



cairns & palm cove

Tourists flock to Cairns to experience the wonders of the Great Barrier Reef, but the culinary treasures on dry land are worth the trip, too.

WORDS CELIA FEIL PHOTOGRAPHY MARK ROPER

If you've always thought the Far North Queensland town of Cairns was geared only towards backpackers and scuba divers, think again. While images of palm trees, tropical reefs, sandy beaches and spectacular sunsets attract tourists in droves during the high season, the area has undergone a culinary renaissance and is now making serious waves on the foodie radar.

In Cairns itself and at the resorts dotted around Palm Cove, 25 kilometres to the

north, top chefs from across Australia are opening city-slick restaurants and serving fabulous food, using produce grown right on their doorstep.

Just an hour from Cairns, on the higher ground of the Atherton Tablelands, you'll find an exotic smorgasbord for food lovers that's well worth exploring. Here, farmers and producers are in the process of growing and developing a wide array of tropical fruits, coffee, dairy products, seafood, Asian spices and even liqueurs.

the guide.

Clockwise from right:
Fresh tropical juices
at Sea Temple; setting tables
at Mangostin's Restaurant;
breakfast at Nu Nu –
poached rhubarb and
apple toastie; grab a table
with sea views at Nu Nu.



WHERE TO EAT

Nu Nu, Outrigger Beach Club and Spa,
123 Williams Esp, Palm Cove,
tel: (07) 4059 1880.

If you're not a local, a visit to this restaurant is sheer torture. Why? Because you won't be able to get the memory of Melbourne chef Nick Holloway's (ex-Pearl) sensational food out of your mind, and it's a long way back to Palm Cove to try it again. Taste his breakfast dish, humbly described on the menu as a 'toastie', of poached rhubarb and apple on a sweet challah (traditional Jewish bread) with vanilla cream and you've found culinary nirvana. So good, that you'll have to come back for dinner to see if such a performance can be repeated. (And it can, with seafood dishes such as roasted Spring Bay scallops a highlight.) The good impression carries through to polished waitstaff, a cool but elegant ambience and sparkling sea views.

Reef House Restaurant, 99 Williams Esp,
Palm Cove, tel: (07) 4055 3633.

London-trained chef Philip Mitchell has been doing it tough in the tropics for the past six years, and when you see where he works, you can understand why he's not rushing to leave. From the open kitchen, Philip looks out over this stylish, airy verandah restaurant,

set against a backdrop of palm trees and melaleucas and water lapping onto a moonlit beach. The setting is matched by a menu that travels from the Middle East to the Mediterranean and across to Asia. Dishes include seared barramundi with dukkah, parsley nicola potatoes and egg remoulade; grilled prawns with chorizo, pea and saffron risotto; and scorched salmon with fried wasabi cake, stir-fried local bamboo shoot and a miso and soybean sauce.

Spice Market, Novotel Palm Cove, Coral Coast Dr, Palm Cove, tel: (07) 4059 1234.

It's not an easy task to lure diners away from Palm Cove's airy, beachfront restaurants and into a space enclosed by four walls. That chef Khalil Smith succeeds in doing so bears testimony to the exotic and well-conceived flavours found in his Asian-inspired dishes. His spices are put through their paces in creations such as a dish of tiger prawn and blue swimmer crab with lime, coriander, pickled garlic, chilli, pork crackers and galangal. Rice-paper screens and comfortable wicker chairs lend a relaxed atmosphere.

Mangostin's Restaurant, 65 The Esplanade,
Cairns, tel: (07) 4031 9888.

The beachfront strip of a holiday hotspot such as Cairns often attracts eateries catering

to the cheap-and-cheerful tourist market. So it's good to see a restaurant turning out serious food that does justice to its scenic location. Using fresh local seafood and produce, Mangostin's presents well-crafted Australian dishes with an Asian bent – the Singapore chilli crab is the star attraction. An oyster and tapas bar is tucked away upstairs for serious oyster lovers.

Café China, Rydges Plaza Complex,
cnr Spence and Grafton Sts, Cairns,
tel: (07) 4041 2828.

Harry Sou's bustling establishment serves Peking and Hong Kong cuisines to crowds of locals and tourists. Café China has won more awards than you can poke a chopstick at, gaining a reputation for being among the best Chinese restaurants in the tropical north. You'll discover why when you choose a live lobster from the tank to be braised with vegetables and crispy spinach, sample a Cantonese glass noodle and prawn hotpot or try a mud crab omelette. The wine list reads more like an encyclopedia and caters for both the casual drinker and the serious connoisseur, with such offerings as a bottle of renowned French red Château Pétrus 1986 for \$4895. There's also a noodle bar for more casual dining, serving soups and stir-fries.



Clockwise from above left: ready for the lunchtime service in the dining room of the Red Ochre Grill; salt-and-native pepper leaf prawns and crocodile with Vietnamese pickles and lemon aspen sambal; the leafy verandah setting of Perrotta's, adjoining the Regional Art Gallery; flowers in bloom at Sea Temple Resort and Spa.



Tamarind, Sofitel Reef Casino,

35-41 Wharf St, Cairns, tel: (07) 4030 8897.

The flavours of coriander, garlic and chilli – the cornerstones of chef Craig Laska's Thai-influenced cuisine – are demonstrated in dishes such as whole crispy baby barramundi with tamarind, chilli and garlic sauce. The striking decor in eggplant and lime adds another authentic Thai element to the room.

Perrotta's, Regional Art Gallery, cnr Abbott and Shields Sts, Cairns, tel: (07) 4031 5899.

A visit to the art gallery is not complete unless you've dropped into the adjoining cafe, Perrotta's. This verandah-style cafe has a wonderful laid-back, north Queensland feel and is artfully decorated with modern wrought iron features, in keeping with its location. Chef Darren Law does innovative things with locally grown produce – look for dishes such as lamb carpaccio with apple, celery and red onion salad, or roasted wild barramundi wrapped in prosciutto with braised chickpeas and plums.

Fusion Organics, cnr Grafton and Aplin Sts, Cairns, tel: (07) 4051 1388.

Don't dare ask for a bottle of Coke or you'll be run out of town – or out of this cafe, at the very least. Self-confessed health-food fanatic Penny Brown has found her niche in this

temple of all things wholesome and organic, which she runs with husband Robert and daughter Maddie. The large and colourful blackboard menus proclaim an array of tasty, well-balanced breakfast and lunch dishes, like the fusion stack – rye toast topped with spinach, tomato, mushrooms and poached eggs with hollandaise sauce. Follow this with a freshly squeezed juice and you'll be charged up for the day.

Tamara's at the Beach, Outrigger Beach Club and Spa, 123 Williams Esp, Palm Cove, tel: (07) 4059 9200.

The Outrigger resort's signature restaurant dispels any preconceived notions of often stuffy hotel dining, as you sink into the large wicker chairs, soak up the sea breezes and enjoy the romantic ambience of this stylish, airy restaurant. Turning out well-crafted modern Australian food is chef Marcus McKay, recently returned from Paris where he ran an award-winning restaurant.

Red Ochre Grill, 43 Shields St, Cairns, tel: (07) 4051 0100.

Owner and chef Craig Squire specialises in modern Australian cuisine, in the true sense. He uses up to 40 varieties of Australian bush foods – native fruits, berries and spices, plus game meats and local seafood – to create

beautifully flavoured dishes such as salt-and-native pepper leaf prawns and crocodile, served with lemon aspen sambal. For the full bushfood experience, choose the 'taste of Australia' antipasto plate, featuring spiced kangaroo, emu paté and smoked yellowfin tuna. The recently refurbished space also has an Australiana feel, with burnt-orange walls and a timber slat feature on the ceiling.

The Edge Gourmet Fruit and Veg Café, 1/138 Collins Ave, Edge Hill, Cairns, tel: (07) 4053 2966.

This is much more than just a cafe. Former Melburnian Loren Gillison, with husband Andy, has obviously thought of all the things she missed about her home city and put them into one fabulously eclectic fruit shop, delicatessen and cafe. Situated in the well-heeled suburb of Edge Hill, this is a one-stop shop for those who love to eat well. Sit at the outdoor tables as you enjoy a healthy and delicious breakfast or lunch. Then wander inside to the gleaming fruit and vegetable display. The vast array of deli lines would satisfy even the fussiest foodie, and there are handmade chocolates, cakes, slices, dips and breads. If you don't feel like cooking dinner, grab one of the gourmet prepared meals from the fridge on your way out.

the guide.

WHERE TO SHOP

If you need to stock up on holiday supplies from the deli in Cairns, head to **The Edge Gourmet Fruit and Veg Cafe** (mentioned previous page) or **Stratford Deli and Café** (7 Kamerunga Rd, Stratford, tel: (07) 4055 1633). Stratford Deli and Café stocks gourmet breads and pies plus more than 50 cheeses, and you can eat in at breakfast or lunch.

If you're after a fabulous foodie gift – or just want a treat – head to **Biscotti** (139 Collins Ave, Edge Hill, tel: (07) 4032 0222), where you'll find a tempting array of German,

French, Belgian and Swiss chocolates, plus petits fours and French pastries.

Asian Foods Australia (101-105 Grafton St, Cairns, tel: (07) 4052 1510) offers a wide selection of Asian groceries, plus locally made curry pastes and chilli sauces; while **Rusty's Bazaar Markets** (64 Sheridan St, Cairns, tel: (07) 4051 5100) is a great shopping experience. A Cairns tradition, these massive markets operate on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, selling every conceivable type of tropical fruit and vegetable, plus coffee, dairy products, seafood and much more.

WHERE TO EAT

7. Spice Market
9. Nu Nu
9. Tamara's at the Beach
10. Reef House Restaurant
13. The Edge Gourmet Fruit and Veg Café
14. Mangostin's Restaurant
16. Fusion Organics
17. Perrotta's
18. Red Ochre Grill
21. Café China
22. Tamarind

WHERE TO SHOP

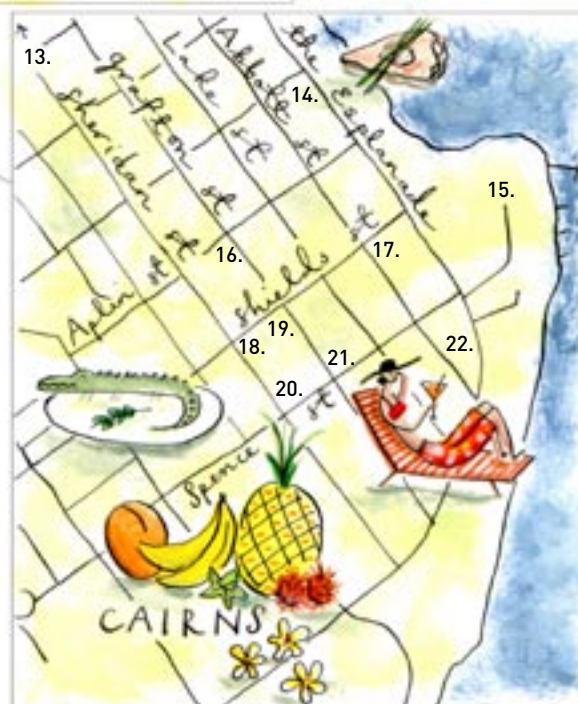
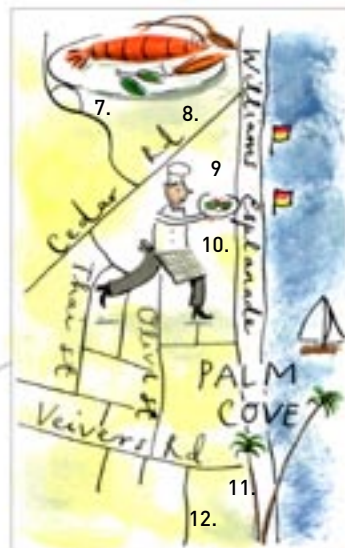
13. Biscotti
13. Stratford Deli and Café
13. The Edge Gourmet Fruit and Veg Cafe
19. Asian Foods Australia
20. Rusty's Bazaar Markets

PROVIDORES

2. Tichum Creek Coffee Farm
3. Mt Uncle Distillery
5. Tarzali Lakes Fishing Park
6. Mungalli Creek Dairy

WHERE TO STAY

1. Trinity On the Esplanade
4. Rose Gums Wilderness Retreat
8. Sanctuary Palm Cove Resort
9. Outrigger Beach Club and Spa
11. Angsana Resort and Spa
12. Sea Temple Resort and Spa
13. The Lakes Cairns Resort and Spa
15. Shangri-la Hotel





Clockwise from far left: coffee paraphernalia and products at Tichum Creek Coffee Farm; dine in at Stratford Deli and Café; Mario Sorbello of Tichum Creek Coffee Farm; a resident of Mungalli Creek Dairy hard at work.



PROVIDORES

Mungalli Creek Dairy, 254 Brooks Rd, Millaa Millaa, tel: (07) 4097 2232.

Take the scenic drive through the Atherton Tablelands to this certified organic and bio-dynamic farm. Mungalli's milk, yoghurts and cheeses can be found in restaurants and cafes throughout the region and are sold in local food stores and supermarkets. Stay and have a bite to eat at the Out of the Whey Café.

Mt Uncle Distillery, 1819 Chewko Rd, Walkamin, tel: (07) 4086 8008.

When banana plantation owner Bruce Watkins decided to diversify, the result was a medal-winning banana liqueur. Encouraged by their success, Bruce's son Mark began distilling other fruits. They now produce a whole range of liqueurs – including coffee, mulberry and lime, and even a home-grown version of the Italian liqueur, limoncello.

Tarzali Lakes Fishing Park, Millaa-Malanda Rd, Tarzali, tel: (07) 4097 2713.

Fish doesn't come any fresher than this. Owner Peter Whiddett breeds golden perch, North Queensland jade perch and red claw yabbies at his aquafarm set among 16 hectares on the Atherton Tablelands. You can buy direct from the farm, or catch and cook the fish yourself on the spot (tackle and bait are provided).

Tichum Creek Coffee Farm, 3576 Kennedy Hwy, Mareeba, tel: (07) 4093 3092.

Mario and Claudia Sorbello have only been producing their Mareeba Coffee for a couple of years, but they are already gaining a reputation for their fabulous, smooth-tasting blends and flavoured coffees. Stop in for tastings, then take your favourites home.

WHERE TO STAY

Shangri-la Hotel, The Marina, Pierpoint Rd, Cairns, tel: 1800 222 448, www.shangri-la.com.

One wouldn't expect to find many similarities between Cairns and New York. But when you visit the newly refurbished Shangri-La Hotel, (formerly the Radisson Plaza), you may think otherwise. The lobby has a certain New York feel: very cool with a contemporary, minimalist design and furnishings. The rooms are sleek too, especially those on the executive level, where guests have access to Horizon Club privileges – a private lounge, buffet breakfast, evening cocktails and a business centre. Only a glance out at the stunning Cairns marina and ocean views will remind you where you are. Don't miss the new Tides restaurant, on the marina's edge (see What's New in Foodie File). Room rates start from \$221 per night.

The Lakes Cairns Resort and Spa, 2 Greenslopes St, Cairns, tel: (07) 4053 9400, www.thelakescairns.com.au.

Ideal for families, this Tuscan-style resort has four large pools, a tennis court and a kid's club. While the littlies are having fun, relax at the day spa, or chill out at the Lime Bar. Or stroll through the nearby Cairns Botanical Gardens and Centenary Lakes. Rates start from \$129 for a one-bedroom apartment with full kitchen and cable TV.

Sea Temple Resort and Spa, Triton St, Palm Cove, tel: (07) 4059 9600, www.mirvachotels.com.au.

As soon as you step into the airy, Asian-inspired lobby of Sea Temple, opportunities for indulgence abound. A visit to the day spa? Dinner in the restaurant, headed by chef Shane Watson of television's *My Restaurant Rules* fame? A dip in the huge pool? Or just luxuriating in the spa of your ultra-modern suite? It's a tough decision, so just relax and enjoy it all. Studio rooms from \$275 a night.

Outrigger Beach Club and Spa, 123 Williams Esp, Palm Cove, tel: (07) 4059 9200, www.outrigger.com.

Giant melaleuca trees add grandeur to the entrance of this tropical oasis. But it's touches like the 'pillow menu' that highlight the

the guide.



Clockwise from far left: Urban chic meets water views at the Shangri-La; perfect white sands at the Outrigger Beach Club and Spa; old-world tropical charm at the boutique hotel Trinity On the Esplanade; modern-Asian luxury at Sea Temple Resort and Spa.



attention to detail at this five-star resort. The Sanctum Spa is a haven, but if retail therapy is required, head to the boutiques instead. Have a drink at the resort's lobby bar before dining at Tamara's at the Beach, or at one of the four other restaurants in the Outrigger complex. Rates start from \$270 per room.

Angsana Resort and Spa, 1 Veivers Rd, Palm Cove, tel: (07) 4055 3000, www.angsana.com.

If staying close to (or right on) the beach is a priority, this is Palm Cove's only absolute beachfront resort. But there are other reasons to choose to stay at this Small Luxury Hotel, such as the spacious and elegant one-, two- or three-bedroom suites, decorated with Thai silk drapes and sleek, Asian-style furnishings. Dining at Far Horizons is a must for seafood lovers, and the Angsana Spa comes highly recommended. Rooms from \$356 per night.

Sanctuary Palm Cove Resort, 6 Cedar Rd, Palm Cove, tel: 1800 684 684, www.sanctuarypalmcove.com.au.

These self-contained one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments are so roomy and stylish, you'll wish you'd invited a few extra friends. The modern kitchen is also party material, complete with a teppanyaki hotplate. The resort is surrounded by landscaped gardens, about 100 metres from the beach and

restaurants. Rates start from \$195 per night for a one-bedroom apartment.

Trinity On the Esplanade, 21 Vasey Esp, Trinity Beach, tel: (07) 4057 6850, www.trinityesplanade.com.

This stately white mansion surrounded by gigantic palms is like a set straight out of *Gone With The Wind*, offering old-world charm with a tropical twist: white plantation shutters, lavish decor and a glass-fronted dining room with ocean views. Comprising six rooms plus a penthouse, the hotel is just 15 minutes north of Cairns. Rates start at \$175 per night for two, including breakfast.

Rose Gums Wilderness Retreat, Land Rd, via Lake Eacham, tel: (07) 4096 8360, www.rosegums.com.au.

Jon and Peta Nott have turned their dream into reality and built a pole home, plus five treehouses, in the midst of a 93-hectare rainforest in the Atherton Tablelands. You'll feel like you're dreaming too, as you sit on your own private balcony overlooking the stunning vista of the National Park and Queensland's highest peak, Mt Bartle Frere. Or enjoy the panorama from your large spa bath, or curled up in front of the fireplace. Rates start from \$200 per double per night, including a breakfast hamper.

THINGS TO DO

For a fabulous foodie experience, pick up a **Taste of the Tropics Food Trail** brochure (www.australian-tropical-foods.com) from the information centre and eat your way around Cairns, Palm Cove and the Tablelands. Or, for non-drivers, try **Food Trail Tours** (tel: (07) 4032 0322, www.foodtrailtours.com.au).

No visit to Cairns is complete without a trip to the Great Barrier Reef. **Ocean Spirit Cruises** (140 Mulgrave Rd, Cairns, tel: (07) 4031 2920, www.oceanspirit.com.au) will show you the wonders of the reef and spoil you with a buffet lunch and live entertainment. There's also a romantic dinner cruise.

Another must is The **Kuranda Scenic Railway** (tel: (07) 4036 9249, www.ksr.com.au). One of Australia's most spectacular train journeys, the railway winds from Cairns to Kuranda through beautiful mountainous rainforest, past giant waterfalls, over bridges and through 15 tunnels. Buy a combination ticket that takes you one way on the scenic railway and the other on the **Skyrail** (tel: (07) 4038 1555, www.skyrail.com.au). Designed for those not afraid of heights, this 7.5km cableway glides above the rainforest, with two stops along the way to explore from a more earthbound perspective. **d.**