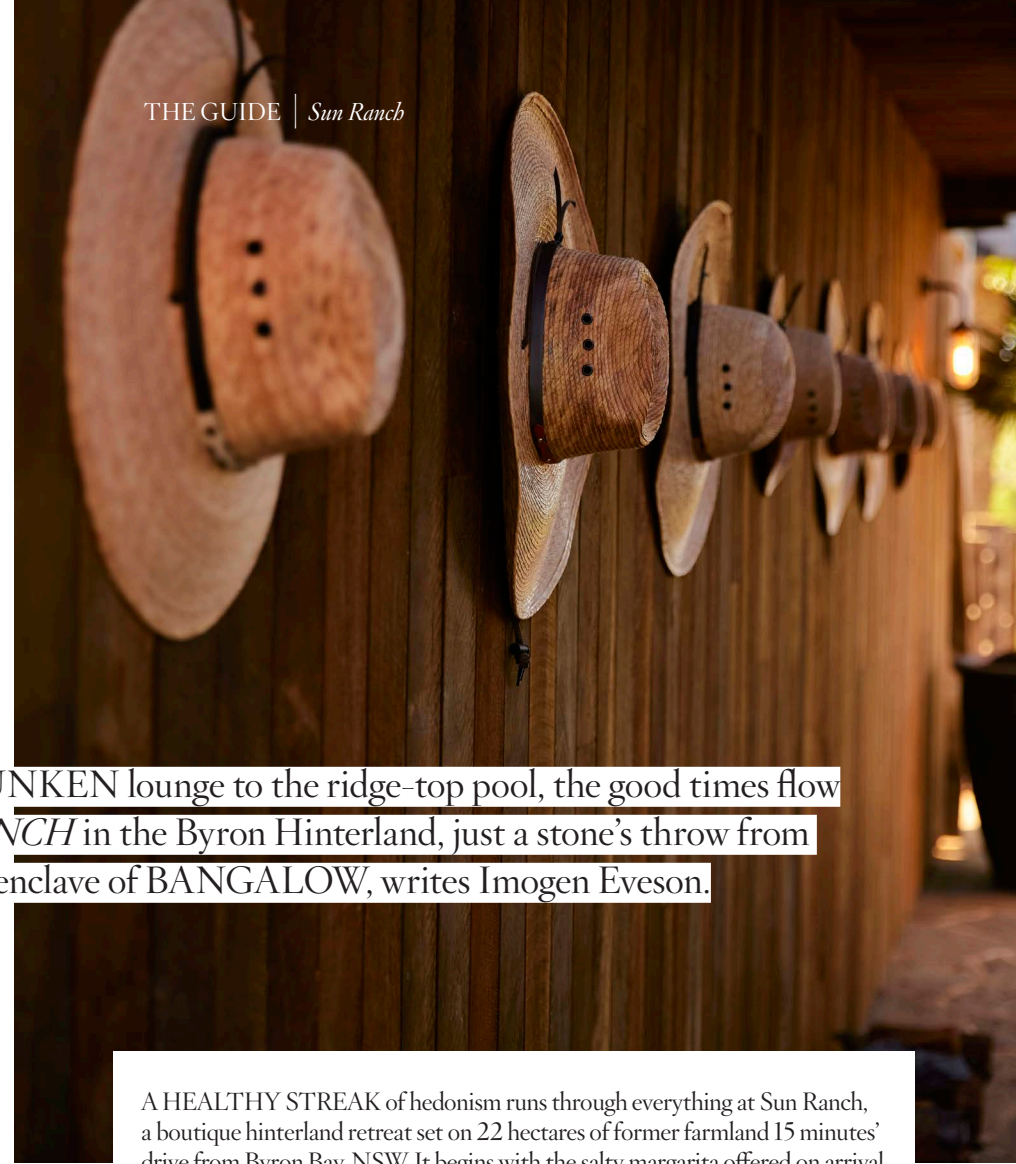




LIKE

MINDS



THE GUIDE | Sun Ranch

From the **SUNKEN** lounge to the ridge-top pool, the good times flow at **SUN RANCH** in the Byron Hinterland, just a stone's throw from the creative enclave of **BANGALOW**, writes Imogen Eveson.

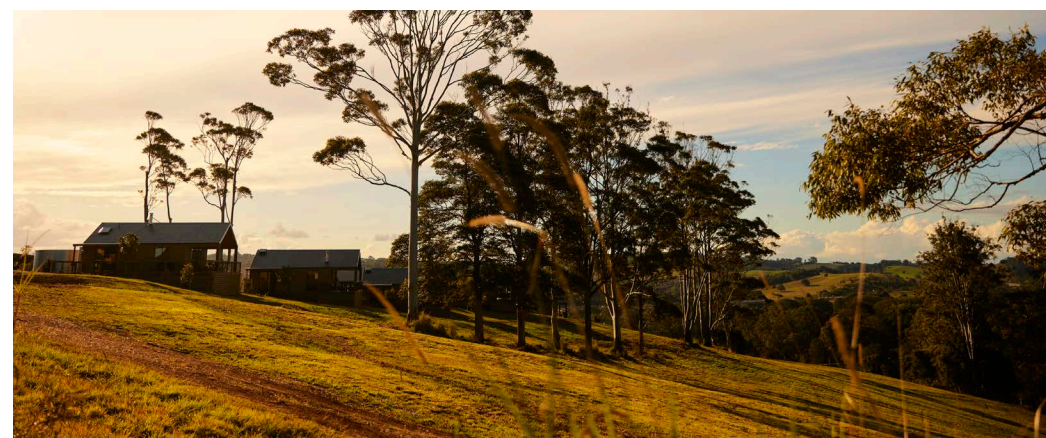
A **HEALTHY STREAK** of hedonism runs through everything at Sun Ranch, a boutique hinterland retreat set on 22 hectares of former farmland 15 minutes' drive from Byron Bay, NSW. It begins with the salty margarita offered on arrival and lingers into the evening with a strong nightcap in the velvety Whiskey Lounge. This is, after all – as the tagline goes – the Hotel of Good Times.

Opened in September 2023, Sun Ranch is cut from a different cloth to others in a region known for its breezy, rustic-luxe aesthetic. Here in the Rambler Longhouse, in my Pool Suite dubbed The Rattler alongside its Wam Bam, Gettin' Lucky and Saddle Up counterparts, there's nary a crisp white linen in sight. Instead, shades of olive, burnt orange, indigo and chocolate brown concoct a decadent visual feast. Owners Julia Ashwood (of The Vista, who first made her interior design mark with an eclectic reimagining of the nearby Eltham Hotel's guestrooms) and Jamie Blakey (former creative director and founder of cult denim brand One Teaspoon) wanted to create a place to stay that is offbeat, laid-back and ultra-chic. Drawing inspiration from 1970s Californian ranch houses, old spaghetti westerns and Mexican and Spanish design, they have melded it into something all their own. With a sprinkling of Byron's cosmic energy and a helping of tongue-in-cheek playfulness, it's both of its place and wholly original.

Up on the hill, six two-bedroom, off-grid barns are each named after songs from the '70s such as *Afternoon Delight*, *The Joker* and *Hello Darlin'*. A further private suite – billed as the ultimate cowboy den – completes the guest quarters.

This is a place for cool kids and creatives to hide out for a weekend. Indeed – with a mini bar of local snacks and drinks, smart TV, vintage sound system, access to the ranch's private pool and in-room dining – you could easily stay ensconced in your room. But step out your door into the adjoining Longhouse to find The Lair, with its sunken lounge area around a sculptural fireplace and one-of-a-kind pieces sourced from a buying trip to LA and Mexico, and the Whiskey Lounge, with its retro vinyl collection and intimate saloon vibes. →

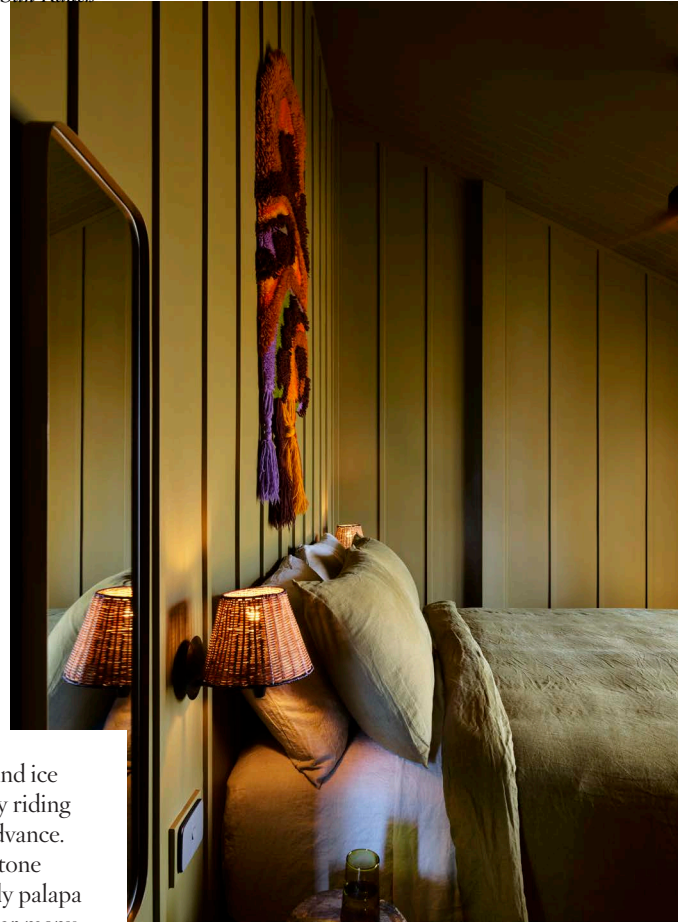
CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The Lair is a space for communal meals; The property's design was inspired by 1970s Californian ranches; The Pool Club features a basalt stone infinity pool with hinterland views; The property also comprises six off-grid hillside barns.



PHOTOGRAPHY: ANSON SMART



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *Ciao, Mate!* is an Italian diner in nearby Bangalow; The local restaurant is run by Julia Ashwood who also co-owns Sun Ranch; The interiors are a visual feast of warm colours; The former farmland has been partly rewilded by its new owners; The ranch design is cool yet playful.



Elsewhere there's a badminton court, a woodfired floating sauna and ice bath, and a hilltop healing circle for prime sunset viewing. Byron Bay riding club Zephyr Horses offers rides here on the property too; book in advance.

Perched on the top of a ridge is the Pool Club, featuring a basalt stone infinity pool with hinterland views, bleacher-style day beds and shady palapa umbrellas. Order for poolside delivery from the ranch kitchen and bar menu; take your pick from dishes such as guacamole and tortillas, pan-fried haloumi with hinterland honey, or a local wild-caught prawn roll on brioche. And of course, more margaritas or perhaps an ice-cold *cerveza*.

One morning I take a yoga session with instructor Hannah; Toby the dog has wandered over from the neighbouring property and joins in. It's almost breakfast time and he knows it. The doors of the Longhouse are flung open and our farmers' market-fresh breakfast is served in a sunny spot on the verandah.

Sun Ranch's food offering might include a home-style dinner served in The Lair or a Fire Feast, which the ranch hosts throughout the year in its al fresco Field House. Cooked in the bespoke brick Argentinian barbecue and fire pit, the seasonal feast could feature Ballina prawns over coals with curry leaf butter, saltbush lamb ribs or venison shoulder flatbreads with *zoug*, pickled peppers and radish. My partner and I take the opportunity on one night of our stay to drive out to Bangalow, five minutes away, for dinner at Ciao, Mate! Also run by Julia, husband Matt Rabbidge and their business partners at the Mosey On Inn Group, it serves the best pizzas for miles in a fittingly creative space.

For all of the impeccably executed aesthetics of Sun Ranch, the star of the show here is nature. Horses graze, ducks waddle, glossy black cockatoos lark in the gum trees. A huge Moreton Bay fig presides over the sloping site overlooking green folds of hinterland. The lemon orchard is bearing fruit and the regenerative planting undertaken when its eco-conscious owners took on the property is forming a forest.

It's a place to commune with nature and with people in a space, born out of its owners' lifelong friendship, designed to be shared with loved ones and like-minded people (a hub of the local creative community, the ranch also hosts workshops and music gatherings). My thoughts drift to the idea of a Full Ranch Buyout – which gives exclusive access to the property for you to enjoy with up to 33 of your closest friends, and perhaps the neighbour's dog too.

sunranch.com.au 

Further afield

Sun Ranch is located five minutes' drive from Bangalow, a hinterland town blessed with heritage streetscapes and creative energy that has seen an influx of new hospitality offerings of late. "Bangalow is a charming village," says ranch co-founder Julia Ashwood. "Lovely old buildings nudged together, surrounded by parks and waterways. More recently, the restaurant scene has really popped with the addition of Ciao, Mate! (Italian woodfired pizzas, home-style pastas and a particularly moreish tiramisu!) and You Beauty, which serves small and large plates and excellent wines headed up by chef Matt Stone."

By day, says Julia, Woods cafe and Japanese diner Mangosteen are excellent spots for lunch. "Bangalow is a special little country town with a great community oh-so-close to the coast," she continues. "It's perhaps more family-centric these days, [attracting] young families who are seeking more space and more creative career choices. Beyond Bangalow, further into the hills, Federal and Mullumbimby are alive with incredible makers and creatives who have grown up here or moved from the big cities to experience the tranquillity that the hinterland regions offer. Newrybar is also a great nearby hub with sweet stores and a great bakery and restaurant."

