

AUSTRALIA SPECIAL HISTORY ALIVE



Star encounters shine on

Cooktown's history is dotted with famous visitors, from Captain Cook to the Queen. By Denise Cullen

STRONG easterly winds whip my hair into knots as I stand on the deck of the Riverbend Tours' boat, the Nautilus, gazing towards the redeveloped foreshore of Cooktown (Waymburr).

This laidback tropical township has variously been described as the gateway to Cape York Peninsula and, according to skipper Nick Davidson, "a drinking town with a fishing problem".

But Cooktown is best known for a twist of fate in which it became the unintended landing spot, in June 1770, for a desperate Captain James Cook and his crew of 86 men, after their ship, the Endeavour, hit reefs further south. They dragged themselves ashore on the banks of the Endeavour River (Waalmbal Birri). Fortunately for them, this was considered neutral territory by the local Guugu Yimithirr people.

Cooktown served as the sailors' refuge for 48 days, first as they struggled to fix the ship, and then as they awaited favourable winds and tides for the onward journey. It was the most time they would spend at any location during their expedition up Australia's east coast.

Over that seven weeks, natural history draughtsman Sydney Parkinson recorded 150 words and phrases of the Guugu Yimithirr language, while botanists Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander collected 325 species of plants, most previously unknown.

Today, Cooktown is a small town of about 2500 people, with no traffic lights and a single roundabout, yet it punches well above its weight in terms of museums, galleries, monuments and other markers of its colourful history. In this way, Cooktown reminds me of a nobody who got famous after sleeping with a celebrity. The affair might long be over, but they're holding fast to the photos and the memories.

The annual Cooktown Discovery Festival in June has as its centrepiece a re-enactment of Cook's landing in which dozens of direct descendants of the Guugu Yimithirr bama (people) and white settlers participate. Told from the dual perspectives of those

onshore, and those at sea, it draws hundreds of spectators. But it's possible to follow the fascinating threads of history at other times of the year, too.

One of our first ports of call is the Cooktown Museum, which is set in a heritage-listed 19th-century Sisters of Mercy convent. The museum houses an original anchor and cannon from Cook's beleaguered Endeavour - two of many items jettisoned in 1770 as the crew fought to stop the ship going down.

The museum also contains an extensive collection of Guugu Yimithirr artefacts, including message sticks. These provided their carriers with safe passage through the lands of other mobs and clans to deliver important news, says the museum's Beverley Grant.

"When Captain Cook reached Botany Bay, messages came all the way up to the tip (of Australia) from the people at Botany Bay," Grant explains.

The Cooktown Museum also tells the story of the first recorded act of reconciliation, which arose after the Guugu Yimithirr people discovered turtles on the deck of the Endeavour and sought, unsuccessfully, to return them to their sacred breeding grounds. Amid the ensuing conflict, the Guugu Yimithirr set fire to the grass around the crew's campsite, while Cook fired a musket, wounding a man on the shore where no blood was to be spilt.

Grant tells how a Guugu Yimithirr elder,

known only as the Little Old Man, approached the crew, carrying a spear with a broken tip, to signal that he meant no harm.

"He was the first one to initiate peace by blowing the sweat from under his arms," she says, miming his gestures.

Other places to retrace these stories include heritage-listed Reconciliation Rocks, the Cooktown History Centre, and the beautifully curated Waalmbal Birri Heritage and Culture Centre, which opened in 2021.

Also worth a visit are the lush Cooktown Botanic Gardens, established in 1878 in the wake of the region's gold rush days. We crush fragrant leaves between our fingers in the First People's Grove, examine species collected by the Endeavour's botanists in the Banks and Solander Garden, and admire the delicate orchids kept under lock and key within the orchid "house" (a large cage designed to thwart thieves).

Also on-site is the Vera Scarth-Johnson Art Gallery featuring the botanical artworks of one of Cooktown's favourite daughters. Before her death in 1999, she captured close to 200 of the region's plants, from the spiky holly-leaved mangrove to the graceful curves of the weeping ivorywood.

The waterfront contains other echoes of Cooktown's history, including the Milbi Wall created by Indigenous artists and storytellers, statues of Cook and "Mick the Miner", and an out-of-place set of steps built to

Clockwise from main: Enjoying the views on a Riverbend Tours sunset cruise; Waalmbal Birri Heritage and Culture Centre; heritage-listed Reconciliation Rocks; Cooktown Museum.

accommodate Queen Elizabeth's 1970 visit.

Riverbend Tours' Davidson says the idea was that the Queen's ship, the Britannia, would be anchored offshore, and the Queen would be brought to the steps by ship's tender. "But Cooktown being Cooktown, things never quite worked out as planned and the tides were all wrong at the time she arrived," Davidson says.

Her Majesty was brought to shore further down the road instead. She stayed in Cooktown for a grand total of 47 minutes, but that didn't stop the loyal townsfolk blanketing the Queen's Steps in flowers after her death in 2022.

It was yet another brush with celebrity, all too brief.

The writer was a guest of Cook Shire Council and Tourism Tropical North Queensland

TRIP NOTES

Getting there: Cooktown is about four hours by road or 45 minutes by air from Cairns.

Staying there: The nostalgic Seaview Cooktown overlooking the harbour has joined the revamped-retro-motel trend, with extensive renovations creating a sleek contemporary retreat. A sparkling new pool provides a welcome spot for visitors to swim sans crocodiles. theseaview-cooktown.com.au

Touring there: Riverbend Tours Cooktown's sunset cruises (\$60 per adult, which includes a locally sourced gourmet cheese platter) provides a good introduction to the region. The museums and other treasures of Cooktown are accessible to independent travellers. The 66th re-enactment will take place during the Cooktown Discovery Festival from June 20-22, 2025.

Explore more: cooktownandcapeyork.com