



Ghosts

in the sand

Kate Johnston went to Queensland's Fraser Island for a contemporary, eco-travel holiday, but found herself swept up in quite another story.

The shipwreck of the *Maheno* sits deep in the sand of Fraser Island's eastern coast, a rusting reminder of the eternal battle between man and nature. And high on the hill above the island's western beach, bushwalkers might come across scattered scraps of World War II commando training equipment – a reminder of man's battle against man.

These metal and rubber remnants, though gradually deteriorating, have outlived the humans who once used them. But their silent presence on this island of sand, now an eco-tourism

mecca, shouts stories of human struggle. Who sailed on this sunken ship, this defeated, yet still majestic, frame? Who abandoned these tools, suddenly it seems, when the call came to fight?

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In the bush, I carefully walk amongst skeletons of equipment the young men of Z Unit once handled as they prepared for war. The atmosphere is eerie, heavy with history; it slows me down, as if to ensure I respect these glimpses of a

past world. More than your average foot soldiers, the Z Unit were brought to this then secluded island to study stealth tactics. I imagine them here, panting from fitness drills up and down the huge dunes, looking after their guns, gathering around maps and papers to learn military intelligence. Standing beneath the ancient tree canopy, however, I become aware of how relatively recent this history is.

It was only 64 years ago that Fraser Island was chosen as the site for a Special Operations training camp – its beaches were perfect for boat handling, its forests for junglecraft. The men used the beached *Maheno* (washed up here in 1935 after an unseasonable cyclone) for commando exercises, learning skills which served them well in the secret missions to come, including Operation Jaywick, the successful sinking of Japanese ships and submarines in Singapore Harbour in late 1943.

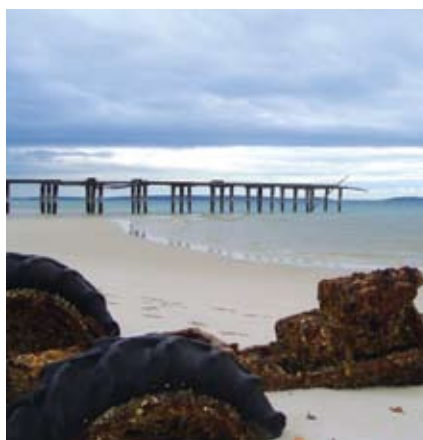
The story of their Fraser Island experience is very different from mine. Like many tourists, I've come here to relax and forget the world beyond these shores, to enjoy the extensive bird life and keep watch for dingoes. Before I came, I had been told of the island's particular beauty but was unaware of the many tales it could tell – of 5000 years of Aboriginal occupation, of extensive logging, which only ceased in 1991, of sand-mining operations and of the quarantine and immigration station set up to handle immigrants during the Gympie gold rush.

And there is no more famous a tale than that told by Eliza Fraser, who, in 1836, lived on the island for six weeks after the shipwreck of the *Stirling Castle*. Fraser Island is named after her husband, the *Stirling Castle's* Captain James Fraser, who died here. The details of Eliza's adventures – her supposed maltreatment by Aborigines, her rescue made possible by the help of runaway convicts – are confused and uncertain. To cut a long, and tall, tale short, Eliza ended up in the salons of London performing her survival yarns to anyone who would listen, the facts of which shifted at least as often as do the sands of Fraser Island.

For Fraser is made entirely of sand; in fact, it is the largest sand island in the world. This sand has made, and continues to make, its own kind of history – an evolutionary and ecological story of extraordinary importance. Nowadays, the self-promoting Eliza Fraser must take second place to the famous Fraser Island dune system, some of it more than 700,000 years old and holds the world's oldest continuous record of climatic and sea level changes. Part of the system comes in the form of immense sand blows – huge cuttings that develop when onshore winds break through the vegetation, driving sand from eroding dunes and forming wide, undulating highways of sand. Another part of this ecological jigsaw puzzle is the coloured

cliffs, which you would swear are rock but which, when scratched, are revealed as compacted sand, stained yellow, brown and red by iron-rich minerals over thousands of years.

Just as the environment of this World Heritage-listed site is forever evolving, so have the uses and appreciation human beings have found for it. I may never know much of the hearts and minds of the men and women who came here, brought by fate, weather or war to make it their home. But sitting on the beach, I can at least reflect on those who lived and died here amongst the rough beauty, and who in all likelihood would have watched the same bright sun slip down past the ocean's edge. ^{YL}



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Fraser Island offers a wide range of accommodation options: camping, resorts, backpacker hostels, and private apartments and houses. Kingfisher Bay Resort and Village was one of the first eco-friendly resorts and is the winner of the inaugural Steve Irwin award for eco-tourism. The dingoes often come out at dusk on the resort beach but visitors are well-advised to keep their distance. Keep in mind that the only way to get around the island is on a four-wheel drive vehicle, whether you hire your own or go on a tour.

Websites

www.fraserisland.net
www.kingfisherbay.com
<http://fraserisland.au.com>

Books

War on stealth: Australians and the Allied Intelligence Bureau 1942–1945
 by Alan Powell (Melbourne University Press 1996).

Silent Feet: The History of 'Z' Special Operations 1942–1945
 by GB Courtney, MBE MC
 (RJ & SP Austin 1993).