



WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY Gary Blake

Gary and partner Wendy spent a fortnight touring Queensland in a hired motorhome. How does it compare to UK touring? More exotic by miles... and miles... and more miles



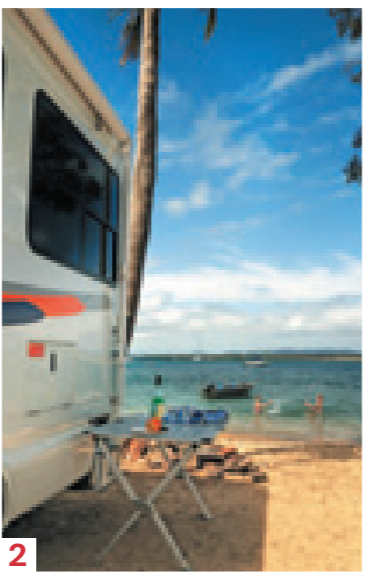
Hire, fly and drive To The Great Barrier Reef

Tempted off the Bruce Highway into Bowen by a witty hoarding, we were glad we stopped. Though one of the local residents did bite me...





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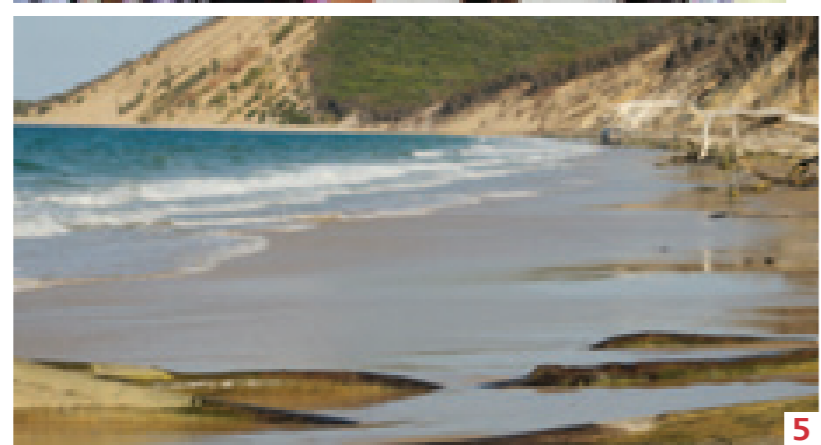
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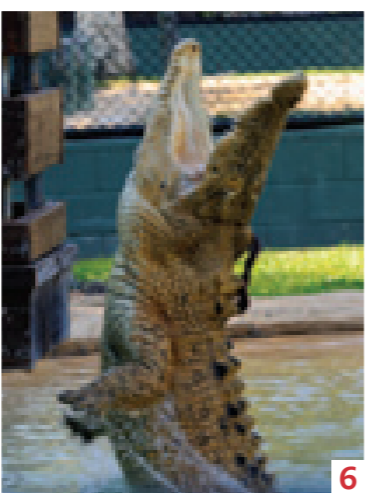
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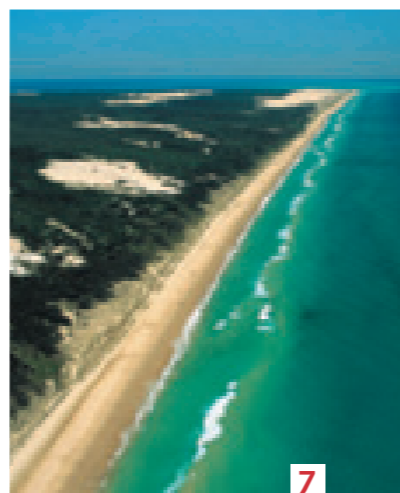
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1 & 6 The Crocoseum is part of Australia Zoo, founded by the late Steve Irwin (below) 2 Town of 1770, where Captain Cook landed 3 The Kea-built four-berth was a joy 4 Coloured rainbow cliffs lead down to... 5 ...Rainbow Beach's magic tideline 7 Frazer Island has beaches 50km long



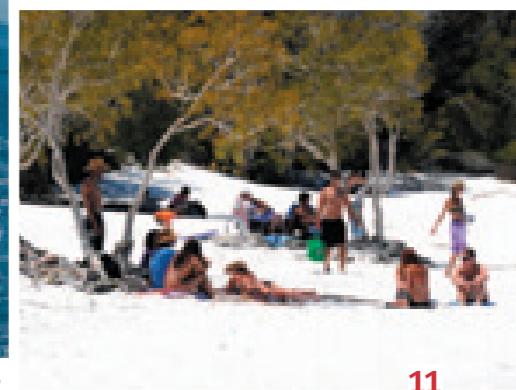
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8 Whale watching in Hervey Bay is a highlight nobody visiting in the season should miss 9 Lunchtime on our 4x4 'coach' tour of Fraser Island 10 Maybe more truck than coach! 11 The locals were very choosy about where and when they swam...

Day 3: our Noosa base

Next day we went to Noosa's headland on a nature boardwalk; so well-organized and typical of Australian bush walks. It is here that botany and wildlife lovers would be in their element: crimson rosellas, bush turkeys, pandanus palms, fruit pigeons and possums.

Campsites are better than in Europe – spacious, with cooking and recreational areas, and shade. In the shower blocks there are baths and exotic pot plants. It's a joy to be camping, whether you stay at the council-run sites, private sites, or the Big 4 sites. Some pitches have even have private showers units.

As we embraced Australia, with 5am starts, we got used to the vast distances between interesting places, calculating our arrival at each destination by sat nav.

Day 4: Town of 1770

We continued our journey on to Captain Cook's second point of landing after Botany Bay – a headland now named the 'Town of 1770', also a departure point for reef cruises and fishing charters to the outer Great Barrier Reef. A long but exciting day ended with another twilight entry to our specified pitch, right on the beach in the Town of 1770 camping ground. Had we been there earlier in November we could have seen the migratory humpback whales from Antarctica in Hervey Bay – they're usually there from late July onwards.

With inroads of only a few inches made on the map there was a lot more asphalt and country to discover. The

cruise control was a joy over long distances but we were on guard for the sudden bends. We took heed that truckers and Greyhound bus drivers are instructed not to

“AS WE EMBRACED AUSTRALIA, WE GOT USED TO THE VAST DISTANCES BETWEEN INTERESTING PLACES”

deviate from 'straight driving line' when eastern grey kangaroos nibble the grass verges then step onto the Bruce Highway at dawn and dusk.

Darkness fell even earlier as we crossed the Tropic of Capricorn at Rockhampton. This parallel of latitude at 23°30 south of the equator is the southern boundary of the tropics. There was no way we could get to the intended campsite before closing so, after typing 'Sarina Beach' into the sat nav, we were camping wild under palm trees, and listening to the surf. This is what motorhoming is all about: to wake up early and stroll along a deserted beach (or a forest glen) before the searing sun gets a grip. Lots of towns are RV-friendly, with welcome signs

After two months of planning with Google Earth, this was it. We were setting off on a 2000-kilometre trip of a lifetime along one of the world's great coastal roads, from Brisbane northward to Cairns and the Great Barrier Reef.

Our choice of transport? A KEA-built four-berth, motorhome with every luxury. And here, it needed to be. The Queensland climate averages 77 degrees and 95 percent humidity in November, so air conditioning is a must, as are flyscreens, a flat screen TV, a cassette toilet, hot water, a cooker, microwave, refrigerator and, thankfully, a sun awning.

Australia is 30 times bigger than the UK with less than half its population, all living on the edges of this vast continent. Nowhere in Europe could we find this sense of space and adventure. Tackling just a fraction of it would take the whole fortnight

Day 1: Brisbane to Noosa Head

With the air-con on, Top Gear's Seriously Cool Driving Music blasting on the DVD and wearing heavy black sunglasses, we squinted through the tinted windows down the Bruce Highway. Comfortable in our captain's seats, we set our sat nav system for the Australia Zoo. The Bruce Highway – a

generously wide A-road was to be our constant companion but, just 30km out of Brisbane, I was asleep at the wheel. Jet-lag had kicked in and decided to set off for Australia Zoo one day late. It meant we missed the 10th anniversary celebration of its opening. It was founded by Steve 'Crikey' Erwin, crocodile hunter and passionate conservationist, who was killed by a stingray barb in 2006. We were still in time for the 2.30pm daily crocodile feeding at the Crocoseum; a spectacle not to be missed. These giant reptiles are the real McCoy – genuinely dangerous saltwater crocs. We finished up seeing snakes, cuddling a koala and feeding wallabies.

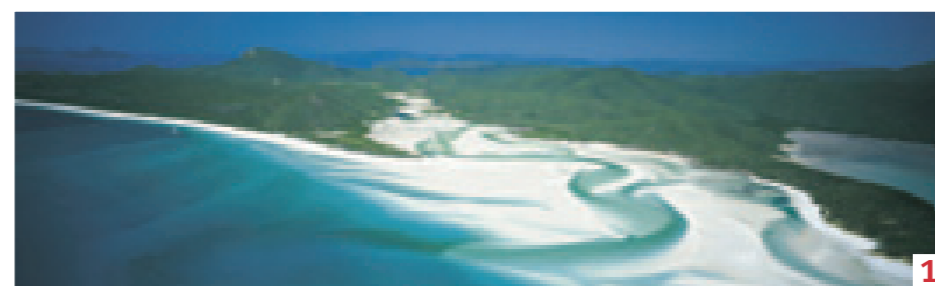
Then on to Noosa Head just on nightfall, for an early bed to be ready for a 4x4 Discovery Tour of Fraser Island the next day; a 350km day trip, door to door, on to the largest sand island in the world.

Day 2: Quick trip to Fraser Island

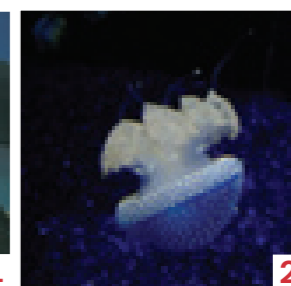
The tour took a forest shortcut on an unmade road, across on sand dunes to a barge, along beaches, and up to the sand hills. We bucked and skittered along, rushing sand dune hills in the rainforest in low gear in the 4x4 'coach', as we followed the route loggers once took to haul out the huge, rot-resisting Satinay trees by buffalo.

To drive along 50km long beaches; to swim in one of the 200 freshwater lakes with the snowiest of white soft sand; to ride for miles on the tide line at Rainbow beach with its coloured sand cliffs: these were things we could never do in Europe.





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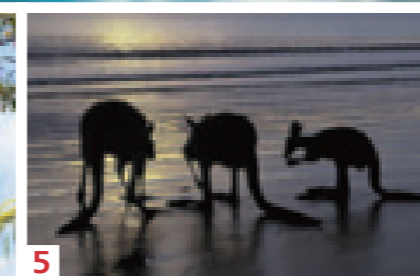
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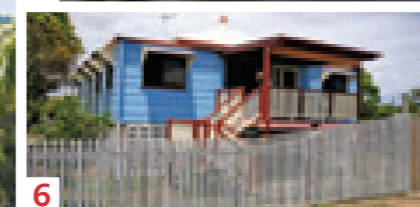
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1 Whitehaven Beach on the Whitsunday Islands 2 Exotic jellyfish – but thankfully, not a box jelly 3 An Aussie roadhouse 4 The motorhome let you hear the surf at night 5 Wild kangaroos on the beach 6 ‘Real’ Australia was never far away 7 The Great Barrier Reef – one of the world’s natural wonders

offering dump points and fresh water. The publication *The Wanderer’s Mate* is an essential book for the glove compartment with these things listed. Turtles breed on these beaches, their main diet being dangerous box jellyfish – loved by turtles, hated by mankind. At Sarina’s Sugar Shed attraction, visitors can see the processing of the cane from the surrounding plantations, and see a statue of a cane toad. This most loathed creature was brought into Queensland to control cane beetles; unfortunately it ignored the beetles and devoured the native wildlife.

Day 6-8: Cape Hillsborough and the Great Barrier Reef

We detoured to Cape Hillsborough National Park. The landscape opened from the local style of sparsely-spaced eucalyptus trees to a more English type of countryside with vivid, luscious greenery (albeit with volcanic hills) and a Devonshire clotted cream teashop to complete the illusion.

The end of the road was Seaford and the Cape Hillsborough Nature Resort, a haven nestled in the forest, and surrounded by the beautiful Cape Hillsborough National Park and Robinson Crusoe Beach. The campsite has to be recommended. It is one of a few that have the privilege of being right in the national park.

In want of a swim on the Great Barrier islands, we were soon on a Fantasea Cruise to Whitehaven Beach in the Whitsunday Islands. It’s set in a National Reserve and has been voted the Best Beach in the World. Pristine white, sandy beaches line these islands while the jungle-clad interior is home to unique flora and fauna. Underneath lie the crystal-clear waters of the Great Barrier Reef.

Looking the part in our box-jellyfish-resisting Lycra head-to-toe stinger suits, we marched across the cool mica sand (mica doesn’t absorb heat), erected our Telly-Tubbies sun pods and had swim number three. There

Going to Oz

Ideal motorhoming conditions: Great weather, spacious country, helpful, friendly people.

Planning the trip: We checked distances on GoogleMaps. Bookmark www.exploroz.com and www.queenslandholidays.com.au/travel-info/health-and-safety/driving.cfm. The free Jason’s Australian Guides and Maps we had delivered to KEA’s base in Brisbane (www.jasons.com/guides/) were a boon.

Campsites: Big 4 franchised sites have excellent facilities but make time to camp wild in a scenic spot. Some towns are RV friendly with welcome signs offering dump points and fresh water. Get the publication *The Wanderers Mate* or go to ‘On the Road’ at www.australiancaravanclub.com. We booked our sites by email.

Sat Nav: was vital, allowing us to estimate the ETAs in advance.

Fuel: Top up with petrol often – there are some sparse patches. They take all credit cards. Prices are given on www.exploroz.com/OntheRoad/FuelPrices/Default.aspx

A laptop PC is very useful to check what’s on, what’s ahead, and weather. Sites charge for Wi Fi but find free ‘hotspots’ at www.wififreespot.com/aus.html

Food: Get used to the national takeaway – over there, it’s hot pies rather than fish and chips.

£ to \$AUS: With a weak £, food was expensive, but it was so hot, we ate less, anyway!



OUR MOTORHOME

KEA MOTORHOME (4ST)
AUD 275 A DAY



Our 6.8 meter 4-berth coach-built motorhome, based on a 2.4L turbo-diesel Ford Transit had

power steering, captain seats, air conditioning, tinted windows, full fly screens, a sun awning, was a perfect road runner on the flat Queensland coast road.

We liked:

- ➔ The four-berth motorhome was comfortable and spacious for two people.
- ➔ We slept over the cab to save making the rear double bed.
- ➔ The overall length was no problem in Australia with its wide roads, angled parking, reversing camera and roomy campsites.
- ➔ Good sized shower and loo together with a fold down basin, air con that could run on campsite power and a safe for all-important documents (and cash).
- ➔ The reversing camera helped in car parks.

We didn't like:

- ➔ The vehicle was a bit a large for two but we had the walk around comfort when parked up.

WE HIRED FROM:

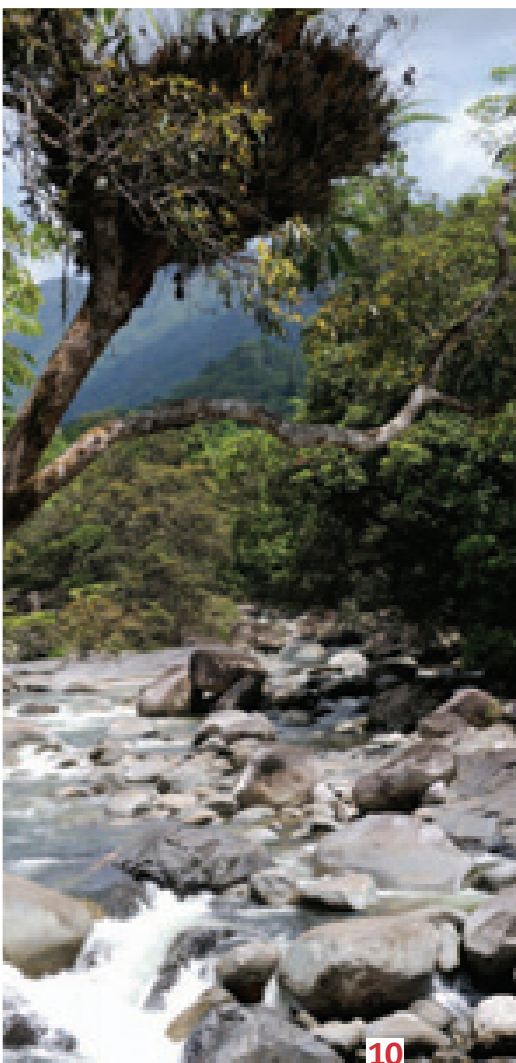
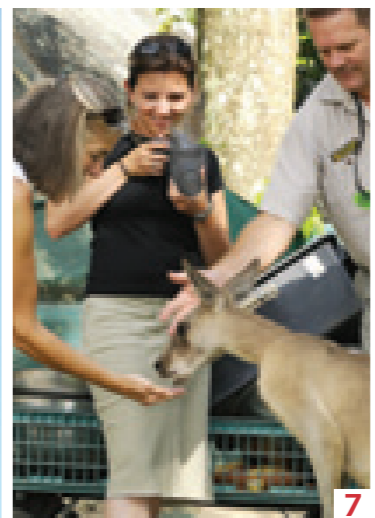
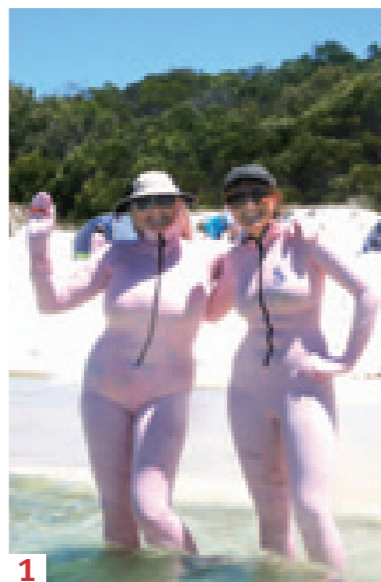
KEACAMPERS
www.keacampers.com at a cost of AUD 275 per day (Nov to Dec 2009), plus insurance AUD 60 a day. Our trip was from Kea's Brisbane base, but you can make the reverse trip from the KeaCampers base in Cairns.

Brisbane: 348 Nudgee Road, Hendra, QLD 4011, Tel +61 7 3868 4500, Email brisbane@keacampers.com

Cairns: 54 Fearnley St, Cairns, QLD 4870, tel +61 7 4051 1989, Email cairns@keacampers.com

Extra tour costs:
Fraser Island Discovery (4x4 Warrior" 20 seat coach)
www.fraserislanddiscovery.com.au
AUD 155 per Adult including lunch

Fantasea Cruise to Whitehaven Beach
www.fantasea.com.au
AUD 140 per Adult including lunch



1 Stinger suits on Whitehaven Beach 2 Astonishing plants are everywhere 3 The Daintree Ferry took us to Cape Tribulation 4 Big 4 Cairns site: real luxury 5 Gary and Wendy enjoy Whitehaven Beach

6 Palm Beach is a paradise 7 A 'roo at the zoo, in Cairns 8 The flora extends to flowering trees 9 A monitor lizard – the Aussie's 'goanna' 10 Fresh mountain water tumbles to the sea at Mossman Creek

weren't a lot of locals in the water. We concluded that Queenslanders are sensible people who know how to live in this land so we gave up the idea of swimming in the sea from then on. The saltwater crocs were yet to show, but that happens just once...

The days rolled on, the countryside varied with cane fields and their narrow-gauge railway tracks criss-crossing the Bruce Highway, transporting sugar cane to the mills. We passed the mango and banana growing regions; and thanked KEA for our air conditioning as we turned it up a few notches.

In our travels we were always looking for the 'old Australia' and suddenly we came across some interesting old buildings at Prosperine Historical Museum. We strolled around them, pondering over the hardship endured by the early settlers whose wooden houses were ripe for the termites to eat.

The roadside hoardings became a source of amusement. For example, just as you'd get overheated on a long drive, a sign would announce 'Fuel 15km. Cool Beer 15 mins.' A place called Bowen (the first settlement in Queensland in 1861), was chosen by Baz Luhrmann for his film 'Australia' to portray Darwin. The hoarding read 'Baz, Hugh and Nic loved Bowen. So will you.' So it became our next campsite stop.

I needed a shot of the motorhome in location so I climbed the rocks across the road where it was parked next to

Bowen's Horseshoe Bay. The first shot was hurriedly taken on the tripod as the sun was disappearing fast in the Tropic of Capricorn, when I felt a nip on my bare elbow. I continued shooting before I reminded myself of Bowen and its snakes: 'This is where snakes wrap around car tyres at night to keep warm,' we'd read. Was that painful bite on my elbow a vicious mozzie or a snake bite? I showed the tiny wound to a passer-by for reassurance.

Semi reassured, we did enter the motorhome through its caravan side door that night, well away from the wheels.

Day 9: on to Cairns

Breakfast started with the daily consultation of our maps. The country is so huge that it is better to concentrate on one area at a time. Our journey became the equivalent of London to Naples, but the smooth road surface approaching Cairns were heaven after the previous wavy road surfaces.

After a long day's driving in the searing heat, the comforts of the town camping The flat, concrete pads for our table and chairs (which on our first encounter we'd mistaken as stands for the motorhome itself) kept us away from the crawling nasties that seemed to be Queensland's daily topic of conversation.

Day 10-11: Cape Tribulation and home

North of Cairns we headed to Cape Tribulation and the Daintree Rain forest that was the piece de resistance... a hinterland of ancient palms, Buttress vine trees, the scary saltwater crocodiles, cockatoos, cassowaries,

“WAS THAT PAINFUL BITE ON MY ELBOW A VICIOUS MOZZIE OR A SNAKE BITE?”

kangaroos and other wildlife; this is picture-book Australia. We made a welcome detour up the river to Mossman Gorge, away from breeding fresh water crocodiles, to have a refreshing dip in the rock pools. Then, on to a ferry barge across the Daintree River and along the sealed road up to the end at Cape Tribulation, where the jungle descends down to white sandy beaches, palms, mangroves and turquoise sea. I had a surprise for Wendy; a spa tub in our hotel room, together with a bottle of champagne waiting for her birthday.

This was the last stop before our handover in KEA's Cairns depot. The motorhome helped to make the trip so delightful: fuel is cheap, campsites are to die for and the Australian dawn chorus is a delight. In a motorhome, we had felt Australia's pulse.

