

LIFE

Island
magic

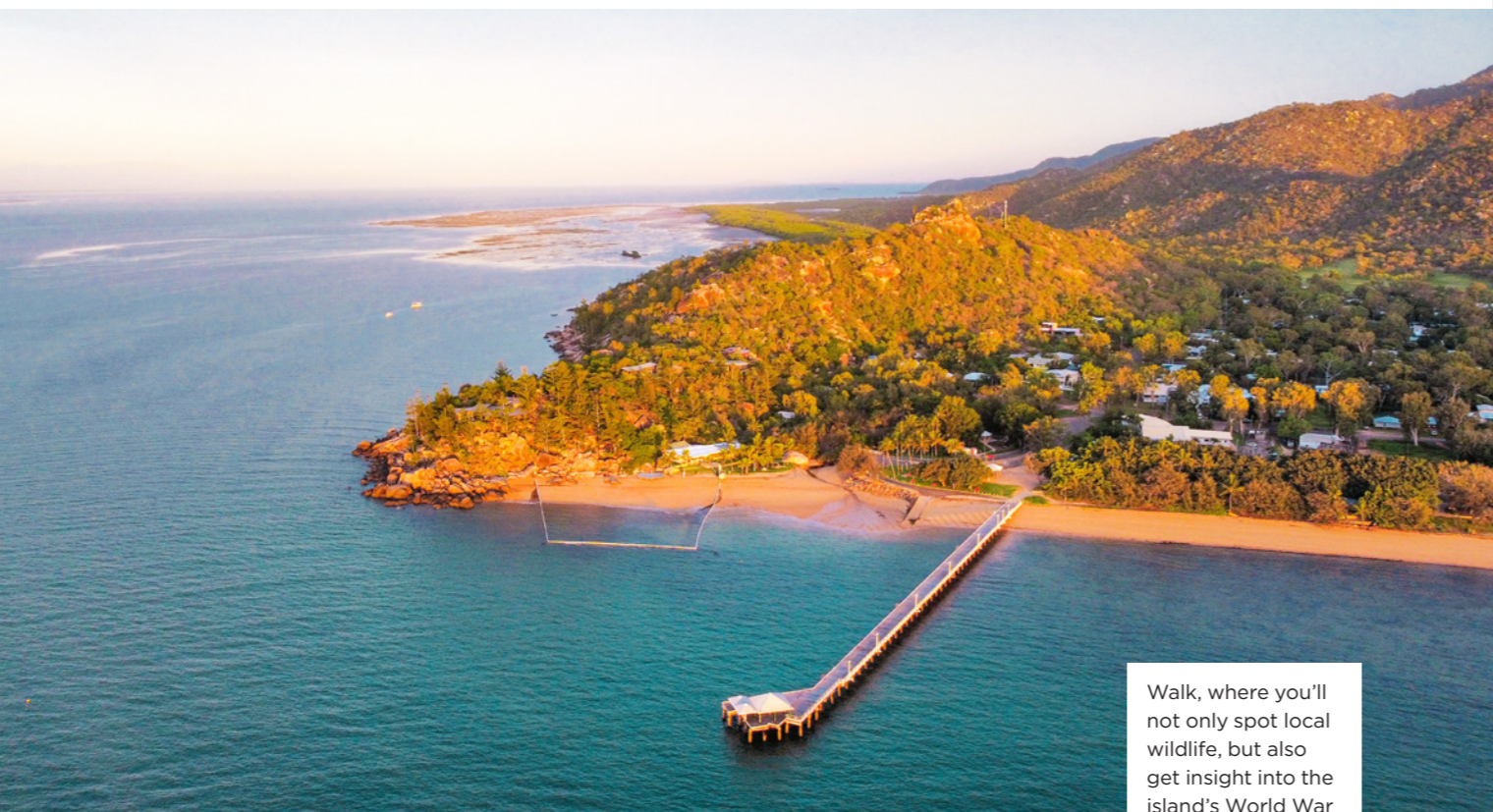
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Magnetic Island

If a tropical escape sounds like
just what you need, hop on a ferry
to this North Queensland gem

Idyllic
Horseshoe
Bay

By Emily McAuliffe



Spectacular view from the Forts Walk



Snack time for a rock wallaby



PHOTOGRAPHY: ROMAIN-TERPREAU/UNSPASH; EMILY MCAULIFFE

Walk, where you'll not only spot local wildlife, but also get insight into the island's World War II history. In 1942, fortifications were built on Magnetic Island to protect nearby Townsville from invasion. Now, the highest fort structure affords unobstructed views of the coral sea, thick woodlands, granite boulders and the many turquoise bays that scoop into the island's coastline.

Hidden Gems

Though the Forts Walk is the most popular trail on Magnetic Island, many hikes kick off from the same starting point at the Forts Junction hub. On day two, I opt for an at-times challenging 4.6-kilometre track that ends in Horseshoe Bay village and lets me

some odd noises during mating season, after all. I'd possibly busted a moment of romance. Sorry, mates. The koalas on Magnetic Island (Yunbenun to the traditional owners) form one of Australia's largest colonies of the marsupial. Around 20 were given refuge on the island in the 1930s when koalas were being hunted on the mainland for their waterproof pelts. Given 20 has since turned into 800, the romancing - wails, grunts and all - has seemingly gone well for the fuzzy favourites.

One of the best places to spot koalas on 'Maggie' is on the 4-kilometre Forts

If it wasn't for the apparent domestic, I would have walked straight past. At first, there was a high-pitched wail, then came a deep grunt. Another wail; another grunt. I inched into the bushland, following the sound, and there they were: her, arms stretched overhead, hanging precariously from a branch, and him, casually sitting in the fork of a tree. The pair looked at me and fell silent, as though realising it was inappropriate to make a scene with company.

Past Peek

Despite the ruckus, there's a chance it wasn't actually a barney - koalas are known to make



Magnetic Moments

I ate...

tapas-style at Smugglers Wine Bar in Nelly Bay. Magnetic Island isn't exactly a foodie hotspot, but you can enjoy a casual night out at family-run eateries like Smugglers. FYI, most kitchens close at 8pm and restaurants fill up quickly, so book ahead.

I stayed...

in a cute A-frame cabin at Club Nautique. If you prefer hotel vibes, there's a Peppers and Grand Mercure near the Nelly Bay ferry terminal.

I saw...

rock wallabies at Geoffrey Bay. They generally come out around dusk.

I learnt...

that the island is named Magnetic because James Cook thought it was interfering with his compass during his 1770 journey.



Magnetic Island sits 8 kilometres off the coast of Townsville. Both a passenger ferry and car ferry connect to Nelly Bay, so you can take your own wheels, or hire a car or scooter on arrival. Buses connect the Forts Junction and main villages.

duck in and out of quiet and otherwise inaccessible bays on the north-east side of the island. The gentle crash of waves and scent of frangipanis in the air made Radical Bay a highlight, and I felt a glow of accomplishment as I worked my way down a steep rocky hillside to reach Balding Bay, where butterflies fluttered through the trees and the sea gently lapped at white sand. (Heads up: Balding is a nudist beach, so come with an open mind... and maybe extra sunscreen.)

Water Works

Though you have to mind the jellyfish between October and May, Arthur

and Florence Bays are popular for snorkelling (the island and its surrounding waters are part of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area). Meanwhile, Horseshoe Bay has kayaks, stand-up paddle boards and jet skis for hire, not to mention a stinger net (Picnic Bay has one, too). Still not keen on jumping in the drink? Downing a cold slushie with a side of fish and chips on the beach is an equally fair reward after a day of hiking.

After three days of sweaty hikes, sunset dips and peaceful moments gazing out to sea, I can safely say Maggie is everything you

want a tropical island to be. The water is blue, the weather is warm, the people are laid back and the quiet beaches are fringed with palm trees. Oh, and there are koalas. What's not to love? **WH**