



*Hinchinbrook Island welcomed the climbers with driving rain and cold mist. Wrapped in warm blankets and parkas (top) they cut coconuts to refresh their determination to go on despite the un-tropical weather. With the first breaks in the cloud they dried the equipment (above) and set out to climb Mt Bowen (above right) under its usual thick cover of cloud. Two and a half days later they received their reward in the views from the summit of Mt Bowen, looking down over a peaceful paradise to the deserted Pacific Ocean far below (right).*





# SAFARI TO THE UNKNOWN

The island lies just a mile off the Queensland coast, not far from a large town. But it could well be another, lost world. Mangroves guard its shores and pythons its mountains — and this is the challenge eight explorers face!

By Robert Rankin





We stood in a small group on the jetty at Dungeness and peered out across the channel. Through the mist we could see steep, jagged ridges rising upwards to be lost in a blur of driving rain.

A strong easterly was ripping clouds across the peaks. For a moment the sky cleared and there towering above us was Mount Straloch.

Then the clouds rolled in again, obliterating everything but a dirty grey sea whipped up by a freshening breeze.

It wasn't a pretty sight — not at all what we had imagined. But no one was disillusioned. The very impressiveness of the island beckoned us to set out across the channel immediately.

Hinchinbrook is an extremely rugged but beautiful tropical island just off the coast of northern Queensland, near the town of Ingham.

It is small and craggily mountainous, with its highest peak, Mount Bowen, soaring to more than three and a half thousand feet, only a few miles from the beach.

It is only a mile from civilisation, separated by the Hinchinbrook Channel from the mainland; yet looking out from the water's edge at Ramsey Bay, overshadowed by the bulk of Bowen, it might be a thousand miles from anywhere.

People go to Hinchinbrook to fish, skindive or just beachcomb around the coves and inlets of its twenty-mile shoreline.

But the eight of us, landing at George Point on the island's southern tip, had come to climb mountains.

We waded ashore from the dinghy, balancing our fifty-pound packs, trying to keep them out of the water. The rain was driving hard in our faces and we paused for a moment to struggle into anoraks before putting heads down into the wind and trudging round the point.

Suddenly we were compelled to look up, rain in our faces or not.

Away to the north stretched a broad sandy beach. Inland, Straloch thrust abruptly to 3,000 feet, its rocky summits covered in dense banksia.

Rainforest trees crowded down the lower slopes to the edge of the beach, where they stopped as solid as a wall. Every hundred yards or so there was a cluster of coconut palms, punctuating the sweep of the beach right down to the rocky headland at the far end.

For a second the sun broke through a gap in the cloud. Its streaky rays caught Straloch straight on, spotlighting it against the black rain clouds, and dazzling the spray of a thousand-foot waterfall pouring from the mountainside.

We headed down the beach of Mulligan's Bay to where a creek washed into the sea between the sand and the headland. We had decided to follow the creek estuary up into the interior of the island, to the base of another waterfall

plummeting hundreds of feet down the side of Mount Diamantina, a prominent peak to the north of Straloch.

On either side of the estuary rainforest ran right down into mangroves, forming what appeared to be an impenetrable barrier.

Taking what looked to be the most direct route we dived into the mass of mangrove, immediately becoming entangled in twisting roots and branches. That way was impossible.

Equally, the rainforest, threaded with thorny vines, offered little hope of a way through.

But at that moment we stumbled on a strange feature of the forest. Between the mangroves and the trees there was a narrow space, a clear path about five feet wide. Time and time again in our explorations of the island this space was to give us a fine natural highway through the thickest vegetation.

Soon we had left behind the sluggish mangrove water of the estuary and were following a swift and stony-bottomed creek which jumped and plunged over cascades and rapids.

It was late afternoon, and in the fast-dying tropical half-light we searched for a campsite, eventually settling on a small — and rare — piece of flat ground about ten feet square. There was no room to pitch the tents we had brought, so we improvised a shelter against the rain.

It drizzled all night. The enthusiasm of our early discoveries was severely dampened by deluges of water which periodically flooded into the shelter, after collecting in pools on the roof.

In the morning morale was at an all-time low. We had intended to go on past the falls to climb Mount Diamantina, but now all anyone wanted to do was head back to the beach.

This was not an escape, merely a concentration of all our energy on the main goal, the reason we had come to Hinchinbrook: to climb mighty Mount Bowen.

The island is not just another of Australia's overpopulated, playground National Parks. In two days it had been brought home to us already that it is an extremely wild and primitive place, almost untouched by men. One could spend a year in its secluded coves, seeing no signs of civilisation except an occasional fishing boat on the horizon.

We had been prepared for some of Hinchinbrook's isolation, arranging with people on the mainland that we would light three fires on the southern end of the island if any of us had an accident or needed help.

But as we continued northwards we began to realise that we would certainly have to treat any accidents ourselves, as the rough and difficult journey back to the southern tip would take days.

If any of the party had a serious accident the situation would be nothing



*Mt Bowen and The Thumb rise behind a party collecting water at Zoe Bay. It had then been four days since landing.*

short of desperate. It might take two days to carry someone with a broken leg down from the mountain to the beach, and then two more precious days struggling along the coast to the beacon point.

Anyone with a normal injury would probably survive that long wait, but if there were any more serious problems, like snakebite, little could be done.

There are taipans and death adders all over the island. Luckily, we saw neither during our stay there.

We put such dubious thoughts out of our minds and began the long, four-day walk up the coast to Ramsey Bay.

Each night we camped on beaches, close to a creek outlet which would provide us with fresh water.

Three of the party — John Simmons, John Stewart and Irene Davies — were our fishing experts, and usually managed to provide us with fresh barramundi to cook over an open fire in the evenings.

On the afternoon of the fourth day we rounded a headland and drank in the first, unforgettable vision of Mount Bowen.

Rising up behind Zoe Bay were the sheer cliffs of The Thumb, one of Bowen's attendant peaks. A stripe of mist hung around the middle slopes, and the main summit of the Bowen massif rode high up beyond, under an ice cream of vanilla-coloured cloud.

The next day saw us encamped at Ramsey Bay, which was to be the base camp for our Mount Bowen traverse.

The five of us making the climb sorted out our equipment: sleeping bags for the cold nights at 3,000 feet; light packs and tents; nylon ropes and climbing gear; and packs of dehydrated food.





*Mulligan's Creek gave the expedition an icy swim, a superb view, and a way to the island's mountainous interior.*

The fishing enthusiasts were staying on the beach, and early the following day we left them, to begin the long haul up the low slopes.

On the lower section of Nina Ridge we met the mountain's guardian: a seven-foot python tightly curled into a coil. Remembering that that variety of snake is not poisonous doesn't really help when you almost tread on it.

We gave the python a wide berth, but soon found ourselves presented with another, larger problem. The sheer, almost overhanging face of Pineapple Peak blocked our way. We skirted it to the left, and then to the right, hoping to discover the elusive "easy way up."

Eventually John Webb found it, and led us up the first of a series of steep gullies round to the left of the main summit.

But what looked relatively simple to start with became harder and harder. I looked up and saw John confidently toe-holding from ledge to ledge. With my own confidence restored I followed him, and soon we were all standing on a large, flat ramp.

The way ahead looked easy, but the north face of the peak hung dark and ugly before us, its far edge cutting dramatically across the wide, flat, golden beach of Ramsey, five miles to the north.

It was late afternoon as we crossed the ridge and came up to a small, clear and well sheltered spot, marked on the map as 2,000 feet up. To the east it dropped away vertically. A small stream racing down from the mountain shot suicidally over the edge and vanished in a fine spray. Higher up the ridge the great rocky mass of North Peak glowed crimson in the setting sun.

The spiritual fire kindled in us next day by a glorious sunrise stayed for the day's tangling with thick undergrowth — until we met The Wart.

It was most appropriately named, for it bulged up in front of us, completely barring the way. It took several infuriating hours to scramble over it, and even then our problems were not over.

Invariably the ridge tops were a confusion of boulders and thick bushes which hid menacing holes, often twenty feet deep.

Jan Ohlsson was negotiating one of these obstacles when she slipped and fell into an abyss between two rocks — only to be arrested and suspended in mid-air as her pack frame jammed between the chasm walls.

A white and shaken Jan was heaved back onto the boulder from which she had slipped, while some of the party covered the general anxiety that what had been a slight fall might have been serious by making sick jokes about the point of climbing being to go up, not down.

In spite of the day's frustrations we had made progress, and that night we camped well up on Bowen's summit ridge, only 250 feet from the top.

The views at night from this altitude were staggering. To the west we had a great sweeping vista of the mainland. During the day it was an insignificant blue haze, but at night it was alive with thousands of dots of light — a bright cluster of them for Ingham in the south, and a few pinpoints for Cardwell in the north.

The dark line of the shore and the flickering glow-worm sparks all looked unbelievably close; but one look back at the cliffs and ravines below was enough to show us how isolated we really were.

By ten o'clock the next morning we were on the summit. We had just completed the eighteenth recorded ascent of Mount Bowen, and after all that effort it seemed a terrible anticlimax.

The mist cleared slightly and there, at our feet, three and a half thousand feet below, was Ramsey Bay. It was two and a half days since we had left it, and now we must head back there.

But first, The Thumb. It stood out, exactly as might be expected from its name, at the top of the ridge by which we planned to descend the mountain.

The temptation to add another summit to the score was too strong to resist, so with afternoon drawing into evening we made a quick dash for the top, engulfed in a thick mist which cut visibility in the ascent gully to a few feet. All around us the invisible cliffs dropped thousands of feet into the valley below. The summit itself was like a precarious platform, no more than fifty feet square.

We had left ourselves little time to settle on a campsite — not that there were many alternatives at this height. The

best was a steep-sided saddle between The Thumb and Bowen.

The route we had chosen for our descent became dangerously steep below The Thumb, falling directly to the beach one way and into Zoe Gorge the other.

Large rocky outcrops hindered our progress and we had to abseil off the end of the buttresses.

Abseiling involves clipping a rope into a friction brake attached to a waist band and then leaning out over the cliff and walking down backwards.

But this time it wasn't quite as easy as that. The cliff was too high and the rope too short for us to abseil straight down. We had to go diagonally across the rock to a ledge from which it was moderately safe and easy to climb down.

What wasn't moderately safe was the traverse across the face. I barely managed to retain my balance, and was greatly relieved to reach the ledge.

Peter Hanley, the next man down, was not so lucky. He missed his footing and swung like a pendulum across the rock, gashing his knee open on the way. But he did not fall into the usual abseiling trap of letting go to grab something. He had the presence of mind to grip the rope tighter than ever, halt his fall, regain his balance and gradually inch his way back.

Two more sixty-foot abseils brought us down to the easier slopes near the rocky creek leading to the beach.

But once again night fell too quickly; we had reached the mangroves and could hear the roar of the surf no more than a quarter of a mile away, but there seemed to be no way to extricate ourselves from the sinister twists and tangles of the mangroves between us and the shore.

Each time we tried to find a way out we came up against a dead end.

Possibly we could have followed the main stream out to sea, but that would have meant a long, cold swim in the gathering darkness.

We were just weighing up several equally daunting alternatives when we heard a faint cry drifting up to us on the shore breeze from the beach.

John Simmons had been calling for us for more than an hour.

He, John Stewart and Irene, had been fishing in the creek that very morning, and had discovered the secret of the way through the mangrove maze.

Soon he was leading us out along a clear path beside the southern bank, between the water and the forest. It was nine o'clock and a golden moon was rising out of the sea as we felt the sand of the beach crunch under our feet.

At base camp panfuls of barramundi and coconuts were waiting for us. We were home, with one night more to relish the delights of a deserted beach, a cosy campfire, the hiss and rush of the sea and the satisfaction of having climbed the highest mountain on wild and peaceful Hinchinbrook. □