

Rum crew on the coast

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'WHY pink?' is the one question people can't help asking when they're out eco-touring with Col Young and David Legge on the Coral Coast north of Bundaberg.

And they aren't talking about flamingoes.

"Well," they're told, "the LARC was that colour when we bought it from a Rockhampton car yard. We just haven't got around to changing it."

It's a reasonable answer from the laconic duo but still, pink is an odd colour for a 7.5-tonne, ex-US Army amphibious vehicle (Lighter Amphibious Resupply Cargo), even when it's on operations where camouflage isn't an issue.

Young and Legge, who are enthusiastic guides with 1770 Environmental Tours, run two of these gaudy, Vietnam-era boats-with-wheels out of the Town of 1770 along a pristine, creek-indented coastline up to Bustard Head and its 19th-century lighthouse.

They get a lot of customers and they keep them very happy with a mix of history, botany, zoology, geology, soft adventure and good-natured humour, all of it in an environment which shows off Queensland's natural coastal beauty to perfection. Worth a look? You bet, which is one reason 1770, a sleepy kind of town that has risen from obscurity in recent years, is on the map now as a tourist destination.

It's been years in the making but nearby Agnes Water, which is vaguely reminiscent of Port Douglas during its Skase-led development phase, is now a centre of gravity of sorts on the Coral Coast.

It has smart apartment resorts, some good restaurants, surfing beaches, ready access out of 1770 to the reefs and cays of the southern Great Barrier Reef and a population that triples during school holidays. It also has poor TV reception, issues about

public access to its development-backed beaches and, unlike Port Douglas, no definable centre or soul. Perhaps that's in the master plan somewhere.

Regional towns have to be on the ball if they want to capture and retain a share of domestic tourism and the marketers of the combined Town of 1770/Agnes Water and what is called the Discovery Coast are working hard at selling not only the region's natural attractions but its legitimate claim to being the closest departure point for the Great Barrier Reef.

From the 1770 marina, you can get out for a day to Lady Musgrave Island (a coral cay in the Bunker Group which has a lagoon perfect for snorkelling), go diving at any one of numerous excellent reef sites or take in a short or extended reef fishing charter.

Bundaberg, a coastal sugar-growing town about four hours' drive north of Brisbane, has daily flights to Lady Elliot Island, which has one of only three Great Barrier Reef resorts located on a coral rather than a continental island, and which I can attest offers great scuba diving.

Bundaberg's dive-related tourism inventory also includes shore dives on coastal coral reefs off Bargara and Elliott Heads.

Bundy, which recently opened a \$40 million-plus shopping centre, has always had an air of affluence and looks at its best during the sugar cane harvest season in the second half of the year.

Turtles at Mon Repos beach have been a major seasonal (November to March) attraction over the years, but the Bundaberg Rum Distillery remains an icon attraction which, from my experience, is worth the \$9.90 tour fee if only because it includes two free samples of the product.

Nearby, Childers must be one of the prettiest and proudest towns along the length of the Bruce Highway and although it has only a limited number of obvious tourist attractions, these are enthusiastically promoted.

John Wright visited Bundaberg and the Coral Coast with the help of Tourism Queensland.