

FEELS LIKE HEAVEN

ALLAN WHITING rounds out his three-island jaunt with a trip to the super-popular Fraser Island



PICS BY ALLAN WHITING

Incredibly, the essential wilderness value of the world's largest sand island has remained virtually unchanged in the 20 years or so that I've been visiting it.

Logging was stopped 12 years ago so Fraser Island's forested areas and beachfronts have actually improved, and top camping areas, with toilets and open-air showers, have replaced beach-humpy 'villages' that had sprung up in secluded areas. Free camping is still permitted just off the beachfront on the eastern shore, but access is rotated, to allow the bush to recover from human visitation.

In the beautiful, sensitive areas of Eli Creek and Wanggoolba Creek, boardwalks keep visitors off the vegetation and limit erosion.

Sure, the sand tracks that crisscross the

island are wider than they used to be and there's more traffic, but if you visit outside of peak times it will be as uncrowded as it was 20 years ago. If you go in mid-summer or during school holidays, you'll feel the pressure.

Many people only visit Fraser Island for the fishing, which is a pity, because they miss out appreciating the island's spectacular beauty. Even if you're a fishing fan allow time for bush-driving or -walking around the inland.

Fraser Island is alive: not only the vegetation, but the very sand itself. The island is formed of sand that has travelled north from NSW over the last two million years and has been deposited on bedrock, hundreds of metres below the ocean surface. The only visible rocks on Fraser are large volcanic-deposit headlands

around Indian Head-Waddy Point and smaller outcrops along the eastern beaches. Sand erosion by wind and water continues, as does the deposition of fresh sand from the south.

The magnificent stands of trees in Fraser's inland regions would suggest good soil quality, but without parent rock dissolving and releasing fresh nutrients as happens on the mainland, Fraser is dependent on blow-in nutrients in sea-spray and the decay of its own plants to maintain soil quality. That's why there's a strict ban on using any native wood for camp fires.

Fraser is noted for its 'perched lakes'. These bodies of water sit above sea level on lake bottoms that have been made leak-proof by layers of decayed vegetation. Fraser has the largest and highest perched lakes in the world.



The awesome coloured sands of Fraser's Pinnacles

Also, Fraser Island has many conventional lakes and some of these are being overtaken by sand 'blows' – most notably Lake Wabby.

The amount of fresh water trapped in Fraser Island's 140,000-hectare sand mass makes it one of Australia's largest fresh-water reservoirs. This water leaks out continuously, in creeks that vary in size from soaks on the beachfront to the four-million-litres-per-hour rush from Eli Creek.

The eastern beachfront is in stark contrast to the island's deep valleys inland that are home to giant, grooved-barked satinay trees, smooth-barked kauri 'pines', tangled strangler figs and tall piccabeen palms. One of Fraser's ferns is a member of a genus that has remained genetically unchanged for 250 million years.

Fraser's contrast is incredible: beach to lush, green inland

Crush some leaves from the understory carrol plant and inhale the musty vapour as you wander through this cool, shady wonderland and you know why people keep returning.

Fraser Island was populated by the Butchalla Aboriginal tribe before white settlement began in the 1840s, followed by exploitation of the island's timber and a shameful period of Aboriginal detention on the island that ended in 1904. Deportation of the Butchallas then began and continued until the 1930s.

The island takes its name from Eliza Fraser, wife of James Fraser, captain of *The Stirling Castle*, a brig bound from Sydney to Singapore in 1836. The ship was wrecked on the Great Barrier Reef and the crew headed for Moreton Bay, 1000 nautical miles to the south, in lifeboats. Eliza Fraser gave birth during the six-week voyage, but the baby died soon after.

The boat grounded on what was then known as Great Sandy Island and the survivors were captured by the Aborigines. Some perished, including Captain Fraser, but others escaped and organised a rescue party.

Early exploration of Fraser Island was a by-product of searches for shipwreck survivors and one wreck is a highlight of most Fraser visits. *The Maheno*, built in 1905 as a luxury passenger steam ship, was decommissioned in 1935, and ran aground just off Fraser's east coast. The wreck was used for bombing practice during World War II. Most visitors to Fraser check out *The Maheno's* rusting remains.

Fraser Island was a source of mineral sands until the late 1970s and timber until 1991. World Heritage listing was granted in 1992.

The best inland drives are clearly signposted with colour-coded direction arrows at intersections, so we haven't compiled the usual trek notes, with kilometre readings.

Suggested drives are marked on island maps and if you're camping at Central Station or on the beach between Dilli Village and Cathedral Beach Resort you're in the ideal place to start these drives.

Lake Garawongera Tourist Drive – this one-hour drive passes through tall forest that was extensively logged in the past. There are many stumps with wood cutters' plank grooves cut in them. There are several rainforest patches on this drive, but near the beach the trees are smaller and the forest is quite open. The Lake is deep and pristine, flanked by reed beds and water-loving malaleucas.

Central Lakes Tourist Drive – this two-hour

drive takes in Lake Wabby – the lake that's gradually being invaded by a sand 'blow' – and the favoured swimming lake, Lake McKenzie.

The start of the loop is difficult to spot on the beach, but is signposted Cornwells Rd. This track climbs up to Lake Wabby lookout and then leads to Lake McKenzie.

The loop continues through the magnificent timber stands in Pile Valley to Central Station, where you can catch up on Fraser Island's history at the visitors' centre. Wanggoolba

> THE PRICE OF TIDES

Many 4X4s are drowned on Fraser Island – mainly through driver carelessness. Read the tide chart in your permit pack and drive the beachfront at low water and in the two hours before and after slack water.

Many drivers think it's 'macho' to drive around rocky outcrops, such as Yidney Rocks, on incoming tides, rather than use wooden-slatted bypass tracks that offer safe passage. These people risk corrosion from salt deposits or, worse, vehicle stranding and subsequent write-off.

Another mistake is ripping through the saltwater shallows. It may look good on TV ads for 4X4s, but ad agencies don't have to foot your subsequent damage bill.

Hitting a shallow creek on the beachfront can ruin your day – and your vehicle. Roll-overs into the deeper creeks, such as Eli Creek, occur because drivers try to cross them at high tide.

The inland tracks have a speed limit of 35km/h, which is ridiculously high for vehicle-width sand tracks that have hundreds of blind corners. The speed limit should be dropped to 20km/h.

Creek boardwalk is an essential short stroll, before you rejoin the track and head for the beach at Eurong.

Although the driving time for this trek is two hours, side visits to the lakes and time spent at Central Station can make it a great day out.

The Northern Forests Tourist Drive – 36km through beautiful rainforest sections around Yidney Scrub, Boomerang Lakes – the highest perched lakes in the world – and the Knife-blade sand blow. The northern exit from the track onto the beach is close to The Pinnacles coloured sands and *The Maheno* wreck.

The southern approach to this trek is Happy Valley, then just follow the blue circuit signs.

'Yidney Scrub' is a strange name for magnificent rainforest featuring gigantic kauri, satinay and strangler fig trees, separated by piccabean palms. The track passes through open woodland dominated by banksias, then gum forest, before reaching testing soft sand over the last few kilometres.

The Southern Lakes Tourist Drive – this green-signposted track leads towards Central Station from Eurong, then swings south and wanders around Lakes Jennings, Birrabreen, Benaroon and Boomanjin, before emerging onto the beach at Dilli Village.

The Beach Drive – northwards up Seventy-Five Mile Beach as far as you like – tides will – but at least as far as Orchid Beach.

This trek is best done at low water, on hard tidal sand. The greatest difficulties are shallow creeks that often have hard, vertical sides. Smack one at speed and you'll do tyre and suspension damage – or worse.

The tracks around Waddy Point were once hazardous, but now there are two one-way tracks.

GETTING THERE

By far the most popular way of getting to Fraser Island is by car ferry from Inskip Point, just north of Rainbow Beach. At \$60 for a 20-minute return trip with your 4X4 it seems to be a rip-off, but what can you do? Interestingly, there are two competitive companies operating barge services, but the charges are identical.

PERMITS AND CAMPING

You need an access permit and camping permits for Fraser Island – in advance. There's a ranger's office at Rainbow Beach.

The service permit and camping charge for four days worked out at \$32, which isn't bad. If you choose to run the gauntlet and arrive without a permit and pre-paid camping charges it costs more when the rangers track you down – and they will.

It's forbidden to forage for fire wood or to bring it, so wood is available in very limited amounts at nominated points around the

Island. We have no argument with that stipulation, but the woodpiles are poorly arranged, with a deliberately long walk to and from parking areas. Our advice: take some heat beads if you're planning camp oven cooking.

DINGOS

You'll get the dingo lecture from the rangers, who mark your tent with a 'dingo-aware-graduate' ribbon after the talk. You'll receive ample literature on dingo-awareness and what to do on Fraser when you pick up a visitor's permit.

MAPS

Sunmap's Fraser Island is readily available in the area and has all the info you'll need. **4x4**

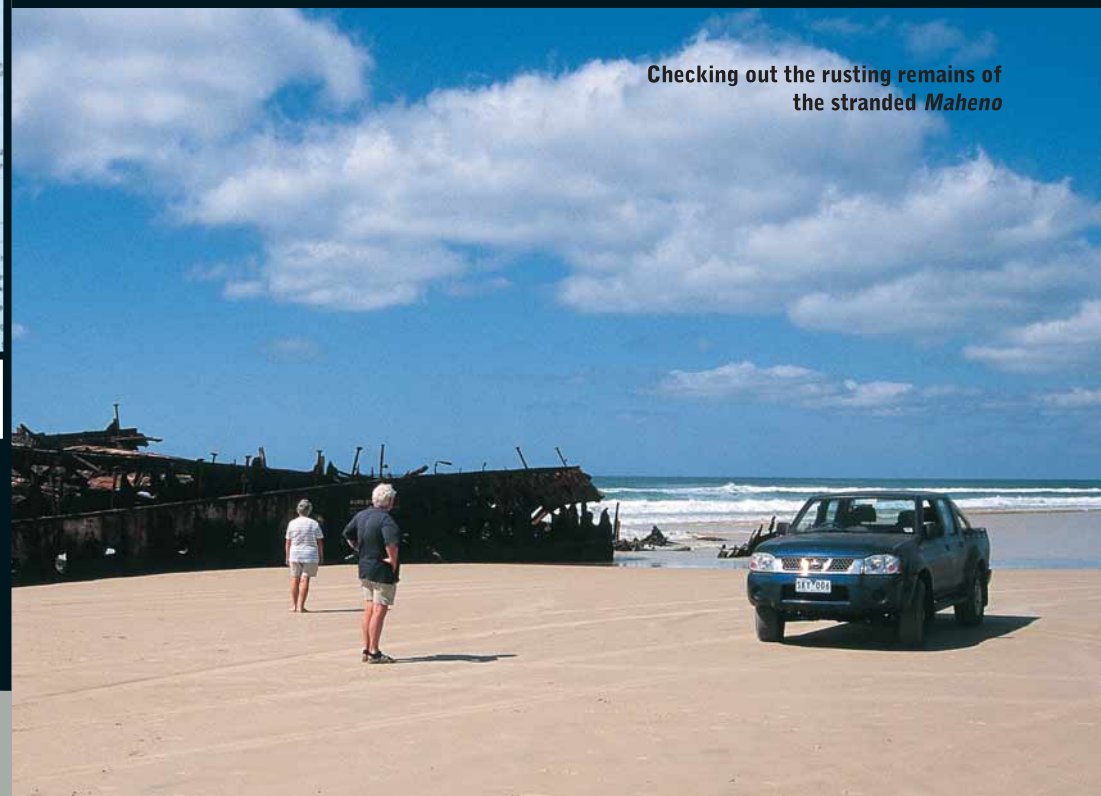
> NISSAN NAVARA V6

Our trek vehicle for the Three Islands Odyssey was 4X4's long-term Navara ST-R V6. It handled the trip up and back and the island sand trails with ease and averaged 12.3 litres per 100km on the highway legs and a credible 16.1L/100 km on the sand.

With our loan Engel (kindly donated for the trip by Landwide Rentals) strapped onto the back seat and our camping load in the back the Navara rode very well, with far less rear-end bump action than when unladen.



Pay attention to tide charts and you'll have a safe, enjoyable trip



Checking out the rusting remains of the stranded *Maheno*

For more treks and four-wheel drive information check out the Nissan website: nissan.com.au/patrol