

# **The Rise and Fall of Tropical North Queensland**

## **The Bastion Memorandum**

### **Introduction**

Whilst Cairns has been a popular destination for visitors for many years from early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this paper looks at the rapid development of Cairns as a tourism destination from the beginning of its international push shortly after the opening of the International Airport in 1984. This significant development opened Cairns and Tropical North Queensland to the excitement and financial benefits of true international visitation and, rightly or wrongly, propelled Tropical North Queensland away from an agriculturally based economy to one that would become almost totally dependent on tourism.

The strength of Cairns' attraction to visitors - international and domestic alike - is built on its proximity to the Great Barrier Reef and its superb range of options to access this natural wonder of the world. This strength is bolstered by Cairns also being the gateway to yet another world heritage listed area – The Daintree Rainforest. On top of these two giant visitor magnets, Tropical North Queensland is almost embarrassed by a wealth of tours and attractions that thrust the destination into the limelight – indigenous tourism, natural and outback attractions, the complementary destination of the Atherton Tablelands and beyond, some of the best adventure activities in Australia, world class game and recreational fishing and some of the country's (and the world's) most sought after island resorts.

The International Airport was, however, the most crucial piece of the puzzle by providing ease of access to virtually all corners of the globe. By 1990, besides the domestic airlines of Qantas & Ansett, Cairns was serviced by Qantas international, Cathay, Thai, Singapore, JAL, Malaysian Airline System, Garuda, Continental and Air New Zealand. These airlines provided the gateway to the major international markets of USA, Canada, Europe, the United Kingdom and in particular, Japan. International currencies were strong against the Australian dollar and the then recent world coverage of Expo 88 and in particular, a Paul Hogan television campaign in 1984 which was followed by the movie, Crocodile Dundee in 1986 had positioned Australia as the hot destination of the decade and Cairns, along with Sydney and Ayers Rock made up the major places for our burgeoning guests to visit.

Life was good but not without its complications.

Just as Cairns and Tropical North Queensland was starting to make an in-road into the tourism stakes, the infamous Pilot's Strike of 1989 occurred and put the brakes on for several months. On 18 August 1989, airline pilots of Australia's domestic airlines went on strike to fight for a pay increase of 29%. Whilst such action brought the country to its knees, its crippling effects were most felt in remote locations. Whilst tourism was yet to become as dominant in Tropical North Queensland as it would become a decade later, it

was, even at that stage, economically imperative to the region. The region was forced to rely on self-drive, rail services and the odd Australian Air force Hercules air service but none of these were a consideration for international visitation and the region suffered terribly. Not a lot of good came out of those dark months except to highlight to the community at large, that a significant proportion of the work-force were highly dependent, directly or indirectly, on tourism to survive. It dawned on the milkman that visitors drank milk, they bought bread and petrol. With a downturn in business people shelved their plans to renovate houses or put in-ground pools into their backyards. We were all at the mercy of tourism.

There is no anecdotal evidence to postulate this theory but it could be argued that the effects of the Pilots Strike may have proven to be an underlying contributor to the success the region was about to experience simply by highlighting what a broad impact it had across the entire community.

Entering 90's Cairns and the Tropical North did not realise what lay in store.

### **The Halcyon Years 1990-2000**

The 90's marked a period of unprecedented tourism growth in Tropical North Queensland. In 1990, the arrival of Australia's first low cost airline, Compass, signalled a gold rush of domestic visitors. Most accommodation houses, tours and cruises experienced outstanding loadings and sometimes for up to several days in advance. This influx on visitors really sharpened the Tropical North product in terms of the quality of the experience and also in the delivery i.e. customer service. Sadly, Compass became a victim of its own success and was eventually squeezed out of the market by its own financial shortcomings and combined pressure from both Qantas and Ansett. Compass Mk II made a brief revival in 1992 but again only lasted 12 months.

Still, during the 90's, international markets were performing well, in particular the Japanese market which peaked in 1993 before commencing a slow decline until a combination of the SARS epidemic in the mid 90's and the fallout from the Asian economic meltdown in 1998 started to severely impact on numbers. As with any destination, there were minor barriers constantly coming along – Olympics, Presidential Elections, outbreaks of localised hostilities – that were to have some impacts on visitation but the industry weathered these occurrences well.

The region continued to make headlines in Australia and internationally as the tourism product continued to evolve with world class developments – Skyrail in 1995, Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park in 1996 and steady flow of accommodation houses the Reef Casino, Eden Coral Coast Resort (now Novotel Palm Cove), Jewel of the Reef (now Angsana), attractions (Rainforest Habitat) and infrastructure (Quicksilver's Wavepiercing Catamarans) – all kept Cairns and Tropical North Queensland in the vanguard of Australian tourism.

Another substantial benefit was added to the Tropical North tourism base with the opening of the Cairns Convention Centre in 1997. In the ensuing years, the CCC has contributed significantly to the community by both attracting a new source of tourism revenue i.e conferences, meetings and incentives but also for the community at large with concerts, entertainment events and the as home base for the Cairns Taipans Basketball team.

I believe there were a number of reasons Tropical North Queensland prospered during this time period :

- \* An overall aggressive stance by Tourism Australia in all major international markets
- \* Strong leadership at both a regional and state level encompassing both domestic and international marketing
- \* Internationally, Australia was a popular destination and along with Sydney and Ayers Rock, the Great Barrier Reef became the 3<sup>rd</sup> destination of the 'Inbound Triangle'
- \* TNQ possessed adventurous entrepreneurs and marketed itself boldly on an international and domestic scale
- \* A cohesive and united marketing front put forward by all operators i.e 'destination first, product second' and supported with co-operative dollars
- \* the Australian dollar offered good value to overseas visitors, especially those carrying American dollars and British pounds
- \* a tremendous sense of pride in the destination and its product offerings
- \* an underlying culture of the importance of customer service underpinned by the arrival and widespread embrace of the Aussie Host customer service program from the mid 90s.

### **2001- The Game Changer**

Tropical North Queensland, along with the civilised world, celebrated a change of millennia with the added impetus that Australia would once again take the global centre stage with the 2000 Sydney Olympics – and what a tremendous show Australia put on. The Olympics had a positive/negative effect. There is no doubt that Tropical North Queensland benefitted from a flow on effect of overseas visitors, who when visiting Sydney, travelled further afield to see the Great Barrier Reef and secondly, the associated worldwide media coverage only enhanced our standing as a 'must-do' on many viewer's bucket list. There is no hard evidence however, on how much business we may have lost due to both the difficulty in obtaining rooms, particularly in Sydney, and the associated exorbitant fees for hotels rooms before, during and after the event. There is certainly much anecdotal evidence that many overseas tour operators became disenchanted with Sydney and by association, those destinations that benefit from a vibrant Sydney visitation suffered

proportionately as they went in search of other destinations that offered similar experiences – exotic, different, cultural – mainly Africa & South America

Nevertheless, the future looked rosy but after a decade of prosperity there seemed to be an attitude of complacency creeping in. Not only were overseas destinations stepping up their own promotional efforts but closer to home, other locations were starting to lay claim to what Tropical North Queensland viewed as its own turf i.e. The Great Barrier Reef.

However, what lay just a few months away was to change not only the world in general but was to leave an indelible imprint on Tropical North Queensland

The ramifications of September 11 2001 were to be far reaching both in their scope and longevity. Compounded with the international terrorism incident inflicted on New York, the collapse, 3 days later, of Australia's second biggest airline, Ansett only added to the confusion and unease.

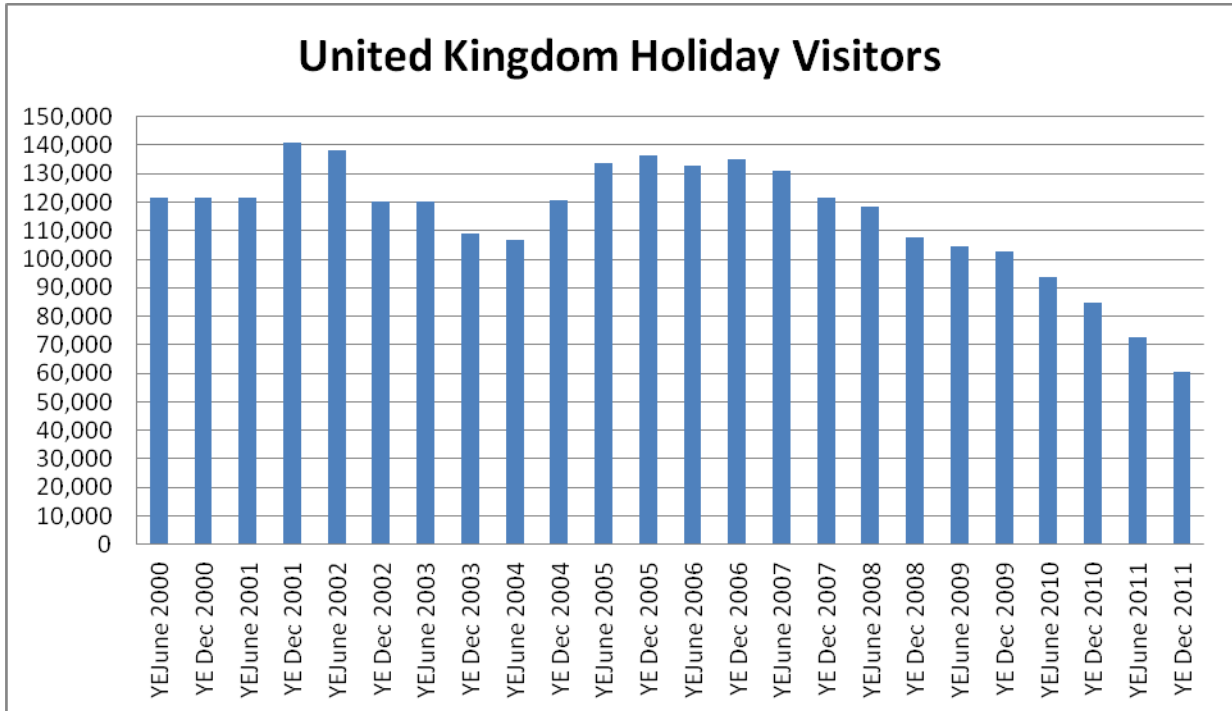
In the immediate aftermath of these 2 events, the smaller, on a world scale, the collapse of Ansett, was to have the most immediate detrimental impact. Uncertainty of arrivals and departures, alternate arrangements for ticketed passengers and widespread cancellations produced the greatest threat that Tropical North Queensland had faced in a decade. Whilst the industry scrambled to make sense of this confusion, the uncertainty of future global travel, sat patiently in the wings waiting to make its own presence felt. From 2001 to 2004, there was a 3.8% decrease in all international arrivals to Australia. With America's formation of an "alliance" in 2002 and eventual invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, there were a number of cultural changes in travel patterns around the world.

The Americans, as the victims of the 2001 atrocity, were the most affected both mentally and geographically. As a nation, outbound travel from the USA slows significantly in times of conflict. Additionally, their travel pattern, immediately after September 11, changed from east-west to north-south. In other words there was concern about travelling long haul to Europe and the UK and in the short term, the pattern switched to short haul being Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean. Basically, most Americans who were travelling (and that number reduced significantly) felt more secure being no more than 2 or 3 hours from US soil.

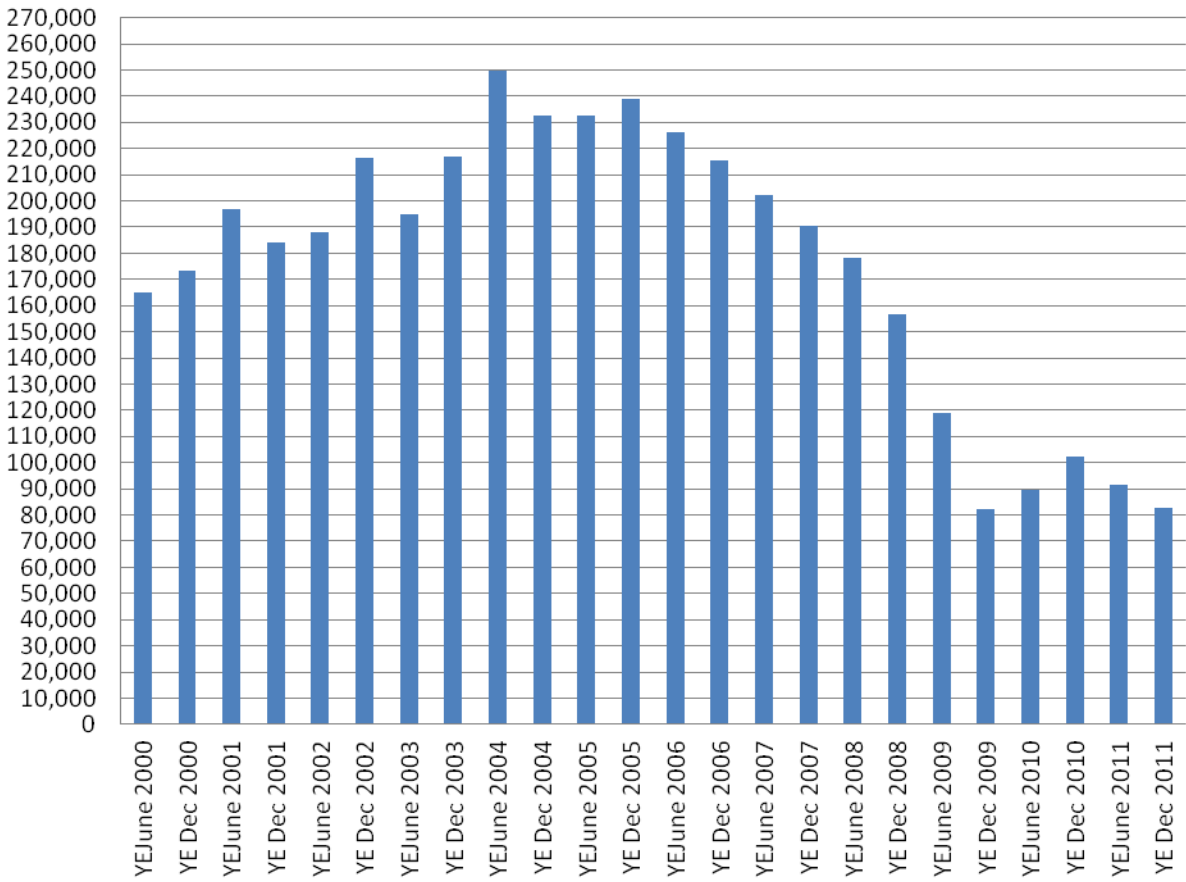
In a somewhat bizarre occurrence, Australia actually fared better than most long haul destinations. No hard data but the anecdotal story tells us that Americans felt Australia was 1) far removed from any areas of possible retaliation and 2) our immediacy in joining with the American forces stamped Australia as "a friend of the US". (As an aside, a comparison can be with the backlash France faced from America for its refusal to join the alliance).

The IVS figures listed below show the holiday visitor arrival figures into TNQ from 2000 – 2011. The figures show an alarming decline for y/e end 2001 to y/e 2001

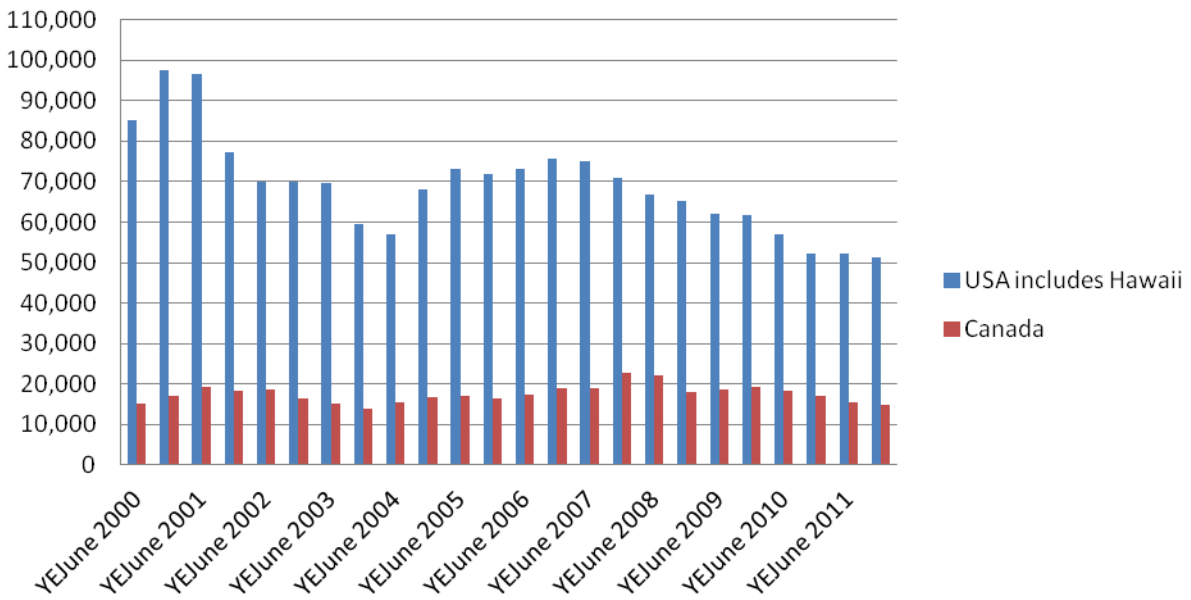
Country	2001	2011	Change	
UK	140,000	60,000	-80,000	⬇️43%
North America	112,000	66,000	-46,000	⬇️41%
Japan	185,000	82,000	-103,000	⬇️55.6%



## Japan Holiday Visitors



## North America Holiday Visitors



## **Riding the Storm – 2001-2012**

### **2001 - 2003**

Australia, and by default, TNQ slowly came to grips with a post September 11 world. International business slowed immediately after 9/11 and even more so after the commencement of the second Gulf War in March 2003. On the flip side of the coin, we did see a resurgence in domestic travel for many reasons but primarily that Australians thought it prudent and safer to holiday in their own backyard. This was tempered by a continuing downturn in some, not necessarily all, overseas markets. Certainly, the US was still struggling but there were the beginnings of concern in traditionally strong markets for Australia – Japan and combined Europe. Both markets were sending signals of an impending downturn. To add to the problem, another outbreak of SARS in 2003 impacted on the already declining numbers and resulted in Australian Airlines reducing flights from Japan to Cairns from 4 times a week to 3. Not much but a sign of things to come.

### **2004- 2006**

Following the turmoil of the first few years of the new millennia, the years from 2004 onwards were earmarked to re-build but, almost without realising it, the playing field has subtly changed. Funding for tourism, in a difficult economic climate decreased, funding of the local promotional body failed to keep abreast of the competition and a changing aviation scene both offered opportunity and despair in equal proportions. The region puttered along, slowly leaking visitors. The international markets were slow to respond to a world in chaos and the big winner for most international markets were short haul destinations and Australia was seen to be too far away and very costly. The region itself had also changed. From 2000 onwards saw the arrival of the big multi-nationals, mainly accommodation houses who saw the dramatic rise of TNQ in the 90's and wanted in on the action. Unfortunately, they were not to contribute to the culture of the region's operators. The 'oneness' and 'unity' that were the hallmarks of its previous success was lost to the head offices in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane and many of the area's accommodation houses became just one of their many hotels scattered throughout Australia.

### **2006-2012**

Cyclone Larry, a category 4 storm made his appearance in March 2006 near Innisfail and was the largest such storm to cross the Queensland coast since 1931. Whilst, in some

quarters it takes a back seat to the subsequent Cyclone Yasi Category 5 storm in 2011, Larry caused a tremendous swathe of damage not only in physical and economical terms but perhaps even more so with extremely damaging media coverage that was both national and international in its breadth. TNQ has often had to fight not only the physical elements but also counter the perceptions that are generated by at times, over exaggerated media reporting. Cyclones, wet seasons, stingers – all are subject to sensational journalism and with damaging effect to an often fragile industry.

The battles being fought in the opening years of this century were having an effect on the industry – its confidence was waning, its fund depleting and markets eroding. Still, the region had weathered tough times before and always seemed to rebound bigger and better than ever.

In 2008, Tourism Queensland released the most successful tourism campaign of its kind when it released the Best Job in the World – a worldwide search for a lucky contestant who was to earn the right to live and work on the Great Barrier Reef. For a \$1 million dollar investment, this tantalising idea caught the attention of the world's media and returned in excess of \$70 million in advertising and promotion. Unfortunately, it coincided with the faint rumblings of economic discontent which seemingly overnight, developed into the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression of 1929. The innocuous collapse of the Lehmann Brothers hedge fund in New York on September 14 (seems that date is an ill omen for tourism) 2008 set in motion a chain of events which are still being felt today. Travel, vacations, holidays have always been allocated out of a person's disposable income i.e. funds remaining after essentials have been paid for – housing, food, medical and with any economic crunch, it is always one of the first budget items to be put to one side. But it wasn't just the GFC that was causing problems as TNQ ended the first decade of the 2000's.

Since its arrival in 2006, 'new' LCC (low cost carrier), Jetstar had its eye firmly on overseas markets and initially started cautiously operating to nearby Asian resort locations, mainly Bali. This in turn started to quietly erode a strong domestic base for TNQ in the major population centres of Sydney and Melbourne. The opportunity to travel 'overseas' cheaply was to have a gathering appeal to our once traditional winter market.

Cyclone Yasi arrived in all destructive glory on 3 February 2011 and it was all of the detrimental effects – physically, economically and journalistically – of Cyclone Larry five years before but multiplied by a far greater factor. Now 3 years into the crippling GFC, the impact of Yasi was almost beyond measure. As we battled to make some headway here the Australian dollar started a spectacular climb against the USD having a twofold effect – making a destination already perceived as expensive even more expensive and inviting the newly blooded fraternity of Australian international travellers to travel even further abroad. International travel by Australians is now at an all time high and to highlight this fact, Australia is now the Number #1 international market for California !

One small glimmer of hope has been the continuing growth of China and its visitation figures are experiencing double digit growth year on year. Thankfully a number of Cairns



operators were quick to see the potential of this market some years ago and through their foresight and hard work, the region does entertain good Chinese visitation and more importantly is adapting products and its promotion of the region to cater for this ever increasing and vitally important market

All of these events – cyclones, cheap international flights, decreasing marketing budgets, strong US dollars, growing competition (international & domestic) – all came together in 2011 to create the ‘Perfect Storm’ for Tropical North Queensland. Like a series of crushing breakers, these factors rolled in on TNQ one after another. This is where we are at now, this is 2012.

## **The Here & Now**

### **Aviation**

Aviation has been a recurring theme in the previous 5 pages and so it should be. Cairns, despite its 5 star hotels, modern amenities and futuristic reef fleet **is** a remote destination. Not only is it a remote destination but one, like it or not, almost entirely dependent on tourism. Anything that halts the flow of tourists or causes a disruption to access is nothing short of catastrophic. It has been said before and often that this is not the case. **“Aviation is important but it is not the lynchpin to Cairns’ success or demise”**. Think again and if confirmation is not instant and overwhelming, look at past history :-

- \* The Pilots Strike of 1989 – refer to the above
- \* Whilst short lived the effect on both Compass Airlines in 1990 and to a lesser extent, Compass Mk II in 1992 had a significantly positive result for the region for domestic visitors
- \* The slow withdrawal of international services. Since the mid 90’s North Americans no longer have direct (via Honolulu) access to Cairns. Refer to visitor arrival figures
- \* In 2000 Virgin Blue commenced operations and industry pundits suggested that it may well travel the path of both Compass endeavours. Many people, including executives of Qantas and Ansett, vastly underestimated the steely resolve and depth of financial backing that Richard Branson brought to the table and Virgin, despite the early efforts of both Qantas and Ansett, has become an Australian aviation success story
- \* The effect of collapse of the Ansett group in 2001 and the ensuing decline in domestic numbers
- \* The value of Thai, Singapore and Cathay Airlines did not lie in the markets they represented - Thailand, Singapore & Hong Kong –but rather in the valuable one stop link between Cairns and Europe/UK .

\* The phase out of Qantas services to Japan and being replaced by Australian Airlines between 2002-2006 whilst not disastrous, had a noticeable impact on numbers. The Japanese traveller is, to some extent, a status seeker and the 'downgrade' of airline from Qantas to Australian Airlines was seen as a 'loss of face'

\* The further downgrade of this service from Australian Airlines to Jetstar **was** disastrous and the market declined so quickly that Jetstar withdrew 100,000 seats between Japan and Cairns in 2009

## **2012 – The future of TNQ**

Whilst there is clear evidence that the region has suffered and been in decline for several years – and many, not all, of those reasons have been outlined above – we need to first accept this as a statement of fact. There is a culture at all levels of our industry that 'it wasn't my fault', that if we ignore it, it will eventually get better. Slowly enveloping this region but most apparent in the last 18 months, is a sense of depression and a healthy dose of apathy – 'there's nothing I can do to make it better'. Given the battering this region has taken, those feelings are understandable but the region needs to undertake a complete reversal of this mind-set before it's too late. The region will not magically fix itself and even with the enthusiasm of all sectors of the industry – local council, state government, and private companies – it is going to be a long, difficult and at times, painful haul back to where we belong. The region lacks faith in itself and questions its own ability to perform.

What is required right now is strong leadership, again from our industry leaders and certainly from our local, state and corporate stakeholders. There are a number of issues that need to be addressed immediately. These issues form the framework for future success. It is, quite simply, useless to pursue other goals – event tourism, business tourism, port dredging for cruise ships etc – until you have a strong foundation. These other pursuits are simply a smokescreen to hide the inevitable whilst failing to address the root of the problem.

## **TNQ – The Fix**

### **1. Address the funding issue**

This is a controversial issue that no one wants to talk about but quite bluntly is the catalyst for any further progression on how to move forward in a positive light. As mentioned earlier, this is not a political slight at any institution but until a positive resolution can be found on how to fund the future growth of tourism in TNQ, all the other grandiose plans are smoke and mirrors. TTNQ is the largest RTO in Australia but one of, in comparison, one of the most poorly funded.

A Tourism Levy is not a mythical beast resigned to fiction. Besides the Gold Coast, the Sunshine Coast, the Surf Coast in Victoria, Broome have all embraced the pain and the benefits of a tourism levy to subsidise their tourism efforts. As a matter of fact, it doesn't only enhance their efforts in a financial way but it liberates their thinking, their innovation by utilising their community's money to the benefit of all.

If you doubt the value of tourism to the community have a look around you now and then back at the Pilots Strike. In 1989, the local milkman didn't think he was in tourism until sales fell by 40%, similarly supermarkets, banks, nightclubs, any industry that benefits from an influx of visitors. It's called the multiplier effect and for too long the 'tourism companies' of this region have been shouldering the burden while the fringe dwellers delight in the profits generated. It's time to share the burden and increase the opportunities that await us when armed with a competitive marketing budget. There are quicker ways to starve than waiting for handouts from council, government and airports but none more certain. That is not to denigrate the support from these institutions but rather engender a sense of contribution from the business community to complement these other areas of assistance.

## 2. Back to basics – Market to our strengths

Whilst it is easy for us, the tour operators of the region, to get bored with the same old, same old, we need to remind ourselves we are not marketing the region for our pleasure but for the pleasure of our visitors, many who have not been here before. We **are** the Reef and the Rainforest but we seem to have forgotten this in our quest for other shiny objects. The truth is that most people in the United States don't know where Queensland is (or any of the other states for that matter) and they are travelling to the Opera House, the Harbour Bridge, Ayers Rock (not Uluru) and the Great Barrier Reef. It should come as no surprise that given this truth, that Hamilton Island has managed to hi-jack the branding of the Great Barrier Reef. While we sit and cry 'unfair' and lament our past glories, the Whitsundays, armed with the underlying funding of Hamilton Island, are pushing the Great Barrier Reef as their own **and** winning !

We need to immediately regain what made the region a dynamo of international tourism. To start, in the same way that Liverpool (UK) airport is known as the John Lennon Airport and a dozen other examples, we should immediately re-brand our airport as the **Great Barrier Reef International Airport, Cairns**. It shouldn't be a big deal, shouldn't need 9 months of meetings and discussions – just do it. It's where the vast majority of international visitors think we live anyway !

Similarly, we need to seriously look at the way we market the Daintree Rainforest. We have excellent product in a unique part of the world whose operators can feel rightly disenchanted that they seem to have fallen off the

map. A serious and honest look at where we are losing business will highlight the excellent work of destinations that, 10 years ago, were largely unknown to overseas visitors – Kangaroo Island, Tasmania and Broome to name a few of the rapidly risen stars. Their wins are our losses.

### **3. Get the branding right !**

Are we changing our latitude, adventurous by nature or where the rainforest meets the reef ? Similarly, is our mother state beautiful one day, perfect the next, where else but Queensland (although that in itself is redundant), or are we positioned where Australia shines. Between both Tourism Queensland and Tourism Tropical North Queensland, it's understandable if the world doesn't know who or what we are – we are having trouble ourselves ! Besides keeping advertising agencies rolling in cash, constant changing of image and brand does nothing for the destination. Conduct a simple survey at the next ATE and ask our leading international wholesalers 2 simple questions – what is the branding of Queensland and what is the branding of Tropical North Queensland. The results will be disappointing but not surprising.

Look at the most successful tourism branding examples – I Love New York (1977), Tourism Victoria “You'll Love every Piece of it” (1993) and “100% Pure New Zealand” (1999). Excellent branding combined with longevity. Why is the obsession with changing brands every 2 years ? It isn't enough time for any cut through, subconscious association or developing any type of brand loyalty.

If you travel overseas and talk to almost any person with knowledge of Australia you'll hear “Throw Another Shrimp on the barbie” before “Where the Bloody Hell are You”, you'll hear ‘Beautiful One Day, Perfect the Next’ before ‘Where Australia Shines’ and isn't that “Where The Rainforest meets the Reef’ before ‘Adventurous by Nature”. Stop trying to be something we are not, stop trying to be clever – embrace what we are and leverage off it.

### **4. Adapt our Product**

The Tropical North Queensland of 2012 is a far cry from the same region in 1992. We now attract a different customer but have we evolved our product to suit ? For example, we have gone from a Qantas hub with several significant international airlines to, quiet bluntly, a low cost carrier destination. Instead of Thai, JAL and Malaysian we now get Jetstar, Virgin and Tiger – a different type of consumer. To that extent, the airlines are very much determining not only the quantity of business we get but also the type. It is not only the effects of the GFC that has seen hotel prices plummet as the type of visitor we attract changes its demands. Five star hotels are now fighting for market share. Fighting is possibly the wrong term - perhaps buying market share is more

accurate. With 5 star hotels now available for the low \$100s it is a consumer market. Unfortunately operators find the easy fix is to drop rates. They are glad to take the short term gain without realising the pain that lies in the future. It will take years for hotels to raise prices back to mid 2000 levels.

Rather than grow the size and type of visitor, we see hotels and tour operators squabbling over what is already here. Conversely, many tours, attractions and restaurants in Tropical North Queensland are perceived as expensive certainly to the type of visitors we now attract.

## 5. Exceed Expectations

Thankfully, there are exceptions to every rule but customer service standards, in general, are below average across all elements of our region. Again, I do not speak only of direct tourist related business but any business that has interaction with visitors – banks, supermarkets, retail shops, taxi drivers – all of whom have an impact on the quality of experience our customers encounter. In the mid nineties, this region embraced the Aussie Host customer service program and I believe it had a most favourable result. Aussie Host exists today, well I think it does, their website [www.aussie-host.com.au](http://www.aussie-host.com.au) gave me no information in relation to who or when this course is delivered in Cairns. Is this indicative of how much we value customer service in Tropical North Queensland ?

The delivery of powerful customer service must come back under the arm of TTNQ or a business appointed by them and accountable to them. Customer service must become an integral part of our tourism fabric. Not only does the level of customer training need to be vastly stepped up but surveys of existing customer service need to be implemented on a daily basis and those findings – good and bad – publicised. There are spasmodic attempts at this but again this infrequency is almost a reflection of itself to the unreliability of quality customer service across the board. Failure to fund and operate such a basic fundamental of successful tourism reflects our seriousness on becoming a world class destination.

***“A relative who recently returned from Hawaii gushed about the experience and customer service (right or wrong, tipping makes a big difference.) I reckon Far North Queensland has Hawaii covered for natural beauty, but with too much patchy service and standards in Australian tourism, it’s getting harder to make the case to holiday locally – at least for big trips.”*** (The Melbourne Age, 9 January 2012)

I am sure there are numerous other areas we need to address but unlike our

recent, desperate attempts to find something positive about the tourism industry in TNQ it is imperative that we formulate a cohesive, achievable plan that builds a strong industry from the ground up. It has become alarmingly apparent that those very foundation blocks that were laid in the 1990's are in a state of serious disrepair. Grasping at events tourism, cruise tourism, and sports tourism will not fix the underlying foundation problems of general leisure tourism. In summary :-

### **GET THE BASICS RIGHT**

- \* Develop a strong plan to obtain and generate funding on an on-going basis and not a 'hope and pray' year by year scramble
- \* Embrace who and what we are and market to our strengths. Niche, specialised and topical tourism should come under an overall regional umbrella. Reassert ourselves as **THE** Gateway to the Great Barrier Reef. Re-name the airport
- \* Choose a successful brand from the past or develop a new brand with a 10 year life span and stick to it. Develop brand recognition and loyalty
- \* Adapt our products and experiences to more closely align with type of customer we are getting – demographic ( type of domestic visitor we are getting – do we have the right mix of product), geographic ( China ready programs, product adaption), sociographic ( do we have the right attitude, are we customer serviced focussed)
- \* Deliverables – ensure visitor's expectations are exceeded. Fund and co-ordinate a strong customer service environment – courses, surveys, encouragement, motivation

### **Conclusion**

The world has changed significantly in the past 20 years and naturally, so has Tropical North Queensland. Whilst the region triumphed in the 90's despite occasional barriers, the same cannot be said for the last 10 years. The region has not fared well but more alarmingly seems morosely stagnant when things got really tough these last 3 years. When circumstances went against TNQ rather than fight, we have capitulated. The region stands at a crossroads more challenging than ever faced in the past 20 years. What we do in the next 12-18 months will define this region for the next decade.

Tropical North Queensland **has** all the necessary attributes to not only be successful but to rebound from the challenges of recent years. What is at question now, is do we have the resolve and fortitude to do so. It won't be easy and it will require dedication, strong leadership and a steely resolve. Neither is it rocket science. The path back to success is reasonably well lit. It needs a balanced

mixture of architects (local & state government, the airport and TTNQ – funding, administration and lobbying) with builders (industry leaders, tourism operators and experienced sales people). The region needs to act not procrastinate. The region needs to make decisions not hold interminable meetings. The region needs to step up and re-assume its rightful mantle as one of Australia's leading tourism destinations.

Robbie Bastion  
29 February 2012

### **About the author**

Robbie Bastion

- 39 years experience in the tourism industry
- Sales & marketing head for several state and national tourism award winning companies
- Named by the Premier of Queensland as one of the State's Top 400 business leaders in 1998
- Market advisor to Tourism Queensland & Tourism Australia
- ATEC Outstanding Individual Contribution 2009
- TTNQ Outstanding Individual Contribution 2010