



Time warp... the deterrent of distance protected Mission Beach from the development excesses of the 1980s and '90s.

Mission no longer impossible

Sleepy Mission Beach, a 90-minute drive south of Cairns, is attracting interest and shaping as Queensland's latest hot spot for coastal property, write **Robert Harley** and **Ben Wilmot**.

Sarah Mort is a town planner and developer who worked in Sydney for Multiplex Constructions, the Kuok Group and the Sydney City Council.

James Mort is a developer and builder whose projects in Melbourne included up-market residences and townhouses in Toorak and Brighton.

Independently they headed to North Queensland, discovered Mission Beach, found each other, married and now, as Mi Corp Property, are doing their first development.

"Mission Beach is shaping as Queensland's newest hot spot for coastal property," Ms Mort said.

"And unlike so many other areas on the coast, Mission Beach has the potential to attract quality and sensitive low-rise property developments and avoid the excesses of overdevelopment."

Mission Beach is a 90-minute drive south of Cairns.

In one way, that is a disadvantage.

"The tourist places that have done well are those within an hour of an international airport; Port Douglas cuts it, Mission Beach doesn't," said Rick Carr, a Cairns-based director of independent property advisers Herron Todd White.

But the deterrent of distance has protected Mission Beach from the development excesses of the 1980s and '90s.

Today, the strip remains a collection of hamlets – like Harold Holt's tropical retreat of Bingil Bay – that stretch for 14 kilometres along the beach, looking out across the Coral Sea to Dunk Island and nestled at the rear into World Heritage rainforest hills.

"People are saying 'this place is in a time warp, it is fantastic'," Mr Mort said.

Of course, values are fast catching up with the 21st century.



'We could have run the development from down south, but decided that we really should be in Mission Beach to do it right.'

— James Mort, pictured with wife Sarah

Last year, the average price along the beach was \$750,000 – quadruple the level of 1988-89, according to Herron Todd White. Back from the beach, the average was \$310,000, up 130 per cent.

"People come into Mission Beach and ask, 'What can I buy?' but they don't have anything to buy," Mr Mort said.

"Your purchase choices are basically limited to an old house on land or to vacant land, so a lot of potential buyers end up buying

in other places like Port Douglas, when what they would prefer is to buy a high-standard new property in Mission Beach."

Following a sewerage upgrade in 2004, and despite the interruption of this year's cyclone, that is starting to change.

The Mort's are about to start Mission@Mission; they have bought a 2 hectare beachfront caravan park for which they have approval for 100 low-rise tropical villas; and

Tropic Coast is talking to major developers and resort operators about involvement in the 220-ha project.

"We'd expect to punch along with it at the beginning of the new year," director Ross Plapp said.

Further north, at Ella Bay, John Holland and the North Queensland-based Witt Property Group are planning a \$1.5 billion complex including a golf course, international school, housing and several resorts.

Mr Mort said that in Mission Beach, council development controls, including a two-storey residential building height, would limit over-development.

"We feel the need to lift the bar in terms of quality and sensitivity to the natural environment," he said.

Mi Corp is also sensitive to the locals. "We could have run the development from down south, but decided that we really should be in Mission Beach to do it right and we have worked hard to forge links with long-established locals," Mr Mort said. "We were quite frank with some people, who were not anti-development, but fearful of change."

Mi Corp's first project, Mission@Mission, will start next year. It's just six apartments on a hill overlooking the Coral Sea but will aim upmarket with big outdoor terraces and individual swimming pools.

they have also acquired a 4.5-ha site and plan a "sustainable low-density residential subdivision in a mature tropical landscape".

Leighton Holdings subsidiary John Holland is planning 135 apartments and a four-star resort called Sartori; Woolworths has proposed a new shopping centre at Wongaling Beach; and the private Tropic Coast Properties has gained approval for a \$530 million golf and residential eco-resort course called Palmae.