myself into the tiny plane and cling tightly to my camera as we drive along the beach picking up speed. Then we’re in the air, climbing above the ocean and the cars that were driving alongside us moments before. As the plane banks, I feel my stomach lurch, and we turn to soar over the forests, the pristine lakes >>



and the golden beach. On the way back, we pass over the Maheno Shipwreck which is surrounded by tourists the size of ants.

I'm mesmerised by the view of the shimmering ocean below where we look out for whales and dolphins. It's obvious to see that Ben, our pilot, loves his unique job as he beams and proudly points out the landmarks below.

The touch-down on sand is so soft I wonder what I was worried about. I climb out of the aircraft feeling exhilarated to have seen a different side to Fraser, and excited that I pushed myself beyond my comfort zone.

## ONE ICONIC WRECK

We meet the bus at the Pinnacles, coloured sand cliffs along the island's eastern beach. They have formed over hundreds of thousands of years when minerals leached through the sand and on exposed high sand dunes.

"Up to 72 different colours have been found here," our guide explains as we stare at the vibrant shades of yellows and reds. The Pinnacles are significant to the local Aboriginal Butchulla people who believe it is a sacred women's place with the Rainbow Serpent being responsible for the created sand formations.

**"I'm mesmerised by the view of the shimmering ocean where we look out for whales"**

Next stop is the Maheno Shipwreck, where a bunch of friends have pulled up to start an impromptu game of footie right across the beach highway. We dodge the cars that are streaking past, and the players and ball, to walk around the rusted wreck that rests on the sand. Built in 1905 and beached in 1935, the slowly deteriorating hull is Fraser's most iconic wreck.

We soon find ourselves in the historic heart of Fraser Island, Central Station on Wanggoolba. Wanggoolba Creek was a Butchulla woman's area and birthing place where men were excluded. This large clearing was later the headquarters for the Queensland Forestry Service from 1920 until the late 1950s.

"Back in the logging days, up to 150 people were based here," Gary explains as we continue our drive. "Trucks arrived in the 1930s - before that they did it all with horses. In fact, four brumbies have just been found on the island. This has started up talk about whether to take them off or leave them here."

The bus pulls in so we can take a bushwalk along a shady trail through the dense trees. As we hike, we marvel at the size of the remaining straight, red turpentine trees that stretch up 40 metres. It's easy to see why they were attractive to the loggers.

The final stop of the day is Lake McKenzie. The sky turns black but the pure white silica sand still dazzles. Despite the rain, I go in for a swim as it's too beautiful

**Clockwise from right:** The Pinnacles coloured sandcliffs; a breaching humpback whale; Lake McKenzie; the Maheno Shipwreck



not to. The clear freshwater lake is a dream to swim in, if a little cold. As the rain comes down, I float looking back at the arc of white sand backed by greenery.

Even on a rainy winter's day, this place is one of the most stunning places I've ever seen. It's the perfect way to end the tour.

## WHALE OF A TIME

Next morning is another early start for the whale watching cruise. Each year, some 17,000 humpback whales set off from the Antarctic along the Australian coast to the warm waters of the Barrier Reef to mate and give birth. On their return, they take a breather in the calm waters of the Great Sandy Strait, where Fraser acts as a buffer from the winds and currents.

It's a place for mothers to feed their young and teach them skills needed to survive in the deeper waters. Sightings between August and October are guaranteed, and if conditions are right you can even swim with these elegant giants.

When it comes to awe-inspiring experiences, few things match watching a pod of whales putting on a show for your camera with their tail slaps, sprays and breaches.

I can't decide where to look as action is going on all around the boat. In the end, I stop trying to document the experience and instead immerse myself in the moment. As the whales play at the bow, everyone gasps in excitement.

On the boat's return journey, after being warmed up with coffee and cakes, we pass a dingo standing alone on the beach at the water's edge.

Back on dry land, it's time for some family time at the beach. We collect shells and laugh at the armies of soldier crabs that run around the beach every time we move. There are thousands of them covering the floor, and, from a distance, it looks like the ground is moving.

## BUSH TUCKER

Having tried some bush tucker flavours in the Seabelle restaurant on our first night, I'm eager to attend the Bush Tucker Talk to learn more.

A chef cooks up crocodile, kangaroo and emu while a ranger talks us through the tasting platters. The award-winning restaurant carefully blends flavours like pepperberry and bunya nuts into its dishes, but to be able to taste all of the unique sweet, spicy and sour flavours individually, and hear about their origin, is really fascinating.

As the sun goes down, Lincoln - my little wildlife enthusiast - and I join a guided night walk at the resort. A group of us gather behind the torch waiting to see what wildlife the ranger will uncover in the darkness. He quickly spots a huntsman spider up the road. Sure enough, there it is on the tarmac. He explains, "If you stand behind the beam you can see the spider's eyes shining like diamonds."

We go on to explore a log filled with funnel web spiders. He holds a stick by one of the tunnels and >>



## GET OFF THE BEATEN TRACK!

For the ultimate Aussie adventure try a two or three day tag-along safari tour of Fraser Island with Drop Bear Adventures. These popular four-wheel drive tours guide you off the beaten track through the island's many stunning lakes, creeks and beaches, offering you the chance to learn about the true story of K'gari, aka Fraser Island. Drop Bear tours depart from Noosa and Rainbow Beach four times a week.

[www.dropbearadventures.com.au](http://www.dropbearadventures.com.au)



we watch as the spider comes out to grab it, then ducks back in when it realises it's not an ant.

"Although we have these spiders here, they don't cause any problems with guests." I can see that they're obviously more scared of us than we are of them, but I make a note to avoid sitting on any logs in future.

As we walk up the road, we discover a sugar glider's eyes glinting high in the tree, and then we go hunting for stingrays and squids from the jetty, before looking at eels in the resort's stream.

"I want to be a ranger when I grow up!" exclaims Lincoln excitedly as we head back to our villa.

While packing, I reflect on our holiday. We've had chance to hang out together as a family, and we've had our own adventures too. The kids won't let go of their toy dingoes we bought them from the shop – a lasting reminder of "the best holiday yet".

It seems the traditional owners of the land knew what they were doing when they named the island 'K'gari', meaning paradise. The name seems pretty fitting to me. 🇦🇺



**Clockwise from above:** A rainforest boardwalk in Wanggoolba; the children play on the beach by Kingfisher Bay Resort, learning about wildlife at the Junior Eco Rangers kids' club



## FURTHER INFORMATION

Rooms at Kingfisher Bay Resort ([www.kingfisherbay.com](http://www.kingfisherbay.com)) start from A\$149 (£87) per night. Its Beauty Spots Tour costs A\$185 (£108) for an adult and A\$120 (£70) for a child. The Whale Watching Tour costs A\$120 (£70) for an adult and A\$70 (£40) for a child. The Ranger Guided Night Walk costs A\$10 (£5) per person. The Bush Tucker Taste experience costs A\$20 (£11) per person. The Junior Eco Rangers kids' club (5 – 14 year-olds) costs A\$30 (£17) per child. All tours and activities are bookable through the resort.