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Coastwatch



You're not going to have a whale of a time every time you visit Hervey Bay – but you will be indulged with amazing seafood, a visit to the seafaring past and as Amy Holgate experienced, the discovery of Fraser Island's fascinating coast.

I've always thought of Hervey Bay as a bit of a one-trick pony: a spot for a hastily grabbed night before a trip to the azure waters of the largest sand mass in the world – Fraser Island. My own visit takes place in the off season, so there are none of the famous migrating whales making their way past the area between July and November.

But it soon becomes clear that the area has more to offer than the spectacle of the mighty mammals in motion. Technological advances, for a start: the new airport, built in 2005, brings flights from Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne. There are also grand plans afoot to develop the marina (Urangan boat harbour) to the tune of \$800 million.

Hervey's unremarkable, sprawling outskirts hide the gem at its heart: the esplanade which arcs in sandy splendour around the bay. Sheltered, scenic and rich with marine life, the bay is dotted with places to eat and drink and enjoy the view. This 18km stretch is perfect for exploring at a leisurely pace by bike – Bay Bicycle Hire will equip you with maps and locks and, most importantly for a nervy novice like me, helmets.

For a small place Hervey Bay is surprisingly well-endowed with festivals – the Whale Festival, the Easter Esplanade Festival, the *Mary Poppins* Festival and many others fill the calendar with colour. The festival held during my visit is the Fraser Coast Cultural Festival, which showcases international food, arts and craft – the new, the unknown, the different and delicious. A quick horchata de chufa and I'm well set up for the day.

The biggest event of all is the Seafood Festival, which takes place this year on Sunday 17 August at Urangan boat harbour.

The Urangan Seafood Fisheries on the harbour plays an important role in this event when it opens its doors to visitors. The Fisheries factory is

fascinating for seafood obsessives like me. Hervey Bay scallops are graded into four weight classifications at mesmerising speed by highly skilled workers. Watch these shellfish make their way through this part of the supply chain in all their luminescent glory and you'll never look at them in the same way again.

Another local specialty is the strange-looking spanner crab. Apparently no one has known how to open this crab easily with the meat left intact – up until now. Bob at Urangan Fisheries has cracked it but it's still a closely guarded secret. I'm shown the technique but it's so quick – with a flick and a twist the shell yields and the glistening flesh lies meek and pristine in Bob's palm. The taste is different from the crab I'm used to, more delicate and moist, and delectable.

If it's food you are after there are some great eateries around. Perfectly positioned Enzo's on the Beach spills out onto the sand with an unorthodox 'build

your own' breakfast menu that will please both fussy eaters and big breakfast bruisers. With its ever more popular sushi evenings, Treats restaurant (run by well-known local chef Wayne Gregson) offers something out of the ordinary too.

Granted, there are plenty of attractions for the landlubber at Hervey Bay, but the mermaids sing persuasively around Fraser Island and its lure is difficult to ignore. The Remote Fraser Island tour focuses on the lesser known part of the island, the northern tip. This is another Fraser: a cruel, harsh, uncompromising Fraser, isolated and bleak. Okay: that might have been the weather talking – driving rain and gun-metal grey skies have a lot to answer for – but I got the feeling that even in fine weather this isolated point would have a *Wuthering Heights* type of appeal at odds with the common perception of the 'Sunshine State'.

Our trusty vessel, the *Tasman Venture*, offers us a comfortable and informative ride out to the northern extremities of the island, and we arrive at Sandy Cape Lighthouse an hour and a half later. We are moored in a sheltered cove, but the stretch of water due north of the island, known as



Hervey Bay Seafood Festival

PHOTOGRAPHY BY AMY HOLGATE

Breaksea Spit, has claimed more than 20 vessels over the years. Captain George Poynter Heath, the first Portmaster of Queensland, called this area the 'greatest danger on the Queensland coast'.

You can walk up to the lighthouse quite easily – the going is steep at times but takes only about 10 to 15 minutes at a gentle pace. Built in 1870, the lighthouse's tower, lantern room and cement were brought by ship from Brisbane and Sydney, and trolleys transferring the material were hauled up the slope by horses. The first light installed flashed every two minutes with a range of over 30km, head keeper, three assistant keepers and their families lived in simple buildings around the lighthouse. The keepers had to wind the clockwork mechanism at regular intervals to keep the light rotating, and in 1995 the light was converted to solar.

There is no one there now. The lighthouse is administered by the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and only they have a key so you can't get inside. But, isolated and abandoned, it's an atmospheric little area with stories of mysterious happenings (like one keeper who went hunting with one bullet and shot some game and apparently himself as well). Food and mail were delivered just once a month so I can't imagine a more lonely existence.

We shake away the cobwebs of the past, and after a leisurely lunch the *Tasman Venture* takes us back along the coast of the island. The area seems to be teeming with marine wildlife. A tuna and mackerel, which seemed

preternaturally large to me, were just some of the booty caught in a one-hour fishing trip. A gentle spot of kayaking up Wathumba Creek, an island estuary, is a great way to see Fraser's ecosystem from the water. And at low tide the water is shallow enough to watch hundreds of stringrays gliding close below as you pass over them. A number of dolphins pass close to the boat during the journey,

and snorkelling off the boat in deep water reveals more beautiful surprises, including a snoozing turtle.

Fraser Island is undoubtedly the jewel in Hervey Bay's crown, and it's fascinating to see the more mysterious face of the island. And Hervey Bay itself, the 'happiest place in Australia' according to a survey in 2006, shows that it has plenty to offer in its own right. •

Camels on the beach at the Fraser Coast Cultural Festival.



An extreme boat ride on the Remote Fraser tour.



TRAVEL FACTS

Getting there: Just 3.5 hours drive from Brisbane or an easy Virgin Blue flight from Sydney and Melbourne. From Melbourne: Virgin Blue operates direct daily flights to Fraser Coast (Hervey Bay). From Sydney: Virgin Blue operates direct daily flights to Fraser Coast (Hervey Bay). For bookings visit: www.virginblue.com.au

Where to stay: Grand Mercure Allegra Apartments, Hervey Bay. Prices start from \$210 per night per couple for a one bedroom apartment (minimum length of stay is two nights) over the Seafood Festival weekend of 15-17 August, 2008 – so book now! Tel: 1300 65 65 65 or visit www.accorhotels.com.au

What to do: Whale-watching season starts from mid-July until November. Tasman Venture's whale-watching tours are \$100 per adult, \$60 per child and \$90 for seniors and students. Full day 'Remote Fraser Island' tours operate between November to March are \$180 for adults and \$85 for children. Tel: 1800 620 322 or visit www.tasmanventure.com.au