



TRAVEL

A DRIVE ON THE WILD SIDE

Photos by Andy Hatton
Text by Sarah Reid

**Built for adventure, the MERCEDES-AMG G 63
is the ultimate travel companion on an exhilarating
road trip to Australia's tropical frontier**



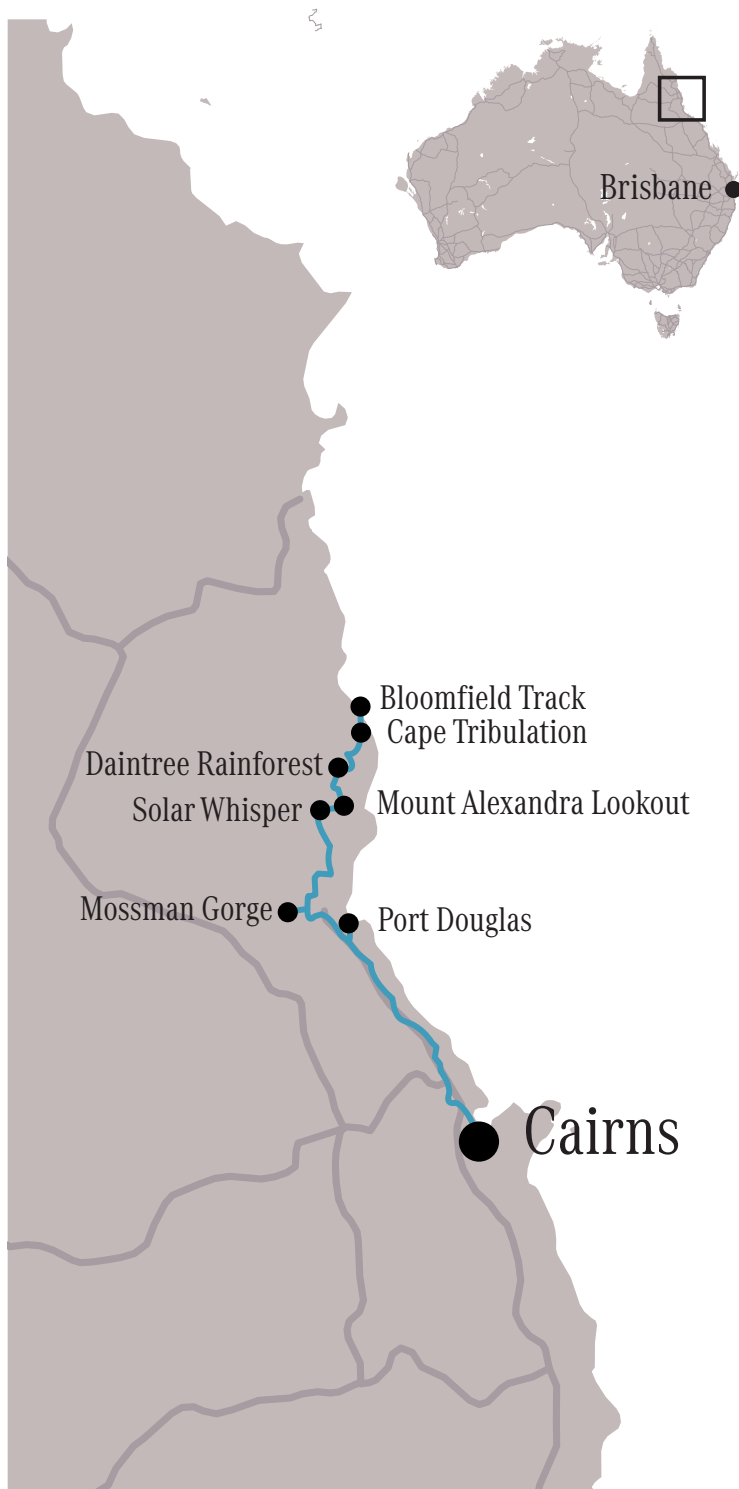
MERCEDES-AMG G 63:

Combined fuel consumption*: 16.2 l/100 km

Combined CO₂ emissions*: 369 g/km

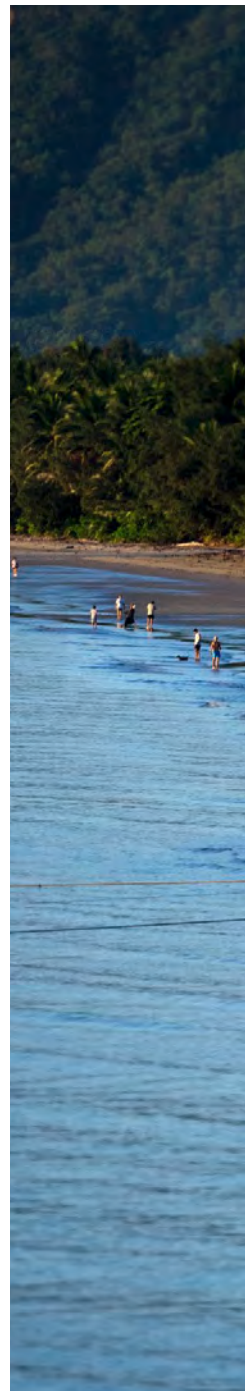


Two of the world's most iconic UNESCO World Heritage Sites – the Great Barrier Reef and the Wet Tropics of Queensland – meet in this sultry corner of Australia, some 1,700 kilometres north of Brisbane



We've barely set foot outside the airport in Cairns on Queensland's Cape York Peninsula, at the north-eastern tip of Australia, and our clothes already feel damp. The steamy, wet season is drawing to a close, yet you could still cut the humidity with a knife. Happily, there's not a cloud in the sky as we climb into the Mercedes-AMG G 63, crank the air-con, and sync our road trip playlist for our forthcoming adventure.

Two of the world's most iconic UNESCO World Heritage Sites – the Great Barrier Reef and the Wet Tropics of Queensland – meet in this sultry corner of Australia, some 1,700 kilometres north of Brisbane. At the gateway to this otherworldly wilderness is the tourism hub of Cairns, a small, welcoming city with the relaxed pace of a country town. Furnished with a renovated waterfront esplanade and a sprinkling of new luxury hotels during the last years, Cairns marks the beginning of the Great Barrier Reef Drive. Stretching north to Cape Tribulation, a headland and coastal locality in the heart of the 120,000-hectare Daintree Rainforest, this 140-kilometre route is one of Australia's most scenic coastal drives – including several side roads all open to road traffic, making it an ideal route for the G-Class.



SAVAGE BEAUTY

Linking Cairns to the small resort town of Port Douglas, the first 70 kilometres of this wonderfully wild drive can be completed in an hour. But this is a journey best savoured – especially behind the wheel of the G 63, its large windows providing a sublime panorama of the verdant landscape, where rainforest-clad hills tumble into a patchwork of sugar cane plantations fringing the coast.



As we pass the outer Cairns suburb of Palm Cove, the scenery becomes more rugged as the road traces the coast through Macalister Range National Park. A string of idyllic beaches beckons us to pause for a swim, but the region's natural beauty can be deceiving, with signs reminding us that it's "stinger season" when the occurrence of deadly jellyfish restricts coastal swimming to stinger-resistant enclosures. This is also saltwater – "saltie" – crocodile country, with prominent red-and-yellow signs featuring warnings in



English, German and Chinese located wherever crocodiles could be present.

The sandy beach access roads along our route, however, offer a thrilling chance to test the capabilities of the G 63. We drop into low gear as we leave the bitumen, but the transition is so seamless it feels like we never left it. With every G-Class vehicle put through its paces on the brand's notoriously challenging test track on Austria's Schöckl mountain, it's hardly surprising.



“The rainforest is like our supermarket, but we have to be careful which aisle we shop in” – Levi Williams



A TOUR THROUGH HISTORY

The G-Class in Daintree Rainforest. Left: Levi Williams explains indigenous heritage.

CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

To really understand the significance of the region's rich history, you have to spend time with an Indigenous guide like Kuku Yalanji man Juan Walker, owner of Walkabout Cultural Adventures, whose ancestors have shared a deep and ongoing connection with the reef and the rainforest for more than 40,000 years.

“Visitors are blown away by the knowledge we still have for using nature,” he tells us when we meet on a local beach. “See this berry?” he asks, plucking the white fruit from a sea lettuce (*Scaevola taccada*) plant and squeezing its briny juice into his eyes. “It works like a saline solution to help prevent infection.”

With each Indigenous Australian serving as a custodian of a unique volume of cultural knowledge, no two Indigenous tourism experiences are the same, as we learn on a Dreamtime Walk with Kuku Yalanji man Levi Williams at Mossman Gorge, a magical pocket of the Daintree Rainforest near Port Douglas.

Our experience begins with a smoking ceremony (traditional welcome), so stirring it gives us goosebumps, before Levi leads us deeper into the rainforest, pointing out sacred sites, native wildlife, and plants used for weapons, medicines and food along the way. “The rainforest is like our supermarket, but we have to be careful which aisle we shop in,” chuckles Levi as he gestures towards a cassowary plum (*Cerbera floribunda*). Digestible only by the cassowary, a formidable flightless bird descended from dinosaurs, these vibrant blue egg-shaped fruits are toxic enough to kill a human within hours.

Vastly more palatable is the region's increasing array of premium dining experiences offering an altogether different cultural experience. Modern Australian cuisine is strongly influenced by Asian flavours, with top restaurants in this multi-cultural region expertly fusing these flavours with local produce and native ingredients.



DRIVE WITH A VIEW

The sandy beach access roads along the Great Barrier Reef Drive offer a thrilling chance to test the capabilities of the G 63.



MESMERISING VIEWS

The dawn sky glows a deep tangerine as the G 63 rumbles to life, as if it knows where it's going. For we're bound for the final leg of our journey across the Daintree River, a 40-minute drive from Port Douglas, and into the wilds of Cape Tribulation. Before crossing the river, renowned for its reptilian residents, we board a croc cruise with Solar Whisper, which uses electric boats to create a peaceful environment for wildlife viewing.

After spotting a few salties, we are back in the spacious interior of the G-Class, ready for the next adventure. Completely off-grid, Cape Tribulation is only accessible from the south by car ferry. The journey across the river only takes a few minutes, but rolling off the barge feels like driving into a dinosaur film scene, with the world's oldest continually surviving rainforest cocooning the narrow road as the G 63 climbs up to our first stop at Mount Alexandra Lookout. Here, clear skies grant us mesmerising views across the rainforest towards the turquoise Coral Sea before we continue slowly, cautious that cassowaries could cross at any moment. A small community also lives off-grid on Cape Tribulation, with many locals working in local tourism businesses such as the Daintree Ice Cream Company, where we sample a refreshing pairing of coconut and native wattleseed flavours.



ON THE TRACKS OF NATURE

Boyd's forest dragon (above) is habitant in the highland and lowland rainforests of northern Australia.







RAINBOWS IN THE WILDERNESS

Signposted walking trails encourage us to stretch our legs en route to the Cape Tribulation headland, where the Great Barrier Reef Drive – and the sealed road – officially ends. From here the road morphs into the infamous Bloomfield Track, a challenging four-wheel-drive route connecting Cape Tribulation to historic Cooktown. Prone to wet-season closures, the route is open today, which we accept as an invitation to slide into off-road mode and sample a section before retracing our route back to Cairns.

Navigating the first creek crossing so comfortably that we barely feel the bumps of the rocky creek bed as water sprays up over the hood, we then ascend the first of two steep hills on the track known to test the limits of most vehicles. The G 63 handles it with ease, but it's reassuring to know that help is available at the push of an emergency button should we find ourselves in need of assistance.

Sooner than we would like, it is time for us to say goodbye to the wilderness as we make our way back. The daylight is fading fast as we pull into Cairns to freshen up at Crystalbrook Flynn, the city's newest luxury hotel, before making the short walk along the waterfront to the twelfth-floor rooftop bar Rocco. Taking our perch at Cairn's highest bar to toast to our incredible adventure, a flock of rainbow lorikeets flashes past us in a cacophony of high-pitched screeches. Even back in the city, the wilderness is never far away.

SARAH REID

Based in Byron Bay on the New South Wales North Coast, award-winning Australian freelance travel writer and positive-impact travel advocate Sarah Reid has journeyed to the edge of the earth (and just about everywhere in between) in search of adventure – often behind the wheel of a car.

