

Rainforest adventures

ESCAPE TO THE LUSH VALLEYS AND WORLD HERITAGE-LISTED NATIONAL PARKS OF QUEENSLAND'S GOLD COAST HINTERLAND...

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“W

hen can we go digging for thundereggs?” eight-year-old Lincoln asks eagerly as we pull into the car park at Thunderbird Park at Tamborine Mountain. “Do you know there was a volcano near here a long time ago? Do you think it could erupt again?”

Thunderbird Park's picturesque bushland setting is an outdoor adventurer's dream. Located 66 kilometres from Brisbane, the 112-hectare activity park set beside Cedar Creek in the Gold Coast Hinterland offers a range of outdoor attractions for all ages, from mini golf to tree top high ropes and horse riding to laser skirmish, not to mention the thunderegg mine, which is the perfect place for geology-mad kids to indulge in their love of volcanos.

TRAIL RIDING

Mount Tamborine is set in the third oldest National Park in the world, and its volcanic history is fascinating for adults and kids alike. >>

Main image: Sunset views from O'Reilly's Rainforest Retreat

Millions of years ago, the earth was a single landmass – the supercontinent known as Pangaea. Around 200 million years ago, the land broke apart and the country we know as Australia split off and started drifting north.

As the country passed over one of the earth's hotspots 23 million years ago, a number of volcanos formed on the east coast. This process gave rise to an enormous shield volcano – the Tweed Volcano –

“Thunderbird Park's picturesque bushland setting is an outdoor adventurer's dream”

which remained active for three million years. Lava travelled far and wide before cooling, therefore the volcano's footprint covers an area stretching from Byron Bay in the south-east, Lismore in the south-west, right up to Mount Tamborine, where we are staying for the first part of our hinterland visit.

It's not time to go fossicking for round lumps of volcanic rock with little pick axes in the thunderegg mine just yet. First, my sons and I are booked to do a trail ride through the rainforest with Horse Riding

Hinterland. We arrive at the paddock to find a row of ponies saddled and ready to go.

“Do you want to go on a big horse or a little pony for your lead rein ride?” the riding instructor asks Eva, our fearless five-year-old daughter who is going to walk around the grass while I take her two older brothers on their first proper trek.

“A big one!” she replies with a grin.

While my husband Matt watches her adventure, our eight-year-old twin boys and I are introduced to our horses for our trail ride. The boys start to look nervous as we're given instructions about how to hold the reins – this is the first time they've been on a horse.

We mount our rides and set off into the forest, following the instructor. The boys quickly get used to going up and down slopes and steering around tree branches as we walk under the cool shade of the rainforest canopy. I can see by the grins on their faces they are having fun and gaining in confidence as we clip-clop along beside Cedar Creek, enjoying the serenity of the birdsong in the trees.

Before we know it, the half hour ride is over and we are riding across the grass back to the stables.

“That was awesome!” exclaims Reuben as we dismount and give our horses a pat. “When can we do it again?”

Clockwise from below: Tamborine Mountain views; horse riding through the rainforest; the boys and Karen mount their rides; Curtis Falls

We meet Eva and Matt in the café just as the lorikeet feeding is underway. The kids take handfuls of bird food and hold out their arms so swarms of colourful birds land on them.

When the birds have had their fill, we finally take the three excited kids to the thunderegg mine.

MINING FOR THUNDEREGGS

Sam welcomes us and gives us a presentation to show us what we are looking for when digging. Thundereggs are spherical lumps of volcanic rock. Larger eggs can be cut open on the machine to reveal patterned stone inside which shows the layers of ash.

“Remember to look for the green colour as you dig and you'll know you're in the right place,” Sam reminds us as we leave.

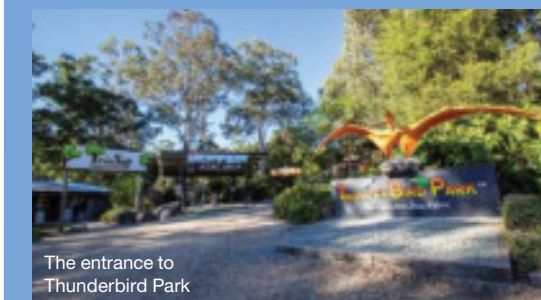
We take a bucket and a little pick each and set off on the walk to the open mine. The kids can't wait to get started, so we begin digging at the first level of the mine. We settle down in our own areas and start chipping away at the rock. We look for the green colour and then stay there to keep on digging, pulling out promising pieces of rounded rock as we go.

After a couple of hours, we walk back to the mine shop feeling pleased with our haul. Sam empties our buckets on the counter and picks the best rocks to cut open on his machine. The kids watch in fascination as

Clockwise from below: A guide explains about thunderegg mining; cut-open eggs reveal patterned stone inside; digging at the mine

5 FUN FAMILY ATTRACTIONS

- Thunderbird Park (www.thunderbirdpark.com) offers a wide range of outdoor activities for all ages and interests. Options include horseback trail riding – with prices starting from A\$50 (£25), fossicking for thundereggs in the open mine – where a family pass costs A\$86 (£46), mini golf, laser skirmish and tree top challenges. The daily bird feeding is free and takes place daily.



- The Tamborine Mountain Heritage Centre (www.tmheritagecentre.com.au) provides a fascinating glimpse into the history of the region. You can visit on weekends from 10am to 3pm with family passes costing A\$10 (£5).
- The Botanic Gardens (tmbotanicgardens.org.au) are an ideal spot to get back to nature and unwind in between activities. They're open daily with a gold coin donation and are a lovely spot for a picnic.
- O'Reilly's Lost World Spa (oreillys.com.au/lost-world-day-spa) is the ultimate place to unwind while taking in stunning views across the infinity pool. Try to choose a treatment that involves the big wooden bath tub.
- Canungra Valley Vineyard (oreillys.com.au/canungra-valley-vineyards) is about so much more than wine tasting – it's a day out for families to enjoy nature, outdoor play, stunning scenery and delicious food and drink. Remember to pre-order your breakfast, picnic or barbeque hamper, with prices from A\$49 (£26).



A couple enjoy a creekside picnic at Canungra Valley Vineyard



he cuts them open and returns with the eggs split in half showing the patterns within.

We leave with three happy, dusty children carrying bags full of heavy rocks.

Exhausted from our day's adventures, we are so pleased to be staying on site at the Cedar Creek

“We find our lodge in the trees right beside the banks of Cedar Creek – it is utterly peaceful”

Lodges. We check in and find our lodge in the trees right beside the banks of Cedar Creek. It is utterly peaceful and our busy lives feel a world away.

After washing off all of the dirt from our mining efforts, and grabbing a takeaway pizza, we light the cabin's log fire. Queensland may be much warmer than the UK, but it is almost winter and the mountain

Below: The family with their pickaxes at the mine; and (below right) Eva in the Frozen-themed room at the Flights of Fancy shop on Gallery Walk

air is cool. I hold a match to the ready-laid fire and watch the flames lick the logs. We huddle together enjoying the novelty of the fire and the cosiness of the cabin lit by flickering firelight.

We find the cabin's wooden box of board games and that is our night sorted – no need for TVs or electronics. This is true disconnection.

GALLERY WALK

Next morning, we devour an incredible cooked breakfast in the sunny Rainforest Restaurant before heading to the nearby Gallery Walk.

Boasting over 60 arts, craft and gift shops, the bustling street of quaint stores attracts thousands of visitors every year.

We begin in a shop we know Eva will love – Flights of Fancy. This place is a fairy-lovers dream with rooms dedicated to all things fairy princess. There is a *Frozen*-themed room and an ocean room (complete with mermaids), not to mention trees decked with fairy doors and endless strings of fairy lights.

Further up the road is the German Cuckoo Clock Nest – a cuckoo clock shop housed in a traditional Bavarian chalet. Started by German owners who were passionate about their culture, the shop is lined with hundreds of cuckoo clocks of all shapes and sizes.

A little way up the road is Castle Glen Tamborine Mountain Cellars – a shop selling rows and rows of delicious wines and rich liqueurs in pretty bottles produced by Castle Glen Australia. The range of wines, fortified wines, liqueurs, beers and spirits are all 100 per cent natural, chemical free and preservative free.

“Why not try some of our chocolate liqueur?” asks the lady behind the counter. It feels like an ideal choice on this chilly morning. I begin with the smooth chocolate mocha and follow it up with the divine chocolate caramel.

When we're shopped out, we leave Gallery Walk behind and stop by the Heritage Centre for a peek into the history of the region. This small historic village includes buildings dating back to the 1930s,

sharing a snapshot of what life was like for the early settlers.

With the kids still full of energy, we take the easy walk to Curtis Falls. We tramp through the eucalypt forest beneath towering gum trees. From the viewing platform we get a view of the tumbling waterfall that is fed by Cedar Creek into the rock pools below.

Our final stop of the day is the Botanic Gardens. We share a picnic on the banks of the lake before meandering around the different gardens gazing at the tropical plants, looking for wildlife and playing Pooh sticks on the little bridges.

ANCIENT RAINFORESTS

Next morning, a 45-minute drive takes us to our next destination: O'Reilly's Rainforest Retreat at nearby Lamington National Park.

While I hit the resort's Lost World Spa to have some relaxing 'me-time', Matt takes the kids into the incredible infinity pool that looks out over the rainforest and valley.

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Below: Sunset views at Moonlight Crag at O'Reilly's Rainforest Retreat; and (bottom) a vintage shop at the Heritage Centre



FAMILY FUN ACTIVITIES IN MOUNT TAMBORINE

■ Enjoy 30 acres of pristine rainforest beside Cedar Creek on the Tamborine Rainforest Skywalk (www.rainforestskywalk.com.au) where family passes start from A\$44 (£23). Take the self-guided walk along the mix of forest trails and steel bridges, plus experience the 40-metre cantilever bridge that is 30 metres above the creek.



Above: The Tamborine Rainforest Skywalk

■ You can see glow worms in their natural habitat on a tour at O'Reilly's Rainforest Retreat, but if you have toddlers that would struggle on a night time rainforest walk, the Glow Worm Caves (www.glowwormcavetamborinemountain.com.au) offers a chance to get up-close with the insects in this purpose-built, accessible attraction that is open during the day. Family passes start from A\$18 (£9).



The Glow Worm Caves at Tamborine Mountain



Above: The historic homestead at O'Reilly's Canungra Valley Vineyards

The relaxation room balcony overlooks the pool, so I sit in my fluffy robe on a day bed sipping water. Every now and again, I duck inside to spend some time in the steam room while I wait for my massage.

When the time comes, I'm led into the spa room which has the most incredible hand-crafted round wooden bath tub set into the window overlooking the rainforest. I make a mental note to book in a longer spa experience next time.

As my worries are rubbed away with fragrant oils, Matt and the kids explore the resort walking tracks. We meet back at our villa to jump in the warm, bubbling spa bath on the deck outside our villa as the sun goes down.

WINE AND WILDLIFE

The final day of our trip has arrived, but it's not over yet. On the way back to Brisbane, we stop at Canungra Valley Vineyards. I taste some of the wines at the cellar door and buy a few bottles to take home while Matt takes the kids for a run around the grass. There are families scattered with picnic blankets around the river banks, and people taking fluffy alpacas for a walk!

The vineyard is set in an idyllic location beside the creek. We spot eels and turtles but, no matter how hard we look, we can't see the resident platypus.

"We have to come back here because we NEED to see the platypus," Lincoln squeals at me.

We don't need any persuading – the Gold Coast Hinterland is a destination that has all of our hearts and we will definitely return soon. 🇦🇺

WHERE TO STAY

- Lodges at Cedar Creek Lodges (www.cedarcreeklodges.com.au) at Thunderbird Park have two bedrooms and can sleep up to five people with a rollaway bed. Prices start from A\$349 (£187) per night for two adults (including breakfast) and A\$39 (£20) per night for each additional guest.
- O'Reilly's Rainforest Retreat (oreillys.com.au) offers hotel-style rooms from A\$149 (£80) and one-bedroom self-contained villas from A\$280 (£150) per night (with a minimum two night stay). Villas with spas on the deck overlooking the rainforest are also available.



Accommodation at Cedar Creek Lodges