



# AROUND THE BIG BACK YARD: COOKTOWN 2012

# THE BACKGROUND

*Well*, in the words of Neil Young's *Tired Eyes*, *it wasn't supposed to go down that way*.

And, as it turned out, the eyes had *a bit*, but *not a whole lot* to do with it.

We got back from the **Canberra road trip** almost a year ago with a pencilled in touring itinerary that ran:

**Randy Newman** concert in **Brisbane** in July;

Three weeks in **Japan** in *coloured leaves time* (October/November);

An excursion to **Angkor Wat** and **Laos** in February;

Possible side trips to **New Caledonia** and **Cooktown** before the end of the 2011-2012 financial year.

We managed the Randy Newman, but a three-day *fly down Thursday, fly back Saturday* jaunt wasn't a **trip** within the definition in the relevant legislation.

The wheels fell off shortly after that when The Supervisor was on the verge of booking the tickets to Japan.

Advice from The Mother and The Sister that frequent aftershocks following the earthquake that took out **Fukushima** made it inadvisable to subject hairy *gaijin* to the tremulous terroir.

While I wanted to get over there and spend a fortnight riding around on *Shinkansen*, I wasn't keen on the prospect of seismic activity.

A Skype call to The Teacher, who we'd stayed with back in 2008 and lives in the hinterland of the tsunami area came just after a minor quake that had induced mass panic on the east coast of the USA.

*It sounds like it was a five* (at least that's the figure I recall, reality may vary from recollection), Megumi reportedly remarked. *We get those every day*.

**Japan**, in case The Alert Reader is wondering, uses a different scale to measure earthquake intensity, one reflecting the apparent effect on humans rather than measuring the actual strength of the seismic activity.

Or something.

What it meant was that, despite a reasonably low **Richter** reading, the quake in question was pretty scary (hence the mass panic), and from Meg's remark Hughesy was happy not to be heading in that direction.

Madam, on the other hand, being relatively tremor-experienced, was OK to go, and subsequently spent a fortnight over there, reporting no significant seismic seizures.

She had a nice spell catching up with old acquaintances and eating out.

I had plans to do a bit of lunching out while she was away, but ended up herding cats through the daytime while roadworks were carried out on **Brisbane Street**.

Plans that revolved around having lunch at **Food Freaks** on Monday, **Coyotes** on Wednesday and **The Grandview** on Friday got pushed aside while I set about ensuring small furry felines didn't intersect with heavy earthmoving machinery.

Two days after the wanderer returned we were off to the ophthalmologist, who announced I needed cataract surgery and pencilled in an operation around the end of February.

*Fine, I thought, that'll coincide with the return from Cambodia.*

The roadworks in **Brisbane Street** and the responsibilities associated with cat herding put the kibosh on that one.

Having watched the snail-like progress of the roadworks on the upper end of **Kennedy Street**, I should have known they wouldn't be finished before the wet set in.

We'd been making sure the furry felines were indoors during the day, which they wouldn't be if we weren't there.

So, as The Astute Reader may have guessed, **Angkor Wat** and the old royal capital of **Laos** remain on the *get around to these in the future* list.

Looking for an excuse to justify the situation, if we put it off twelve months or so I'd be able to see **Angkor Wat**, the **Bayon** and the rest of the temple-related landscape properly, wouldn't I?

The cataract surgery, two eyes, three weeks' recuperation after each, an extra week between them to fit the surgery schedule and another week tacked on to see a retinal specialist meant we wouldn't be going anywhere before late April.

Getting caught up in **The Actor for Mayor** in the local government elections pushed things back to mid-May, once the final results were posted on the 8th.

With a choice between **New Caledonia** and **Cooktown**, things became clear pretty quickly.

**New Caledonia** needed a bit of research, airfares on special (not entirely essential, but 'Er Indoors is firmly in budget mode when scheduling flights on the basis of why fly there now when it's going to be cheaper then). The fact that flying out of Brisbane meant at least one night either way in Brisbane.

The *el cheapo* option would be to spend a couple of days in the unit at **Southport**.

Cooktown moved into firm favouritism.

I already knew a bit about the area, we had friends who'd been there recently, and travel by car delivered a degree of flexibility that meant research wasn't so important.

A quick calculation suggested a week and a bit would get us there and back with a couple of stops along the way.

It'd also be long enough to start getting the furry felines used to the idea of lengthy absences while the neighbours keep the food up to them.

The schedule wasn't that difficult to get together.

Bowen to **Cooktown** via the inland route would involve a minimum two days' drive, with an overnight stop on the **Atherton Tablelands**, an area Madam is keen to explore.

**Bowen** to **Atherton** or **Mareeba** is doable in a day, but **Townsville**'s two hundred kilometres closer and that's two more hours to have a look around along the way.

A phone call got us the spare room at **The Golfer's Motel** and the rest fell into place fairly quickly.

Overnight in **Townsville** and Tolga, a side trip to **Laura** to see the rock art, overnight at **Lakeland Downs**, back up to **Laura** if there's more to see, **Cooktown** that night and a couple more, then back down to the **Tablelands** for two nights and back off home.

A phone call to the Quinkan Centre at **Laura** revealed most galleries were still inaccessible after **The Wet** which was not long finished up that way, so the *back up to Laura* isn't definite, and if it isn't that just gives us longer in **Cooktown**, doesn't it?





1

# ON THE WAY THERE

[Bowen > Townsville](#)

[Townsville > Ingham > Mamu Rainforest > Tolga](#)

[Tolga > Laura > Lakeland Downs](#)

# BOWEN > TOWNSVILLE

**Sunday, 13 May 2012**

Given a short leg and a golfer who wasn't likely to be back at base much before five (or so we thought, but reality, as it turned out was different to expectation) there wasn't much point in heading off much before two-thirty.

With the need to fuel up on the way out it turned out to be just after three when the laden vehicle backed out into **Brisbane Street**. Fifteen minutes later we were back, having forgotten the torch, which was probably going to be an essential item somewhere along the line.

Grabbing the torch was straightforward, but the thing didn't work when I tried it, Madam thought we had a spare battery in the storeroom and reality, again, proved the opposite to expectation.

So it was just on three-thirty when we passed within sight of the Warbo Roost on the way out of town.

Five return trips to **Townsville** since February meant we knew to expect roadworks, but there was only a brief delay just north of **Bowen**, and the trip proved entirely uneventful until a failure to remind the driver which set of lights to turn at had us heading along Abbot Street rather than the extension of **Bowen Road**.

A left turn through Fairfield Waters got us back to where we were supposed to be but necessitated a u-turn at the **Endeavour Park - Mervyn Crossman Drive** roundabout.

It was just after six when we pulled up in front of **The Golfer's Motel**, to find a rather *agitato* host who was reportedly concerned about our failure to arrive. The golf had apparently finished around four, and he'd hastened home rather than sampling an ale or three at the nineteenth.

The presence of Mad Mick and his Highly Vocal Better Half on the premises might have had something to do with the *agitato*, since the HVBH has been known to comment adversely on anything within eyesight, and they'd been on the premises for two hours.

Our arrival gave her something else to discuss other than The Golfer's personal habits, taste in home decor, and assorted other matters.

Wide-ranging discussions gave us a few pointers for the **Tablelands** leg of the trip and reminded me that an old school cricket acquaintance used to be the principal at **Laura**.

The Golfer, as has been mentioned before, is a better than average cook, and a rather toothsome roast lamb dish was washed down with a couple of bottles of decent red, and out came something in the qualitätswein line to finish off before we toddled off towards the cot.

Hughesy didn't take much rocking.





TOWNSVILLE >  
INGHAM >  
MAMU  
RAINFOREST >  
TOLGA

**Monday, 14 May 2012**

It wasn't quite sparrow fart when I emerged from the spare room to start tapping out the *Travelogue*, but the scent would still have been in the air.

Our host emerged just after the word count passed four hundred, so there was a considerable backlog to catch up on when we pulled into the **Atherton Tablelands Motor Inn** around five in the afternoon.

With breakfast despatched we were on the road around eight-thirty-five.



That wasn't too bad for a day where the driving quotient was around four hundred kilometres when you took a couple of planned sidetracks into account.

Anyone who has done the **Townsville** to Ingham drive knows there isn't much of interest for the first half, given the fact that you're still in the dry tropics.

While the rainfall might be a little more generous than in the **Bowen** to **Giru** stretch, and **Townsville's** inexorable outward sprawl will eventually transform everything up to **Bluewater** into the regular major city arterial road landscape, it's still not a very interesting drive.

Once you've cruised past **Rollingstone** and the Paluma turnoff, of course, things start to green up, and we cruised into **Ingham** intent on taking a break and grabbing a new battery for the torch.

That proved slightly more difficult than I'd anticipated. Someone had decided to relocate or conceal the supermarket I seem to recall lurking on the left as you dogleg out of **Lannercost Street**.

No drama, since a diversion into a what looked like a pretty close to brand new **IGA** did the trick.

Back on the highway, I anticipated delays on the **Cardwell Range**, where a complete reconfiguration was in progress, but we sailed up and over the crest without delay.

A roadworks depot ensured we kept going until we passed Port Hinchinbrook and debated whether to stop in [Cardwell](#).

There has been plenty of publicity about the locals doing it tough since the devastation wrought by [Cyclone Yasi](#), but the beachfront seemed to have recovered reasonably well.

Having breakfasted, since it was too early for lunch, the to stop or not to stop question came down to the need to fuel up or the necessity of a toilet break.

Neither applied, so it was on to **Tully**, where we'd refuelled last time.

They'd probably need the money too.

Lunch in **Cardwell** on the return leg, on the other hand, looks a strong possibility.

The run down from the top of the range provided frequent reminders of **Yasi's** presence fifteen months or so ago.

While a lot can happen in a year and a bit there's still a long way to go before the rainforest along the way is back to its full verdant glory.

The most evident reminder ran along the ridge lines as we headed north out of **Tully**

At ground level, looking across towards the mountains while you can see the effect on individual trees there's enough depth there to disguise things, at least to a degree.

For most of the way down from the range, the ridgeline had been out of sight, and from **Kennedy** to around **Euramo** it's far enough away so you can't quite make it out.

Heading out of **Tully** the ridges were close enough to see gaps between individual trees rather than the continuous green line that usually runs along there.

The Golfer and I passed through the area four months after [Larry](#) did his thing across the same section of coast.

With another eleven months or so for the vegetation to recover things weren't quite so stark, but a full recovery is still going to take a while.

Mad Mick had spoken glowingly about a pie shop, somewhere you turned off the highway to the left. Madam thought it *might have a name starting with W*.

Under the after-effects of the previous night's indulgence, I wasn't quite sure about these things but thought **Silkwood**, from some fuddled memory or other, might offer some prospect as far as a *gobble and go* lunch was concerned.

A turn off the highway to the left revealed a sprawling settlement with nary an option on the main drag and not much, as far as I could see, on the side streets.

There was a business centre somewhere, but it didn't seem to be on the main drag.

Back on the **Bruce Highway**, we headed towards **Innisfail**, stopping in **Mourilyan** on the principle that continuing on in search of *places on the left that start with W* might well see us turning off to the **Mamu Rainforest Canopy Walk** before we'd managed to find lunch.

A sign on the highway advised of a bakery in **Mourilyan**.

Regardless of Mad Mick's endorsement of *place starting with W*'s comestibles if they're better than what the **Mourilyan Bakery** turns out they must be pretty damn fine.

Madam's spinach and ricotta pasty hit the spot nicely.

My gourmet mushroom pie was arguably the best pie I'd eaten since **Rutherglen** at the end of 2006.

There mightn't have been a plethora of pies in the meantime, but this one was excellent and wasn't far short of the **Rutherglen beef and burgundy** number.

I could easily have gone another, but Madam's mind was set on the [Mamu Rainforest Canopy Walk](#), and she was driving so...



I'd conveniently forgotten the turnoff onto the **Palmerston Highway** is north of **Innisfail**, which was just as well since stopping there for lunch would have involved more than getting out of the car.

**Mamu** beckoned, and it was just after one-fifteen when we turned off the **Palmerston** and pulled into the relatively empty car park.

You might think four vehicles in a substantial car park suggests a venue that isn't highly favoured.

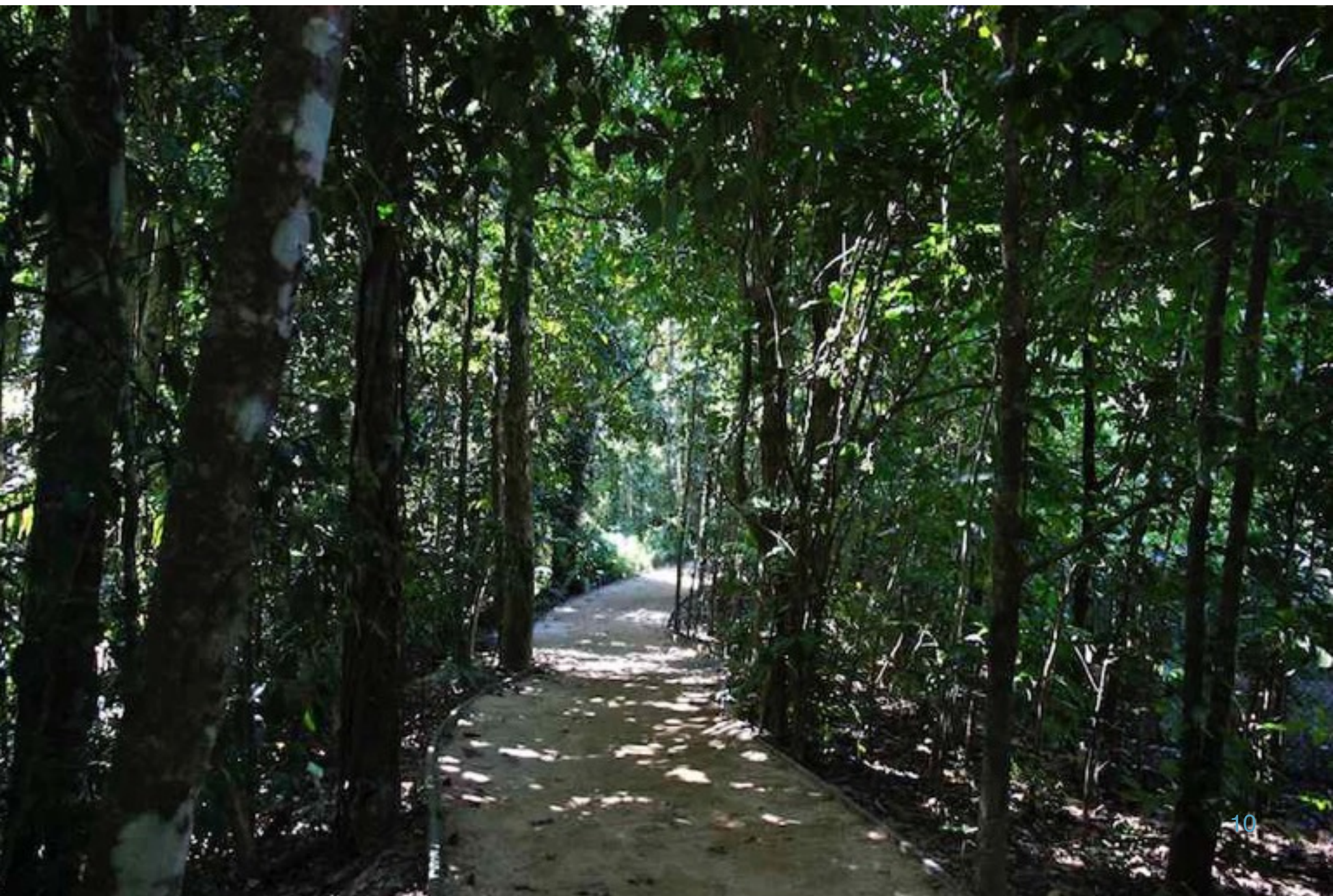
And, you may well look at the \$20 admission and think that's a contributory factor.

But once you're in it's apparent the twenty isn't an unreasonable impost. But more of that anon.

If you're looking for an overview, you can find one [here](#).

While the walk through the rainforest is pretty standard, it's the specially constructed viewing structures that set the **Mamu RCW** apart from the usual rainforest experience.

That's obvious from the time you read one of the plaques on **The Cantilever**, preferably after you've been all the way out to get the view over the curve of the **South Johnstone River**.







Once you've been out, taken your photos and taken in the green panorama is the time to read the screed that explains the movement you felt underfoot stems from the fact that the viewing platform isn't held up by vertical posts.

The structure is supported by an arrangement with its foundations in the hillside. Less disturbance to the forest floor that way, *compris?*

It's also at this point that you appreciate the location of the whole thing.

You're on the upper slopes of the escarpment that runs down to the **South Johnstone**, and the track runs along an old timber trail.

The steep slope down to the river means you don't have to go out too far to get to the point where you're effectively *right out there in the treetops*.

**The Walkway** gives you more panoramic vistas over the river valley on one side and a chance to get up close and personal with the bits of the trees you can't get to from the ground unless you're a tree kangaroo.

And if you're still inclined to quibble about the twenty bucks, take yourself out for a three hundred and fifty-metre walk, preferably in a straight line where you can see the starting point.

Take a gander back to where you started, and there's the length of **The Walkway**.





There are viewing platforms at *not quite regular intervals*, and the structure follows the contours so that you're not talking a straight line.

Nature rarely does straight lines, and on the rare occasions when she does, it's not likely to be in a rainforest in a cyclone prone area.

Once you've negotiated **The Walkway** it's back into the forest until you reach **The Tower**, which takes you up, should you choose to do so, to points where you've got a bird's eye view rather than a treetop vista.

Reading the screeds at the base of **The Tower** while I was waiting for Madam to finish up yonder, I learned the **RCW** was built in the wake of [Cyclone Larry](#), and there was plenty of evidence of [Yasi](#) in the area.





Still, rainforests grow, and the area will recover its former glory. It couldn't have been too far short of that, given the location just on the lee side of the ridge.

Our ramblings were regularly disturbed by half of the **Year Eight** cohort from an **Innisfail College**, clipboards in hand.

They were under the supervision of an **RCW** ranger, who sympathised with us ex-teachers while maintaining an eye on proceedings.

Back in the car, once we'd reached the top of the **Palmerston** we were off on the waterfall circuit, taking the looping track that delivers you to the **Mungalli Falls** rapids, and on to the [Mungalli Biodynamic Dairy](#).





By this time it was nearing three-thirty, so a couple of ice creams (Belgian chocolate and rum and raisin respectively) was enough to keep us going along the actual [Waterfall Circuit](#) a bit further along the **Palmerston**.

I have vague memories of these three waterfalls from deep in the dim distant past on a teenage visit to the area with my parents.

While those recollections include remarks about *not being Zillie*, they don't include legging it along a steep downwards trail to the **Elinjaa Falls**.

My recollections seem to involve getting out of the car and walking across a patch of sward to swimming holes, so I'm probably getting things mixed up with other waterfalls in neighbouring areas





Forty-five years or thereabouts does tend to muddy the detail in these matters.

The view from the bottom of **Elinjaa Falls** was reasonably spectacular, though things were decidedly slippery underfoot.

**Zillie Falls** involved a stroll through the rainforest with a view from the top as waters plunged into the depths below.

**Millaa Millaa Falls** had the swimming hole and a large group of people who seemed to be celebrating some form of strange aquatic ritual.

By this time thoughts were firmly on the night's billet, and we pointed the chariot towards Tolga, arriving at the **Atherton Tablelands Motor Inn** just after five.

It hadn't been a long day in driving terms.

Four or five hours out of eight and a half isn't excessive, IMHO, but non-driving time was mostly taken up with reasonably brisk walks through rainforest canopies and up and down access tracks to waterfalls.





So when Madam ventured the opinion she *wouldn't mind eating here*, I wasn't about to demur.

Here delivered a fish and chips for Madam and a rib fillet and roast veggies for Your Correspondent, both of which did what they needed to do, filling a space that needed filling without hitting any great heights or plumbing any significant depths.

Good home cooked tucker that you mightn't write home about, but you won't be belittling either.

One slight niggle, however. I was expecting rib fillet to come in a reasonably substantial chunk rather than a couple of slices.

What I sampled was pretty close to the rib fillet sliced thin for barbecue purposes that I'd known as cube roll back in the days when I was organising the lunchtime catering associated with school cricket carnivals.

From there, after an hour or so tapping out the *Travelogue* it was early to bed in anticipation of...





## TOLGA > SPLIT ROCK > LAURA > LAKELAND

**Tuesday, 15 May 2012**

And this, folks, is where the adventure begins.

I'd been in touch with the [Quinkan Cultural Centre](#) to see what the go was as far as guided tours of the rock art sites around **Laura** were concerned, and had been informed that the only one accessible at the moment was **Split Rock**.

But I should call back the day before we arrived in case there were developments in the meantime.

Now, we *should* have made that call while we were down on the coast and in range of the **Virgin Mobile** network, but that detail had slipped by in the pursuit of pie shops in towns which might have names starting with W.

We were walking out of the **Rainforest Canopy Walk** when Madam asked whether I thought I should ring.

Well, it was fairly apparent that I should, but in the car park at **Mamu**, there was no trace of a signal.

So we figured it'd be better if we waited till we were close to a larger centre (**Atherton**, for example).

But by the time we were there Mickey's big hand was awfully adjacent to the twelve with the little hand hovering just before five, so I reckoned it wasn't worth trying.

*Better, I thought, to call from a pay phone somewhere en route in the morning.*

The **Palmer River Roadhouse** seemed like an obvious choice since it would be easy for people on the other end of the line to calculate a likely arrival time. More on that matter anon.

The first consideration on the day, however, was breakfast.

Something at the motel or get on the road and grab something along the way? No brainer.

We had the car packed after a good night's sleep and were pulling out of the car park at the motel just before eight.

Any decent sized town is likely to have a bakery.

**Tolga** according to the phone book, was no exception to the rule.

About two blocks down from the motel was a cafe, and we turned into a side street to investigate and, in the process discovered the bakery lurking just behind the cafe.

Fine. Next question. *Sit down in the cafe or grab something from the bakery?*

Anyone who assumes we were looking at whatever would get us to **Laura** ASAP would be right on the money. Mini pizzas from the bakery did the job.

The result was that we were out of **Tolga** by eight-ten or thereabouts, with the next issue being the question of fuelling up.

**Mareeba** seemed the logical choice, so I settled back for the brief sojourn through **Walkamin**, pointing out the distillery as a possible stop on the return journey.





At this point, there are probably alert readers rolling their eyes at what may be seen as an obsession with alcohol-related venues.

The Author would counter the eye-rolling with the observation that we end up going where the driver wants to go, so I mention possibilities without expecting much.

If we get there, we get there. If we don't, we don't.

Past **Mareeba** it was apparent we were getting away from the high rainfall belt.

Actually, it was obvious before we left **Mareeba**, but there were irrigation channels streaming water from [Lake Tinaroo](#) to crops of bananas, mangoes, sugar cane and other crops between **Atherton** and **Mareeba**,



They gradually receded into memory once we were well on the **Mulligan Highway**.

The run through [Mount Molloy](#) and [Mount Carbine](#) was uneventful, with a quick scan of the horizon as we sailed through each township in case there was a pay-phone in view.

Given the relatively early hour, I wasn't inclined to look too closely. **Palmer River Roadhouse** was, as previously indicated, probably the best option.

Scanning the horizon for pay phones was less absorbing than watching the terrain;

I spent the next while visualising would-be miners, bullock wagons and teams of pack horses battling their way up hill and down dale en route to mining discoveries in the hinterland.

Those thoughts were mostly prompted after I noted the road down to **Mossman** that branched off the **Mulligan** just after **Mount Molloy**.

Madam informed me that at one point, early in proceedings, before she decided to spend a couple of days on the **Tablelands**, she'd harboured thoughts of using that road to get us back to **Cairns**.

I'm not sure whether the road actually follows the track that required double teams of bullocks to get the wagons over a nasty pinch called [The Bump](#), in that marvellously understated way we tend to describe significant obstacles.





In any case, I seem to recall stories of a very steep descent, and I wasted no time in assuring her that if the subject had been broached, I would have been suggesting a look at the alternatives.

Musings on nineteenth-century diggers doing it tough in a landscape that brooded with what **Fred Dagg** termed *the stark hostility of the very land itself* gave way to thoughts of an ancient landscape, brooding with, *not quite malevolence, more a sense of indifference*.

It's the same feeling I had crossing the Nullarbor, a sense that the landscape knows you're there, but has no concern whatsoever about you or any other minor interruption.

It was there long before you arrived and will be there millennia after you're gone.

Those feelings reached their peak at **Bob's Lookout**, the crest where the **Mulligan** weaved its way around the end of the **Desailly Range**.

After that, the musings turned to the geology of the goldfields.

There must have been reefs of gold in the ancient landscape (the original one millions of years back).

Miners on the **Palmer** turned their attention to reefs once the alluvial started to run out, and I guessed those reefs were old, deep-seated remnants of long gone veins of quartz-laden ore.



Gold, because of its weight, won't travel far when carried by water, so while the rest of ancient, long gone landscapes eroded, whatever gold reached the surface.

That's guesswork, Hughesy's knowledge doesn't extend too far beyond a dimly remembered **geomorphology** strand in **Geography I** in 1969 and the recent *Time Traveller's Guide to Australia* hadn't gone too much further.

Not in the first instance, anyway.

Over the years grains would have been carried down, a little at a time, collecting behind barriers that impeded the flow of water, and creating the pockets of alluvial that gave rise to the **River of Gold**.

We broke the journey at the **Palmer River Roadhouse**, where the phone call established that, yes, *there was a guide available*.

He was booked to do a tour of **Split Rock** with a party on a tour bus. When he'd finished with them, he'd look after us provided we could give him a lift back into **Laura**.

The cost would be **eighty dollars a head**, not cheap, but I figured it was better to have an idea what we were looking at, and he'd get us to places we wouldn't find ourselves.





The rest of the instructions were vaguer than some in the party would have liked.

*Drive into the car park at Split Rock, I was told.*

*If there's an Outback Spirit bus in the car park, he's in the gallery with the tour. If you get there after the tour has gone, he'll be waiting at the kiosk.*

Lack of clarification about driving conditions didn't please the driver, but I reckoned the bloke on the other end of the line probably knew what he was doing.

If his guide was going to get back, we needed to get there, so presumably, there was nothing to prevent us from doing so.

From the **Road House**, there's a rapid descent of the **Byerstown Range** (**Byerstown**, long since gone, was the easternmost settlement on the **Palmer**), and then we were in the broad river valley that takes you, first, to **Lakeland Downs**, and, after a left-hand turn, towards **Laura**.

There are vast swathes of broadacre farming around **Lakeland**, and the ranges are a relatively distant prospect on the left and right.

Somewhere in there over on the left was the legendary [Hells Gate](#), a narrow gap in the escarpment, three days' walk without water, a place so narrow that buckles on the saddles of passing teams of pack horses left scrape marks on the rock.

The ranges on either side narrowed as we neared **Laura**, and we started to spot formations just under the ridge line that certainly looked, to a novice's eyes, like the sort of place where you might find shelter during the wet season.

Shortly after that, a signpost pointed us towards the **Split Rock car park**, just off the bitumen highway.

So we were there, but there was no sign of a tour bus.

Proceeding according to instructions I wandered over to the kiosk, found it deserted, wandered past a parked car that had no sign of an occupant, and headed back to the other vehicle.

When I arrived there, I found a bloke in an **Outdoor Education Centre** T-shirt in the process of negotiating a coffee with The Missus.

I was figuring out what to do when, lo and behold, a tour bus and trailer turned off the highway and pulled up behind the previously noted unoccupied vehicle.

It was an obvious case of heading in that direction.

I arrived to find the bus disgorging its occupants while a nuggety Aboriginal bloke in a faded blue shirt and denim jeans was looking in my direction.





Roy? Ian? And a handshake concluded the introductions,

Since we were to tag along behind the tour group, I headed back to impart news, apply sunscreen, collect bottled water and get my stuff together.

Roy, I noted, was carrying a water bottle, confirming suspicions that I'd be needing two.

By the time we reached the tour group, the bus had disgorged its elderly occupants, and from a look at the gathering, it was apparent we weren't going to be doing anything over strenuous.

As we set off, we found ourselves at the end of what used to be termed, in **English schoolboy stories**, a *crocodile*.

Given the issues associated with fitness and agility with this party, one was certainly hoping saurians were thin on the ground up in these parts well away from the water.

The climb wasn't as straightforward as one might have presumed.

Frequent stops served the dual purpose of giving Roy a chance to talk about bush tucker or point out something of botanical interest and giving less agile members of the party a chance to catch up.

There were a couple of smaller galleries on the way up, faded by weather and partly obscured.





As Roy explained, by dust from the previously unsealed road but arriving at the actual **Split Rock** gallery, we found ourselves on a large wooden platform with seating on the outer rim.

There was plenty to see, with paintings superimposed over others, fading under the influences of dust and weather, but all placed in an invidious position where anything approximating restoration would probably do more harm than good.

There was a long pause there as Roy talked to whoever wanted to talk to him.

I waited until those conversations were breaking up before crossing to check about taking him back to **Laura**.





From conversations along the way, I gathered the bus had come from **Cooktown** via **Battle Camp**, and would presumably be heading off to the **Tablelands** or **Mossman**, so our presence would save the driver going back to drop the guide in **Laura**.

The inquiry produced the news that, *yes*, we were to *drop him back at base*, and once the tour party had left *he'd take us over the top*, though *the top* remained an undefined concept.

With the tour party heading back to their bus, we headed further up the slope to some smaller sites, passing a couple of sightseers on the way.

The adventure really started when we reached one where the track was not quite barred, but a sign indicated that *unauthorised persons should not proceed beyond this point*.

As we proceeded to ignore the instructions one assumed we were now authorised.

The sign was there because the trail hadn't been cleared or prepared after the end of the wet season.

This, from what I can gather, is the problem with the rest of the sites.



Unlike **Split Rock**, they're only accessible by four-wheel drive, and that means getting people out on the tracks to make sure vehicles can get to where they're supposed to go.

The sites are on the **Split Rock** side of the **Laura River**, so the first issue after the wet season has finished is to wait until the river goes down.

**Split Rock** might be easily accessible from the sealed highway, but until they've completed the high-level bridge it's inaccessible from **Laura**, and the tours had only resumed the previous week.

All that explained the fairly rough going as we made our way up the escarpment, across the plateau on the top, over to **Turtle Rock**, a spectacular lookout over the **Palmer** country.

From there, we headed down through the [Gugu Yalanji](#) galleries, the last of which were spectacular, nestled in a site that was more sheltered from dust, wind and water and relatively inaccessible.

The **National Parks and Wildlife Rangers** had apparently been around the area relatively recently, but it seemed we were the first outsiders to visit this particular area this year.

From there we had a long and occasionally hairy descent, joining the **Split Rock** track and making our way back to the car park just after three o'clock.







Given the fact that we'd arrived there around eleven-fifteen (I was too busy scanning the horizon for tour buses to note precise times) and allowing for speed of travel considerations with the tour party, that amounted to a three hour guided walk which seemed pretty fair value at eighty dollars per head.

Heading back to **Laura**, we turned off the bitumen onto dirt just before the new and still unfinished bridge.

Roy explained it could be three or four months once the river rose above the old *low level right down there In the river bed* bridge, and for that time it was a case of flying in food supplies.

Those issues raised themselves again at **Quinkan Cultural Centre**, where the bloke I'd spoken with over the phone elaborated on the new bridge and the likely benefits of year-round access to **Split Rock** from the **Laura** side.

He also let slip the (well, to me, anyway) surprising news that until he'd taken over at the **Centre**, tours to the galleries had been led by non-indigenous guides, something I found quite incredible.



In any case, the other galleries, including [Giant Horse](#), are only available through the **Quinkan Centre**.

But I'd still suggest, assuming you're fit and interested, that you take the guided **Split Rock** tour (I'm guessing that's more or less what we got) rather than just lobbing in the car park and wandering up the hill to take a gander at the paintings.

And if you are there and decide not to do anything extravagant you should drop the suggested \$5 per head in the honesty box at **Split Rock** and take a good look at the displays at the **Quinkan Centre**, where you can also make a donation.

Depends on which way and how far you're going.

A more detailed account of this bit of the trip would have required a notebook or voice recorder, and, to be quite honest, I was too busy keeping up with the walk to be stopping to scribble.

Vocal records would have come with a good deal of puffing and panting.

Still, those three hours were one of the most memorable experiences I've had and did a lot to clarify thinking about some long dormant historical research.

Whether anything comes out of that renewed interest remains to be seen (he said, tapping out his impressions in a motel room at **Lakeland Downs** the following morning).







From the **Quinkan Centre**, it was off to the **Quinkan Hotel** in town for a chilled article, then back to **Lakeland Downs** for the night.

In retrospect, it might have been possible to head all the way into **Cooktown**.

On the other hand, three hours clambering over the escarpment meant by the time we'd checked in had a short rest and demolished a couple of seafood baskets we were both pushing up the Zs shortly after seven thirty.





2

# COOKTOWN

[Lakeland Downs > Cooktown](#)

[Cooktown: Museums, Beaches and Lookouts](#)

[Cooktown: The Lion's Den](#)





## LAKELAND DOWNS > COOKTOWN

**Wednesday, 16 May 2012**

After the previous day's exertions, an easy stage was definitely the way to go, and we headed off from **Lakeland** just after eight, following a brief discussion about breakfast options.

The nearest source of nutrition was the roadhouse at **Lakeland**, which involved a right-hand turn and a short southward stretch past the **Laura** turnoff.

The alternative was, of course, to head straight into [Cooktown](#) and do the brunch bit there.



*The brunch bit there, predictably, won.*

On the ground, nearly forty years after **Cooktown frontier conflict** research I was interested in spotting anything that tied in with that generation-back reading. It's not too surprising to learn there wasn't much of it around until we hit the rivers.

We must have sailed right past a turnoff to [Kings Plains](#) because I subsequently spotted the name on the map, but I didn't find things that coincided with distant historical memories until we hit the **Normanby** and the **Annan**.

Since the next bit of the narrative is more or less *we got to Cooktown, had breakfast and a good look around, grabbed a spot of lunch and headed off to the accommodation and took a break until dinner time*, it's time for **Hughesy's history lesson**, which might differ from what readers are accustomed to.

Predictable, since much of what actually interests me hasn't been written (much).

So if you're interested in the chain of events that brought [Lieutenant Cook](#) (he wasn't promoted to **Commander** until **August 1771** and *made post* or promoted to **Captain** in **1775**) to the Endeavour River in **June 1770**, you can click [here](#).

In the process of saving his ship, Cook found a safe, convenient anchorage, visited by [Philip Parker King](#) and [Allan Cunningham](#) on [HMS Mermaid](#) in 1819 and 1820 and [Captain Blackwood](#) ([HMS Fly](#)) and







[Lieutenant Yule](#) on the [Bramble](#) in 1843. It came in handy again after [James Venture Mulligan](#) found gold in the [Palmer River](#).

[William Hann](#)'s [1872 expedition](#) found gold in the **Palmer**, but that was a Government sponsored *get out and see what's out there* trip around the back blocks rather than a serious quest for gold, which had been found on the [Etheridge](#), at Gilberton and at several other locations around the North.



The critical issue here was whether it was *payable* gold, in sufficient quantities to allow the miner to *make rations* or pay for his tucker.

If you could *make rations*, the field *might* work. If you couldn't, it wouldn't.

*Making rations*, of course, applied to European miners. The sums were different where the Chinese were concerned.

In any case, Hann reported gold, though not in payable quantities.

Various experienced miners, including **Mr Mulligan**, reckoned Hann was a grazier who *probably wouldn't know payable gold if it came up and bit him in the leg*, and set out to take a look for themselves.

**Mulligan** reached the **Palmer** on 29 June. He struck payable gold on 12 August and was back in [Georgetown](#), the centre of the Etheridge Goldfields, on 3 September with 102 ounces of gold (around three kilograms in the new money, folks).

**Mulligan** stayed on the Etheridge just long enough to report the find and collect fresh supplies.

News of his discovery had a hundred men and three hundred horses heading out of the Etheridge with **Mulligan** in September 1873.

Do the sums yourself. At today's gold prices, three kilograms (let's keep things in round figures here) would be worth something in the order of one and a half million dollars.

In their constant quest for things that would create revenue, the colonial government had commissioned an expedition with [George Elphinstone Dalrymple](#) in charge to sail north from [Cardwell](#) and investigate prospects along the coast between **Rockingham Bay** and the Endeavour.

Dalrymple had two small cutters, the *Flying Fish* and the *Coquette*, a party that was heavy on Native Mounted Police, and instructions to check out the countryside and link up with a party that would head down from the **Palmer** led by his old mate [Philip Sellheim](#).

Dalrymple and Sellheim went way back, at least as far back as the declaration of the **Kennedy Pastoral District** on 1 January 1861.

Dalrymple had been appointed Lands Commissioner for the district and held a little New Years Eve party for a few selected friends to allow them to select prime slices of real estate off the map (you'll find the details in Jean Farnfield's **Frontiersman: a biography of George Elphinstone Dalrymple**, assuming you can track down a copy).



In any case, Dalrymple set off with his two cutters loaded with Native Police, took a good look at things along the way and landed at the mouth of the Endeavour River on 24 October 1873.

The two vessels weren't large enough for the party to sleep on board, so once they'd reached the destination, they started unpacking the next morning, preparing to settle in until Sellheim arrived on the scene and the Native Police contingent could head up to the **Palmer**. They were setting up camp when the masts of a ship appeared above the mangroves at the mouth of the river.

There had been a slight change of plan. The Queensland Government had changed its mind, told Sellheim to hold his horses, and chartered the steamer *Leichhardt* to carry Goldfield Commissioner Howard St George, engineer Archibald Macmillan assorted officials and seventy-nine miners to the Endeavour.

They were going to blaze a trail from the port to the goldfield rather than from field to port.







Once we'd arrived in **Cooktown**, the obvious first item on the agenda was breakfast, and the most likely source was Charlotte Street, which conveniently runs past the points where Cook beached the *Endeavour*, Dalrymple set up his camp, and the Macmillan party landed.

And the obvious thing to do after breakfast was to take a stroll along the main drag, scope out the town and see whether I could visualise the events of 25 October 1873.

Unsurprisingly, that's not as easy as The Casual Observer might think.

The arrival of the *Leichhardt* sparked a remarkable boom, and there were at least four wharves constructed along the shore near the river mouth, which meant things like mangroves had to go, which they did.

One would guess there was a certain amount of dredging and reshaping of the entrance, so the twenty-first-century observer watching a fishing boat towing a string of dories coming back to port is quite possibly watching a vessel crossing water that wasn't there a hundred and forty years ago.

Still, if you couldn't quite visualise the masts coming over the mangroves, with your back to the town looking over the estuary you could imagine things from the point of view of a disembarking miner.

It looks like not much has changed over on the north shore.



A stroll around the town took us along the northern side of Charlotte Street out as far as the jetty for the Pilot Launch and back along the south side, past plenty of vacant allotments. When we reached the original starting point just along from the **Cooktown Cafe** Madam was ready for a spell.

Just quietly, she wasn't the only one, but our morning ramble had failed to reveal a Commonwealth Bank auto teller and the wallet was going to need a cash injection at some point, so I went on a little without locating what I was looking for.

I saw machines from other banks along the way, so the technology has indeed reached this far north.

Apparently, in this era of rationalisation and bank super profits, actual physical branches are few and far between, which explains why the **Quinkan Centre** has to go to **Mareeba** to do the banking, but you'd suspect each of the Big Four would have an outlet hereabouts. I was hypothesising something tucked around the corner at the Post Office, or strategically located outside the supermarket.

If all else fails, of course, there's always ask a local.

That's what we were doing when I met Madam in the Community Arts Centre, once the ticket office at the railway station, and again when we'd pointed the car at the Information Centre, where we planned to refine the schedule for the next two days.







We'd allocated a day to head out of town, with lunch at **The Lion's Den** and a chance for Madam to get in some rainforest photography, and a day devoted to the same around town, so it was a case of checking local knowledge against possibilities.

To the south, we'd been told **Quarantine Bay** was worth a look, and we could possibly get a bit beyond **Helenvale**, though the area around **The Lion's Den** would probably keep us busy.

That's good. Hughesy's legs are still disinclined towards much more cross-country rambling.

Back around town, there's **Finch's Bay**, a walking track to **Cherry Tree Bay**, the **Botanic Gardens**, **Grassy Hill**, and sunset across the water to occupy the photographer.

The **Historical Society Museum** will certainly occupy The Ex-Historian, so it's not as if we're going to run out of things to do.

From the **Information Centre**, we headed back to town to the [James Cook Museum](#), located in the old convent with plenty of explanatory material, not just about Jimmy Cook but also covering, in impressive detail when you're looking for an overview, the broad sweep of the region's history.

How impressive?

Well, how about the information that in the 1920s a Chinese family business farmed twenty thousand hectares out around **Laura**.





1887, Chinese community of Cooktown organised an elaborate procession to honour the visiting Chinese commissioner. The photograph originates from the album of Lord Brassey who visited Cooktown the same year

Lying in the predawn dark the following morning, I started off on a bit of mental calculation.

Twenty thousand hectares at ten thousand square metres a go equals two hundred million square metres. That's two followed by eight zeros. If five fours are twenty, you take the other seven zeros, split them four and three to give a notional strip of farmland five kilometres wide and forty kilometres long (or vice versa).

The actual dimensions wouldn't have made that kind of tidy rectangle, but it's an impressive figure.

So, if you're looking for an excellent overview of the historical side of things, the **James Cook Museum** is definitely the way to go.

I'm more interested in filling in the detail on my version of the story, filling in the gaps in the memory.

Day Five has a visit to the other historical museum pencilled in to do that, because if there is a negative in the **James Cook Museum** (and I'll admit the possibility it's there, but I managed to miss it) it's a lack of supporting material and references to add depth to the main narrative.





*Summary: Strong on displays, short on supplementary material.*

From the museum, however, with legs disinclined to further trekking, it was a choice between a light lunch and checking into the accommodation.

Since it was just coming up to one o'clock, an hour ahead of standard check-in time, lunch was the winner.

We weren't after anything substantial, so we headed to **Capers**, which we passed on the morning stroll for some coffee and nibbles (flourless chocolate slice this way, lemon tartlet for Madam) and then headed off to [Milkwood Lodge](#), located a couple of kilometres out of town just off the main road.

Six pole houses in the rainforest deliver a quiet retreat, and it looks like the way to go when you're looking at a couple of days away from the swing of things but close enough to get there if need be.

Questions about dining options produced a big wrap for **The Italian**, a place I'd been inclined to miss from the *and Thai* tacked onto the end.

I suspected it might be an operation that was sort of neither fish nor fowl, tackling two and not getting either of them right.

How wrong I was! But more of that anon.

A power nap recharged the batteries and got me back onto the iPad to tap out the narrative.



I was pretty much out of the backlog when Madam decided she'd head up to **Grassy Hill** for a look and some photographic action.

I could have gone, but we decided **Thursday** was in town and **Friday** was **Lion's Den** day, so I was keen to get the guts of the historical side of things tied up and finished by the time she returned.

We'd been advised to try **Shadows of Mount Cook** for dinner, and since it was just down the road, it seemed like an obvious first choice.

An investigatory phone call suggested they're not doing an *open to the public dining* bit any more, and brought another suggestion pointing us to **The Italian**, which is where we were pulling up around six-fifteen.

The wrap from **Milkwood Lodge** had a firm tick beside *pasta Di Mare* (assorted seafood, olive oil, garlic, fresh basil and a touch of chilli) with the suggestion that we ask for it *Wog style*, something I would usually demur from doing, but I'm certainly glad I didn't.

It's **BYO** so we'd set off with a good bottle of **SSB**, which went down very nicely with one of the best Italian meals I've had in a long time, and since I've been eating Italian style for much of the past forty years...







## COOKTOWN: MUSEUMS, BEACHES AND LOOKOUTS

### **Thursday, 17 May 2012**

With a fair idea of the lie of the land, we'd decided Thursday was the in-town day, mainly due to the guided tour of the **Botanical Gardens** that runs from ten o'clock each Thursday.

I was half inclined to go myself, but experience suggested the tour would be followed by extensive photographic action, and I wanted to have a look at the **Historical Society Museum**...

There was a load of washing to deal with some time during the day, so the eventual plan of attack started with breakfast at the kiosk on the wharf.



We'd follow that with a trip out to **Finch's Bay**, and call in at the **Botanic Gardens** along the way to verify the starting time for the botanical tour.

Madam would drop Hughesy at the **Historical Society** and head back to do the botanical tour and the anticipated long photographic session.

Then we'd head to the pier for fish and chips for lunch.

An extensive photographic session may seem flippant, but I'm sitting in the **Historical Society** tapping this section of the *Travelogue* at 11:33 with no sign of the lift to lunch.

Breakfast looking out over the water was delightful, something that'll definitely be repeated.

Maybe not tomorrow or before we head off on **Saturday** morning, but then again you never know.

**Finch's Bay** was apparently a popular swimming spot *way back when*, not that you'd know it from the road that gets you there.

The bitumen stops right after the Gardens, and the track meanders through the scrub.

It delivers you to a broad sandy beach with the rainforest running right down to the waterline from the outliers of **Mount Cook** on the right and from the slopes of **Grassy Hill** on the left.







I was back in the town outside the **Cooktown History Centre** by a quarter to ten.

A walk around the displays revealed a wealth of detail that filled in gaps in the memory and added fresh detail that will be useful if I decide to have another attempt to write about the frontier violence that followed the settlement of **Cooktown**.

I could have taken extensive notes, but opted, in the end, for hard copies of a couple of the Society's publications (***Cooktown through the Years***, ***Peninsula Pub Crawl*** and ***The Rail to Nowhere***) that will do a far more thorough job than an hour's hasty scribbling could possibly deliver.

The bloke looking after the door, and the women who were working away inside delivered very welcome news regarding the fate of the **Cooktown newspapers** I'd perused back in the mid- to late-seventies.



I assumed those files would have fallen to pieces long ago.

I was reading them in the old **Bellevue Hotel**, across the road from the **Queensland Parliament**, once home to the rural representatives in the state legislature.

The building had been demolished in controversial circumstances during the **Bjelke-Petersen era**, and I had a sneaking suspicion those runs of the ***Cooktown Courier*** and the ***Cooktown Herald*** might have ended up in the rubble.

Fortunately, they seem to have survived and have even been microfilmed.

Apparently, there are plans to digitise the microfilm at the **National Library** in **Canberra**, though one doubts a couple of files of **Cooktown newspapers** are very high on the pecking order.

As far as the Historical Society Museum is concerned, \$5 admission is cheaper than the **James Cook Museum**.

And since it's relatively light on for Jimmy Content (and rightly so, since there's only so much display material relating to the Endeavour you'd expect to find it in a central location), it's able to go into a fair bit more detail about individuals and families.

If you're interested in history, in other words, do the **James Cook** first, decide whether you want further information. If you're even slightly inclined to tick that box head for the **Historical Society**.







It really is excellent.

From the **Historical Society Museum**, we had an appointment with a washing machine and a tumble drier and lunch.

Both seemed best tackled in the vicinity of the **Fisherman's Wharf**.

After depositing the laundry in a machine and depositing four \$1 coins in its innards, we set off for **Gilld and Guttd** for a round of fish and chips consumed at a table overlooking the river mouth with views across to **Cape Bedford**.

Fish and chips, in most cases, is fish and chips and provided things have been done right nothing more needs to be said.

I've had some good examples of the combination over the years with the best (**Swains** in **Gladstone** - highly recommended) being quite sublime, and while what we found here wasn't quite *up there* it was an example of what you get when things are done right.





From there the laundry went into the dryer, and Hughesy set out in search of the elusive **Commonwealth Bank** auto teller.

A query in the **Post Office** revealed that the **EFTPOS machine** on the premises was as close as I was going to get.

Two runs through the dryer got the laundry to the point where a light airing would finish the job, so it was back to base with a walk from the **Botanic Gardens** pencilled in for the late afternoon, followed by a hike up to the windswept summit of **Grassy Hill**.

The spell back at base allowed me to catch up on the ***Travelogue***, to the point where more than halfway through the trip I'm right up to date with the day to day detail.

I had the time to peruse the publications I picked up at the **Historical Society** and followed that with a spot of quiet R&R.

That didn't last too long, in any case, and it was just after three-thirty when we headed back towards the **Botanical Gardens** and the walking track to **Finch's Bay**. It's part of the **Scenic Rim Walking Trail**, and we'd looked at adding assorted other sections to the schedule.

Given the up hill and down dale nature of the track we'd probably have been rearranging the plans pretty smartly if we'd included the **Finch's Bay to Cherry Tree Bay** and **Cherry Tree Bay to Grassy Hill** tracks in the plans.





Maybe if we hadn't spent those hours clambering over the top out near **Laura**...

As it was, about halfway along the Finch Bay track, there was a unanimous we'll be heading back to the **Botanic Gardens** along the road since we knew that route was almost entirely flat.

Don't get me wrong. It wasn't a case of being anti-exercise.

I like walking, but at this point in time, I'd prefer to walk the climbing-induced aches out of the leg muscles along a relatively flat surface.

That was not, however, going to be possible if I wanted to get all the way to the top of **Grassy Hill**.





Madam had been up there the previous evening and hadn't revealed much detail about the top, except to remark that the view was spectacular and conditions up there were windy.

We'd already heard comments along those lines from friends and acquaintances who'd been there and stayed long enough to experience the prevailing conditions.

When someone from ***Blowin' Bowen*** tells you the place is *windy*, you better believe it's windy, boys and girls.

We could have ignored signs that advised the road loop was for buses and disabled people only and driven up.

But we're law-abiding citizens, and we walked from the car park to the summit.

Since we didn't have much pencilled in before dinner, I could have stayed there, meditating on matters historical and the ways of the world until Madam finished capturing (*Photographers*, in case The Casual Reader is unaware, *don't merely take photos*, they *capture images*) the sunset if it wasn't for the wind.



Back in the car, we headed back down, pausing at the second car park and lookout, where the views were almost as spectacular but didn't give you the full three-sixty.

So we headed down to the shores of the Endeavour to fill in the time until we signed ourselves in at the **Bowls Club** for dinner.

**Sunset** turned out to be more spectacular than Madam expected, given the light conditions when we were atop **Grassy Hill**.

It was around a quarter to six when I managed to prise her away from the setting sun and point us towards dinner.

To the best of my recollection, I've never eaten in a bowls club, and I doubt there's a bowls club in any town of similar size that has an eatery with a menu to match this operation.

There aren't too many restaurants with a menu that would match what's on offer there.

The two-sided menu board covering the current specials would probably do for some eateries.

There's a full ***a la carte*** menu on the tables offering the usual categories with ample variety within each one.







As I made my way up to the servers to order Madam's **grilled wild barramundi**, I was still tossing up options.

There's a blackboard menu above the servers that didn't seem to be quite the same as the one on the table, and another on the left-hand side that had some of the specials listed outside plus a few I didn't recall seeing before.

Overwhelmed by choice, I ended up going for **Cajun Porterhouse with chips and salad**.

I got to do the swapsies bit with Madam (a portion of **porterhouse** for a bit of **Barra**) and can recommend either.

If the rest of the menu matches what we had that night (and the place is almost universally regarded as offering the best food in town), you'd probably be able to eat there three or four times a week for at least a month before you went into *I've tried everything and it's time for a change mode*.

Back at **Milkwood Lodge**, I settled on the veranda for a glass or two of red, and a listen to some **Levon Helm** while Madam clarified a few details about **Sunday** over the phone.

And then it was another case of early to bed.





## COOKTOWN: THE LION'S DEN

**Friday, 18 May 2012**

But not a case of early to rise the next morning.

Fitful dozing over ten hours doesn't quite deliver totally restful repose.

I woke up a couple of times to the pitter patter of sprinkling rain, and a couple of instances where drizzle was transformed into something between a shower and a downpour.



Not for long, or at least *not for long while consciousness prevailed*, but long enough to raise serious questions about the day's activities.

I was up around six-thirty tapping out *Travelogue*, and an hour later, after a bit of speculation about the plans for the rest of the day, was quietly headed back to the cot for more relaxed repose.

As I drifted in and out of a pleasant doze the rain continued in fits and starts.

Madam's decision to have a shower around nine seemed to coincide with an end to the external precipitation, so once she was finished, I took my turn in the rain room, an act that seemingly persuaded the drizzle to return in sympathy.

By ten, I was set up with a cup of coffee, musing on the possibilities for the day if **The Lion's Den** was ruled out.

Then the light improved, the drizzle lifted and, at 10:06 as I type this there's a patch of blue sky and wispy white (rather than grey or black) clouds over to my left.

It was around ten-thirty when we decided to avail ourselves of local knowledge and Internet access before we made a firm decision about what to do.







The weather seemed to be hanging off, but by the time we'd parked at the **Botanic Gardens**, it was back.

Not exactly a downpour, though there was a heavier scud while we were there, more a reminder the clouds held their share of condensation and were quite happy to distribute some of their allocations.

We'd been looking at **The Lion's Den** (four kilometres off the highway, the first two well made though slippery dirt, bitumen for the last two) and **Quarantine Bay** (all bitumen).

Although the weather was going to rule out long photographic rambling, we reckoned it was worth going out for a look, at least.

Even if we didn't get in much of a ramble, there was the undeniable prospect of lunch and beer. One light for The Driver, maybe a second or even a third for The Passenger.

That was more or less the way things panned out.

There were patches of drizzle on the way out, and roadwork on the bridge over **Mungundy Creek** just before you reach the Den, and the road definitely looked slippery.

But just before twelve we pulled up, had a bit of a wander through the historic structure and ordered lunch.



A vacant table at the front seemed as good a spot as any, so we settled in and waited for the tucker to arrive.

Scanning those around us we had two distinct classes of clientele. Things might be different away from Friday lunchtime.

Over the Queens Birthday long weekend, for example, there seemed to be a mini blues festival in the offing.

That would probably draw them in from far and wide.

But I suspected the swell in numbers would probably deliver the same demographic proportions.

The crowd appeared to be a fifty-fifty mix of travelling retirees and local residents displaying various degrees of feral hippie attitude.

Like the **Quinkan Hotel** at **Laura** and the pub at **Lakeland Downs**, the bar staff appeared to be of the European backpacker persuasion, though the young dude who delivered the meals seemed to have an Australian accent.

Under different weather conditions, we could have spent quite a while there, wandering down to **The Beach**.







It was a concept Madam found intriguing, given the fact that we were well away from the coastline.

If we'd headed that way, I'm confident we could have spent a good half hour traversing the environs in search of interesting subjects awaiting a photographic capture.

But once I'd demolished the pizza (meat lovers, the only variety on offer that didn't include pineapple) and Madam finished the fish burger, there wasn't much to do but take another circuit of the interior and head back out to the car.

**Quarantine Bay**, highly spoken of by a certain **Bowen** builder, turned out to be a handy place for launching the boat if you happen to be travelling with one.



Under different circumstances, you could probably be an enjoyable beach ramble with the *not quite rainforest covered* hills coming down to meet the water on either side of the beach.

We took a quick squiz, jumped back into the car and thought about diverting to **Keating's Lagoon**, which appears to be better suited to a drier day.

From which The Astute Reader can probably gather we ended back at base.

Safe and dry, I started reading Ion Idress' ***Back o' Cairns*** while the precipitation proceeded in fits and starts, and Madam gave the eyes a bit of a rest.

Having recharged the batteries she was up for some form of away from base activity, so we wandered into town to take a walk and see whether the photographer could find anything worth capturing.

As it turned out, she didn't, mainly because the band of cloud that had been delivering the latest series of scuds had moved on over the river and was now strategically located just under the Sun.

Once the celestial object slid behind that cloud there wasn't much in the way of colour, so we found a handy seat, meditated on the view and waited until the replete from recent feeds feeling started to move towards something resembling hunger pangs and headed off to **The Italian**.







As far as Madam was concerned dinner was an option rather than a necessity, and there was no way Hughesy was up for anything resembling a full meal, so the best option seemed to be a takeaway *risotto del mare*, which turned out to be just the trick.

Looking at the heaping helping in the styrofoam container I had a sneaking suspicion there'd be issues with internal capacity, but by the time Madam decided to move inside the contents had been reduced to a few grains of rice that proved challenging to muster into something that would resemble a spoonful.

On the strength of the three nights we've been here a casual visitor staying a week or so wouldn't need to move beyond **The Italian** and the **Bowls Club** to find a satisfying variety of evening meals.

By the time we're back, of course, **The Italian** will probably have changed hands.

It's on the market with the real estate agent telling prospective buyers they can *Learn To Make Pizza Just Like The Wog Boys*) and the kitchen staff at the **Bowls Club** will probably have moved on, but I suspect those are the first two options we'll be checking out.



A large tree with many hanging roots in a forest. The roots are thick and numerous, hanging down from the canopy. A person is standing in the foreground, looking up at the tree. The background is filled with lush green foliage.

3

# HOMeward BOUND

Cooktown > Atherton Tablelands > Cedar Park





## COOKTOWN > ATHERTON TABLELANDS > CEDAR PARK

**Saturday, 19 May 2012**

With the *Travelogue* up to date by seven in the morning, there wasn't much to get in the way of an early departure.

It was just after eight when the laden chariot set off down the driveway, headed back into town.

Madam thought the bakery was a logical source for a minimum wait breakfast.

Hughesy had suspicions about prospects at the **Cooktown Markets**.



Given the size of the community and the fact the tourist season didn't seem to have kicked in I suspected the **Markets** would be a sort of community get together.

Not that I would have ventured that opinion as we sat outside the bakery devouring breakfast.

There mightn't be much of interest in the **Markets**, but it was an excuse for another lap of the main street, and a five minute stop there would keep the driver happy.

As it turned out, the turnout was long on local fruit and veg and other food-related items, with not much else.

There was indeed nothing in the way of ancient and decrepit loads of paperbacks and non-legitimate cassettes and videotapes certain operators in **Bowen** seemed to whack out on display every week.

**Cooktown** may be a long way from the rest of Australia, but at least they seem to appreciate the days of the cassette player and the VCR are long gone.

Back on the road, heading south the weather was clearing. It was shaping up as a rather pleasant day, with steadily improving photographic prospects

And we had time on our hands.







We took a brief break to capture photographic memories we hadn't been able to grab in the drizzle as we made our way past yesterday's destinations, with the infamous and legendary **Black Mountain** as the main point of interest.

By this stage I'd established the old road from **Cooktown** to the **Palmer** followed a different line to today's **Mulligan Highway**, so I wasn't too concerned with trying to piece recollections together.

After a brief halt at **Lakeland Downs** we were back on, or close to, the old road to the **Palmer** as we went up and over the **Byerstown Range**.

We halted at the lookout for a view back towards **Cooktown**.



We'd been in a hurry to get to **Laura** on the way up, and, in any case, the lookout was a better fit for southbound motorists.

I'd been hoping for an aspect across the once-golden gullies of the **Palmer**, but that was not to be.

From there we headed back south, giving the **Palmer Roadhouse** a miss this time around and making another scenic stop at the **Mount Bob** lookout.

As The Astute Reader might surmise, there isn't a lot to occupy the mind on this section of highway, and the journey out always seems longer than the outward leg, though there's no scientific reason why that should be so.

As a result, it seemed like no time at all before we were pulling over near **Mount Carbine** to check whether we had an issue with tyres.

As it turned out the wind really was that strong, and we headed off, with the odd sideward glance to check for **Lighthouse Mountain** and a suitable spot for a photo once we had.

When that failed to happen, Madam's attention turned to **Lake Mitchell**, which looked impressive on both legs of the journey without any sign of a lookout or similar venue for photographic action.







That changed, more or less, when we made our way to the **Mareeba Wetlands**, though getting there involved seven kilometres of *could have been a better dirt road*.

Eventually, we made our way into the **Visitors Centre**, a fairly impressive turnout that offered the sort of basic lunch we were looking at.

Lunch came with reasonably spectacular views over an extensive stretch of water that's home to a wide range of bird life that seemed, for some reason to be missing in action while we were there.

So there you have it.

Finally, a venue where a photographer could click away to her heart's content and a total lack of subject matter apart from the odd scenic shot.

After a couple of Chilli chicken wraps, we were off again, pointing the chariot towards **Mareeba's Coffee Works**, which was reputed to be the *Disneyland of the coffee world*.

That was the *Sydney Morning Herald's* description, anyway.

Hughesy's would go more like *an impressive array of locally made chocolate with a similar selection of coffee and a swag of artistic bric a brac*.

Most of the latter sported the sort of trite inspirational slogans Hughesy tends to steer clear of while employing a forty-foot barge pole.



Still, the chocolate was rather good, and I escaped with some dark Chilli and lime and black pepper that'll go down a treat on a chilly night, and a sample of filter coffee.

Next stop was the **Mt Uncle Distillery**, where I figured there'd be something interesting.

There was, but they'd opted to close the regular tasting area, and we found ourselves in the corner of the cafe, sampling a very good (actually, seriously good) white rum.

If I'd seen the price tag before I decided to buy I might have had second thoughts. I'm not exactly a connoisseur of white rum, but even at \$60, I thought it was reasonably good value.

With those out of the way, it was time to head for accommodation that was supposed to be 26 km from the turnoff to **Kuranda**.

We were around the 23k mark when we spotted a sign, which you might have thought was a warning that the turnoff was coming up. On that basis, you'd have been looking for a sign on the left pointing you in the appropriate direction.

If I hadn't spotted a **Cedar Park Rainforest Resort** logo beside a track leading off to the right, we might have been looking for some time.







My prediction that we'd somehow chosen the lesser of two avenues of entry, made as a rough dirt track twisted and turned through the scrub turned out to be entirely erroneous.

There's just one track into **Cedar Park**, but when you get there, the twists and turns are definitely worth it.

It's difficult, however, to decide how you're going to describe the place.

*Quality accommodation* is part of the package, *with rooms that are much larger than you'd have a right to expect, especially for the price.* There are, however, two slight drawbacks.

The building was initially built in some configuration that needed to be subdivided.



Subdividing didn't deliver much in the way of soundproofing between adjoining rooms.

We had what sounded like a gathering of old Teutonic speaking acquaintances next to us, and with a drink or two under their belts, the robust conversation went on well into the night.

Could have been a problem if I hadn't anaesthetised myself rather well.

If you choose to go down that road and indulge yourself in a drink or three, the configuration within the room might not be *stumbling drunk friendly*.

Our room came in three sections - a sitting room closest to the front door, the bedroom section with a double and two singles, fridge, sink and so on, and a bathroom, with stone floors and more than a single step between each.

Not, I think, the sort of place you'd want to be stumbling around in the dark in search of the toilet in the small hours.

But with those caveats, *quality accommodation*.

Then there are the grounds.

On the way in you'd be inclined to question the rainforest bit if you're coming in from the drier **Mareeba** side and you're more or less out of the **Kuranda rainforest** when you hit the turn.







Once you arrive at **Cedar Park** it's obvious, regardless of how things were when the founders found it, there's been a great deal of restoration, and the grounds are, in a word, quite magnificent.

I know that's two, but you get my drift.

But the clincher comes with dinner.

The owners are a trio of chefs with impressive credentials.

The menu is small but offers an impressive array of immaculately cooked dishes.

They cheat a bit, but all's fair when it comes to immaculately cooked meals.

I don't know whether you'd define a request for your order by five when dinner starts at six-thirty as *cheating*.

Frankly, I don't care if the arrangement is going to deliver the same *tender meat falling off the bone* lamb shank I had.

If you've tried cooking lamb shanks you know that they need a long slow cook, which isn't possible without pre-cooking if you're going strictly *a la carte*.

If you're headed down that road you're also headed for *sorry sir we've run out* or *what the hell do we do with the leftovers* territory.



Ask me to order early and deliver something as good as this, and you won't be getting arguments.

We started the meal with a cob of rustic bread and two dips, a rather tasty exercise that put us in the mood.

Madam had the **entrecôte with wild mushroom sauce**. I thought I'd asked for **herb butter**, but Madam wasn't objecting.

We washed the mains down with an **Angoves Coonawarra Cabernet** that was definitely **Coonawarra** and definitely **Cabernet**.

Not a label I tend to associate with the district, but everything **Coonawarra Cabernet** should be. Once again, no complaints.

And no complaints about the **mud cake** or **lemon and rose sorbet** we had for dessert.

Although neither of us really needed either, both plates went back almost spotless.

Getting off to sleep wasn't, as previously indicated, easy, but early to bed and late to rise delivers the required number of hours who's complaining?







## CEDAR PARK > KURANDA > YUNGABURRA

**Sunday, 20 May 2012**

The promise of a **continental breakfast** had us heading out onto the balcony the following morning.

I was in the middle of contemplating which of the array of spreads I'd be adding to the two slices of bread in the toaster, whether two **croissants** would be deemed excessive and whether I'd be needing cereal when Madam arrived with news that made further considerations academic.

She'd grabbed a glass of orange juice for herself and an apple juice for me and had just placed them on a corner table with an outlook over the surrounding forest when a **cheese platter** appeared.

Actually, calling it a **cheese platter** is probably selling it short.

Samples of **half a dozen cheeses** along with **ham** and **salami** made further consideration of breakfast accompaniments unnecessary.





We worked our way through what was there without *quite* managing to get to the **Camembert**.

Madam's not big on **Emmenthal**, but heavily into **Gruyere**, so there was a disproportionate allocation of those two, but we managed to share the rest nicely, filling up the vacant space and chatting with co-host Markus Ryf, who seemed to have taken on the front of house duties while we were there.



From there, after packing the goods and chattels and ferrying them back to the car, we took another wander through the grounds and headed off to **Kuranda**, where we were due to catch up with another of Madam's Japanese blog friends and her husband.

There have been encounters with a number of these blog friends, Adelaide Lady, Baker Girl, Vet and Ace Photographer (Hughesy's not good with names at the best of times). They've all been interesting people in their own right, and the latest couple were no exception.

Husband Sami had apparently spent eight years riding a bicycle around the world, visiting **Ayers Rock** and crossing the **Sahara** before settling in **Cairns** and opening one of the city's first Japanese restaurants.

I'm not sure the proprietors of the cafe where we sat chatting for the next couple of hours were happy with the lack of orders coming from the table, but we didn't seem to be keeping other paying customers away, so there you go.







From **Kuranda**, we retraced our route back to **Mareeba** and **Tolga**, stopping at a farm-based fruit and veg operation (bundles of garlic bulbs were marked *Product of China*) and **The Peanut Place**, where Madam collected some of the raw product, and I went for a packet of the Chilli and lime version.

After refuelling in **Atherton**, we took a sidetrack to **Lake Tinaroo**, looped back past a flock of white cockatoos feasting on something in what seemed to be a recently ploughed field, and sidetracked to revisit the **Curtain Fig Tree**.

We arrived on the doorstep at **Allumbah Pocket Cottages** just before four.

Unpack the car, take a wander through downtown **Yungaburra** and then back to the cottage to avail ourselves of the **free WiFi** available was the order of the day before dressing for dinner.

That was more a case of dressing for the anticipated temperature outside as night fell) and wandering off to **Nick's Swiss Italian Restaurant**.





Dinner was **bruschetta** and a rather superb **Osso Buco**.

There had been a debate about the main course (Madam had been inclined towards the barramundi until I pointed out this would complicate the wine factor), but there were no complaints when the meals arrived, particularly when it came to the bone marrow.

From there, with a bottle of **Coriole Sangiovese** under the belt, it was a case of back to the cottage for a spa, and off to bed a little after the regular eight-fifteen to eight-thirty.



# YUNGABURRA > BOWEN

**Monday, 21 May 2012**

Coming to the end of something like this there's a temptation to say something along the lines of, *and then we went home*.

Back in your primary school days (or mine, in any case) you wrote until you'd produced something around the required length and then you wrapped things up as quickly as possible.

As the word count on this little effort creeps up towards fifteen thousand, you might think that's what I'm doing, but two factors encourage a speedy conclusion to the narrative.

The first came five minutes before we headed out of **Townsville** on the way north.

*And when are you coming back?* was the Golfer's question, and our reply (*Next Monday*) produced news that he was flying to Melbourne that day and the motel was not accepting bookings.

*Fine. Delivers us home a day earlier, doesn't it? No problem.*

It also meant the last day's leg was extended from around four and a half to about seven hours - not a significant problem if you leave early (say around eight) and take a couple of stops along the way.

The second hadn't quite kicked in when Madam drew my attention to a platypus viewing platform not far from the cottage. That was just after six-fifteen.

Within a quarter hour, we were heading off through a light drizzle to check it out.

It was the kind of weather that would have any self-respecting monotreme snuggled in his or her burrow chuckling at the thought that there might be the odd human out there who'd be silly enough to venture out in weather like that expecting to sight an *ornithorhynchus anatinus* in swimming mode.

Back in the cottage, I used the **free WiFi** to check the weather radar, noting the 128km loop had a patch of cloud more or less on top of us. Switching to the 256km version suggested rain between **Cairns** and **Townsville** was confined to the **Central Tablelands**.

It was still drizzling as we set about stowing the possessions in the chariot, and we set off just after eight in the confident expectation that the weather would clear before we were too far down the track.



As it was, the drizzle turned to rain with occasional downpours you might have expected to move the mud we'd managed to acquire crossing two kilometres of dirt road between **The Lion's Den** and the highway.

**Lion's Den** mud has substantially more stickability than the common or garden variety.

As a result, we drove through rain almost all the way to **Cardwell**, and when we pulled over for brunch, the view over towards **the Range** suggested we weren't out of the woods as far as the precipitation was concerned.

Under the original schedule, we might have pulled over at **Wangan** (the place whose name starts with W that boasts the *best pie shop in the North*, according to Mad Mick). Then we'd have diverted to **Etty Bay** (where the friendly ranger from the **Rainforest Canopy Walkway** reckoned we were sure to sight a cassowary or two) and paused wherever there was a prospect of an interesting photographic capture.

That would've probably have got us into **Townsville** around three or four.

If he'd been there, we would have had time for a spot of shopping while we gave The Golfer time to finish his round on the course.

But, of course, he wasn't, and we were faced with a choice between another two and a half hours on the road or an overnight stay in a regular motel.

So the rain, in its own way, was doing us a bit of a favour, hustling us along the road with minimal excuses for a stop.

As it turned out, we pulled into the shops at **The Domain** almost right at one o'clock.

We were heading south again by two-thirty having stocked up on bulk cat food, hand towels and water bottles and made the now regulation diversion to **Angelina's Deli** at **The Precinct** in **Fairfield Waters...**

And that's, more or less, the end of the story, as the word count nudges towards fifteen thousand.

The published version will, of course, probably be considerably longer.