



Looking southeast along Abbott Street, Cairns, ca. 1925. (John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland. Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#)).

Cairns/ Gimuy

Sources:

[A History of Cairns, Far North Queensland:](#)

[History of Cairns from the 1870s:](#)

Wikipedia: [Cairns](#)

Queensland's fifth-largest city by population, Cairns sits on the state's northeastern coast, 1390 kilometres north-northwest of Brisbane, on territory formerly occupied by the Gimuy Walubara clan of the Yidinji people.

Although it developed as a port for mines in the hinterland and a centre for tropical agriculture, the city's location on the shores of Trinity Bay and proximity to the Great Barrier Reef and the Wet Tropics rainforests have transformed it into a significant international tourist hub.

After James Cook passed by on Trinity Sunday 1770, maritime visitors to Trinity Bay included Phillip Parker King (three voyages in the northern winters of 1819, 1820 and 1821), James John Gordon Bremer in HMS *Tamar*, bound for Melville Island (1824), John Wickham in the *Beagle* (1839) and Francis Price Blackwood in the *Fly* (1843).

Beche-de-mer fishers began visiting the area in the 1860s. They used a large native well on the modern-day Cairns foreshore to refresh their water supplies. An 1872 confrontation between local Yidinji people and Phillip Garland over access to the well saw the locality subsequently called Battle Camp.



Chinatown Cairns, circa 1890. The Crown Hotel (35 Shields Street) is in the upper right of the photo. The photo was taken from the roof of the Hides Hotel (87 Lakes Street). (Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#))

European settlement in the area followed James Venture Mulligan's discovery of gold on the Hodgkinson River in 1876. Several sites for a port for the new diggings emerged, including Port Douglas, Smith's Landing (further up Trinity Inlet, later renamed Thornton), Smithfield and Battle Camp. For a while, Port Douglas prevailed, but after Queensland Native Police Sub-Inspectors Douglas and Johnstone opened a new track from the goldfields to Battle Camp, it rapidly eclipsed its immediate neighbours.

After Battle Camp was renamed in honour of Queensland Governor Sir William Wellington Cairns in 1876, the area's mangrove swamps and sand ridges were cleared and filled. Chinese immigrants moved down from the goldfields to develop the region's agriculture. At the same time, the port became a favoured destination for blackbirding ships transporting indentured labourers to Innisfail's sugar plantations.

Further mineral discoveries closer to Cairns strengthened the town's position as the most significant port between Cooktown and Townsville.

John Atherton discovered tin on the Atherton Tablelands in 1878, while the Mulgrave goldfield upstream from modern-day Gordonvale was proclaimed two years later.

Approval for a railway into the hinterland in 1884 finally settled matters in Cairns' favour, though construction was a laborious process. The line to Kuranda opened in 1891 and went on to Mareeba (1893) and Herberton (1910). To the south, the Mulgrave sugar tramway opened in 1898 to serve the Mulgrave mill at Gordonvale.

Developments in local government saw the settlement declared a borough (1885), a town (1893) and a city thirty years later.

Transport connections with the south improved with the completion of the coastal railway line in 1924, while the hinterland became more accessible when the Gillies Highway to Atherton opened the same year.

Seven cyclones struck Cairns between 1903 and 1920, with another in 1927, prompting a gradual change in building materials from timber to reinforced concrete or cavity brick. Further developments saw the Cook Highway to Port Douglas open in 1933, with the Barron hydroelectric scheme providing the city with electricity from 1935.

During World War II, the city became a staging ground for the Allied troops bound for New Guinea and the South Pacific, with airfields, naval facilities and a Catalina airbase in Trinity Inlet. Combat missions flown out of Cairns played a role in the Battle of the Coral Sea in 1942.

Tourism developed gradually through the postwar years, with the opening of an International Airport in 1984 establishing the city as a significant destination for international visitors.

