



## experience fraser island

Author: Suzy Young - Tourism and Events Queensland

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# Developing A Dream... Naturally

FRASER ISLAND: It sounds like a developer's greatest challenge or a nature lover's nightmare - take a pristine but well-loved spot in one of the world's last remaining wild areas and build a smart resort that brings in the discerning tourist, but doesn't harm a hair on Mother Nature's sweet head.

This was the task for the creators of Kingfisher Bay Resort on Fraser Island, who faced objections, outrage and obstacles all along the way. The deep forests of enormous trees, the stunning lakes, the miles and miles of pristine beaches, the huge and beautiful sand dunes of Fraser Island have all rung with the rage of protesters against sand mining, logging, and development at one time or another.

From beginning to building to being, Kingfisher Bay Resort had to measure up as a place fit to grace this extraordinary environmental treasure.

Despite being only a few hours from one of Australia's largest cities - Brisbane, Fraser is home to only a handful of people, is mostly National Park and has at last attained World Heritage listing. Only sandy forest tracks exist and only experienced four-wheel drivers attempt to drive them.

The veneration of Fraser Island haunted the folks who first dared to think of breaking the surface of its sacred sand and shattering its peace with bulldozers and chainsaws to build a smart eco resort.

Kingfisher Bay Resort's Managing Director, Gary Smith, remembers falling in love with Fraser Island as a university student and was well aware of how highly people valued its pristine beauty. But he also knew it would make a great place for a resort and he says the "knockers" only made him and his associates more determined to prove them wrong.

"This was a far more complex project than anything we'd ever done," he admits, "but we had the studies and we knew it was feasible."

It was hard work.

Imagine building yourself a dream home on some perfect little patch in the woods and actually lifting, potting and reserving 150,000 plants from the site so as to carefully preserve the original flora, setting up a huge nursery of these plants to keep the flora ecologically pure and avoid mainland plant diseases, and then lovingly propagating future plantings from those plants, growing them all in soil taken only from the site itself.



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All landfill came from Fraser itself and gravel and aggregate had to be purchased from specially chosen mainland sites and washed to make sure it brought no unwanted elements.

Then imagine placing most of your house delicately on pylons driven into the sand, not just plopping it down on a concrete slab, to allow air to circulate and the roots of nearby trees to continue their growth unmolested. Yes, the original trees.

Anything of any size had to stay put and the bulldozers had to wend their way around them during the building. The majority of the buildings have been placed so as to leave these trees in peace, except for a few utility buildings in the tiny central shopping village and tennis court area.

And, except for these tennis courts and the pool area, there are no areas of gratuitous space, such as lawns, golf greens or manicured gardens. There is a tiny patch for a picnic table and playground near the 'pub', The Sand Bar, but otherwise the vegetation is quite natural and without a weed or an exotic plant to be seen. The original nursery from the site-preparation days thrives today under the care of the 'gardeners' who have to make all their work look as if they have done nothing at all.

The exquisite ecological tight-rope walk of building and running Kingfisher Bay Resort has proved successful. Doubters have retracted their sneers - one of the resort's loudest critics, Mike West, who organised the original blockades to stop logging on the island, now declares that he's come full circle on Kingfisher and thinks they've done a great job. And awards have poured in for its architecture, pollution strategies, project development, its example for environmental tourism and even its healthy bush tucker menu.

Australian architects Guymer Bailey wanted to make the place look like "a natural extension of the island". It must have been heartbreaking to be asked to design something visually beautiful that doesn't show too much. Make it gorgeous, but invisible.

The Centre Complex is huge, but all you see as you approach by vehicular ferry across from River Heads is the graceful lines of its roof peeking through the trees and, at the right time of day, a lavish sunset reflected in the glass at the very top of the main building. Inside, you can see how vast the building actually is, looking up at its cathedral ceiling or perched in the little loft overlooking the indoor rainforest gardens that punctuate the public areas. It is built on a slab that has been painstakingly buried deep in the sand so that nearby tree roots can find a comfortable depth and so the place doesn't fly away in a high wind.

The entire place, main building, guest rooms, outbuildings, private villas and holiday houses, are all designed so as never to rise above the height of the trees, never break the even line that nature has created. The effect is that the complex appears to have somehow grown, organically, on the hillside in Kingfisher Bay, rather than being added to the landscape.



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And such a landscape. Fraser being the world's largest sand island, a giant collection of sand dunes, the architect has given the buildings a roofline that follows the natural parabolic curve of a sand dune, a satisfying and graceful concept.

He's also used a lot of internal and external bracing, which is modern and clever, but somehow captures another natural feature - the tangle of slender tree trunks and vines in the rainforests and the stalks of thick reed banks in Fraser's lakes.

Everywhere you look the design of the place seeks to reflect the island itself, in homage to its natural beauty. The lines of the flooring are swirls of rainforest lianas, the upholstery glows with wildflower colours, and the swimming pool is designed to remind one of the lovely Lake McKenzie, a perfect clear lake with glistening white sand beaches that is arguably the prettiest of Fraser's many perched lakes, some clear, and some golden brown.

External colours also echo the natural hues of the island. The buildings are a deep, dark foresty brown, like the rich peaty soil you see everywhere on Fraser mingled with the sand, like the trunks of many of its incredible variety of trees, and like the 'coffee rock', which sounds delicious, but is simply a compacted version of that peaty soil and looks like rock protruding from the beach sand, but crumbles with a slight kick from a hiking boot.

The brown is complemented with a saucy turquoise in many strengths on walls, trim and furnishings, echoing the sea, the lakes, the bluey-green of Australian eucalypt leaves, and a deep, rich red, like the berries and tree barks from the dark rainforest of Fraser's interior.

The resort's interiors are mainly timber, light and cool, and decor is minimal and refreshing, with the exception of some peculiar light fittings, everywhere from bathrooms to the cocktail lounge, which are meant to reflect the rough but endearing Australian outback by using shiny corrugated iron in simple curved shapes.

There is so much upon which to feast the eyes, whether you head off on 4WD adventures across the island or just toast by the pool. From genteel spotlighting walks around the resort at night to a jouncing, gear-meshing, 4WD trek on pure sand roads through the bush, up to the lakes, along the beaches, and into the deep woods at Central Station, you mustn't miss Fraser Island, the reason for this very special resort's existence here at Kingfisher Bay, where a love of rugged nature can finally meet the desire for a very comfortable place to stay.

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