

Mission possible

By Allison Harding

CASSOWARIES call Mission Beach home. And I'm not looking forward to meeting one of the tall flightless birds with killer toes.

Locals advise carrying a rake in the rainforest so the creatures think I'm taller than them. Obviously they're not too bright (the cassowaries, not the locals).

So, twice, three, four times a day, I gather my courage and make the hike to the beach from our rented holiday house through the hacked-out jungle.

But I don't bother with the rake. Not because I'm brave. But because the "hike" only takes 30 seconds.

Yep, life's tough at Mission Beach, hidden away off the main highway between Townsville and Cairns. It's secluded but not remote. And far enough away – from Cairns it's a 90-minute drive – not to be a popular point for day-trippers.

The name is something of a misnomer because there are actually several main areas – and none seems to be actually called Mission Beach. There is Bingil Bay up north, then North Mission Beach, with its small collection of laid-back cafes and bars, shops, and galleries. Then, about a 10-minute drive away, there is Wongaling, which has a central shopping centre, backpackers' hostel, and water taxi to Dunk Island. And then there's South Mission, home to Luggar Bay and Kennedy Bay, and stunning views.

The 14km stretch of beach, lapped by the Coral Sea, is among the most beautiful on the Queensland coastline. Mission Beach is the closest mainland point to the resorts of Dunk and Bedarra Islands.

Dunk, a palm-tree fringed haven, is a delightful place to spend the day. Especially if you can scrounge a free boat ride across. All you need is to have the foresight to rent a holiday house next to the site of a new home in progress.

We had been looking forward to escaping

FACT FILE

Getting there: Mission Beach is 15 minutes off the Bruce Highway, between Townsville and Cairns.

It's a 90-minute drive from Cairns, and about a 2½-hour drive from Townsville.

Major coach lines including Greyhound operate from both cities to Mission Beach.

Accommodation: Ranges from backpacker hostels, caravan parks and holiday units to holiday houses available for rent through local real estate agents.

Our beachfront holiday house, which could sleep six people, cost \$970 a week.

Getting around: Sugarland Car Rentals offers free pick-up and delivery. Be aware you cannot return other car hire company rentals anywhere in Mission Beach. A bus service operates from South Mission Beach to Bingil Bay.

Information: Contact Mission Beach Promotion Bureau on (07) 4068 7099 for more details on accommodation and attractions.



IDYLLIC . . . clockwise from left, the waterhole at Paronella Park, looking across to Dunk Island from South Mission Beach, and Paronella Park in the rainforest.

a building site two doors down at home, which had noisily fired up at 6.30am each day for months.

So arriving at our idyllic holiday house, to see a partly built, two-storey home, complete with workmen next door, isn't exactly welcoming. Nor was the sound of the drills, jackhammers and saws.

A quick call to the real estate agent, though, is met with concern. They'll try to sort something out, the woman says.

Later that morning as we're relaxing by the pool, a bloke wanders in from next door.

"G'day," he says amicably. "I own the place next door and the real estate agent tells me you're a bit worried about the noise."

He promises they won't be working too much and will try to keep the noise down. And as a softener, invites us to dinner at a fine local restaurant and across to Dunk

Island the next day for breakfast and lunch – all at his cost. And, if the agent finds us somewhere else to stay, he'll make good with the owner of our house. It's a friendly sort of place.

But we choose to stay put. After all, we're rather partial to our beachfront location, our patio, barbecue and saltwater pool.

After a few days of doing very little – early morning swims, lots of reading, walks along the beach into North Mission for dinner at any one of a selection of little restaurants and walking home by torchlight – it's time to explore the area.

Hiring a car, we head north for Paronella Park, on the Old Bruce Highway. This National Trust-listed site is the winner of a veritable swag of tourism awards.

Jose Paronella began building his dream in 1929 and completed it by 1935. For decades it attracted visitors to dances, film nights and the wonderful gardens before falling into disrepair.

Today, it is back to its original beauty and home to a magnificent avenue of kauri pines, a suspension bridge, waterfalls, safe swimming holes, turret-topped balconies, tunnels and enchanting gardens. In fact, it's the only part of North Queensland to be featured in new tourism commercials for the state.

In a world full of theme parks and high-tech rides, there is something quite special about spending a day enjoying the simple pleasures of Paronella Park.

Other simple pleasures in close proximity to Mission Beach are the stunning waterholes. The refreshment of a crystal-clear waterhole is hard to beat. Alligators Nest, near Tully, (despite the name, no crocodiles in sight) is a local favorite, although stinger nets mean visitors can swim at Mission Beach year-round.

I'm happy to swim in our pool, though I could do without the cane toads crouching around its fence at dusk. And, of course, those cassowaries lurking in the jungle.