

# OPULENCE IN THE OUTBACK

On a whirlwind tour from luxury island resort to working cattle station to dreamy rainforest lodge, *Olivia Palamountain* tunes into the natural beauty of Queensland



**SEEN FROM THE SKY, THE GREAT BARRIER REEF** blooms and writhes like ink in water, forming a collection of living islands stretching 1,600 miles along the Queensland coast. This string of coral is one of the world's great natural wonders and, as we fly over the shimmering blue ocean in a four-seater helicopter, I'm stunned into silence. For 15 glorious minutes we gaze down at the glistening Coral Sea and scan for whales (not this time), then make a fluttering landing on the blazing sands of Whitehaven Beach to the pop of champagne corks.

This incredible, two-hour excursion takes off from Hayman Island, a 726-acre private isle in the tropical Whitsundays. Some 180 miles south of Cairns, it is home to a five-star resort where helicopter trips aren't the only sign of opulence. Since its inception in the 50s, Hayman Island has set the bar for Australian luxury travel, with a banging 90s heyday that made it *the* place to be seen in the southern hemisphere. Last July, following a multi-million-dollar facelift, it was relaunched by hospitality experts One&Only, and is now firmly back on the global luxury map. An iconic low-rise build with 209 rooms, it appears to have been inspired by a Bond villain's lair. The most striking feature is a gigantic swimming pool, equal to seven Olympic-sized pools, that is accessible from all the ground-floor suites in the main building and topped with a central island restaurant, On the Rocks.

From my private deck I can see signature cocktails being shaken and, although it's not yet midday, I'm moved to take the plunge and glide over for a stiff drink. A honeymoon heaven, Hayman Island will delight couples (the room service is especially comprehensive), but there is also a separate wing designed for family holidays. The indulgent breakfast buffet is a thing of beauty, guaranteed to throw a bikini body off course in one sitting. Thankfully, help is on hand in the form of a Bodyism gym. Founder James Duigan, a trainer to the stars, is best known for shaping Elle 'The Body' Macpherson, and it's a treat to work out with experts trained in his philosophy. If the thought of getting sweaty in a gym seems too torturous, there's also yoga, tennis, watersports and island excursions to enjoy. And frankly, I'll do just about anything to avoid the divine and very tempting in-house boutique – with bikinis and beachwear from Seafolly, Love Stories and Camilla, it's a serious danger zone.

Instead, I decide to go native and explore the island on foot. Only one end of Hayman has been developed, with the rest covered in myriad trails that lead up to lookouts and down to deserted bays, past wallabies and assorted jungle critters. At the Cook Lookout,



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Hayman Island – fit for 007. This page, clockwise from top left: red earth near Crystalbrook Lodge; enjoy cocktails (shaken and not stirred) by Hayman Island's luxe pool; heli-ranching in the Queensland outback

the highest point on the island at 800ft, the view over the water is bewitching. I imagine what intrepid Yorkshireman Captain Cook must have felt when he first sailed into this paradise back in 1770 and, buoyed by his pioneering spirit, I'm relishing my own adventure here.

Queensland is a work of nature painted in three striking colours: the deep blue of the ocean, the red dust of the outback and the living green of the rainforest. You can taste all three in a week. Having blissfully dived into the first, I now head north to the hub city of Cairns, then take a 45-minute flight west to the 85,000-acre Crystalbrook Lodge cattle station. Turbulence bullies our tiny plane as we rattle inland, and the landscape fades from urban to bush, and then finally a deep, blood-red soil that stains the world below.

Just under 100 miles west of Cairns, Crystalbrook Lodge sits on the edge of a man-made lake – a watering hole that tempers this dry land beautifully. Wildlife, from eagles to freshwater crocs, flock to its shores and, with no more than ten guests at a time, this sanctuary feels like a little Eden. After a refreshing dip in the 'magna' infinity pool (magnesium does wonders for the skin) and a sublime supper of Angus beef fillet from the local herd, I'm left to drink in this splendid isolation. Under a vast sky filled with a million stars, the outback hums its nightly tune as fireflies skip through the darkness. ►

# Deluxe TRAVEL



Days at Crystalbrook are equally chilled out. On the face of it, there's not much to do besides fishing, twitching or hacking out on to the land. But this is still a working ranch and the owner, something of a Cairns tycoon, has a surprise in store. Australia's modern ranchers patrol such enormous swathes of land that rustling on horseback would take forever. So instead these intrepid farmers take to the skies in open-sided, two-seater choppers used to drive and herd the cattle.

My heli-chauffeur knows the land by heart and has been flying since his teens. We take off vertically and buzz straight up into clouds. Thanks to his nonchalance in front of the controls, I'm able to open my eyes. The chopper is capable of the most incredible moves and, as we dart and spiral, I giggle hysterically, getting high off the fine line between fear and freedom. From galloping over charging cattle to hovering close to some 'freshies' basking at a watering hole (I keep all my limbs firmly inside), this is one very grown-up fairground ride.

Back on terra firma, it's time to check out the local entertainment with a trip to Chillagoe. Once a thriving mining community, this tin-pot town 15 miles from the lodge is now home to some 230 people. I'm at a loss as to the appeal of such a remote environment. Over a sweating pint in the pub, a Chillagoe resident of more than 70 years fields my questions with good grace, incredulous that anyone wouldn't want to live here – then promptly asks me on a date. With my heart all of a flutter, I decide to cool off with a quick tour of the famous Chillagoe-Mungana limestone caves before beginning the three-hour drive back to the coast.

My walkabout is now leading me deep into the woods to Silky Oaks, a family-owned lodge on the edge of the World Heritage-listed Daintree Rainforest. Over 100 million years old, this is the oldest rainforest in the world, and one of the most complex ecosystems on



Clockwise, from top left: Silky Oaks' accommodation, and its jungle canopy-perched restaurant; Olivia (left) arrives in the Whitsundays



Earth. Silky Oaks Lodge borders this, separated from it by the Mossman Gorge River, which acts like a private water feature flowing the length of the property. The lodge is made up of 36 treehouse-style cabanas built into the forest, many with views overlooking the river and the wilds beyond.

In wet season, the river swells and roars into action but, when I visit in September, it's still flowing gently. I head down to the furthest billabong to appreciate the Daintree from the forest floor. Huge boulders interrupt the riverbed, made perfectly smooth by water that has been flowing over them for century after century, while the surrounding primeval forest has a patient dignity.

I feel humbled and inspired by this verdant and venerable corner of our planet, and later learn that this is a spot where the indigenous Kuku Yalanji tribe would take its women to give birth. It is indeed a special place, resonating with a deeply feminine spirit and a nurturing energy. There's no one around, so it seems only fitting to enjoy a skinny-dip in the river – although it feels more like a baptism, as I happily surrender myself to the beauty of Mother Earth. ■

## BOOK NOW

■ **Cathay Pacific** ([cathayair.com](http://cathayair.com)) offers a fast route to Cairns flying via Hong Kong. **QantasLink** ([qantas.com.au](http://qantas.com.au)) flies from Cairns to Hamilton Island, from where yacht transfers to Hayman Island take 45 minutes.

■ Stay at **One&Only Hayman Island** (from £371 with breakfast, [oneandonlyresorts.com](http://oneandonlyresorts.com)); **Crystalbrook Lodge** (from £457 including meals and activities, [crystalbrookcollection.com.au](http://crystalbrookcollection.com.au)); **Silky Oaks Lodge** (from £202 with breakfast, [silkyoakslodge.com.au](http://silkyoakslodge.com.au)).

■ **The weather is best from April to September. Queensland and The Great Barrier Reef** (£15.99, **Lonely Planet**) is a comprehensive guide; for information, see [queensland.com](http://queensland.com) and [australia.com](http://australia.com).