

Clarence River Wilderness Lodge

Words: Justine McClymont Images: Glen McClymont

Escape to the wilderness

Justine McClymont finds a hidden escape in the rugged Upper Clarence country in northern NSW.

Winding our way slowly down the mountainside it feels like we are entering a hidden valley. In the distance below I can see the Clarence River curling its way through the valley floor. It amazes me to think that this is the very same mighty river of my hometown of Grafton in far northern New South Wales. But I'm a long way from home and it's different up here in the Upper Clarence with its rugged mountains that rise and fall across the landscape. 'So this is where it all starts,' I think to myself with anticipation.

My husband and I are on our way to the Clarence River Wilderness Lodge on the headwaters of the Clarence River in northern NSW. The Clarence River Wilderness Lodge is a 4000-hectare property of old growth forest that sits on the rugged Great Dividing Range.

We have travelled from the south, stopping in at Casino to pick up last-minute supplies, followed by lunch at the quaint village of Mallanganee and then past the rural village of Tabulam. Our trip takes us

past acres of farmlands, stands of eucalypt forest and even pockets of dark green rainforest signalled by the distinct call of bell birds and whip birds.

Most of the 42-kilometre road into the Clarence River Wilderness Lodge is unsealed and twists and turns up and down the mountainside. We cross over the Clarence River on the way and the timber bridge rattles as I look out at the sheer rock faces, smooth river stones and gentle rapids that form this section of the river. The road is steep and rough in parts, but provides incredible views of this upper river country.

By the time we arrive it feels like we are a million miles from anywhere. We park near the office, which is a lovely A-frame timber cottage complete with a stone chimney that no doubt provides warmth for the family business during the crisp cooler months. After checking in and buying a crate of firewood, we are shown to the campground down on the river flats.

It's a huge expanse right on the banks of the Clarence River and it's a pleasant surprise to find such a well-maintained campground in such a remote location. There are a few other campers already set up for the weekend, but there is ample space and we choose a quiet spot for ourselves overlooking the river. We set up our tent on the mown grass and the pegs go easily into the mixture of soil and river sand. There won't be any bent tent pegs from this camping trip!

By now it's late in the afternoon, so we light up the campfire and pull out the chairs. At the first smell of smoke I feel myself relax into camping mode. A beautiful ritual of camping life, the campfire is undoubtedly one of the best things about camping during the cooler months. Out of habit I check my mobile phone, but there's no reception. It's just the simplicity of camping and the magnificent country that surrounds us.

I wander down to have a closer look at the river that is literally a stone's throw from

our campsite. The trees at the water's edge are bent over in the direction of the river current. From here the Clarence follows a long journey down the range, past scores of rural properties and small villages. By the time it reaches historic Grafton it's a wide, grand expanse, before finally spilling out into the Pacific Ocean at the holiday town of Yamba.

The waterhole in front of the Wilderness Lodge is more than a kilometre long and I can hear the sound of rapids upstream and downstream. Colourful kayaks and canoes sit on the bank. I look across and up to the rock ledges keeping an eye out for the colony of brush-tailed rock wallabies that I've been told live here. There's none to be seen at this time of day, but I keep my fingers crossed that we will see some of these elusive creatures in the morning.

Back at the campsite there are a few other campers, including a group of families whose children are obviously relishing the great outdoors. A young boy with a mop of

dark hair rides his bike around on the grass, while two girls huddle together chatting by the fire. When they pass our camp on the way to the river with their parents, the children chat away with excitement at the prospect of going out for another paddle. It's refreshing to see children enjoying nature, with the only gadgets in sight a set of walkie talkies, which must seem like an old-fashioned novelty to kids these days!

After a storm overnight and the sound of thunder echoing around the ridge tops, I wake the next morning at the first bird call and we make the most of the early morning to take a canoe out on the waterhole. It's not long before we see three brush-tailed rock wallabies up on the steep rock ledges. Their grey and brown coats camouflage well into the colour of the rock face. These mysterious animals are endangered so it's quite a thrill to see them so close.

We then paddle gently downstream pointing out birdlife to each other as we go. We glide quietly and keep an eye out for the family of platypus, but they are hiding

from us today. 'You can be sure they are there watching us,' I say to my husband with a smile. I make a mental note to book a canoe tour next time we come back as the expert guides are sure to know the best places to spot the platypus.

The sun starts to break over the ridge top as we paddle back upstream and the chorus of birds sounds like a well-rehearsed orchestra welcoming the morning. Clarence River Wilderness Lodge is home to 160 species of birds, along with the brush-tailed rock wallaby and platypus. It also provides habitat for the rare spotted-tailed quoll and the rufous bettong.

Canoes are available for guests to use and there are also canoe tours for those wanting to explore the wilderness and white water rapids. The property has a fascinating history and is part of the old Toooloom Goldfields where gold was first discovered in 1857. Alluvial gold can still be found in the riverbeds and some of the gullies, and the Lodge has equipment for those keen to try their hand at gold panning.

Clockwise from far left:

Canoeing is a popular activity and the bell tents provide an easy camping option. ❖ Early-settler bush huts tucked into the hillside offer striking views of the river. ❖ The campground provides stunning views of the Clarence River and mountains. ❖ The crackle of the campfire as dusk settles over the valley. ❖ Camping by the banks of the Clarence River.





Top to bottom:
A place of peace and quiet as the early morning mist rises. ❖ Bushwalks range from short walks to full day walks.

There's also bushwalks ranging from short walks starting at the campground to full day walks for the more adventurous. We did a short walk that took us along the mountainside with great views of the river and rapids. There are also tracks that can be explored by mountain bike or four-wheel-drive.

Fishing isn't allowed in front of the Lodge as it's a wildlife refuge and home to the endangered eastern cod, but you can walk at least a kilometre upstream that takes you off the Clarence River Wilderness Lodge property to fishing holes. In the warmer months you can even snorkel in the river to view the underwater wildlife.

The property has been protected as a wildlife refuge since 1980. Owners Steve and Sharon are passionate caretakers of the wilderness and river environment and have put many hours into removing invasive weeds and planting local species. 'We have been pulling weeds and planting trees since before we moved onto the property,' says Steve. 'Some of the early plantings are now

more than 30 metres tall.' Steve and Sharon also aim to provide an eco-friendly camping experience for visitors. They have installed environmentally sustainable facilities for campers including composting toilets and solar hot water showers. The buildings on the property are also powered by off-grid solar power.

Clarence River Wilderness Lodge also has two rustic self-contained cabins and three early-settler style bush huts that are tucked into the hillside with striking views of the river. There are also large bell tents right on the riverbank for those who like a bit more comfort with their camping.

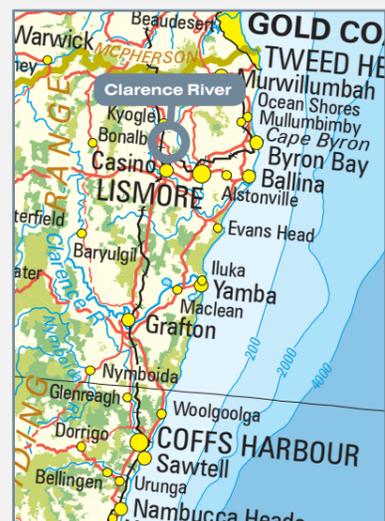
As we pack up our camp and look back out over the headwaters of the Clarence River, I think about how lucky we are to have places like this to escape to. It seems a shame to have to leave this wilderness and step back into the real world. But the drive out is just as spectacular and I'm reminded that the journey is always part of the adventure. ❖

FACT FILE



Getting there

Clarence River Wilderness Lodge is about 3.5 hrs' drive south-west of Brisbane and 2.5 hrs' drive west of Byron Bay in northern NSW. It is accessed via an unsealed road about a 1 hr drive from Urbenville or Tabulam. For instructions on how to get there and bookings visit www.clanceriver.com



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Access

Note that the last 7 km of road into the Wilderness Lodge is a private road that descends 500 m in 2 km and is consequently steep and rough in places. If entering with a 2WD it would need to have reasonable clearance and not be towing a trailer. The Clarence River Wilderness Lodge offers a tow in and out service for trailers at \$30 per trailer per trip.

Where to camp

Campsites are available on the banks of the Clarence River. Facilities include composting toilets and solar-powered hot showers. There are established campfires and firewood can be purchased from the office.

Wilderness camping is also available at a limited number of secluded campsites.

When to go

Camping at Clarence River Wilderness Lodge is available year round and bookings are essential. Please contact the Lodge to check access in the event of periods of extended heavy rain.

Further information
www.clanceriver.com
(02) 6665 1337



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