



Cooktown - A Sleepy Town With A Lively Past

Last time, we travelled along the [Burke Developmental Road from Normanton to Mareeba](#). A fantastic journey through remote country.

A Man-Eating Mountain

We had planned to stay in Mareeba. However the town was bulging at the seams with caravans and camper trailers. Being July, it was peak season for grey nomads. We had no luck finding accommodation, so Peta booked us into the Big 4 at Cooktown - about 250km further north.

The drive is spectacular. To the east are rainforests and steep mountains, to the west is the familiar Savannah woodland which stretches forever westward.



SKIRTING AROUND THE WESTERN SIDE OF THE DAINTREE NATIONAL PARK EN ROUTE TO COOKTOWN.



DROPPING DOWN INTO COOKTOWN BESIDE MT COOK. LUSH TROPICAL RAINFOREST.

Mist-covered tropical mountains were a sight for sore eyes after spending months inland. 25km south of Cooktown is Black Mountain, a mountain of granite rocks. Black algae covers the rocks, giving the mountain its distinctive appearance. Black Mountain lies within [Black Mountain \(Kalkajaka\) National Park](#). This is a special story place for the local Kuku Yalanji people.



BLACK MOUNTAIN LOOMS OMINOUSLY OUT OF THE TROPIC RAINFOREST.

Black Mountain is steeped in mystery. The mountain consists of huge granite boulders of ancient magma - some as large as a house - and totally devoid of any soil. The soil has eroded away over the years and exposed an enormous pile of granite boulders. Danger lurks within the mountain, with deep chasms and a labyrinth of chambers. People have been known to disappear into Black Mountain and never return.

Why The Name "Cooktown"?

Cooktown is a beautiful place. It has an unspoilt old-world feel, really laid back.

Captain Cook was laid up here for a couple of months in 1770 whilst repairing his ship. He had come to grief on the coral reefs just past Cape Tribulation - so named because this is where his tribulations began. Cook had inadvertently sailed straight into the treacherous maze of reefs we now know as the Great Barrier Reef.



SOMEWHERE OUT THERE, COOK RAN AGROUND ON A REEF.

Endeavour River (known as Waalumbaal Birri long before Cook showed up) was named after his ship. It is here that Joseph Banks first sighted kangaroos (or ganguuru). Banks must have thought he was imagining things at first!

Relations between local Aboriginal people and the ship's crew were generally okay, however some inevitable misunderstandings were treated tactfully by both sides.



LOOKING NORTH FROM GRASSY HILL LOOKOUT. COOK REPAIRED THE ENDEAVOUR IN THE RIVER, BOTTOM LEFT OF THIS PHOTO.

I recently heard that Cook and his men happened to land and camp on neutral ground - country common to all mobs, used as a meeting place. By sheer accident he was safe because he hadn't set up camp on anyone's country before asking permission. I need to verify whether this is in fact correct.

Chasing The Elusive Yellow Metal

Cooktown (originally Cook's Town) evolved from the Palmer River gold rush in 1873. In October 1873 a party landed at the mouth of the Endeavour River. Some established a port and others forged a path through impenetrable scrub to the goldfields nearly 200km to the west-southwest.

The existing inhabitants of these lands took exception to hordes of people trampling through their country. Inevitably, killings on both sides were common. A familiar pattern was repeated here - the Aboriginal people resisted fiercely, but their weapons were no match for rifles.

By 1875 - just 2 years later - Cooktown had 63 licenced hotels, 40 brothels and just 2 churches! Palmer River had 15,000 miners at its peak, 10,000 of whom were Chinese. Nearly all of these people passed through Cooktown. They all lived in canvas lean-tos through both the Dry and the heat, humidity, mud and slush of the Wet.

When the Palmer River goldfields were spent, many miners defected to the [Halls Creek gold rush](#) in the Kimberleys, Western Australia. The Chinese miners had severe restrictions on what ports they could dis-embark from. This was an attempt to keep them out of the goldfields. So many Chinese simply walked - or attempted to walk - over 3,000km from Palmer River to Halls Creek. The death toll must have been huge. Starvation, exhaustion, sickness and killing by hostile Aboriginal people were very real threats.

Chillin' Out In Cooktown

So what can you see and do around Cooktown? Well, the first thing I'd suggest is to go for a walk into the town centre. Soak up the atmosphere and get a feel for how laid back this place is. It feels like you've stepped back to the 1970's (I mean this in a good way!) and landed in a sleepy seaside village.



COOKTOWN BACKSTREET LOOKING NORTH. VERY OLD-WORLDLY.



START OF COOKTOWN'S MAIN STREET LOOKING NORTH.



AN AUSTRALIAN BRUSH TURKEY. THESE CREATURES STRUT AROUND THE CARAVAN PARK AND APPEAR IN THE MOST UNLIKELY PLACES.



GREEN ANTS' NEST. THESE ARE THE SAME ANTS THAT TASTE LIKE LEMON/LIME. YUM!

James Cook Museum

Check out [James Cook Museum](#) while you're in town. The building was originally a convent and a girl's school and was donated by the church. The nuns were evacuated in WWII and never returned.

The museum has excellent information on Cook's voyage and a great Indigenous centre. Well worth a visit.



JAMES COOK MUSEUM.

Finch's Bay

Peta had been to Cooktown as a young child. She remembers swimming on a beach near Cooktown, surrounded by mountains. We found it - Finch's Bay. What a magnificent place.

We dipped our toes in the waters of the Coral Sea. We chose not to have a swim. Maybe it had something to do with the sign warning of a recent crocodile sighting...



FINCH'S BAY. SAND, SURF... AND CROCODILES.



CHARLIE WANDERING ALONG FINCH'S BAY BEACH WITH MT COOK IN THE BACKGROUND.



BEN ON A HUGE GRANITE ROCK AT NORTHERN END OF FINCH'S BAY.



LOOKING OUT TO SEA, FINCH'S BAY.



THE CRABS HAVE BEEN BUSY.

Grassy Hill

[Grassy Hill](#) is at the northern end of town. The 360 degree views from this lookout are incredible. You can see out to the Great Barrier Reef, Endeavour River, Mount Cook and rugged mountains to the north and west.

Watch a quick [360 degree lap of Grassy Hill](#) here.



THE LIGHTHOUSE ON GRASSY HILL.



T'WAS RATHER WINDY AT GRASSY HILL LOOKOUT!

What Else?

The cemetery is worth a look. There are lots of young children from the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Sadly, disease wiped out many of the young and vulnerable. A segregated section holds Chinese, who died a long way from home.



ONE FAMILY'S LITANY OF TRAGEDY. COOKTOWN CEMETERY.



A

CHINESE GRAVE AT COOKTOWN CEMETERY.

When the gold rush was in full swing, Botanic Gardens were established. The Gardens were let go when the rush was over. They have been restored to their former glory and are well worth a visit.



COOKTOWN BOTANIC GARDENS HAVE BEEN RESTORED TO THEIR FORMER GLORY.

Cooktown is a beautiful place. It has a warm, relaxed and easy-going atmosphere. Many people simply use Cooktown as a launching point for their Cape York trek.

But it's worth spending some time here to soak up the atmosphere and get to know the place. You won't want to leave.

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