

ACROSS THE GREEN MOUNTAINS

Far North Queensland, Australia, 2007.

by Grant Dixon



In far north Queensland, the Great Dividing Range runs closer to the coast than anywhere else. In the Daintree River country, jungle-clad slopes rise steeply to elevations in excess of 1300 metres, within sight of tropical beaches. Beyond a series of dissected tablelands extend inland and comprise a large area clothed in undisturbed tropical rainforest and woodland. These forests, relicts from Gondwana 100 million years ago, were listed as World Heritage in 1988. While not perhaps universally inviting as a destination for an extended bushwalk, the large area of wild and largely trackless country was attractive enough for the three of us to plan a mid-dry season crossing, from Mossman to the inland road to Cooktown.

Unbalanced by heavy packs, we hopped between rounded granite boulders towards Mossman Gorge. The gorge cuts deep into the tableland but, while its unseen depths were to be our companion for several days, it was not our route. The green wall of the escarpment reared above, blocking out half the sky, and it was up there we had to go.

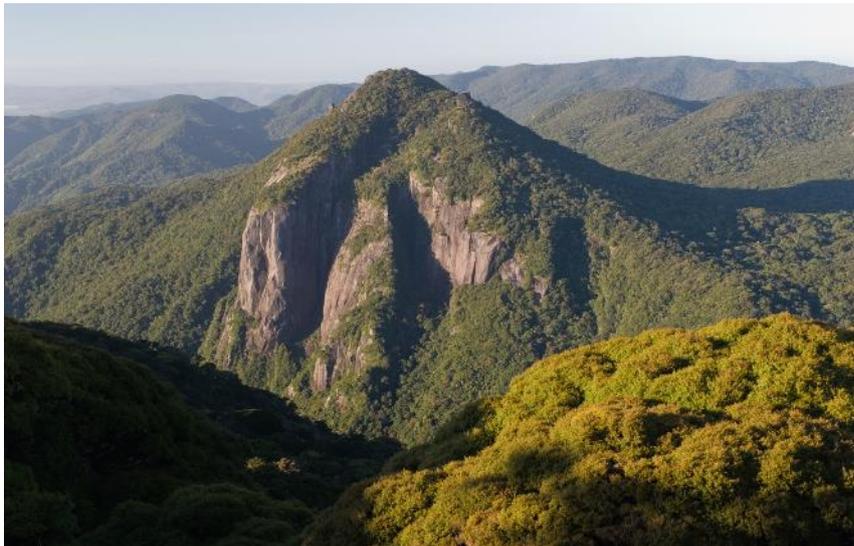
Leaving the sunny riverbed, we dragged ourselves up the riverbank and beneath the closed forest canopy, and started climbing, very steeply. Shady maybe, but the forest air was still and warm. Sweat filled my eyes and soaked my clothes as I hauled myself upwards, aided by vines and whatever

vegetation was handy. Short sections of feral pig tracks eased the way at times. But blundering into lawyer or wait-a-while vines, which are fine and often hard to see, was an occasional hazard, their directional “claws” grabbing clothing or packs (or ripping into any exposed neck or arm skin; a good reason for wearing gloves and a long-sleeved shirt in this country). Once caught, the assistance of others was often necessary to get disentangled oneself.

A saddle with nearby small creek and refreshing pool provoked an early stop for the day, although we were barely halfway up the escarpment. Fluorescent fungi and a few leeches provided excitement this first night under a fly in the dark rainforest.

Leaving soon after the birds announced dawn, we struggled on steeply upwards and crested the escarpment within a few hours. Still beneath a thick canopy, we traversed undulating terrain, with rock gardens and wet gullies, and while often near the escarpment edge, views into Mossman Gorge below were filtered at best.

The summit comprises granite whalebacks that rise from the dense canopy and it was up onto one of these that we eventually hauled ourselves. Big, knarled, moss-laden and apparently ancient teatrees grew in deep crevices. A cold mist-laden easterly breeze allowed only hints of the other magnificent surroundings, and provided a damp and windy night.



Dawn was clear, but still very windy. Enjoyment of the spectacular view to the bluffs beyond Mossman Gorge was brief as we broke camp and rugged up against the freezing gale. A scramble, some steep sidling and a bit of scrub saw us back beneath the forest canopy and warm again. Open forest walking

then prevailed for a while, a highlight being copses of Purple Kauri trees, their smooth and exfoliating trunks a contrast to the surrounding forest. Lunch on a sandbank amid a cascading creek provided the opportunity to rinse three days sweat from bodies and clothes. Heading upstream later, we eventually camped on a ridge above its headwaters, stars twinkling through gaps in the forest canopy.

The next day, not for first or last time would careful compass navigation prove essential to traversing a landscape with no distant views. We followed a series of dry forested ridges, open sections carpeted with leaf litter and crackly underfoot alternating with dense vine thickets. Late in the day tall, smooth, pale-barked boles of eucalypts appeared in the forest for the first time.

Now in the Daintree River headwaters, we followed a small creek downstream, criss-crossing on mossy logs at first until the forest became more open. Entering the gorge country, our style of progress changed, with slab traverses and rock hopping interrupted by scrambles to circumvent small cascades. Additional excitement was provided by a three-metre python curled beneath a clump of swordgrass on our route.

Following a high sidle above a steep wall, the valley opened and dropped dramatically. Reaching the top of these first major falls, the extent of smooth granite either side of the ribbons of water reminded us what this place must be like in the wet season. At the base of the falls all eyes fixed on a perfect 50-metre natural waterslide into a deep pool. Parrish was game enough to give it a go first and, when he returned obviously exhilarated and without lacerated buttocks from any protruding crystals in the granite, Ian and I had to try it too.

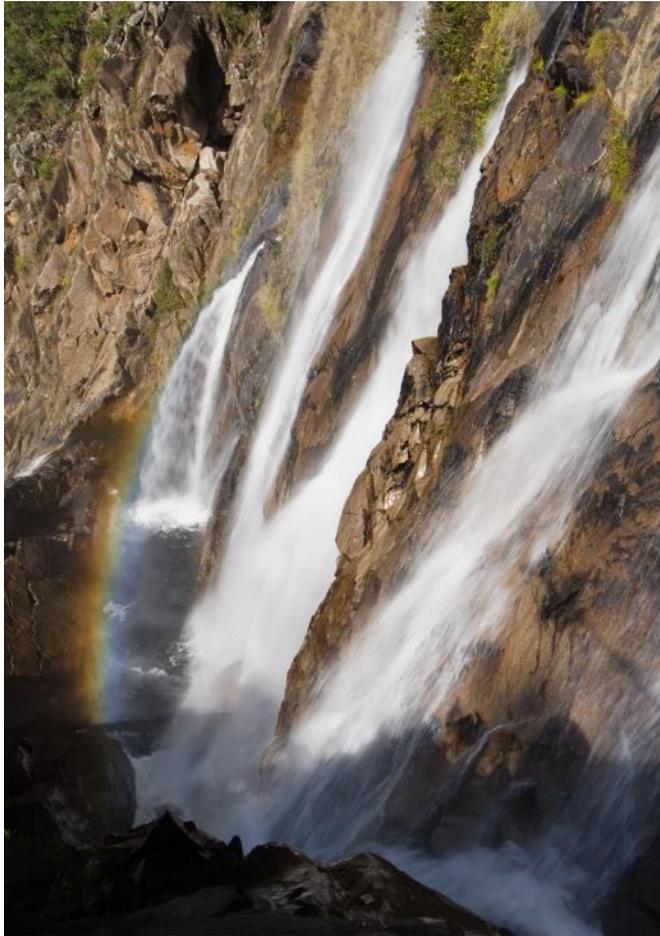


After a warm night camped on the first of many sandbanks, we continued downstream, but the easy travel proved short-lived. An ominous opening of the valley heralded the lip of a 100-metre drop into a dark-walled gorge with no apparent direct route down. Fig roots provided welcome handholds as we climbed a precipitous slope above the falls, then long grass then hid loose rocks on a steep traverse to a narrow crest, and the top of an equally-steep descent back to the river downstream of the falls. Once there we barely hesitated, diving in fully clothed and rinsing sweat and forest filth from our clothes. Platypus and bright blue Ulysses butterflies were the day's wildlife highlights.

The next day was an easy riverbank stroll, with many sandbanks and Water Gums. Hence I was wearing shorts when we decided to explore a side creek that the map suggested contained a waterfall. We scrambled up the steep slabs and boulders then, enjoying the freedom of being unencumbered by packs, elected to follow an alternative route down. Following remnants of feral pig tracks down a steep gully, I blundered into a small stinging tree, the leaves catching me across both exposed thighs. It was not pleasant, the sharp instant pain spreading over subsequent minutes. Back at the river a swim produced a sharp increase in discomfort initially, before improving, but unpleasant sensations returned at times over subsequent days.

We sighted several cattle during the afternoon and a patch of lantana infested the slope above the night's camp. The next day we climbed away from the Daintree River, and these reminders that the

wild country has limits, to spend several days traversing a complex network of ridges and streams towards the Mt Windsor Tableland.



The streams contained a series of delightful cascades and a couple of impressive waterfalls, welcome scenic breaks when staggering upstream on slippery rocks. The intervening ridges were sometimes sinuous, sometimes roller-coaster, and always cloaked in dense forest so careful navigation was essential, but didn't help to avoid lawyer vine surprises. Nor did it prevent us sloshing aimlessly amongst a maze of channels within a vine-rich alluvial flat forest for a couple of hours. Backtracking, we followed the deep main creek channel downstream, sometimes wading over waist depth, easier but rather wet. As the valley widened the stream grew and changed character, and we rockhopped the last section to the top of Adeline Falls, which plunges 200 metres in a series of steep cascades down the escarpment.

The lip of the falls offered an excellent campsite and our first really extensive views for a week, so we unanimously prescribed a rest day. I descended a ridge beside the falls to a fascinating area where twisted water gums embraced boulders amongst braided stream channels, then explored the complex interplay of cascades, pools and falls, by climbing back up ribs and slabs between the ribbons of the falls themselves.

Rockhopping back upstream provided straightforward progress for a while, but leaving the open river to head westwards was necessary. The forest was slow going, with lots of lawyer vines and, even though we were now quite adept at spotting them before becoming entangled, here they were sometimes so thick that one could move to avoid a vine spotted be ahead or above and become snared from the side. The rainforest ended abruptly with the appearance of a large Flooded Gum, then open forest with Cypress Pine groves. The easy going was welcome but the day ended with a series of cattle trails and a depressingly large infestation of lantana filling a small valley.

A day of gloriously easy walking took us along the northern edge of the Mt Windsor Tableland. We first traversed ridges cloaked in open grassy woodland with scattered granite outcrops then, after

collecting water for the night at a one of the mostly-dry small creeks, ambled along rock pavements on the escarpment edge. The northwest apex of the tableland is an outlying granite dome and I sat atop it for awhile watching the scudding clouds and a pair of Peregrine falcons wheeling above, until the strong wind drove me back to shelter and camp in the saddle below.



Wandering southwards, we crossed several ridges between near-dry streams, exploring interesting outcrops and small chasms en route, and watched some Water Dragons at one pool, then descended to the sand-floored valley of Boggy Creek. The character of this stream changed as we wandered downstream looking for a campsite; granite boulders and slabs appeared, and we selected a campsite on slabs beside a swimming pool. Less than 200 metres west of our camp, Boggy Creek cuts a deep notch down the tableland's western escarpment, with bluffs and tors arrayed above, and small cliffs and slabs seemingly everywhere on the wooded slopes below. I viewed the sunset from this airy perch, and attempted to concoct the most feasible descent route for tomorrow.

We descended a series of gullies and ribs, the terrain steep and often loose, to reach polished slabs in the bed of Boggy Creek at the base of the escarpment. Rockhopping and pleasant slab walking then took us to the base of the slope, after which we followed cattle tracks beside the dry stream bed. The vegetation had now changed dramatically - savannah woodland stretched as far as one could see, with patches of gallery forest along the stream bed, and provided very much an inland feel to the country.

We came upon a grass-fringed waterhole at the confluence with Prospect Creek suddenly and a couple of freshwater crocodiles were glimpsed as they were flushed into the pool. Now less enthusiastic about a swim, we wandered on following the sandy riverbed downstream, past more large pools, stands of paperbarks, and increasing signs of cattle. We made fast progress and, climbing a nearby knoll after our last dinner, the Mt Windsor Tableland already seemed a distant blue scarp.

Now in degraded cattle country, I reflected on the country we had crossed to get here, the great contrasts in landform and vegetation from the coastal mountains to the dry inland, the waterfall and wildlife highlights, and other pockets of wild country in a vast continent that I might explore.



A few hours walk took us to the road next morning, stopping to rinse body and clothes in one of the cleaner looking waterholes. Food fantasies were not fulfilled by the Palmer River Roadhouse fare, and a disappointing 'burger sat in my stomach while we waited for the afternoon bus back to Cairns.

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