TO THE TOP OF HINCHINBROOK

by
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IN EXPLORING Australia's wild places, I have found that it is the regions I initially visited many years ago that still have the deepest attraction. These areas may well be some of Australia's most impressive tracts of wilderness but I tend to think my continuing and intense interest in them stems more from the fact that, back then, exploring wild and remote places was novel to me and so these areas tended to adopt an importance in my mind that was perhaps unwarranted.

On the other hand, many of these areas have now become significant in a much broader context. They are nationally significant wilderness areas recognised and cherished by the Australian community as a whole. So, as it has turned out, my initial fascination with these regions was not necessarily misplaced. But still I do not know for sure the fundamental reason for the attraction.

And so it was to be that, in 1993, I found myself back on Hinchinbrook Island.

I was camping at Little Ramsey Bay, next to Warrawilla Lagoon at the mouth of the creek of the same name. In the dusk, I looked south from the sandy shore and saw a multitude of lights emanating from campsites further along the bay and across at Banksia Beach. Nearby in the shelter of the casuarinas stood the tents of several more groups. By now, early evening, the sea breeze had subsided and the occasional crashing of the small swell on the beach was the only sound to interrupt the tranquillity.

The next morning I was on the mist-enshrouded summit of Mount Bowen *(pictured above)* after a three hour climb from Little Ramsey Bay, now far below. To climb it so quickly I avoided carryng the heavy traditional bushwalking pack. Instead, I carried a small waist bag with only the bare essentials. I prefer to move this way.

I sat on the summit rock cairn and pondered. It was still early, ten o'clock in fact, and I had the rest of the day to descend slowly to the beach. But before I did, I would sit here for a while and look into the darkening wall of mist which hung before me. Look past the cliff edge and even beyond Hinchinbrook.

Back several years, to places and times and events which would ultimately culminate in this sojourn to a remote and wild summit.

I had been here only twice before but somehow the place seemed familiar *(author pictured on summit, right)*. Those early trips were far more arduous than this lightweight climb. Then we had planned to take several days to traverse the massif and as such carried heavy camping gear in large rucksacks. Today I carried only a small snack for lunch and it was too warm to even consider a jumper or waterproof clothing. Both modes of travel have their advantages and disadvantages and in fact I undertake either method when the need arises. But somehow, for me at least, the greatest enjoyment comes from travelling light through areas that have some special and personal appeal. And Hinchinbrook is one of these.

In 1971 I made my first trip to the island with a group from the University of Queensland. We were all novices then, none of us having set foot on this remote tropical island before. To us then, the peaks of Straloch and Diamantina looked like Himalayan giants and I can still remember the excitement of walking northwards around Hillock Point and seeing the castle-like structure of Mount Bowen for the first time. A ring of cloud encircled the massif at half height but the higher summits rode well clear of this and shone brightly in the clear sunshine above.

In a bottle on the summit of Bowen we read the notes left by sixteen previous parties who had scaled the mountain and recorded the event there. Ours was added to it. In 1971 the beach at Little Ramsey or Zoe Bay was completely deserted. You knew your group was alone — the entire island was yours. Occasionally a glass fishing buoy washed up with the tide, hinting of a civilisation out there somewhere but one that was not at all obvious. For the duration of your stay on the island you were not part of it and the clues to its existence were thankfully few and far between.

For me, these idealistic images remain but the reality is they now belong to a distant past. In part, perhaps I have myself to blame. I for one have captured the beauty and awe of this island and other wild places on film for all the world to see. And now this world comes to view it firsthand. But the images of this world are worth capturing and recording and I don’t regret doing that. The world should know of such places in order that they be protected.

But after only a few short years, the atmosphere of this island has irrevocably changed. Suddenly it seems a little too close to the mainland. It is no longer that world apart. Happily, some of the power which has drawn me back to the island many times over many years still remains strong. Today when I stand on the sand spit overlooking Warrawilla Lagoon and peer up at the ramparts of Bowen, the magnetism slowly returns and I can somehow feel and know that the attraction will continue. I realise now that once enthralled, the fascination never ends. Some places just seem to have that effect.