



In Praise of Smaller Caravan Parks

Australia's luxurious caravan resorts attract thousands of holidaymakers each year, but some caravanners still prefer lesser known parks away from the beaten track. Marion Marchant is among them.

When you get to the stage of screaming 'No, not another musical toilet block!', you're fed up with the sight of immaculate lawns, and the list of rules takes longer to read than the time you plan to stay there, leave the five-star caravan parks alone and seek out the smaller, older ones.

We've had so much joy out of such parks we found in northern Queensland. The owners soon know us by name and have time to chat about local interests,



Ulysses butterfly among the tropical vegetation at Paronella Park. Above: the park's castle.

whereas at bigger, glossier parks the receptionists are usually so busy all they have time for is to give you some literature and gabble a couple of instructions before turning to the next person in the queue.

The Lake Eacham Caravan Park on the Atherton Tableland, we discovered, was just beautiful. It was full of shady trees and birds and, thanks to the rainforest, was so cool. Very few people came, so we had plenty of space. No gardeners

clipped the lawn edges or knocked the last leaf off the trees. No noisy garbage trucks collected the rubbish. Everything was done very unobtrusively: the toilets were cleaned but we never knew when, and we didn't have to think 'key' whenever we wanted to use them.

We spent a lot of time watching the antics of two brown baby birds that looked like magpies (and apparently were the offspring of black-backed magpies). We were wakened by tumultuous birdsong, not thundering traffic. Lake Eacham CP had a lot of animals – peacocks and guinea fowl paraded freely, while there were donkeys and dingoes to visit in their enclosures.

The park is close to beautiful Lake Eacham in a volcanic crater with bright blue water that beckons you to swim. There is a 4 km walk around the perimeter of the volcano, where the strangler figs and ferns are a marvel along the way.

Nearby is the pretty town of Yungaburra, where one of the highlights is a two-storey gallery exhibiting marvellous wooden boxes and tables. Other places also sell craft pieces; one is Trixie's, a terrific cafe where you can sit under the shade out the back overlooking a pleasant garden while sampling some yummy cakes. There's usually a branch full of bananas for customers to help themselves from too.

Another volcanic lake in the area, Barrine, makes an interesting day trip. There you can find a lovely old tea house dating back to 1927 with fine water views. If you're lucky you may get to see the eels, or the pleasure boats chugging off on a scenic trip round the lake.

Our stay in the Tablelands over, we made for Paronella Park at Innisfail, another beauty spot with a fascinating history. We had intended to make it a day trip only but on arriving decided to stay overnight because here we found a delightful small caravan park attached to Paronella – our quiet, shady spot was so secluded that we couldn't see any other vans, only stunning tropical vegetation. Beautiful hanging crab claw flowers and hibiscus surrounded us, Ulysses butterflies abounded and delightful birds, some of which we hadn't seen before, sang and cavorted. The advantage of staying here was that we could go back into Paronella Park without paying, and

at any time outside of opening hours.

Next morning we were up at 5:30 am looking for platypus at the far end of Paronella Park; after dark, we made our way to the entrance to see the dramatic falls illuminated. We also had a good couple of undisturbed hours painting a scene of the ruined castle before the visitors started to trickle in.

The old cottage that was once the home of the family who built the castle now does Devonshire teas with a particularly delicious paw paw and ginger jam. Being residents, we got a free cuppa!



Baby magpies kept park visitors amused at Lake Eacham in the Atherton Tableland.

Wandering round the grounds of Paronella Park you come across all sorts of hidden and interesting tableaux: there's a secret garden with a small waterfall that you come to through 'the tunnel of love'; an avenue of kauri trees; and a large clump of bamboo. The sheer number of intersecting paths encourages visitors to dart off in all sorts of directions.

The story behind the castle is revealed in a book available from the shop, but we advise people to make a point of visiting Paronella Park personally – we've never come across anything like it.

Nearing Rockhampton, we had heard about Mount Hay, famous for its 'thunder eggs' and, being keen fossickers, decided to visit. We found ourselves in a small though neglected caravan park at the top of a small mountain with glorious views. The owners also ran the shop and gem

workshop, instructing people how to find the thunder eggs.

After the day-visitors departed, we were the only occupants left, and that was fine with us. We'd come to do some fossicking, not worry about the style of the amenities block. Actually, it was rather splendidly decorated with beautiful big blue and brown moths that stayed motionless on the walls all day. Some effort had been made in the past to make garden beds but these were now sadly overgrown and neglected.

We understood why when we visited the

shop later. The owners were very busy with their gemstones and the many tourists eager to try their luck on the diggings. Armed with picks and an old tin bucket we soon joined them, receiving a talk on how to recognise thunder eggs and where to dig. Off we went, and in no time at all had found some – nothing awe-inspiring, but big enough to rush back to the workshop to have cut in two. The cutter was very knowledgeable and told us lots of interesting facts. We were delighted with the cut faces and could see how beautiful they'd be when we got them home and polished them.

Bucket in hand and pick over the shoulder we 'hey ho'ed' our way back to our trailer, feeling like the dwarfs after a good day at the mine. As residents, we were allowed to go back again early next morning, when we found a few more. We left Mount Hay quite regretfully, having

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enjoyed a quiet, starlit night snuggled under the doona, which had to be dragged out and divested of all the red dust it had collected up north.

Most people will have heard of Bowen. The town itself is pretty ordinary and you might be tempted to carry on through but I have to say, 'Don't!' because the beaches will change your mind. We went to Horseshoe Bay and found a small, quiet caravan park just a short walk away from a glorious little bay where coral and fish were easily accessible to this timid snorkeller; we had just about given up on my ever getting to see the beauty of underwater coral gardens because I daren't swim out of my depth with a snorkel!

Here, one very calm morning, even I was able to swim around the rocks fairly close to the beach. What magic! From above you wouldn't know anything was there, but below, shoals of inch-long blue fish darted around near the surface while crowds of striped ones swam below me. I even saw green coral. I was so excited I nearly drowned in my effort to tell my husband, who was protectively swimming alongside. The chance to experience this far outweighed anything a five-star park had to offer.

Our next small park was at Bargara, near Bundaberg. First impressions were not very favourable, which just goes to show how wrong one can be. We always ask for a site away from other people, which either gets the owners' backs up – in which case we leave – or they rise to the challenge. The Bargara caravan park's new owners met every challenge we threw at them; in no time at all we were installed between the toilet block and the camp kitchen right beside the sea. The owner told us to link up to electricity in the laundry as we weren't, strictly speaking, on a site. On Saturday and Sunday the Bathurst car racing was on TV but our set wasn't giving much of a picture. The owner of the park went out of his way to help. First he 'borrowed' an aerial from an onsite van, and when that didn't work he gave my husband a key to the van so he could watch it there. He was in and out all day Saturday and Sunday until a customer came for the van. The



Marion Marchant enjoying the lush colourful gardens at Lake Barrine, Qld.

owners probably thought we were real nuisances but they didn't show it.

When they've finished the camp kitchen and knocked down the old amenities block to make room for more seafront sites it will be a nice little park. It's only 14 km out of Bundaberg and there's lots to see and do there.

Our next good find was at Buderim. It was so small and unobtrusive we actually drove right past it, but the beauty of it was its very central position. We didn't have to take the car out to see the town.

The park is fairly old so it has the advantage of well-established shady trees and is very quiet. When a storm threatened, the owners suggested we might like to park the car under the motel building for shelter.

Buderim is the ginger centre just north of Brisbane and is quite an attractive little town. There are art and craft shops, lovely cafes, a good swimming pool (always an important consideration up north) and lots of market stalls housed in the old ginger factory.

If you're tempted to bypass the older, smaller parks, think again. The amenities may not be so swish, there may not be games rooms or even a pool, but those minuses are far outweighed by the personal touch and the extra things the owners do for you. Remember: small is still beautiful. CW

Fact File

Lake Eacham Caravan Park

Powered and unpowered sites, self-contained cabins, campers' kitchen, store and petrol available; (07) 4095 3730.

Paronella Park Heritage Gardens and Caravan Park (Innisfail)

Powered and unpowered sites, cabins, undercover barbecue area, guided night walks, swimming, fish feeding, general store within walking distance; (07) 4065 3225, fax (07) 4065 3344.

Mount Hay Gemstone Tourist Park (Rockhampton)

14 powered sites, septic toilets, showers and laundry; (07) 4934 7183.

Horseshoe Bay Resort (Bowen)

40 powered sites, recreation room, sauna, pool, mini-golf, kiosk and licensed restaurant; (07) 4786 2564; fax (07) 4786 3460.

Buderim Pines Caravan Park (Buderim)

20 powered sites, campers' kitchen and barbecue, playground, public telephone; (07) 5445 1119.