



Lake Barrine

Far North Queensland, Australia

by Keith Cardwell www.fnqdiver.com

top l-r: Eastern water dragon getting warmth from the sun. Darting schools of banded rainbow fish are in never-ending supply and great to see while snorkelling around near the lake's edge. The lake is surrounded by rain forest providing a sheltered haven for wildlife and a quiet oasis to pass a peaceful day enjoying the beauty of nature. Water lilies cluster around the lake fringes attracting eager pollinators and divers who pop up with cameras. Fungi growing on the dead and dying trees fallen into the lake.

Many who travel to this part of the world do so often with one intention: to visit the Great Barrier Reef. Fairly understandable when considering its place as one of the modern wonders of the world and with other breathtaking facts - like how it can be seen from outer space and, that worryingly, and according to many climate change scientists, it won't be with us for much longer. So see it while you can!

There isn't much doubt that the reef is terrific but up in the 'Far North' it's not on its own. The rainforest offers a whole bundle of surprises that makes one wonder why and how on earth it could be so relatively unknown. That's my take on it anyway. The rainforest provides a stunningly complex habitat for some of the world's most fascinating flora and fauna but at the same time discreetly shrouds a group of idyllic lakes that provide stunningly beautiful underwater scenery with their own mysterious allure.

Like many freshwater bodies that offer easy, free and often unlimited access, those in the far north of Queensland are located not much longer than an hour's drive from downtown Cairns - giving an array of fantastic things to do ranging from twitching (bird watching) to fishing for barramundi (those are the 'bloody big fish' to which Crocodile Dundee refers!), platypus spotting and, of course, scuba diving.

As a brief description of the lake, and citing from a recently published *Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area Tour Guide Handbook* by Dr Julie Carmody for the Marine and Tropical Sciences Research Facility:

Lake Barrine is the largest of the crater lakes on the Atherton Tableland situated 730 metres above sea level, roughly one kilometre in diameter, with a maximum depth of 65 metres (I can personally assure the wannabe deep diver that it's really, really dark down there!) Formed

about 17,000 years ago following a volcanic eruption, the lake is filled only by rainwater.

Dr Carmody certainly gives a far more comprehensive description of this location and available at: http://www-public.jcu.edu.au/news/current/JCU_086495. Well worth the visit!

But from my perspective... From the lake edge and progressing through the littoral zone down to about 18 metres is a nice spongy type of weed often broken by a submerged tree or three used as a refuge for the many schools of rainbow fish, 'mouth almightys' and tilapia, the latter being introduced and a fish considered to be a noxious species which apparently takes food resources away from the indigenous species. Tilapia have only been recognized as residents of the lake since 2007 but already their numbers defy any real chance of eradication. Even so, I find it hard to believe that in this particular water body they are a pest when seeing

the hungry, stalking antics of the mouth almightys darting in and out of the schools of tilapia fry and filling themselves up with more than I can at a seafood buffet. It's a real hoot also watching the big short-finned eels stalking the large tilapia. Fantastic stuff! I don't think the mouth almightys have ever had it so good. Other indigenous species, such as rainbow fish, are constantly pecking plankton out of mid-water and the schools of bony bream, seen as swirling silver clouds, doing the same thing or sometimes as individuals scooping up benthic organisms off the silty bottom in deeper water. How the tilapia compete by gobbling food sources that other fish appear to thrive on beats me as all I see them do is suck on weeds. I just wish we could spear them because they taste soooooo good when smoked!

But it's not just the fish...

The topside fauna are an irresistible must-see, including water dragons and pythons which are relatively easy for the diver to stalk up on from the water's edge. At certain points along the lake where, instead of swimming the distance and with a very modest tribute to the ferry master who normally just takes topside sightseers, divers can be delivered to any remote spot on the lake they may wish to go. It can be a long swim back but the underwater viewing is often stunning

giving plenty of opportunity for some spectacular underwater (and over water) photography.

So what else is there? Apart from the lack of current, not so tasty salt water and knowing you can come and go as you please, an amazing sensation occurs every time an ascent is made ... stillness ... interrupted only by a choir of birdsong so enjoyable that it's almost worth just floating there with your eyes closed. And I do, frequently. With temperatures that only get as low as 18°C in winter and more often-than-not an average of 26-27 for the rest of the year, it's warm enough to dive just in bathers. This experience, therapeutic in itself, gets even better and climaxed by completing the day with Devonshire teas and scones or in winter (such as it is) hot pumpkin soup at the adjacent tea house situated on the lake edge. Life should be so good!

The Far North of Queensland is certainly where the reef meets the rainforest and as much as the Great Barrier Reef is a 'must see' for divers, ever so close by diving can also be experienced in the tranquility of a tropical rainforest paradise.

So when you visit us here - don't forget the magic of the Tablelands! 🐊



Python



l-r: Schools of tilapia hiding in the submerged trees. Platypus best caught early in the morning taking a break at the surface after diving for worms and shellfish. Marbled eels. Mouth almighty. Snapping turtles foraging in the shallows.

