

BLAZE A NATURE TRAIL

by Lynsey de Paul

THE twin-engine Cessna glided over the azure sea and turquoise lagoon encircling Lady Elliot Island, a tiny 100-acre coral cay and the southernmost island of the Great Barrier Reef, an hour's flight from Brisbane.

The Reef stretches 2,300km from here along the Queensland coast north to the Torres Strait.

We bounced down along the 600m runway with the sea beckoning unnervingly in front of us. Thankfully, we stopped, and I stumbled out to be hit by blinding sunshine, 32-degree humid heat and an overwhelming assault of sights and sounds; white-capped, charcoal seabirds with delicate, black webbed feet and long, thin bills were everywhere, making a squawking cacophony of noise.

It was nesting season and 400,000 noddy terns had gathered for the occasion. As there are no indigenous predators, they were sitting on eggs in the middle of paths, under benches and perched in their hundreds in each tree, on their guano and twig nests.

Lady Elliot Island is a self-sufficient eco-resort within the 'green zone' of the marine park. It generates its own electricity and hot water from solar panels, with drinking water from the desalination plant.

The wildlife is prolific, from nesting seabirds and green and loggerhead turtles (November-May) to the majestic humpback whale (June-August) and host of other strange and wonderful creatures. I had come to Australia to experience its diverse and unique wildlife and was in for a treat.

On the first evening, by the light of a pink moon, I watched a green turtle haul herself out of the sea and lumber up the sand, leaving what looked like tractor tyre marks behind. Her 85cm-long carapace weighs only 10 per cent of her cumbersome 150 kilos and she could have swum as far as 1,600 miles across the Pacific to lay her eggs on the tiny island where she had herself hatched.

It took her an hour to choose where to dig her body-pit and egg-

Cuddling koalas and watching turtles by moonlight, the singer fulfils her dream of a lifetime on Australia's East Coast

hole — far enough from the sea to be protected from high tides, but near enough for the hatchlings to make their perilous escape.

Once settled, she hurled swathes of sand backwards with her two massive front flippers until she could sink her body comfortably down and dig the egg-hole with her back flippers.

The average female lays up to 120 eggs at one sitting and can do so up to six times a season. In the process, she enters an altered state of consciousness and you can go up close to her.

I lay on my stomach inches behind her and watched as she dropped her round ping-pong ball-sized eggs, one by one, into the hole. She then deposited the collection of semen from the male

turtles encountered at sea, held within a sac in her body, which fertilises the eggs within 48 hours.

Her back flippers were like hands, with five bones in each and, as she dextrously filled in the egg-hole and patted a sand dune over it, she reminded me of a patient potter.

More sand was hurled behind her to cover up the pit, which can take up to seven hours. Turtles mate between 30 and 50 years old and live up to 90 years. However, their survival is threatened, as only one in 1,000 hatchlings survives the many predators at sea.

Fully grown turtles are endangered by swallowing floating plastic bags and

debris, while in parts of Asia they still appear on the menu.

The next day, I fulfilled a childhood dream to scuba-dive off the Great Barrier Reef — a living organism that grows very slowly. To step on it and break off a few inches puts it back decades. I donned a wetsuit and 20kg of equipment — not easy for someone as light as I am. The water was warm and clear lit by finger-like rays of sunshine.

All of a sudden, a school of 100 foot-long, silver trevally fish appeared and decided to take a closer look. They swam around me in a shimmering carousel, inspecting me with big, deadpan eyes.

I heard myself laughing

underwater until I realised we were directly over a 6ft-long leopard shark and a cowtail ray, and a couple of large white-tip reef sharks were swimming around. Snorkelling and scuba-diving are thrilling, but it was a reminder that I was, potentially, lunch.

That night, a tiny face the size of my fingernail appeared through the sand of a turtle pit dug eight weeks before. Out popped a perfectly formed green turtle, five inches long. It magically orientated itself, scuttled down to the water's edge and then shot out to sea on its epic journey. Good luck, little one, I thought.

Next day we visited the 72-hectare Australian zoo and

Picture: CORBIS

wildlife hospital founded by Steve 'Crocodile Hunter' Irwin, who died in 2006 from a stingray barb through the heart. The zoo is dedicated to education and conservation.

In the 'Crocoseum' — created after watching the film *Gladiator* — there are regular shows for children (and the parrots, cormorants and flamingo-like jabirus that swoop in from every corner).

The hospital, the dream of Irwin's late mother, Lyn, has the latest equipment, is open 24 hours a day for the public and rescue teams to bring in injured and sick wildlife. I cuddled up to the sweetest blind koala, now a permanent resident.

I took a barge to Kingfisher Bay, on Fraser Island, a large sand island in the rainforest renowned for its birdlife. Walking past trapdoor and funnel-web spiders, I was thankful for new heavy trekking boots.

AFTER several hours in the raging heat, my feet were burning and I removed my boots to discover my nail varnish had melted. Then it was on to Brisbane's Lone Pine koala sanctuary, home to koalas, dozens of kangaroos, two large emus, eagles and owls — the latter of which flew and perched on my arm.

For anyone who loves nature, Queensland is an extraordinary, unforgettable reminder of why we should all be working to conserve the planet's rich diversity.

TRAVEL FACTS

AUSTRAVEL offers ten nights in Queensland from £1,799 pp, including return flights to Brisbane with Korean Air, three nights at the Stamford Plaza, Brisbane, five nights on Lady Elliot Island including internal flights and two nights at Kingfisher Bay Resort. Prices based on two sharing a twin room. Valid for travel from April 10-June 20 2009. Austravel: 0800 988 4834, austravel.com. For further information on Queensland, visit experiencequeensland.com



Furry friend: Lynsey de Paul with a new companion in Queensland