

WET AND WILD

QUEENSLAND'S FRASER COAST OFFERS AMAZING DIVERSITY WITH OPPORTUNITIES TO ENJOY CLOSE-ENCOUNTER WHALE WATCHING, VISIT UNIQUE BEACHES AND EXPLORE TOWNS STEEPED IN HISTORY AND CULTURE...

WORDS: Karen Bleakley

As Matt and I sink into the colourful bean bags at Enzo's on the Beach, we feel in holiday mode. We sip our lattes and laugh as our three kids fight a losing battle trying to eat their ice creams before they melt down their arms.

We've timed our visit to Hervey Bay to co-incide with the feeding of the giant sea turtles at Reefworld Aquarium, so once we've had our pit stop we head over to the attraction.

As we enter the underwater world, the owner joins us to tell us a bit about the attraction's history before the feeding session gets underway. I can see straight away that this isn't just a family business – the business is actually part of the family.

"We established Reefworld in 1979. It's an all-natural aquarium and we only use sand-filtered sea water and natural lighting," he explains, as we explore the first big tank and watch some lion fish swim past.

"How old are those barramundi?" asks a customer pointing at a giant fish that is looking at us curiously.

"Probably just under 20 years old. When my son wasn't much bigger than these guys," he says, gesturing to our six-year-old twins, "he went out to the beach with a net and came back with a bucket of little fish. These were in that bucket."

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Main image: Rainbow Beach overlooking Double Island Point



After exploring the tanks, we move outside to meet the sea turtles where we're given lettuce to drop into the water. We are allowed to gently touch their smooth shells as they swim past.

The kids make sure every last scrap of lettuce is gone before agreeing to leave. On the way out, it's time to put our hands in the touch pool where there are sea cucumbers and star fish.

Above, left to right: Rainbow Beach; admiring the coloured clifftops

wildlife in the trees. The night sky is clear and perfect – we feel like we're a million miles from any city.

SURF AND SAND SAFARI

Next morning begins with a blustery walk from our holiday home to catch our first sight of Rainbow Beach. Our resort is just up the coast from the main township, so the sand at this end is deserted. We make the most of the solitude by running around the sand and dodging the waves as we listen to the ocean's roar.

Later, Steve from Surf and Sand Safaris welcomes me aboard his four-wheel drive with a grin. After a few pick-ups, we turn onto Rainbow Beach for our off-road adventure.

Steve explains how beach driving has changed over the years: "Back in '91 they started policing Rainbow Beach as a road. That brought in speed limits and breath-tests, just like a real road. 45 vehicles were stranded here last year," he says.

We learn that the coloured sand has been brought in by the current and deposited, with the wind and sea working together to move it around. "The landscape here is ever-changing," explains Steve. "Once some land has slipped, the wind whips it back up or the tide moves it on and deposits it somewhere else."

We pull in next to a particularly colourful part of the cliff, where Steve tells us: "At least 38 different colours have been found here."

We collect some coloured rocks and head further up the beach where Steve demonstrates how the rocks melt into beautiful, vibrant colours when wet. He swishes the colours in the sand and flicks the reds and the ochres across the beach. It's easy to see why Aboriginal people used the sand to make pictures.

During the tour, we're told the Aboriginal legend of how Rainbow Beach was formed. A maiden called Murrawar loved the rainbow that arrived every

FICTIONAL ICONS

On the way to our accommodation, we pull in to Maryborough to explore. While Matt and the kids play in a park to burn off energy, I explore the town.

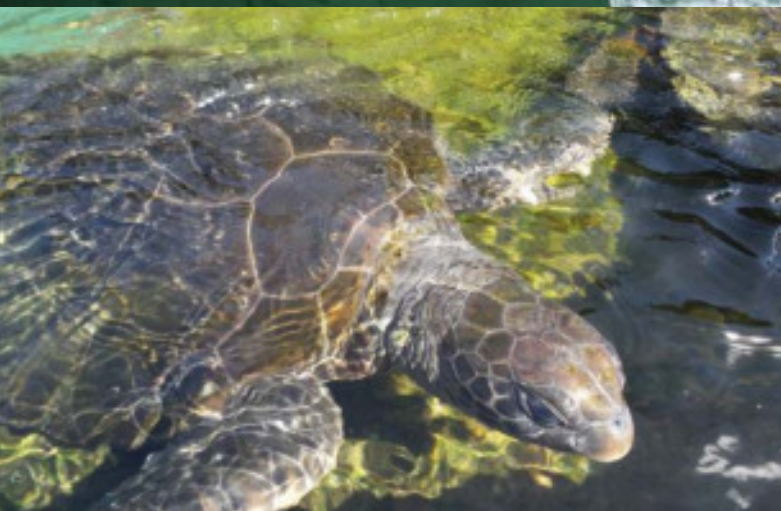
Famous for being the birthplace of Pamela Travers, the creator of Mary Poppins, I find the nanny's bronze statue outside A Spoon Full of Sugar Café.

“Maryborough weaves personal stories through display boards and a story trail of public art”

I take the opportunity to grab a coffee, complete with a chocolate umbrella stencilled in the top. The statue is next to the heritage-listed former bank building where Travers' own father worked as a bank manager, just like Mr Banks in the movie. The town cleverly weaves personal stories through display boards and a story trail of public art, showing there is more to this community than its famous author.

After checking in to our holiday home at Rainbow Beach Resort, I sit on our secluded deck sipping coffee listening to the crashing waves on the other side of the trees. After a hearty meal in the restaurant, we walk back to our house listening to the incredible sounds of

Opposite page (clockwise from top): Swimming with barramundi at Reefworld; a bronze statue of Mary Poppins in Maryborough; Lincoln, dwarfed by a tree on Rainbow Beach; a giant sea turtle at Reefworld





evening. An evil tribesman called Burwilla stole her away as he wanted her for himself. One day, she saw a chance to escape and ran along the beach. Burwilla threw his killer boomerang at her. The rainbow came down to protect her and when the boomerang hit it, the rainbow fractured into thousands of pieces which formed this beautiful beach.

I stand looking at the landscape, taking in the vibrant colours and the crashing blue ocean. The spectacular location is deserving of its dramatic legend.

“I can honestly say that camping on Rainbow Beach will do you more good and leave you more relaxed

Clockwise from above: Sunset over Tin Can Bay; the restaurant at Rainbow Beach Resort; a breaching whale

“The first lighthouse keeper stayed for 35 years, so it can’t have been a bad job,” Steve reveals.

We walk around the lighthouse, enjoying the beach views towards Noosa as the wind whips our hair.

Our eyes turn to the ocean, towards Fraser Island, and we quickly spot a mother and baby humpback whale playing just below.

On the drive back, the forest becomes dense. We stop to get a feel for the surrounding forest, where the air feels damp, the light is sparse but the energy is buzzing. Cooloola’s unique environment is home to magnificent, red turpentine trees, towering kauri pines and scribbly gums with their tell-tale squiggly markings on their silvery bark.

I’m sad the tour is over, but I’m amazed that we crammed so much in to half a day.

Bright and early the next morning we set off for Barnacles Dolphin Centre at Tin Can Bay. Even though the dolphin feeding doesn’t start until 8am, we’d been told by friends to arrive for 7am to give us time to paddle with the dolphins before the crowds arrive.

We join the small line of other early risers in the water’s edge and listen to the volunteers talk about the pod while dolphins swim between them in waist-deep water. When 8am approaches, we collect our buckets of fish and wait for our turn. We go into the water to feed a dolphin named Mystique – he’s the alpha male of the pod. We each hold out a fish and Mystique gently swims up to us to take it from our hands.

After a lazy breakfast watching the pelicans, we spend the day enjoying the waterside park.

FULL MOON BEACH RIDE

A horse ride hadn’t been in my plans, but when I found out our stay coincided with a special Full Moon Beach Horse Ride, that sealed the deal.

“I stand looking at the landscape, taking in the vibrant colours and the crashing blue ocean”

than any fancy hotel or spa,” Steve tells us. I believe him. Having only been on the sand for a short time I am feeling calmer and connected with nature.

WHALE WATCHING

As our drive continues, Steve tells us childhood stories of surfing at Honeymoon Bay – an area boasting the longest surf break in Australia. The large saltwater lagoon there looks like a picturesque spot to spend a lazy day.

Our journey continues to Double Island Point Lighthouse. As we drive up the steep hill, Steve explains that the lighthouse was brought over from England in 1884. He goes on to tell us stories of the community that once called this home. The residents included children and a teacher, and every month deliveries would be dragged up the hill.

Opposite page (from top to bottom): The large saltwater lagoon at Double Island Point; dolphin feeding at Tin Can Bay; Double Island Point Lighthouse



Above: Mary Street in Gympie; and *(below)* a historic cannon near the river in Maryborough



USEFUL CONTACTS

Plan your visit with these top recommendations...

- Reefworld Aquarium, Hervey Bay – open 9.30am – 4pm. Entry costs A\$20 (£12) per adult and A\$10 (£6) per child. www.discoverherveybay.com/ReefworldAquarium
- Surf and Sand Safaris, Rainbow Beach – the half day tour costs A\$85 (£52) per adult and A\$50 (£30) per child. www.surfandsandsafaris.com
- Barnacles Dolphin Centre, Tin Can Bay – feeding session commences at 8am daily. A\$5 (£3) entry fee per person, plus A\$5 (£3) per fish. www.barnaclesdolphins.com.au
- Rainbow Beach Horse Rides, Rainbow Beach – a full moon beach horse ride costs A\$200 (£123) per person. www.rainbowbeachhorserides.com.au
- Maryborough City Heart Markets and Mary Ann Steam Locomotive – this is held every Thursday 8am-1pm. Train A\$3 (£1.80).
- Gympie Gold Mining and Historical Museum, Gympie – open daily 9am-4pm. Entry costs A\$10 (£6) per adult and A\$5 (£3) per child. www.museum.gympiegoldmuseum.com.au
- Cooloola Rocks and Minerals, Gympie – open daily. www.coolrocks.com.au
- Rainbow Beach Resort, Rainbow Beach, offers a range of apartments and town houses, with pools, tennis court, gym and restaurant on site. From A\$150 (£92) per night. www.rainbowbeachresort.com.au
- Enzo's on the Beach, Hervey Bay – beach front café. www.enzosonthebeach.com.au
- Rainbow Beach Resort Pavilion Restaurant, Rainbow Beach – family friendly dining in a bush setting. www.rainbowbeachresort.com.au/restaurant-bar

As our kids are too little for a big horse ride, I sneak off and meet Andrew and his team at Rainbow Beach Horse Rides back at Rainbow Beach.

We mount up and walk our horses down a track to the beach where we take in the view of the soft-coloured sky, the long stretch of sand and the frothy ocean.

“You’re a writer,” Andrew says. “I challenge you to come up with one word to describe the experience of this ride on the way home.”

Everyone starts off happy and chatting, but as the light fades we become lost in our own thoughts, taking in the spectacular scenery.

We ride further along the beach, following the water’s edge and listening to the sound of nothing but the wind and the ocean.

Much further up the beach, when we thought we’d long since left town behind, we pass a large cluster of friends who are sitting around a campfire in camping chairs. They raise their beers to us to say ‘cheers’ as we ride past.

As we stop to watch the sun touch the horizon and see the full moon bathing the beach in a soft glow, I realise Andrew has set me an impossible challenge. There is no single word to describe this experience. But I do know this is up there as one of the best travel experiences I’ve ever had.

JOURNEY’S END

Next morning, with our stay at Rainbow Beach drawing to a close, we call in to visit Carlo Sandblow. Named after one of Captain Cook’s crew, the 15 hectare sand mass is a breathtaking natural wonder.

www.getmedownunder.com



Clockwise from top: The Mary Ann Steam Locomotive; memorial jacarandas at Gympie; Carlo Sandblow; Karen on the full moon beach ride

Even the kids are speechless at its vastness. We watch a parachutist glide above us towards the beach below with the backdrop of the bright blue sky and the dazzling sand.

We move on to Maryborough markets for a spot of shopping. We bribe the kids to let us weave through the stalls looking at the local produce and arts and crafts by promising them a ride on the Mary Ann Steam Locomotive – a replica of the first steam engine build in Queensland in 1873 which runs on market days.

Our final destination of the day is Gympie. We take a stroll around the pretty duck pond at Lord Alford Park and enjoy a picnic before taking a tour of the Gympie Gold Mining and Historical Museum where we learn about the town’s colourful history and how Gympie saved Queensland from bankruptcy. The kids love panning for gold and exploring the old trucks and machinery.

On the drive back to Brisbane, we make a stop especially for our geology-mad six-year-old, by calling into a ‘little gem shop’ I’d read about. Cooloola Rocks and Minerals turns out to be a huge shop with rows and rows of sparkling stones.

After an agonising hour trying to decide how to spend their pocket money, Evangeline ends up with a gem bracelet, and the boys get some amethyst.

The moment the car starts, the kids fall asleep, clutching their precious stones in one hand and their toy dolphins in the other.

This old-fashioned family holiday has been filled with the discovery of all kinds of natural wonders instead of theme parks. We haven’t left yet and already I can’t wait to come back here. 