

High on the scenery (Courier Mail)

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IN A little over 24 hours I've seen a tree kangaroo, a couple of platypuses, a python and a green tree snake, possums, parrots and bandicoots, sawshelled turtles and water dragons.

But this is no wildlife park. This is a short overnight visit to the Atherton Tableland, or to give it its new marketing moniker, the Cairns Highlands.

In between times there has been a bit of history, a spot of fishing, some picture-postcard waterfalls and giant trees, award-winning gardens and great local food.

Admittedly we were pushing it a bit trying to cram it all in, but it serves to demonstrate that the Cairns Highlands is more than a day trip out of Cairns – it is a destination in itself. The base for this 24-hour blitz is a self-contained unit at Grandview, at Tarzali, in the central Tableland area. The brief is to sample as many of the local attractions as possible within half an hour's drive of the accommodation.

Even with a fast and furious schedule, we don't even see half of the possibilities on offer.

Louise Knol, who with husband Chris runs Grandview, is the tour guide. The vehicle is a new Ford 250 dual-cab diesel. With Chris's modifications it is an attraction in itself. Here, in no particular order, are just a few of the attractions on offer.

Gadgarra Red Cedar

Who knows how this forest giant escaped the axe.

Thought to be 500 years old, this huge tree is an inspiring clue to how this area would have looked a century ago before the timber-getters and settlers felled most of the surrounding forests.

Lake Barrine

The Highlands have a very recent volcanic history and the crater lakes Barrine and Eacham are tranquil now, but have a violent eruptive past. Try a guided cruise on the impossibly blue waters of Lake Barrine with its surrounding garland of tropical rainforest. Afterwards tea and scones in the Lake Barrine Teahouse, before walking it off with a stroll to the Twin Kauris or on the circuit right around the lake.

Curtain Fig

Another impossibly large forest veteran – part nature, part natural engineering, very much a high-rise for wildlife. It's only a short drive from Yungaburra and readily accessed with a good boardwalk.



McHugh's Lookout

On a clear day this historic lookout, on the road between Millaa Millaa and the Kennedy Highway near Ravenshoe, offers expansive views over the rolling Highlands – pastoral and agricultural lands, patches of rainforest, Queensland's highest mountains and volcanic cinder cones. But on a misty day you'll see nothing.

Millaa Millaa Falls

You've seen these falls in countless postcards, and even on a Qantas commercial with the children's choir. It's part of the waterfall circuit near Millaa Millaa. If time is on your side also check Zillie, Ellinjaa and Mungalli Falls – all best after a good wet season.

Mungalli Creek Dairy

Try the cheese-tasting at the Mungalli Creek Dairy Teahouse, near Millaa Millaa. Owner Robert Watson explains this is a biodynamic dairy – "the Rolls-Royce of organics" – and that the dairy farm and cheese factory are his way of adapting to the changing circumstances of the dairy industry.

Mungalli Creek makes a range of cheeses including quarks, havarti and cheddars as well as organic milks and flavoured yoghurts (mango, lemon aspen, Davidson's plum, passionfruit). Soon there will be a range of dairy desserts.

Robert says the greatest challenge is keeping up with demand – "It's gobbled up as soon as we make it".

Mungalli Creek has made it as far as Perth but nothing beats sampling the product in sight of the cows it came from.

Tarzali Lakes Fishing Park

Tarzali Lakes operators make a lot of promises that they back with a money-back pledge. They guarantee visitors will see a platypus on their tour to a back lake, and given only 12 per cent of Australians have seen a platypus in the wild, this is some promise. And if you want to try the fishing, they also guarantee hooking up on some sporty jade perch.

They have a cafe that serves very good quality locally grown fish and redclaw. It's a great destination for families and reasonably priced.

Dining out

The evening dinner is at Nick's Swiss-Italian Restaurant in the historic village of Yungaburra.

Nick is prone to yodelling, piano accordion playing and other bizarre promotional activities, but the food is very good and reasonably priced.

It includes a range of local produce and traditional Swiss specialties such as rosti (potato cakes), Spatzli pasta and bratwurst.

Contrary to the opinions of some, there are more than a few good restaurants and hotels serving meals on the Tableland – central Yungaburra has the greatest range.

Tree kangaroo spotting

Very few Queenslanders even know about the existence of tree kangaroos, much less seen them in the wild.

Again, local wildlife enthusiast Garrie Douglas provides tours of private properties that come with the guarantee that he's never failed to locate a tree kangaroo yet. He doesn't disappoint with a young Lumholtz tree kangaroo spotted.

Majestic Theatre, Malanda

Douglas's other claim to fame is as the lessee of Malanda's Majestic Theatre, arguably Australia's longest continually running regional picture theatre. He is happy to show visitors the old Westrex arc-lamp projectors and the 1917 glass-slide projector.

On our visit the theatre is set up for the local theatre company's production of Oliver, but when the cinema returns, so do the traditional canvas sling seats. A great weekend night out, old style.

Malanda Dairy Centre

Set in a completely refurbished old dairy co-operative, the Malanda Dairy Centre combines a good local food outlet with a dairy museum and dairy factory tours. The local tapestry group is often beavering away on site.

Walking with Ernie

At Malanda Falls, just outside the town, local Ngadjon elder Ernie Raymont takes guided walks in the forest. His people lived on the edge of this rainforest until the late 1960s. Raymont is a very personable and knowledgeable guide with a commentary combining natural history with cultural insights.

We see a large python squaring off with an entranced scrub turkey, a river full of turtles and water dragons, and a brilliantly coloured green tree snake.

This 40-minute walk is, for me, one of the highlights of the visit, interesting in its own right but given greater impact through Raymont's quiet grace. As walks in the woods go, this one takes some beating.

Hillside Eden Gardens

This recently was one of 10 finalists in the *Better Homes and Gardens* competition. If nothing else, the tropical garden serves as an inspiration for what one family, Shane and Teresa Davis, have been able to achieve through imagination and sheer hard work. A work in progress.

GETTING THERE

- [Grandview Country Accommodation](#), Hogan Rd, Tarzali. Chris and Louise Knol, (07) 4095 1266
- Malanda Falls Visitor Centre, (07) 4096 6957 (book here for the Ngadjon guided walks with Ernie Raymont, adults \$10, children \$4, families \$20).
- Ravenshoe-Koombooloomba Visitor Centre, (07) 4097 7700
- Atherton Tableland Information Centre, (07) 4091 4222
- Lake Barrine Teahouse and Cruises, Gillies Highway, Yungaburra. Cruises: adults \$13, children \$6.50, (07) 4095 3847
- [Tarzali Lakes Fishing Park](#), Malanda-Millaa Millaa Rd. Fishing: from \$20 adults, \$15 children. Platypus tours \$10 adults, \$5 for children, (07) 4097 2713
- Mungalli Creek Dairy, Brooks Rd, Millaa Millaa, (07) 4097 2232
- Malanda Dairy Centre, James St, Malanda, (07) 4095 1234

Tree Kangaroo Visits. Garrie Douglas (At A Glance) can organise tree kangaroo visits on request, (07) 4095 3155.