

David Whitley goes off-road to explore the beaches, lakes and rainforests of Fraser Island

Fraser quest



The largest sand island on earth, Fraser Island is one of the big drawcards of Australia's east coast.

Long a backpacker favourite, it was the centre of a publicity blitz when Harry and Meghan made a royal visit shortly after their wedding last year.

The World Heritage-listed natural wonder combines beauty, ecological importance and a sense of wild adventure - making it a perfect peg for a holiday in Queensland.

▶ SEE: NATURAL BEAUTY

The initial highlight of Fraser Island is the main road - which happens to be the 75-mile-long beach on the eastern coast. It

also doubles as the landing strip for scenic flights.

As with the rest of the island, it's a four-wheel-drive affair, and many of the highlights lie just off it. These include the gentle freshwater flow of Eli Creek, which backpackers float along in rubber tubes, along with the photogenic Maheno Shipwreck and the Pinnacles, a section of multi-coloured sand cliffs.

Farther north, the Champagne Pools provide safe saltwater swimming, and Indian Head is a top spot for wildlife watching. It's one of the rocky outcrops that the island has formed around, and provides a good perch for spotting whales, dolphins, manta rays and sharks



There are restrictions on entering the crystal-clear lakes with sun cream on, to keep the water pure


- which explains why saltwater swimming is best restricted to the Champagne Pools.

But head along the bumpy tracks inland, and some astonishing natural sights await. This is believed to be the only place in the world where rainforest grows on sand, and the best way to experience it is on

one of the walking trails heading from Central Station - a former logging camp that provided the turpentine trees to help build the London Docks and Suez Canal.

The star attractions for most visitors, however, are the lakes - crystal clear, perfectly drinkable water and surrounded by fine white sand. Restrictions on entering with sun cream on are in place to keep the water as pure as possible. Lake McKenzie, in particular, is one of the most memorable swims on earth.

▶ SELL: EAST COAST ADVENTURE

Fraser Island's two gateways - small-scale holiday hideaway Rainbow Beach, and bigger 



PICTURES: PETER LIK, EZRA PATCHETT, MADELYN ROSE PHOTOGRAPHY

ABOVE:
Eli Creek

ABOVE RIGHT:
Maheno
Shipwreck

BELOW:
Kingfisher
Bay Resort

➔ whale-watching hub Hervey Bay – are within a three-and-a-half-hour drive of Brisbane. This makes Fraser a logical end point for a two-week holiday in southern Queensland, combining Brisbane’s big-city energy, the Gold Coast’s theme parks and the Sunshine Coast’s beaches and markets.

The best way to explore the island is a matter of personal taste, although fortunately, there are plenty of options.

At the most basic end of the scale are day tours from Hervey Bay or Rainbow Beach that take the ferry to the island and then take in the highlights in a 4x4 coach. Fraser Explorer Tours, part of the Kingfisher Bay Resort Group, sells commissionable day trips for about £102.

If freedom to explore is the priority, then hiring a 4x4 vehicle from the likes of specialist Aussie Trax and camping at one of the island’s campgrounds is the way forward. However, this is recommended only for those with experience of driving a 4x4 – there are some tough stretches that vehicles can get bogged down in, and prices are understandably fairly steep.

For younger travellers, multi-day tag-along tours are the most enjoyable way of tackling the island. These allow you to have a go at driving, but ensure an experienced guide is leading the convoy of vehicles, keeping the balance of adventure and safety about right. Some of these involve camping at night, but the popular Cool Dingo three-day, two-night trip offers overnight accommodation in a four-

share bunk house. Austravel sells this for £339 per person.

STAY: KEEP IT SIMPLE

Other options for exploring Fraser Island involve an overnight stay. At the basic end of the scale, this is where campgrounds such as Cathedrals On Fraser come into play. It’s fenced off – keeping the island’s much-beloved but very definitely wild dingoes out – and options range from unpowered camp sites for £16, via permanently erected tents with beds for £30, to cabins with their own bathrooms and kitchen facilities for £102.

The Kingfisher Bay Resort is the plush option, with a mix of hotel rooms – all of which have their own private balconies – and villas. These are spacious, and come with a full kitchen and laundry. The on-site Seabelle restaurant is superb – try the paperbark-wrapped barramundi fish –

with an admirable dedication to using indigenous Australian ingredients such as lemon myrtle, pepperberry and wild lime. There’s also a surprisingly large freeform pool, but the real charm is in how the resort embraces the island. It’s designed to fit in unobtrusively, and offers a series of experiences – from ranger-guided canoe paddles and bush walks to native food tastings – that can seriously enhance the stay. Low season prices can drop to £92.

The solid three-star option is the Eurong Beach Resort on the other side of the island. The rooms are relatively simple – with ceiling fans rather than air conditioning at the cheaper end of the scale – but that’s more than made up for by the convenience of having shops, a beach bar, coffee shop and bakery nearby. The facilities are good for £72 a night, with two pools, a tennis court, fishing-gear hire and a barbecue area as part of the deal. **TW**



- cathedralsonfraser.com.au
- coolingotour.com
- eurong.com.au
- fraserexplorertours.com.au
- fraserisland4wd.com.au
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