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Naturally Beautiful

Atherton Tablelands offer a wonderful exploration of ancient rain forests

Story and photography GLENYS GELZINIS

If you're in need of a little nature therapy, then the Atherton Tablelands in tropical North Queensland is the place to be spirited away into a land of ancient trees, dense rainforests, powerful waterfalls, and crystal-clear lakes. It's the perfect place to calm the mind and soothe the soul.

The drive from Cairns to Atherton is a pretty breathtaking way to start the journey, with the rainforest coming down to meet the Kennedy Highway as it winds its way through the Kuranda Range towards Mareeba and Atherton. We based ourselves in Atherton to be central to the many spectacular natural landscapes and attractions in the region.

Ancient Fig Trees

The Tablelands is home to two incredible examples of these otherworldly looking natural wonders which began from fig tree seeds being dropped on a branch by bird or animal. The seeds germinated and the plant then fed off the host tree before sending out long aerial roots, eventually taking over and strangling the host tree.

The Cathedral Fig tree is 19 kilometres to the north of the town of Yungaburra and it's an easy walk from the car parking area to get to the tree. You wind your way through the thick rainforest which is full of impressive sized trees to see along the way, before the forest opens up to the majestic fig tree. This giant takes your breath away as you attempt to take in its sheer size, and standing at the base and looking up leaves you awestruck.

The bowl-shaped crown of the tree is estimated to be over 2000 metres wide, and as you slowly bring your gaze down, you can spot ferns including the bright green, broad leaf bird's nest ferns, themselves extending metres in diameter, nestled into crevices. It's not hard to see why

the tree was given the name Cathedral Fig Tree, with its imposing size and presence. This tree is estimated to be over 500 years old, but some locals believe it to be many more hundreds of years older than that.

Curtain fig tree is the second of these amazing trees, located just one kilometre from the town of Yungaburra. Another easily accessible walk takes you to this tree and the jaw dropping sight of aerial roots that hang down a length of 15 metres to the forest floor. The tree takes on different shapes as you walk the circuit boardwalk around its 39 metre circumference, all the while in awe of the power of nature and the thick gnarled roots that have developed over hundreds of years.

These trees, as well as having a mystical quality about them, provide food and shelter for rainforest birds, insects and bats in their branches and roots, and if you think they have a familiarity about them, it was species like these that were the inspiration for the mythical setting of Pandora in the Avatar movies.

Crystal Clear Lakes

Out of the dark rainforests and into the light, you can visit a couple of lakes in the Crater Lakes National Park and enjoy a picnic lunch while relaxing in the peaceful grounds. Lake Barrine and Lake Eacham are water filled volcano craters, both around 65 metres deep, fringed with forests and green garden spaces where you can enjoy the serenity and even take a dip, kayak and snorkel in the perfectly clear water.

At Lake Barrine you can take in the views of the lake from the historic teahouse, on a boat cruise or by taking a walk around the 5 kilometre circuit track. Lake Eacham has loads of open green space for families and groups to enjoy picnics or barbecues, or





you can walk the 3 kilometre circuit track with areas to stop and see the fish and turtles living in the lake.

Cascading Waterfalls

Another nature based activity to do in the Atherton Tablelands is to go on a scenic drive to see the many waterfalls in the area. This region is blessed with cascading falls and you can grab local maps which list all of the locations to find them. Some are easier to get to than others, and the easiest trail to follow is the waterfall circuit starting from the town of Millaa Millaa.

The circuit of around 15 kilometres is a loop drive that begins just a few kilometres out of Millaa Millaa and takes you to three waterfalls. Millaa Millaa falls are the easiest to access with a viewing platform at car park level or you can take a few steps down to view from a lower level. Bring your swimming togs here for a refreshing dip in the pool at the bottom of this 20 metre cascade.

Next on the circuit are Zillie Falls which you access through a short rainforest walk. You need to watch your step on the uneven forest floor, which is covered in large tree roots, but soon you arrive at a viewing area at the top of the falls where you see the start of the cascade. From here, there is an overgrown area that leads to a donkey track down to the bottom viewing area of the falls, but I'd leave that for the more adventurous, younger and fitter to try.

The last falls on the circuit are Ellinjaa

falls which take a little effort to access down a well defined path and steps for around 200 metres, but the reward of seeing the rainforest open out to the spectacular falls is worth it. This is another spot where you can jump in for a cooling swim under the cascading falls.

On the drive back to Atherton from Millaa Millaa, stop in to see one more waterfall at Malanda. Access to these falls is also easy and although they are only four metres high, the 30 metre span spills into the heritage listed Malanda Falls swimming pool. The pool is surrounded by grass and paths, and there are steps and rails leading into the long and wide pool which can be used by the public.

After viewing the falls, make sure to drop into the adjacent visitor centre in Malanda, to see if there have been any recent sightings of tree kangaroos in the area. A visit to the centre will arm you with information on how to spot these elusive creatures, and you may be lucky enough to see one nearby as we were. Just as we were thinking these creatures were actually a myth, we decided to take the one kilometre Birrar walking track loop starting from behind the visitor centre to try our luck one more time. Walking through the cool, green rainforest, a track leads down between the trees and the North Johnstone River below, before winding back up to the visitor centre. It was here that we spied a tree kangaroo high up in the rainforest canopy, sitting on a branch

and grabbing leaves to munch on.

The tips we were given for spotting one, is to take your time and let your eyes adjust to the natural movement of leaves in the forest, and then as you gaze across the canopy you're more likely to notice different movements in the tree tops. Signs to look for are leaves falling from the canopy and the telltale long tail of the tree kangaroo hanging down. Seeing a tree kangaroo is one thing, photographing is another with the one we spotted up way too high to capture without a zoom lens, but we were thrilled to just see one at all.

Tree kangaroo spotting is another great way to slow down in the rainforests, and a good reason to just enjoy the stillness for a while, listening to bird sounds and running water from the creeks and rivers. Even if you don't see a tree kangaroo, you've had the benefit of a time out to soak up the peace and serenity.

More information:

We based ourselves at the **NRMA Big 4 Atherton Caravan Park**, Herberton Road, Atherton

Atherton to Yungaburra is around 13 kilometres and Atherton to Millaa Millaa is around 43 kilometres

Lake Barrine Teahouse is open Thursday, Friday and Monday from 8.30am to 2.30pm.

Crater Lakes National Park is open 24 hours and is free to visit.