

Not Quite a Dream Holiday : Vivienne Wilson

We woke to battering winds; slender palm trees bent double as sand and debris smashed against our cabin and mountainous waves crashed on the beach. By evening we were on high alert. Cyclone Emily was headed our way. There was no way off this island.

Easter 1972 and we'd flown with a group of friends from Sydney up to an exotic island in the Barrier Reef.

Crammed under tables the resort guests huddled together in the dining room. I was not sure this was the safest place. Maybe, we'd have been better in our bathroom, under a mattress? I longed for the safety of my Sydney flat. Would I ever see my parents in England again? Would they ever discover what had happened to me? I'd not told them of this trip.

Around midnight the roof lifted. Was this it? Growing up in England, I knew nothing of tropical cyclones. Suddenly all went quiet. Then the noise began again. Would we survive? I must have fallen asleep. I woke at dawn, and all was strangely calm. The sun was shining. We'd survived, but our troubles weren't over. Relieved that our three hired light planes were undamaged, our organiser insisted we return to Sydney straight away, ignoring warnings of bad weather further south. I was angry.

I wanted to stay on the island.

Our three fragile planes took off. I should have refused to board but had no money or any idea how to get back to my job in Sydney. The weather and cloud cover worsened as we flew south. Our pilot was not licensed to fly at night and our fuel was running low as we approached the small aerodrome in Moree. 'Look for a hole in the clouds,' a disembodied voice came over the intercom. Sitting squeezed in the back seat of the Piper Cherokee all I could see was a mass of dense cloud. It was beginning to get dark. Then we spotted the tiny hole with its glimpse of land beneath. We headed towards it. 'Watch the altimeter,' our pilot instructed. I held my breath as we dived down through the swirling endless mist. We emerged just meters above the ground. Had anyone remembered to watch that altimeter? But we'd made it through and made a bumpy landing on the tiny airstrip just as night fell.