

SUNLOVER
REEF CRUISES

SELF-GUIDED NUDEY BEACH WALK



NUDEY BEACH TRACK



Lighthouse Track



Summit Track

Secret Garden Track

Nudey Beach Track Starts Here

Fitzroy Island National Park

NUDEY BEACH TRACK

Nudey Beach track (Grade: moderate)

Time: Allow 45 minutes walking time, you may want to spend some time on the beach as well.

Details: The track is well maintained, and the majority is paved. It does wind through large granite boulders and requires walking up some steep, rough-cut stone steps. The track may be slippery if it is wet, so it is recommended to wear appropriate shoes. Nudey Beach is beautiful – ranked one of the top beaches in Australia in 2018! Do be aware though that it is not your traditional beach – it is made up of coral fragments that may be uncomfortable to walk on barefoot.

This self-guided walk is designed to be used as you make your way to Nudey Beach, using natural markers along the track to highlight points of interest.

BRIEF HISTORY

Fitzroy Island has been an important island for thousands of years, starting as a place for fishing, gathering and connection to Country. Over time, the role of the island has shifted. It has been a pearling base, Beche-de-mer (sea cucumber) farm, a quarantine station during the gold rush days, and a wartime coast-watching outpost.

You can see remnants of its history through other tracks on the island (namely the Lighthouse Track). However, Nudey Beach highlights the final form of Fitzroy Island – a National Park. The Fitzroy Island National Park comprises of lush rainforest, open woodlands, mangroves, and is surrounded by coral beaches and fringing reef, all of it a part of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

ON THE WAY

Before reaching the official start of the Nudey Beach track, you will cross a bridge. Have a look in the water, as you may see the resident short-finned eel or other small fish and crabs.

Keep walking up past Foxy's Bar & Grill – a perfect place to stop for a bite of food or a drink.

You'll know you've reached the track when you see a Nudey Beach sign.

NUTRIENT RECYCLING – LOGS LINING THE PATH

In a National Park, natural materials like logs, branches and fallen trees are left in nature, even the ones cut down for visitor safety. This is because they play an important role in the nutrient cycling system of a rainforest.

Step 1: Colonisation – The First Invaders



As soon as a tree falls, pioneer decomposers arrive. Fungi send out thread-like filaments into the wood, releasing enzymes that dissolve tough compounds. Bacteria move through the cracks and start breaking down cellulose. These microbes make the wood softer and chemically change it so the star players can arrive.

Step 2: Insects!

Termites are star players in a rainforest, though some cockroaches (we don't hate them here!), other beetles and ants play a part.

Scout termites find the log and bring the colony to feed. They tunnel into the wood, creating a network of galleries like little highways. These tunnels increase the surface area, which also helps fungi and bacteria colonise the wood faster.



Termite frass and galleries

This isn't the only way termites and bacteria work together. Termites can't digest the wood themselves, so instead, their guts are packed with symbiotic microbes (bacteria, archaea, protozoa). These microbes break down the cellulose for them, turning it into simple sugars that the termite can digest.

As termites chew through the log, they excrete partially digested wood as tiny pellets (called Frass). Frass is rich in nutrients and softer than raw wood, and becomes food for fungi, other insects and soil microbes.

Step 3: Recycling

Over time, the log collapses into a mix of frass, fungal threads and nutrient rich humus. Rain washes nutrients like nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium back into the soil, which gets quickly absorbed by rainforest plants.

So, the logs lining the path are more than just decoration – they're an essential part of the ecosystem.

GRANITE BOULDERS – THE STEPS

The granite boulders forming the steps, mountains and landscapes of Fitzroy Island have ancient origins. They are millions of years old, dating back to when magma cooled deep underground and slowly crystallised into hard rock. Over time, the surrounding softer rock eroded away, leaving these massive, rounded boulders exposed.

The boulders are often smooth and rounded due to chemical weathering, where rainwater slowly seeps into cracks, reacting with minerals and causing the rock to peel away in layers. All over Fitzroy Island you can see unique shapes that have been created in the granite rocks.



TREE BURLS

At the first set of stairs, you'll see a tree on the right with multiple large growths



Tree burls are big, rounded lumps or knobbly growths, and you can see them quite commonly along the tracks of Fitzroy Island. They can be caused by injury, infection, insect activity, genetic mutations, or fire scars.

This particular tree has been through a lot and created these burls essentially as a way to 'wall off' the problem area with growth tissue. Inside the burl, the wood grain is incredibly twisted and interlocked, making it highly prized by woodworkers for its beauty. As some can live as long as the tree itself, it's a silent record of decades of stress, storms and survival.

Because Fitzroy Island is a National Park, burls are fully protected and stay where they grow to continue to provide habitat.

WHITE STARFISH ORCHID



Look for a tree by an old marker '2', though you don't need markers to find these. If you look closely at most trees, you'll see the radiating roots of the White Starfish Orchid (*Sarcocylus phyllorhizus*).

It is a leafless epiphyte (a plant that grows on another plant, but doesn't take nutrients from it), living entirely through its own roots, which photosynthesis and cling to tree bark.

It bears flowers in short, irregular bursts in November - February. If you're lucky enough to see them flowering, you'll be looking for small, star shaped white and yellow flowers that only last a couple of days.

Because it needs humid, shady conditions, its presence is a good sign of a healthy rainforest microclimate.

VINE THICKETS

To the left at the top of the stairs

Vines are especially abundant on Fitzroy Island because of the warm, wet, tropical climate. These vines range from Lianas (woody vines) that grow massive and twisty and climbing vines that cling using tendrils, hooks, or aerial roots. You may also spot strangling figs, which start as vines high in the canopy and then grow down and around a host tree.

These vines rely on other trees for support instead of investing their energy into thick trunks. This allows them to put more energy into growing leaves and spreading out to catch sunlight in the canopy.



Vines thrive in gaps where trees have fallen, like this thicket here, and quickly cover open space and stabilise the forest floor. They connect trees, making aerial pathways for possums, lizards, and insects, and some that flower even provide food for the local birds, bats and insects.

Sure, the vines around here might tempt you to swing into your best Tarzan impression, but not all of them are friendly jungle décor. In fact, fast growing vines are one of the biggest threats to Queensland's rainforests. Many invasive species race up trees, smothering the canopy and stealing sunlight from the natives below. That's why Fitzroy Island takes biosecurity seriously, following strict pest-free protocols and a team of rangers to keep a close eye on things.

BIRDSNEST FERNS

Clear view standing on a flat boulder towards the bottom of the stairs



Birdsnest ferns, among other common ferns in Far North Queensland, are another epiphytic plant. They can be distinguished from others by their long, leathery and undivided leaves.

Fallen leaves, twigs and even nesting birds often collect in the middle of the 'rosette'. This acts as a mini compost bin, with debris breaking down inside the 'nest' creating rich organic matter for the fern to absorb.

The leaves funnel rain and mist to its centre, keeping the plant hydrated and independent from the tree hosting it.

These ferns create microhabitats for insects, lizards and other small critters up in the trees.

OPPORTUNISTIC TREES

Bottom of the stairs on top of a huge boulder

This large granite boulder is more than just a rock – it's a foundation for life. Opportunistic plants such as vines, ferns and even trees have taken advantage of the proximity to the canopy layer, utilising tiny cracks and pockets of moisture to establish themselves.

The trees you can see up here begin life in a thin layer of broken down leaf litter. With very little to work with, their roots spread down the sides in search of water and nutrients. Over time, the roots have anchored the tree firmly in place, gripping the rock like ropes. As it has grown, it has trapped more soil and organic matter, creating space for other plants to establish. What began as a bare boulder has slowly transformed into a living platform.



A perfect example of how competition in the understory has led trees to adapt and thrive in the most unlikely places.

WHIP VINE



Start to see them commonly before the next set of stairs

Usually quite small until it finds something to hold on to, but once they do they form tough vines, often called 'false rattan'. Unlike some climbers that use roots to cling, supplejack uses its leaves, which end in a coiled tendril that act as a whip-like hook to coil around branches for support.

HAIRY MARY (*CALAMUS AUSTRALIS*)

Looking in the same areas as Whip Vines, you should be able to spot a tangled mass of Hairy Mary (*Calamus australis*), a spiny climbing palm that can grow stems over 30 metres long! These are the exact type of plant you picture when thinking of rugged Australian flora – not friendly! Its spiny stems and hooked leaflets snag anything that brushes past.

However, Hairy Mary thickets aren't just dramatic Australian scenery. They provide shelter and food for birds, reptiles and small mammals, while stabilising the forest floor.



ORANGE-FOOTED SCRUB FOWL



As you keep walking, this area is one of the more common areas to find Orange-Footed Scrub fowl (*Megapodius reinwardt*). They are very shy, so you may notice them first by listening out for scratching in the leaf litter. If you stay still and quiet, they'll go back to their activities, and you'll be able to catch a glimpse of them through the forest.

These birds are amazing ecosystem engineers, as they build huge mounds of soil and leaf litter to incubate their eggs, using the heat from decomposition to warm them. These mounds can be over 4 metres wide and 1 metre high!

Scrubfowl aren't just amazing engineers. Their constant digging and mixing of soil and leaf litter helps aerate the ground and spread seeds and nutrients, keeping the rainforest floor healthy and fertile.

LEAF LITTER

As you keep walking, you'll start to see glimpses of the ocean on your right – you're nearly there! Here, take a moment to look at the forest floor. Notice all the fallen leaves, twigs, and fruits (leaf litter) and it's not just debris. As it breaks down, it releases nutrients back into the soil, feeding the trees, shrubs, and even tiny seedlings sprouting all around you. Tiny organisms like fungi, insects and microbes work hard on this litter, turning it into rich soil that supports the whole forest ecosystem.

Even though there is a lot of leaf litter, the soil beneath is often low in oxygen, and surprisingly nutrient poor. With so many plants competing for space and resources, nutrients get used up quickly. That's one reason why tree roots are often shallow, spreading wide instead of deep. They're racing to capture the nutrients and water near the surface before their neighbours get them. You may have noticed this already as the roots tend to cross footpaths and break up bitumen.

Look a little closer and you might spot seedlings pushing through the litter or delicate ferns unfurling their fronds. Even the smallest plants rely on this constant supply of nutrients to survive in the competition for light and space. This process is one of the reasons the rainforest is so dense and full of life. Everything is connected, from the tallest canopy tree to the tiniest sprouting seed. It's like a hidden, bustling city of growth happening right under your feet!

BRIDGES

Every time you cross a bridge along the track, take a moment to pause and look around. These bridges aren't just convenient ways to cross small gullies or wet areas, they play an important role in protecting the rainforest floor from erosion. By keeping walkers off the soil, the bridges help prevent damage to fragile roots and reduce soil erosion into the reef below.

While you're standing here, listen carefully to the rainforest canopy and understory. You might hear the calls of Fitzroy Island's native birds, like the Wompoo Fruit-Dove (listen for wom-pooooooo) or Australian Spectacled Monarch (look for a bright orange belly). This is a great spot to stop, breathe, and appreciate the forest alive with sound (before reaching the best view on the island!).

Also, take a look at some of the granite formations forming near these bridges, broken down into unique features of the landscape.



FIRST LOOKOUT

On the second bridge, stop here and take in the view over the sparkling water. You can see two beaches on the mainland: King Beach on the left and Little Turtle Bay on the right. Thousands of years ago, this entire area was not water at all, but grassy plains. Rising sea levels after the last ice age gradually flooded the land, creating the bays, inlets and reefs we see today.

Look directly below you and notice the rocks tipped in white along the shoreline. That's bird poop and packed with nutrients. When these nutrients wash into the water, they help support the fringing reef ecosystem, feeding tiny plants and algae that form the base of the reef's food chain.

This is also a hangout spot of the resident barracuda! You might spot it gliding through the shallows. These sleek, predatory fish are top hunters on the reef, helping maintain the balance of smaller fish populations.

SECOND LOOKOUT



As you climb onto the boulders at the second lookout, get ready for your first stunning view of Nudey Beach! This spot is not only a perfect photo opportunity, but also a chance to pause and take in the surrounding rainforest and sparkling blue waters. Keep your eyes open, as you may even spot a major skink (up to 40cm!) basking on the rocks, soaking up the sun.

From here, you can see why Nudey Beach is so special. The sand is made up of coral fragments, giving it a unique appearance. Just offshore the fringing reef supports a vibrant ecosystem of corals, tropical fish and other marine life. The beach is a protected area, providing a safe habitat for nesting seabirds and allowing marine life to thrive. This view shows how the island and reef work together to create a fragile but beautiful ecosystem, a perfect reminder of the connection between land and sea.

THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR ON FITZROY ISLAND

MAJOR SKINK (*EGERNIA FREREI*)

Keep an eye on sunny boulders, or in leaf litter around the tracks throughout Fitzroy Island. These are some of Australia's largest skinks, growing up to 40cm long with a strong build. Major skinks are quick movers and excellent climbers, often darting into cracks if disturbed. They play an important role in the island's ecosystem by eating insects, flowers, and fruit, and in turn providing food for the larger birds on the island.



If you see something that looks like a blue-tongued lizard – it's probably these guys!

YELLOW-SPOTTED MONITOR (*VARANUS PANOPTES*)



If you're lucky, you might spot a Yellow-Spotted Monitor, also known as the goanna, moving through the tracks on Fitzroy Island. They're very accustomed to people on Fitzroy Island, so don't expect them to move out of your way if you spot one on the path!

These impressive lizards can grow over a metre long and are easy to recognise by the bright yellow spots scattered across their dark skin. They're also the only animal on the island that get this big (unless you're looking for turtles in the water – the turtles here are huge).

They're clever scavengers and skilled hunters, feeding on insects, birds, eggs, and small mammals. Despite their size, they're excellent climbers and can often be seen scaling trees in search of food or safety. On Fitzroy Island, they play an important role as both predator and clean-up crew, helping to keep the ecosystem in balance. They also do a pretty good job of annoying the Curlews – you might hear large birds 'hissing' at the Monitor, warning it to stay away from their nest.

BUSH STONE-CURLEW (*BURHINUS GRALLARIUS*)



If you've spent any time in Cairns you've probably seen these guys, or at least heard them. These are the birds you can hear screaming at night-time.

However, their bark is worse than their bite. Curlews are mostly ground dwelling, laying their nests on the ground from March. They are also quite shy unless protecting their nest, and become active at night.

In this picture they're trying to scare off a curious Yellow-Spotted Monitor, spreading their wings wide to look more threatening than they are. If you see one sitting down and not moving, they're probably nesting (or just sleeping). Please do not try and pet them! Remember we are in a National Park.

SULPHUR-CRESTED COCKATOO (*CACATUA GALERITA*)

Another bird you'll hear before you see it, with their loud, raucous screeches echoing through the rainforest. With their bright white feathers and striking yellow crest, these cockatoos are impossible to miss once they land.

Even though Fitzroy Island can be full of people on a busy day, cockatoos mostly keep to themselves. You'll often spot them foraging in the leaf litter for seeds, nuts, berries and roots, occasionally pausing to give you a curious glance before going back to their search.

Being in a National Park means you get to watch these iconic Australian birds living completely in their natural habitat, free to behave just as they would without human interference.



SCREW PINE (*PANDANUS TECTORIUS*)



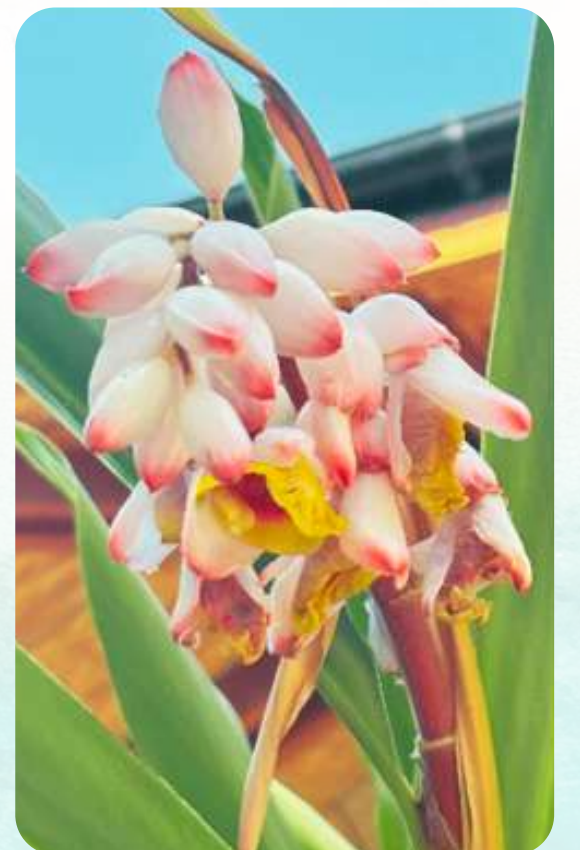
Easy to spot with its spiral leaves and stilt-like roots.

Its large, knobby fruit looks like a pineapple crossed with a football and breaks into bright orange segments that are a favourite food for bats and birds.

SHELL GINGER (*ALPINIA ZERUMBET*)

Striking ornamental rainforest plant with clusters of delicate pink-and-white flowers from Spring-Summer.

Medicinal uses include colds, pain relief and stomach aches.



BUTTRESS ROOTS



These roots help support tall trees in shallow, nutrient-poor soil.

They often have small pores that allow the tree to take in oxygen directly from the air, helping the roots breathe in soil that can be low in oxygen.

HIBISCUS FLOWERS

There are two main types of hibiscuses on the island (both beautiful).

The ornamental pink flower in the picture, and the native beach hibiscus (*Hibiscus Tiliaceus*) that is yellow. Both are clear indicators that you are in a tropical paradise!

