

Marooned on Maggie

Picture an island, its mountainous peaks clothed in green, an occasional patch of grey where the granite bluffs are too steep to support any plant life except the hardiest, rising out of an azure sea beneath an equally intense blue sky. Seen from afar, it might appear totally deserted but as our boat approaches, the tell-tale signs of human habitation become evident: a long jetty pokes out into a bay, the outline of low buildings along the beach can just be made out beneath the canopy of trees fringing a yellow beach, the odd house can be seen, cleverly sited on the side of a hill so that its residents can admire the view and get the benefit of sea breezes. Then, coming around a point, our ferry swims into a calm manmade harbour surrounded by modern buildings, there to discharge its cargo of chattering passengers.

This island could be anywhere, from Waiheke in New Zealand to Corfu in the Mediterranean; in fact it is just eight kilometres from the city of Townsville, in far north Queensland, and it is called Magnetic Island, so named because Captain James Cook believed that his navigational instruments were disturbed by the presence of this mass of granitic rock (he was mistaken: despite many attempts to replicate the effect that Cook seems to have experienced, no-one has been able to find any evidence that the island's properties have any magnetic effects at all). That was in 1770, when the island was already 270 million years old, and was known to the local Wulguru people as Yuenbenun; they used to come across from the mainland on their canoes to hunt and fish and, according to Wulguru tradition, avoid the head-hunters who came down each year from Papua New-Guinea.

Magnetic Island—or 'Maggie', as it is universally known to its two thousand or so residents—has been our temporary home for the last three months as we avoided returning to our locked-down (not to mention wet and cold) home city of Melbourne. We had originally booked just a few days at Peppers Blue-on-Blue resort, as a kind of coda to the cultural rigours of the Australian Festival of Chamber Music, usually held in Townsville every year. The festival having been cancelled, we decided we would hop on the ferry anyway and make the twenty-minute trip across to the island, have our few days of resort time, and that would be that.

But then Covid intervened, and we found ourselves renting a townhouse in a smudge of a village called (very appropriately) Arcadia. The minute you get off that ferry, you sense that you have come to a quiet tropical paradise, a place where life is slower and more relaxed beneath the canopy of gently swaying palm trees and spiky hoop-pines. Forty of the island's fifty square kilometres are a national park, home to the island's population of koalas, rock wallabies, brush-tail possums, echidnas and flying foxes. The rest has just four small settlements: Picnic Bay in the south, Nelly Bay and neighbouring Arcadia in the middle, and picturesque Horseshoe Bay in the north. It takes barely twenty minutes to drive from one end of the island to the other.

Each village has its own character. Quiet Picnic Bay was the original settlement on the island, until the new marina was built in Nelly Bay: today it has a peaceful, deserted air. Picturesque Horseshoe Bay, at the other end of the island, is a visual glamour-puss: a string of cafes and restaurants look out across a broad north-facing harbour dotted with anchored yachts, swimmers bob about in the calm crystal-clear water, and on Sundays a neat little open-air market is held on the grassy foreshore just behind the beach. If the island has a capital, it

would probably be Nelly Bay, where most of the main services are concentrated and where there has been a spate of resort development, not all of it visually attractive.

Our village, Arcadia, sits on a half-moon of flat land between the three-hundred-metre-high mountainous outcrop behind and the shore of shallow, reef-fringed Geoffrey Bay, and is a collection of houses and holiday apartments half hidden beneath the trees. It boasts the island's only gourmet food store, where you can buy all the brands and specialty foods that island's two supermarkets in Nelly Bay rarely stock. We have the only newsagent on the island, there are a couple of idiosyncratic little cafes, a hairdresser, and a monster of a pub.

The Arcadia Hotel is a massive complex. It has a huge open-air dining area, a specialty Asian food outlet where they ladle out curries from bain-maries, a neat little café and pizza place called the Bikini Tree, a pool table and a separate games room for the kids, a function room big enough for the grandest wedding, a big swimming pool, a bottle shop and a retail outlet selling beachwear and the like. It is not so much a pub as a small village in its own right, and a centre for the island's social life; we participated in a thoroughly entertaining trivia night there, with a couple of young visitors to the island who we had met earlier in the week (it helped that they were both Ph D's!). They also run karaoke nights and hold that quintessentially north Queensland sport, Cane-Toad racing.

Though there is nothing wrong with pub food, Magnetic Island does possess quite a few other food options. At the most basic end, there are food trucks and caravans that park up by the side of the road or in the paddocks back from the street, where you can buy surprisingly good takeaways that can be eaten back home or on the beach watching the sun go down. At the other end of the scale is the excellent Saltwater, an open-air restaurant serving first-class modern Australian cuisine that would hold its own anywhere. In between there are cafes and restaurants of every type, among which the most quirky award would go to Scallywags, a pirate-themed café not far from the ferry terminal.

What all the eateries on the island have in common is that they are invariably a surprise. Housed in simple buildings that from the street look like nothing, once the sun has gone down and the trees are illuminated by lights artfully festooned among their branches, the typical Maggie restaurant transforms itself into a tropical wonderland as atmospheric as any similar place in Bali or Phuket. But it is an Aussie-flavoured experience: at Man Friday, a Mexican restaurant hidden away in the back streets of Nelly Bay, we watched a tame possum drop out casually of the trees and wander around as if it owned the place, only scampering off once it had been fed by one of the waiting staff.

That wasn't the only encounter we had with the island's wildlife. We have fed carrots to a colony of bush wallabies, startled one of their larger cousins one evening as he was crossing our street to get from one bit of bushland to another, gawped at koalas hanging about in trees, and watched a flock of black cockatoos squabble noisily over some seeds. The birdlife is abundant and incredibly varied—there are more than 180 different species living here. Their sound is ever-present, from the gurgling chortle of the kookaburra to the mournful wail of the island's iconic curlews. The latter are nocturnal, ground-dwelling birds who when disturbed emit an eerie cry that rapidly climbs in volume, repeated four or five times before abruptly coming to a halt. Once heard, the sound of a colony of curlews shouting at each other can never be forgotten.

The island's human population is a mix of permanent residents and people who have for many years been using the place as their winter escape from colder climes, coming up for three or six months at a time. Many are retired, but there are plenty of folk who commute across to Townsville for work, lots of artists of one kind or another, and the usual smattering of itinerant backpackers common to tourist destinations (though rather fewer than usual at the moment). They are a relaxed lot for whom dressing up involves digging out a shirt with a collar and exchanging thongs for boat shoes, and making friends has proved remarkably easy.

Our time here, alas, must come to an end soon, and as our departure approaches I find myself trying to sum up quite what has made being marooned on Maggie such a wonderful experience. It has something of the idyllic air of a Greek island with its rock-girt coves and calm lapping water. But where in Europe could you walk out of your door, pop in to the local café to pick up your morning coffee latte, then wander down to sip it while contemplating life on an empty beach? Where else would some thoughtful local have left a couple of chairs under the trees next to the said beach for the use of any passer-by? Or listen to karaoke, place bets on cane-toad races, or answer trivia questions under the stars in a jolly, crowded outdoor pub? It is a Greek island without the tourists and with a laid-back Aussie vibe that takes me back to the simplicities of my childhood and youth.

We will miss our island paradise when we finally go, though having discovered Maggie I am sure we will be back. I just hope she never changes her habits or demeanour, and that the little stretch of water between her and the mainland is always sufficient to keep the twenty-first century if not entirely at bay, then at least keeping a respectable distance.