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October 25, 2025

Tourism Tropical North Queensland celebrates 50 years

The 2025 Qantas and Jetstar TNQ Tourism Industry Excellence Awards at the Cairns Convention Centre on October 24 celebrated the 50th anniversary of Tourism Tropical North Queensland with 350 guests at the gala event.

The organisation's first Chair George Chapman and General Manager Bill Cummings were among the former staff and Board members attending alongside industry representatives to mark 50 years of working together to promote Tropical North Queensland.

Tourism Tropical North Queensland (TTNQ) Chair John O'Sullivan said TTNQ represented a trailblazing local industry sector built with personal investment and innovation by legends who worked together to form the region's first tourism body, the Far North Queensland Development Bureau Limited which was registered on 12 September 1975.

"Over the past five decades there have been many visionaries and their legacy continues with Tropical North Queensland's tourism industry developed by family businesses whose owners were proud to live and work in this region," he said.

"They understood that marketing the destination together was the way forward and this mantra of hunting as a pack set them apart from their competitors."

TTNQ Chief Executive Officer Mark Olsen spoke about the organisation's proud history as the oldest and largest Regional Tourism Organisation in Australia and the many people who had helped to develop a world-class destination embracing its World Heritage assets.

"History is an invaluable teacher and so we pause in the 50th year of Tourism Tropical North Queensland to look back at five decades of passion, innovation and resilience that have transformed Tropical North Queensland into the \$4.5 billion powerhouse of today," he said.

Guests received a commemorative history booklet of TTNQ titled 'Hunting as a Pack' and a new perpetual trophy, the Robbie Bastion Award for Inbound Marketing, was launched recognising the individual, team or campaign demonstrating the hunting as a pack philosophy of putting the destination first. The trophy is in memory of the late Robbie Bastion, one of the destination's key Road Warriors who spent much of his time overseas selling the destination.

The winners of the 2025 Qantas and Jetstar TNQ Tourism Industry Excellence Awards are:

TTNQ Life Members

John Morris

John Morris' long history of contributing to tourism in our region stretches back to 1976 when he developed the first tourism accommodation in Port Douglas after arriving with his family two years earlier to live. Now 97, John still hasn't retired, keeping busy with his Restaurant Choo Choo in the Port Douglas Marina and recently completing his development, Escape Villas. John helped to develop the Douglas Shire Development Control Plan to protect the community's character and over the past five decades has developed much of the tourism infrastructure in Port Douglas including several resorts, Wildlife Habitat, the Port Douglas Marina, Wetherby Station and Crystalbrook Station.

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Cheryl Kelly

Cheryl Kelly has extensive marketing experience with key roles including Director of Sales at Hilton Cairns and The Oasis. Cheryl has a long history of promoting our region and is one of the group who “hunted as a pack”, successfully selling Tropical North Queensland to the world in the 1990s and 2000s. Cheryl co-founded the Hotel Sales and Marketing Association for the region, was the North Queensland Branch Manager of the Australian Tourism Export Council and is a past President of Skal Cairns. Today, she partners with Ros Harries to mentor the next generation of tourism leaders.

Outstanding Commitment to the Industry

Sponsored by Cairns Regional Council

Tony George

Tony George is one of our region’s most sought-after entertainers and has performed nationally and internationally. Tony’s performances have been a key part of the Cairns & Great Barrier Reef business events offering for the past 30 years. He is also an MC, keynote speaker, team-building host, and voice-over artist for documentaries and advertisements across radio and television. Tony George Entertainment holds the Australian Bridal Industry Award for Best Live Entertainment and was runner-up in the Master of Ceremonies category.

Outstanding Contribution by an Individual

Sponsored by the Wet Tropics World Heritage Guides

Megan Bell

Megan Bell has been a passionate advocate for Tropical North Queensland since she joined the Far North Queensland Promotion Bureau in 1995 after a 10-year stint running the Queensland Tourist and Travel Corporation’s LA office. She then worked for the Quicksilver Group for 22 years in sales and marketing, business events, cruise ships and media. Megan was awarded the 2009 North Queensland ATEC Most Outstanding Contribution Award, followed by the National ATEC Most Outstanding Contribution Award. Under Megan’s stewardship, the NQ Branch was also awarded the 2009 ATEC Branch of the Year. Megan served as Chair of the Business Events Port Douglas Group, was a Tourism Port Douglas Daintree Board Director and the Vice Chair for four years. Megan is semi-retired but still works in the tourism industry managing the ground tours for cruise ships arriving in the region.

Chair’s Award for Excellence

Singapore Airlines

Singapore Airlines has significantly advanced Tropical North Queensland’s international aviation recovery. The service was originally launched in May 2015 with affiliate SilkAir and expanded to daily flights by 2019 before the pandemic disrupted global aviation. Passenger flights resumed with Singapore Airlines in March 2022 and in 2024 the wide-body Airbus A350 was introduced on the route flying four times weekly. With an additional 442 seats a week into Cairns this enhanced service was projected to inject \$26.5 million into the regional economy as well as boosting capacity for the agriculture and aquaculture sectors.

Young Achiever Excellence Award

Sponsored by Ports North

James Egan, Mt Mulligan Lodge.

James Egan began his career in tourism at the age of 16 as a pastry chef and has rapidly progressed, becoming the General Manager of Mt Mulligan Lodge at 33. He combines his operational expertise with cultural sensitivity and a clear vision for regenerative tourism.

His leadership at the Luxury Lodges of Australia property has elevated guest experiences, created stronger partnerships with regional operators, expanded eco-educational tours and delivered measurable

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sustainability improvements. James also invests in his people by tailoring staff pathways and mentoring emerging talent.

Customer Service Excellence Award

Sponsored by Avis Australia

Simon Rooke, Passions of Paradise

Simon Rooke has been the backbone of Passions of Paradise's customer service for more than 20 years, bringing the same calm, positive attitude to every single day, no matter what challenges come his way. His reputation for going above and beyond includes personally guiding Paralympian gold medalist Tracey Lee Barrell on her Great Barrier Reef experience, escorting a blind customer on a full scuba dive and making it possible for a guest in a wheelchair to join the vessel, despite it not being designed for wheelchair access.

Sustainable Tourism Excellence

Sponsored by Cairns Airport

Tropic Wings Cairns Tours

Tropic Wings made history as the first to introduce electric buses to the Australian tourism sector in 2018 and continues its business leadership with the nation's only fully electric fleet for tours, saving about 600 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions – the equivalent of 2.5ha of reforestation. Their role as an industry leader is further evident in the design and delivery of a \$10.2 million clean energy infrastructure project which includes 11 EV charging stations, two Battery Energy Storage systems and off-grid capabilities that ensure operation resilience during extreme weather events.

Robbie Bastion Award for Inbound Marketing

Andrew Steel

Andrew Steel has been the owner of Hot Air Balloon for more than 30 years and before that was the Managing Partner of RnR Rafting. Andrew joined the Tropical North Queensland tourism industry in 1985 and is one of the Road Warriors who spent much of their time travelling the world to promote Tropical North Queensland, helping our destination to achieve global recognition. He participates in Tourism Australia, Tourism and Events Queensland and TTNQ roadshows, travelling extensively at his own expense with key industry players in the region, including the late Robbie Bastion.

Best of Queensland Experience Excellence Award

FNQ Nature Tours

With a perfect score of 100, FNQ Nature Tours has won this award for the third year in a row. FNQ Nature Tours is a small group experience with expert guides who help guests to understand the unique rainforest environment and the wildlife that call it home. James Boettcher and his team have been bringing the rainforest to life for visitors since 2016. Tourism and Events Queensland's Best of Queensland Experiences Program recognises tourism experiences that best bring the Queensland story to life and consistently deliver an exceptional customer experience. Using independent criteria incorporating online customer reviews it guides the State's tourism industry to deliver exceptional customer experiences and create positive word of mouth to attract more visitors, grow expenditure, and increase market share.

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Images:

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