

Ten years is a long time in tourism. Changes can occur in the areas where you least expect: patience, charity, tolerance, et cetera. But what shocks me most is the attitude I have adopted to those ignorant Pommy backpackers bogged down in front of us who can't move their jeep because they don't know *how* to move it because they've only ever driven their mums' Minis around The bloody Cotswolds.

I *was* one of those backpackers on the obligatory nine-person three-day four-wheel-drive tour of Fraser Island in 1995. Back then everything was "wicked!" or something, and it was great fun if the jeep stalled – time was on our side. In 2005 I'm a lot older, a lot crankier, and those idiots are slowing down my day. We've been stuck behind their vehicle for at least five minutes and the funny side is much harder to see when the tracks are narrow and you've only got nine hours to explore the whole island.

I fidget uncomfortably in our huge air-conditioned bus and turn into my dad, tutting and making unhelpful comments – my itinerary does not allow for kids fanning around with engines. My fellow time-pressed package tourists share my lack of sympathy, and when the jeep in front finally does get rolling we let out a collective ironic cheer – like the ones you hear when a waiter drops a glass. Those pesky youngsters had forgotten to put it in 4WD mode. Grrrrrr.

Ten years ago, Seventy-Five Mile Beach was just that – a long stretch of sand between dunes and sea where the odd fisherman waited patiently with his worms. Drivers smiled and waved at each other as they passed, happy to see another soul. Now the beach is an official highway and we're all playing one big game of chicken. No-one has time to drive on the soft sand, the salt water causes rust, and there's a nice, narrow, flat strip that we all want... Get out of the way little backpackers – our bus is a monster!

But no sooner have we bullied our way past the tourist minnows, we have to give way ourselves... to a plane. Yes, a plane. Certain sections of the strip are now designated take-off and landing areas for the pleasure flights that irritatingly buzz above the island – you can't keep a money-making opportunity down.

The bus stops at The Pinnacles and we're told that we have eight minutes (yes, eight) to soak up the atmosphere than nature has spent millennia creating. And then it's back down the beach to the famous Maheno Wreck where we've got just enough time for a photo (I think I'm turning Japanese) and it's back on the bus.

I distinctly remember wading up and then floating down Eli Creek when I came here as a backpacker. The water was crystal and the tranquillity so precious. I remember listening for the calls of the birds and the eerie rustles in the bushes, hoping to be nicely terrified at the sight of a snake. The sounds this time around are more familiar, and the creatures scarier. I wade my way up through the "Excuse me!"s and stutter down through the menacing scowls; it seems that every one of these faces is searching for their own little piece of untouched paradise. I shut my ears to the sounds of screaming schoolchildren, and close my eyes and hope all those vehicles disappear. At least the water is still beautiful.



Cruising back along the beach, I stare out into the Pacific and dream of going back ten years in a time machine. But my cynicism is put on hold when a more focused passenger spots something splashing around in the surf. A giant humpback and her calf are doing that thing whales do in wildlife documentaries, and it's impossible not to be impressed. We all gape in awe and let out a collective non-ironic cheer when they do that documentary whale thing in unison – they did it just for us! And for those eight other busloads of dewy-eyed whale-worshippers parked around us. It's time to move on.

I know the other tour groups will be following our itinerary, but it's nice to arrive at Lake Birrabeen before they do. White sands without footprints greet me, a clear lake without parents playing lifeguard helps to cleanse my dirty heart. This is the place of dreams. I try to forget about the impending invasion of camera-wielding day-trippers, and I am allowed twenty-five full minutes (yes, twenty-five) to drift into a peaceful sleep.

There's now a big resort on the island where you can stay and sleep and eat, but it's a far cry from those makeshift villages of canvas strewn between trees that I helped to assemble all those years ago. I start dreaming that I am a backpacker again, roaming idly through the forests in search of firewood, eating beans from a pot with a three-day old baguette, boring my companions senseless with tales of where I've been and what I've done. But no, it's too late. Just like Fraser Island, I've become pragmatic. We've both grown up, and moved on, and left our innocence behind.