

Alive and kicking

The Cairns Esplanade has, in recent years, been given a facelift. **Bridget Martin** explores the new-look 'Nard and its recreational role in the life of a sultry city

THE sun has removed itself behind the mountains. For a brief period, before darkness hits the off switch, the Cairns Esplanade is alive with activity.

Some people are jogging; others, in pairs, are striding out, exchanging gossip of the day; tots are wobbling on bicycles; dogs lead owners; tourists stroll, many making a first acquaintance with their holiday destination; I'm cycling home.

In the heat of summer this shoreline, stretching between the Cairns CBD and Trinity Bay, is the place to catch the breezes. They may be humid, but they provide some respite at the end of the day as it matures from sweltering to balmy.

The 'Nard, as it is known to long-term residents, has undergone a transformation in recent years, thanks to a \$32 million redevelopment project undertaken by the Cairns City Council and state and federal governments.

Highlight of this was the opening, in 2003, of a free 4800sq m swimming lagoon, with its now emblematic steel fish sculpture, just a stroll from the city centre. With nearly four million litres of filtered seawater circulating through it — but none of the stinging jellyfish and crocodiles that make the bay a hazardous place to dip — it has been a hit with locals and tourists alike.

The next stage of the facelift saw the opening of the equally popular Muddy's Playground, a bit farther



along the shoreline. A maze of slides, water channels, climbing nets, playhouses and water jets, it is pure heaven on a hot day for toddlers. At its centre is Muddy, a brightly coloured mudskipper modelled on the rather strange fish that come out of the water and scamper over the mud flats of the bay.

These mudflats have always been a source of tourist complaints. "There's no beach!" they cry in dismay. Aerial photos, taken at high tide and used to publicise the city in tourist brochures, show a town facing the sea and an arc of what looks like sand.

In fact, beyond a narrow sandy fringe — much of it trucked in by Cairns City Council for cosmetic

reasons — Trinity Bay is all mud. But then there are the thousands of visitors who come to Cairns specifically for the mud.

Admittedly, the majority are feathered travellers, migratory wading birds for whom the mud flats of Trinity Bay are a welcome stop on their extraordinary journeys.

Godwits and whimbrels, tattlers and turnstones, sandpipers and knots, they leave their breeding grounds in the far north of the northern hemisphere and fly up to 12,000km for a life of perpetual summer, arriving in Cairns in September and staying until March.

And what attracts the birds also attracts the bird-watchers. They know about the Cairns Esplanade, appearing in flocks or alone, their sturdy binoculars and massive telescopes trained on the mud.

Cycling back along the Esplanade

the following morning, I meet three birders from England, their binoculars pointed out to sea. They have been there since first light, taking advantage of the incoming tide, which corrals the birds towards the shoreline.

"I've seen more waders here than anywhere else in Australia," enthuses one, scanning the shore, hoping to catch sight of one of the local holy grails, the beach stone curlew.

The morning sun is already slicing cruelly through the humid air. "It was minus five degrees when we left home two days ago," the man's wife confides. She's obviously not sure it's a change for the better.

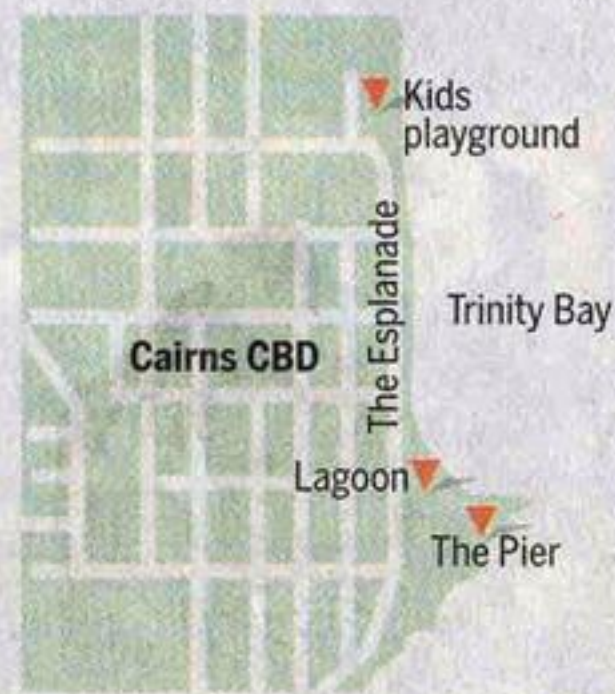
I pedal farther along the Esplanade and find four grey nomads, their campervan parked nearby, taking advantage of the boule court — another new addition tucked under the shade of a spreading fig tree.

Closer to town, the new skateboard park is empty — its devotees prefer a later hour — but a group of schoolgirls is making good use of the beach volleyball courts.

I leave my bike at Muddy's and stroll along the wide boardwalk that, having replaced the older path, links the playground to the lagoon. Telescopes have been provided for casual bird spotting, there are interpretive display shelters and several exercise stations, sturdy wooden structures complete with instructions.

At the lagoon, backpackers are cooking up their breakfast on nearby barbecues and the first swimmers have taken to the water.

There is certainly plenty of life in the old 'Nard.



CAIRNS

GO The city centre and Esplanade are a 20-minute drive from the airport. The Esplanade runs north from the lagoon, next to the city centre, for 2.5km. The term refers to both the road running parallel to the sea and to the grassy foreshore with its walking and cycle tracks.

SWIMMING The lagoon is open 6am-10pm in summer and 7am-9pm in winter. Entry is free and it is patrolled by lifeguards.

BIRDING The best bird-watching area is opposite the end of Florence St to opposite Minnie St. Best time is before high tide.

Comfort zone: The swimming lagoon provides a safe place for residents to cool down (below); and Muddy's Playground (above)

