



# Divine Mission

**Susan Gough Henly** savours a slice of the "old" far north, where rainforest meets the reef, the fishing is excellent and clever locals favour low-key luxury.



MISSION Beach is what aficionados call "old north Queensland". Think Port Douglas 30 years ago, with a whiff of Byron Bay. A sinuous string of four sleepy villages wedged by rainforest, banana and cane farms between Cairns and Townsville, Mission Beach's 14-kilometre, coconut palm tree-fringed beach embraces the balmy aquamarine waters of the Coral Sea.

"It's such a beautiful place that gives you space for your mind to wander," says artist and gallery owner, Helen Wiltshire. "Locals still have a place here. They haven't lost their identity as in so many other beach resorts in Queensland."

While it may be difficult to ascertain where Mission Beach begins and ends, it embodies two UNESCO World Heritage sites – the Wet Tropics and the Great Barrier Reef. This is where lush mainland is closest to the reef, sitting a mere 38 kilometres away.

As you drive in from the Bruce Highway, bold signs introduce you to Mission Beach's iconic rainforest warrior, the endangered cassowary, and ask you to slow down to protect this proud, flightless black bird, with its gaudy red and blue wattle. The cassowary is an apt moniker, in a strange sort of way, for this tropical community with its cast of colourful characters.

You might catch a glimpse of them – cassowaries and characters – on the Ulysses Track, named after another iridescent local, the magnificent blue Ulysses butterfly. Enriched with mosaic and ceramic sculptures that evoke both indigenous and settler stories, the track meanders through the rainforest alongside the beach.

The Djuri Aboriginal clans lived the good life around here, using rainforest resources to build canoes, nets and spears for hunting dugong, turtles, sharks and other fish.

The name Mission Beach comes from a government-run Aboriginal settlement established in 1908. Although called a mission, it was more like a penal colony, which, mercifully, was destroyed by a cyclone in 1914.

In 1848, explorer Edmund Kennedy laboured through impenetrable jungle on his disastrous attempt to find an overland route to the Gulf of Carpentaria. Today, the Edmund Kennedy Memorial Walking Track from South Mission Beach is still pristine, with coral trees, pandanas and paperbarks framing Lovers Beach and Lugga Bay.

It took a further 34 years before the Cutten brothers carved a farm from the rainforest using Aboriginal labourers; growing bananas, coffee,

tea, sugar cane, tobacco, coconuts and pineapples. The Bicton Hill Trail, named after their farm in Clump Mountain National Park, now weaves past Alexander and arenga palms and soaring stands of milky pine, strangler fig, swamp mahogany and brushbox. Here, you might come across lace monitor lizards, doves and paradise kingfishers, Ulysses and Cairns birdwing butterflies, green tree frogs and the ever-elusive cassowary – not to mention views across to Dunk, Bedarra and Hinchinbrook islands.

With the flourishing banana and sugar-cane trade, cashed-up farmers built beach houses on stilts along the promenade at South Mission and Wongaling beaches. They still keep their tractors handy to tow fishing boats across the road to the beach. Thus, Mission Beach architecture retains much of this unassuming quality alongside the democratic jostling of newish million-dollar, Tuscan-style villas and nouveau Queenslanders, as well as gated estates in the hills.

As the locals know, the fishing is damn good in these parts. Fishin' Mission does trips in the Coral Sea for red emperor, coral trout, Spanish mackerel and sweetlip, while off the beach you can catch whiting, flathead, trevally and prawns – not



to mention the barramundi in the nearby Hull River.

But remember, these can be dangerous waters. There may be salties lurking in the rivers; irukandji and box jellyfish in the sea. Wear stinger suits, which can be bought or rented locally, and swim between the flags in the netted areas in Mission and South Mission beaches. If you are stung, there are vinegar stations posted along the sand.

In the early 1960s, the then-prime minister Harold Holt and his wife, Zara, had a holiday house in Bingil Bay. Holt Street, site of more than a few rip-roaring parties, is named in their honour. A few years later, Mission Beach was discovered by artists, bohemians and hippies who revelled in the climate, the beauty and the fertile soil. Bingil Bay, the northernmost village, retains an alternative vibe, with a tree-house youth hostel and Sanctuary Retreat yoga resort, while cows grazing on organic pasture lead contented lives in the rolling lime-green hinterland.

For many years, there was just a handful of residents, plus a caravan park or two, across all four villages of Bingil Bay, (North) Mission, Wongaling and South Mission Beach. The Shrubbery, or Shrub, under the palm trees was – and still is – the locals' hangout and the perfect place from which to watch the full moon streak across the Coral Sea.

Cyclones have blown through with insistent regularity, yet it is remarkable how swiftly the vegetation regenerates. Fast-forward to 2010 and there's still no

airport, no plans for one, no traffic lights, movie theatre or tacky souvenir shops. However, there is a giant cassowary at Wongaling Beach and plenty of great eateries, such as Friends, Nana Thai, Blarney's and Gecko's. Sewerage connections were dug just five years ago and Woolworths didn't arrive until 2008 – in the form of a big box at the entrance to town. The newly-refurbished Elandra resort, built above South Mission Beach, has raised the accommodation bar several notches. It features exotic carvings and tribal textiles on whitewashed walls and its billowing day beds, placed around a free-form pool, have attracted a clientele looking for the next big thing.

There are other gems, too, such as Altitude One40, a sleek luxury retreat perched like an eagle's aerie in the rainforest. It boasts a spectacular infinity pool, helipad and, quite possibly, the most jaw-dropping view in Australia: across a turquoise sea to the voluptuous mounds of the Family Isles. Then there's the Sejala beach huts – shuttered Queensland-style cabanas painted in playful, electric-tropic colours, tucked behind the beach.

The perfect spot for families is Castaways Resort and Spa, on the beach, newly refurbished and retaining a relaxed beachfront style. But no matter where you stay, be sure to leave plenty of time for lazing in a hammock under the coconut palms, Mission Beach-style.

## With the kids

MISSION BEACH is perfect for an old-fashioned beach holiday. The Mission Beach Adventure Centre housed in a bright little cabana behind the main beach and next door to Castaways Resort, has kids' clubs (for ages four and above) for an hour each morning and afternoon, during which time there are fully supervised activities for children on the beach, such as sand-sculpting competitions, while parents go tandem skydiving, stand-up paddle boarding or escape to the spa.

The adventure centre is the place to go to rent bicycles, kayaks and blocarts – a cross between a catamaran and, well, a go-kart that offers the possibility of exhilarating thrills as you come close to flying via sail along the hard sandy beach.

Snorkelling trips to the Great Barrier Reef are sensational and as Mission Beach is the closest mainland point, it doesn't take all day to get to the reef, which means more time for marvelling at the coral and tropical fish. The Sealegs island picnic tour is another fun family activity, where you ride an amphibious marine craft to one of six secluded islands in the Family Group for a gourmet picnic, with lots of time for beach-combing.





## Trip notes

### Getting there

- ▶ Qantas, Virgin Blue and Jetstar fly daily from Sydney to Cairns. Mission Beach is a 90-minute drive south. Leading hire-car companies are at the airport. There are also regular bus transfers.

### Staying there

- ▶ The Elandra, Explorer Drive, South Mission Beach, is priced from \$270 a night, for two. (07) 4068 8154, elandraresorts.com.au.
- ▶ Altitude One40, Narragon Beach, Mission Beach, is priced from \$660 a night for one bedroom. (07) 4068 7777, altitudeone40.com.au.
- ▶ Sejala Beach Huts, Pacific Parade, Mission Beach, is priced from \$260 a night. (07) 4088 6699, sejala.com.au.
- ▶ Castaways Resort and Spa, Pacific Parade, Mission Beach, from \$195 a night for a family resort room. (07) 4068 7444, castaways.com.au.

### See + do

- ▶ Tandem skydiving costs from \$235 a person. skydivemissionbeach.com.au.
- ▶ White-water rafting on Tully River is priced from \$155 plus \$30 tax. ragingthunder.com.au.
- ▶ A snorkel day tour of Great Barrier Reef is from \$165. www.calypsodive.com.
- ▶ Mission Beach Adventure Centre, Seaview Street, has blo-karting, mountain biking, kayak hire and kids' club. The beach shuttle bus stops there. 0429 469 330, missionbeachadventurecentre.com.au.

### Need to know

- ▶ The best time to go is between May and October.

### Further information

- ▶ www.tropicalaustralia.com.au; missionbeachtourism.com.



Unspoilt habitat ... (clockwise from top left) tandem skydiving; the Elandra; a cassowary; Altitude One40. Photos: Susan Gough Henly; James Brickwood AAP



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Harold Holt and wife Zara had a holiday house in Bingil Bay.