

# Sweet sights





# and memories

Gordon and Pam May, self-confessed "love birds", are keen travellers who delight in the diversity of our beautiful country. They particularly enjoyed the Canecutter Way as it covers varied environments, from remnant rainforest to glorious beaches, as well as cutting out a part of the busy Bruce Highway. En route, Gordon and Pam were enchanted by the yesteryear-townships and their "Old Queenslander" homes, the verandah-shaded pubs, century-old sugar mills and the romantic, dream-come-true Paronella Park.



## Take your time to savour the delights of Queensland's Canecutter Way

Story and photography by GORDON & PAMELA MAY

CAMPING at a castle is one of many sweet tastes of history along Canecutter Way, an alternate route south from Innisfail in Queensland. True blue pubs, honour-system fruit stalls, bakeries selling their own pies, a fruit winery in a canefield – the 42km of Canecutter Way need to be savoured, not rushed.

For a century, Canecutter Way was part of the Cairns-Townsville road. However, when the Bruce Highway was realigned between Innisfail and Silkwood, it bypassed South Johnstone, Mena Creek and Japoonvale settlements, leaving them to mellow in an "early Queenslander" atmosphere.

At the northern approach, Innisfail features an Italian marble canecutter statue, commemorating migrants who pioneered the district's sugar industry. It is an appropriate starting point for the route past historic settlements and through to Kurrimine Beach.

Canefields line the road, dotted with signs warning of narrow-gauge train crossings. Mobile signs show where bin-

haulers are operating. These machines tow cane bins from farms to trains and burst from fields at a great rate of knots.

About 6km south of Innisfail, we stopped at Wangan hamlet's bakers for freshly made pies. Another customer suggested we visit nearby Currajah Hotel to see their mosaic art display – in the amenities! It was the first of several interesting pubs along the way.

Only 4km distant, South Johnstone's Criterion Hotel is in the heart of sugar country and its cool verandahs have shaded locals and travellers for a century. A sugar mill 300 metres away cloaks the township with a strong, sweet smell of molasses.

Proving "sugar rules", cane trains run down the middle of the street. Aptly named, Off the Rails gallery and café is mere metres from the track.

Travelling on, we noticed cane barracks that once housed canecutters.

The barrack rooms were small and hot, but townsfolk reckoned that after working all day under a blazing sun, ►

Narrow gauge tracks for the sugarcane trains line the waving fields.





**The enormous South Johnston sugar mill.**

► cutters slept soundly “anywhere they could lie down”.

More inviting accommodation (and country cooking) is available southwest at Mena Creek. After a bistro lunch on Hotel Mena’s verandah, we walked 50 metres to a Canecutter Way highlight – Paronella Park.

If South Johnstone is the heart of this historic district, Paronella Park is its soul. It embodies an incredible dream come true. We’ll tell the story in brief.

Spanish pastrycook Jose Paronella landed at Innisfail in 1913. After labouring, buying, improving and selling cane farms, he was able to buy land beside Mena Creek Falls and start building his dream, a Catalan-style castle.

Jose and wife Margarita first built a “Grand Staircase” so they could carry creek sand for cement to build a cottage on the upper level of their five hectares. They then started their labour of love.

Together they built a turreted castle, picnic grounds, swimmers’ changing rooms, tennis courts and pavilions, refreshment rooms and a theatre/ballroom. A parkland of 7000 tropical trees

**A cane train hauls its sweet load.**



and palms was created, enhanced by a fountain and a Tunnel of Love to Teresa Falls.

In 1933 the Paronellas installed North Queensland’s first hydro-electric plant for lighting the castle and grounds. The crenellated power-house still clings to a cliff beside Mena Creek Falls and the park owners since 1993 (Mark and Judy Evans) will soon have the hydro operational again.

Adults are fascinated by Paronella Park’s history. Children love the fairytale aura and the various activities for them. Fish and turtle feeding, swimming and spotting butterflies and birds are popular and a flat meadow is ideal for ball games.



**The turreted silhouette of Paronella Park Castle, a real highlight of the journey.**

It takes a couple of hours to explore Paronella, so its Café-on-the-Deck is well patronised. Campers who stay in the rainforested caravan park can enjoy free guided evening walks through Paronella.

Hikers who overnight at Paronella Park or Hotel Mena gain an early morning start on the 3.7km (one-way) Gorrell Track to MacNamee Creek. This easy grade walk to a rainforest pool and picnic area is one of the Misty Mountains’ network of tracks into ranges backing Canecutter Way.

We took the easy option of continuing south to another sugar township, Japoonvale, to cool off in freshwater Liverpool Creek. Many travellers have a break there and appreciate the deep shade, picnic tables and amenities.

Keeping an eye out for trains, bin-haulers and fruit stalls, we headed east to the old sugar town of Silkwood. Glad we didn’t obey our first instinct – to drive straight through Silkwood to camp at Kurrimine Beach.

First we noticed classic Silkwood ►

**Train tracks run down the middle of the street at South Johnstone.**







**Beach camping at Kurrimine.**

home. We found "Silkwood Castle, circa 1990" one street off the main road. This four-storey folly/eccentricity/magnificent obsession proved the Paronellas were not the last north Queenslanders to dream on a grand scale.

On the last leg of Canecutter Way, 1.6km east across the Bruce Highway, we visited Murdering Point Winery, another dream come true.

The Berryman family of cane farmers also grew pineapples, papaya and passionfruit. Years ago they dreamed of making wine from the cocktail of tropical fruits grown locally.

Their dream was realised in 2001 when they opened a winery on their farm, offering red, white and fortified wines that have won Australian gold and silver medals. Delicate flavours from rainforest fruits, black sapote, mango, lychee and passionfruit tempted us to linger over tastings, but Kurrimine beckoned.

Kurrimine Beach Holiday Park has a rare attraction.

On suitable tides, guests can walk out to beautiful King Reef, only 100 metres offshore. More conventional activities include strolling the palm-fringed beach, fishing, socialising in the cool camp kitchen or lolling in an enormous pool.

Too tired for more activity, we sat on the shady beach with a glass of Murdering Point's lychee-based "Romance" and toasted the history of Canecutter Way, an appropriate finale for an interesting journey.



**Paronella's Cafe-on-the-Deck.**

► Hotel, with its high-ceilinged verandahs. Australia's smallest National Bank caught our eye, then a cubby-house sized police station.

While we photographed a cane train in the street, a guard told us Silkwood also has a castle – and it's a private

**Australia's smallest National Bank is at Silkwood – no room for crowds here!**



**Location:** From Innisfail, the 42km Canecutter Way runs southwest through Wangan, South Johnstone, Mena Creek and Japoonvale before turning east through Silkwood and crossing the Bruce Highway to Kurrimine.

**Activities:** Sightseeing around historic sugar towns, seeing modern canefield operations, visiting unique Paronella Park, sampling tropical fruit wines and ending the day at a beachfront caravan park.

**Contact:** Canecutter Way Visitor Centre, Innisfail, (07) 4061 4361, [www.canecutterway.com.au](http://www.canecutterway.com.au) (a brochure/map on the Canecutter Way can be downloaded from this site).

Hotel Mena, Japoonvale Road, Mena Creek, (07) 4065 3201.

Paronella Park, Japoonvale Road, Mena Creek, (07) 4065 3225, [info@paronellapark.com.au](mailto:info@paronellapark.com.au).

Murdering Point Winery, Murdering Point Road, Silkwood East, (07) 4065 2327, [info@murderingpointwinery.com.au](mailto:info@murderingpointwinery.com.au).

Kurrimine Beach Holiday Park, Kurrimine Beach, (07) 4065 6166, [info@kurriminebeachholidaypark.com.au](mailto:info@kurriminebeachholidaypark.com.au).

Our map is from Hema's Road Atlas, (07) 3340 0000.

