



WHEN Christopher Skase built the Mirage at Port Douglas in the 1980s, locals worried the town had been ruined for everyone but the rich.

But the poor and not-so-rich, like the common cold and the obscenely rich, are always with us, and travellers can still go a long way on a small budget in Port Douglas if they know where to look.

While a lot of the marketing for the iconic tropical north Queensland town focuses on five-star resorts with day spas, there are also affordable places to stay and eat and even some free things to enjoy.

For instance, you can go sailing free of charge every Wednesday afternoon from Port Douglas Yacht Club. Afterwards you can eat at the club, one of the best cheap meals in town.

You can go to local shops or the Sunday markets to buy fresh fruit and vegetables to take home to cook in your apartment or communal kitchen at a backpacker lodge.

At the markets, you get to meet some of the locals from the days when Port Douglas was a hippie town. They're older and greyer, the men are skinnier and the women are fatter, but they're still turning out crafty stuff by the stall-load and recycling clothes. There's also well-made jewellery and art, and it doesn't cost to look.

The Funky Cow in Davidson St has an outdoor cinema in return for a gold-coin donation, drinks are at pub prices,

there's a pool and food is affordable. The Combined Club has affordable meals and I found the Star of Siam good value for Thai food.

While adjoining cafes were busy with people tucking into bacon and eggs and the full brekky, I loved my good coffee and a big, buttery fresh croissant served by friendly people at a little bakery in Owen St. It's popular with locals, who sit at tables on the footpath or at a long coffee bar overlooking the street.

My favourite affordable restaurant was at my accommodation at Port O' Call Lodge, 10 minutes' walk from the heart of town and five minutes to the famous Four Mile Beach. There were meals under \$20 for a main course and a seafood plate for \$25 was great value — fresh, well-prepared and delicious.

Port O' Call generates all its hot water needs from the sun, uses wind energy from on-site turbines for all lighting and has water and waste minimisation programs.

Prices start at \$119 for a deluxe motel room for two and \$17 for each additional person up to four; \$99 for budget double rooms; and \$31.50 a night per person for a four-bed dormitory with ensuite bathroom, bar fridge and airconditioning.

The Lodge is registered with YHA and offers discounts for members. Bunk rooms cost \$26.50 a night per person for non-members. There's a big communal kitchen, wi-fi and internet

connections. Transfers from Cairns or the airport are free if you stay at least two nights, a good saving with airport shuttles costing around \$32 per adult.

Latitude 16 has 10 properties in Port Douglas with one, two and three-bedroom units. One-bedroom apartments start at \$130 in the low season, increasing to \$150 for one or two people. Seven-night deals start at \$92 a night at Latitude 16's Garrick House.

The Wet is regarded as low season but is actually a great time to visit if you're interested in rainforests and roaring waterfalls and streams. In the Wet this year the Best Western Lazy

Lizard Motor Inn was offering three nights for \$100 a night for one or two people mid-week.

One of the best things about Port Douglas for budgeters is that you really don't need a car. The local bus service runs on a continuous 15-minute loop from 7am to midnight along the main road into town from the highway and costs \$3 each way.

Tour operators pick up from accommodation centres and you really only need a car if you want to spend time on your own around the Cairns highlands sampling the cafes there.

Visit the Marina View in the Marina Mirage for a breakfast or lunch for under \$15.

By building the first major five-star luxury development here, Skase alerted a lot of people to the town's



natural charms and its surrounding rainforests and reefs. He also alerted concerned locals to the threat posed by uncontrolled development, and the Douglas Shire was the first local authority in Australia to impose a population cap.

So far the friendly small town feeling remains strong and locals are happy to share the best of their Wet Tropics wonderlands with visitors.



Cosy pub: The Court House Hotel has a welcoming ambience; and the Port O' Call eco lodge



PORT DOUGLAS

Port O' Call Eco Lodge, call 4099 5422 or visit www.portocall.com.au; Latitude 16, call 1800 463 325 or visit www.latitude16.com.au; Lazy Lizard Motor Inn, call 4099 5900 or visit www.lazylizard.bestwestern.com.au.

Queensland Holidays, call 13 88 33 or visit www.queenslandholidays.com.au.