Queensland’s Iron Range region, taking in Portland Roads, Lockhart River and Kutini Payamu (Iron Range) National Park, is full of hidden surprises, writes Danielle Chenery.
The town gets around 30 per cent of the 4WD traffic that goes to Cape York.

1 Thriving art scene

The Lockhart River Art Centre is home to an inspiring range of paintings, sculptures, necklaces and locally created Indigenous artefacts.

'The Art Gang' – a group of Indigenous artists, work from the centre along with many artists of different ages. There's 'The Old Girls', a highly respected group of elders producing vibrant art that's among Australia's most collectable, along with many artists who come on an ad-hoc basis to work in the bustling creative hub.

Community elders have an important role at the centre, sharing knowledge of traditions, languages, song, dance, history and artefact making.

Art from this town certainly does what great art should – it reflects a modern take on the community’s environment, culture and traditions. The result is a unique expression of life in Lockhart River, and a completely different style of Australian art.

Importantly, half the proceeds from every artwork sold by the centre goes to the artist. The centre retains the other half and uses the funds to provide artists with canvas, paints, brushes, exhibitions, exhibition-related travel, workshops and other essentials.

Artists from the centre will be taking part in the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair being held from July 24 to 27. It is well worth checking out.

2 Less than 700 people live here

However, during the dry season – from June to December, the Iron Range region swells with tourists. Greg Westcott, co-owner of Out of the Blue café, in Portland Roads, says the town gets around 30 per cent of the 4WD traffic that goes to the “Top” in Cape York, creating a temporary swell in the town's otherwise small population.

“For six months of the year we are very busy with tourism, but for the rest of the year Portland Roads is one of the tiniest communities in Australia,” he says.

Tourists on their epic journey to Cape York come to Iron Range to experience the unique National Park, Chili Beach, and of course everyone wants to see the world famous Art Centre in the indigenous community of Lockhart River, he explains.

“Tourism is the economic driver for the area. We look forward to the influx of people wanting to experience the region. Our dry season is our work time and we’re flat out, then the wet season is our time to recover and enjoy our paradise.”
**Interesting history**

From its earliest beginnings, Portland Roads was always a safe anchorage and shore landing point, first for exploration, then for the commercial harvesting of pearl shell and sandalwood.

Then in the 1920s, gold was discovered at nearby Gordon Creek and further west in the Wenlock River area. The population swelled to thousands. With an increased need for access to the goldmining area, an 800-foot jetty was constructed at Portland Roads in 1939 to allow steamers to berth and discharge cargo direct to shore. The gold rush had declined by the beginning of World War II but, in 1942, a bomber base was established inland from Portland Roads and three military airstrips were laid. At the peak of the battle for the Coral Sea about 20,000 United States and Australian troops were based in the area.

At the end of the war the region was left abandoned. The coastal shipping service began again in the late forties as life returned to normal and continued until the early sixties when road access became available to the Cape. The labours of the past, the airstrip and the jetty were revived as Commercial Fishing ventured north. The fisherman and sailors made use of these established freight facilities and, in doing so, helped sustain the Iron Range area until the advent of tourism in recent years.

Lockhart River’s Indigenous history is especially interesting. According to the Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council website: “Lockhart Mission was established in 1924, when people from five traditional territories in the area were coerced into a new Anglican mission now known as ‘Old Site’.”

This was eighty kilometres south of where the township is today. The mission was abandoned during World War II but was re-established in 1945 with the return of the residents. In 1964, the church handed power of the community back to the Government and, in 1971, the community was forced to relocate to the current site, which is now known as “Lockhart River”.

**Iron Range National Park**

Kutini Payamu is the name given to the National Park by the Kuku Y’u people, the traditional owners of the national park land. A 4WD is required to enter and the park is not suitable for large caravans. It’s worth the effort though, offering amazing beaches and views from headlands, along with animal and plant species not found elsewhere. The park has the largest remaining area of accessible lowland rainforest in Australia and is a haven for birds such as the vibrant Eclectus Parrot, which lives only in the Iron and McIlwraith ranges. The Palm Cockatoo, Riflebird and Cassowary are also found here. There are four camping areas, including Rainforest, Cooks Hut, Gordon Creek and Chili Beach.

Alcohol restrictions apply to Lockhart River, but the camping areas within the national park are not in the alcohol restriction zone. Organise an e-permit in advance, as these areas are very popular in the dry season.

The region attracts two main groups of visitors – the birdwatchers (aka twitchers) and adventurous 4WDers.

**Camping at Chili Beach**

With five kilometres of magnificent sandy shores, Chili Beach is within the Kutini-Payamu National Park, and is a hotspot for all 4WDers visiting the Cape. The Camping ground offers walking tracks behind the shoreline through the dense scrub or, for a more leisurely pace, a relaxing stroll along the beach during low tide. Try your hand at beachcombing and there is a picnic and day-use area for those coming in for the day.

You can spot many of the park’s stunning birdlife from Chili Beach. From August, the Metallic Starlings flock offshore to showcase their dance at dusk. Other Pelagic and Wader species are plentiful. Bird watching is best in the early morning or late afternoon, but night twitchers will also enjoy spot lighting around the road or campsites at Chili Beach for nocturnal birds, including owlet-nightjars and Papuan Frogmouths and mammals such as the spotted cuscus.

Be aware though – you must be self-sufficient and pack lots of drinking water as there’s no fresh water in the park. [0]