



Mission possible

Mission Beach is a quiet and unpretentious coastal holiday gem, writes **Claire Sutherland**

PEOPLE will do anything to get to Mission Beach. That's certainly the impression you get if you arrive in this low-key tourist town about 2pm, in time for a cascade of skydivers to drop from above on to the wide and deserted expanse of yellow sand that is the focus of this most beautiful of Queensland holiday spots.

Every afternoon and morning, backpackers and thrillseekers strap themselves to professionals to enjoy a gentle waft to earth and a bird's-eye view of the beaches and islands of far north Queensland.

There's Dunk Island – a family-friendly playground of water sports, bushwalking and fishing. And over there is Wheeler Island, a deserted dollop of national park where camping is allowed and a pit toilet and fresh-water shower are the only amenities.

And yonder is Bedarra Island, where the privacy, luxury and a fantastically stocked open bar attract premium prices and a clientele that ranges from heads of corporations to couples who've saved all year for the ultimate in island holidaying.

Our base in the area is the stylishly renovated Castaways Resort and Spa at Mission Beach, the region's only absolute beachfront hotel.

My sister and I make a classy arrival after our picturesque two-hour drive south from Cairns, through fields of sugar cane and rainforest. As she hauls her suitcase from the boot of the hire car it opens its mouth and dumps what appears to be everything she owns across the driveway.

I make a dash for a rolling hairdryer nozzle as she goes on a treasure hunt

for the array of smalls which now adorn the hotel's entrance.

Undergarments collected, there's a hotel to explore. The bottom level features a bar, outdoor restaurant, 25m lap pool and single and double sun beds, all looking across a wide strip of grass to the beach through a clear glass pool fence.

There's also a separate undercover pavilion available for weddings and other functions, and a day spa with private outdoor massage tables.

The renovation is so new that the finishing touches were still being done when we arrived.

The restaurant in particular is a revelation. The exquisite menu of dishes using largely local produce created by British chef Neil Phillips and his Italian partner Serena Fedeli would be twice the price in any Melbourne or Sydney restaurant – triple if they had views this lovely.

The quality and price of the food made it difficult to motivate ourselves to try any other local eateries, although the imaginative lunch and breakfast menu at the Flame Cafe on the main street is highly recommended.

Equally enjoyable is the Castaways Drift Spa – the sound of waves is real here, not piped in on a generic spa music CD. Who knows if hot rocks, salt scrubs and anti-ageing facials actually do what they claim, but they feel good and improve your mood, and that's what a holiday is all about.

Mission Beach is a gentle place for a holiday. It doesn't have the frenzy of the Gold Coast, or the posturing of Noosa and Port Douglas. There's no need to dress to the nines in resort-wear to wander down the main street

for a coffee, and there's no beer barns or spruikers.

You'll be able to buy a pair of thongs and a sunhat, but don't expect to shop 'till you drop in Mission Beach.

Its winter temperatures hover around the mid 20s – enough for southern visitors to thaw out but not get third-degree sunburn.

As the water temperature drops up here, the stingers disappear but even so, the main beaches have stinger nets for the wary to swim in. Road signs plead for slow and careful driving to avoid hitting the cassowaries native to this area.

In keeping with the slow approach to holidaying, ask the Castaways front desk to book you on a trip to Wheeler Island. They'll pack you an enormous picnic hamper, including fresh fruit, prawns, sandwiches, orange juice and a bottle of champagne, and send you off with a beach umbrella and box of distress flares for some planned marooning.

Don't be tempted to set them off if you run out of champagne – they're for deadly serious situations such as stinger attacks or drownings.

The amphibious *Sea Legs* boat will drive up on to the beach in front of Castaways to collect you and drop you on the island for three hours of snorkeling, swimming, sunbaking, and exploring, if you can be bothered. We had the place to ourselves for the entire time.

On the way, the two-man crew took us past a private island owned by an elusive Melbourne businessman, the roof of his house just visible through the trees above a tiny crescent of sand. A trip to Wheeler Island was a nice way to pretend we had our own.



ESSENTIALS



Mission Beach is a two-hour drive south of Cairns

Staying there: Castaways Resort and Spa, Pacific Pde, Mission Beach. Phone 4068 7444, www.castaways.com.au. Rooms range from \$120 to \$295 a night.

Seeing there: Castaways can organise a 7am guided 3.5km beach and rainforest run, skydiving, snorkeling, diving and day trips to Dunk Island (resort day passes are \$40 plus transfer). The Wheeler Island day trip with picnic hamper is \$120 to \$145 per person. Visit: queenslandholidays.com.au





GREAT ESCAPE: Castaways Resort and Spa is only a stone's throw from the beach. Take a picnic to a deserted island on an amphibious boat or soak up the sunshine by the lap pool.