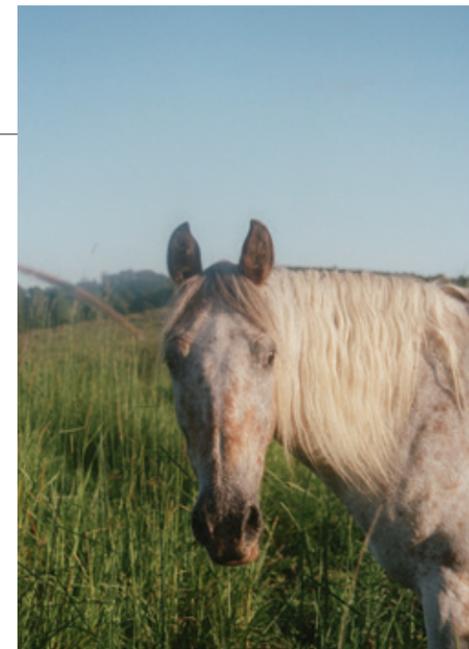




ON RANCH TIME

words Amy Campbell

Once, staying in *Byron Bay* meant *booking a hostel* in the centre of town. But today, the area's *coolest stays* are scattered throughout the hinterland – including new destination, *Sun Ranch*



THE BYRON BAY AREA ISN'T exactly lacking in cool places to stay. Boutique hotels with Aesop products in the bathroom and communal spaces strewn with ceramics line the coast from Lennox Head to Pottsville. Such stylish stays are a far cry from the hippy hostels and camper van-packed car parks the region was once known for, before fashion designers, Hollywood actors, artists and influencers descended upon its rolling hills and serene point breaks, bringing with them a shift in demographics that was documented - if not exaggerated - by a controversial 2022 reality show with a title that replaced 'Bay' with 'Baes'. Locals say this influx of new residents, however cool and famous they may be, has spread the magic of Byron deep into the surrounding hinterland. But this isn't necessarily a bad thing. A number of the area's best-kept secrets are tucked in behind its rolling hills, up roads dimpled with potholes, where 5G turns to 3G and koalas summit gums, largely unbothered. And it is here, in one of these particularly arcadian valleys, that Byron's most talked-about new stay sits. It isn't a recently renovated motel or a private villa, but a sprawling farm with a lemon orchard and horses grazing in the paddocks. It's name? Sun Ranch.

THE ROAD LEADING INTO Sun Ranch is long and meandering. There's no signpost at the turn-off, but we follow our noses across a creek and up a gravel driveway, which leads us through a giant wooden gate with the words "Sun Ranch" painted in a spaghetti Western-style font. I spot the floating sauna to our left; it's perched over a dam,

Film photography throughout by Jamie Green. Additional photography throughout courtesy of Sun Ranch.

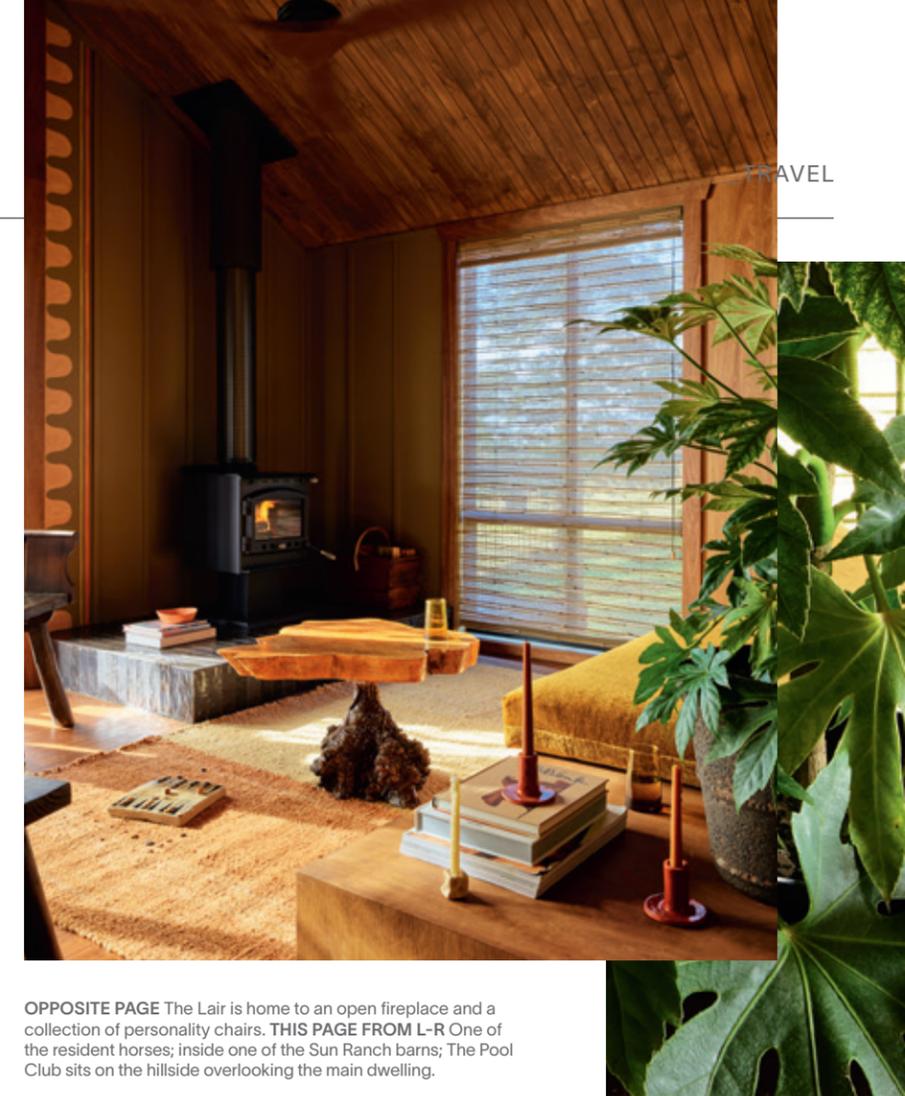
"We call ourselves 'ranch barbies,'" says our host with a wink

with a jetty for performing dramatic dives and cannonballs.

We park and walk into the main house, where a guy with an alarmingly good suntan hands us a welcome margarita. Our host leads us through the Whiskey Lounge - a colourful, library-style room with a record player - and into The Lair, which is an open-air space with sculptural white walls. Across the way, people are chatting cheerfully in the kitchen as they slice fresh produce for that evening's communal dinner. We're introduced to each of them by name.

"We call ourselves 'ranch barbies,'" says our host with a wink as she hands us the keys to our "barn". "Oh, and if you see a guy walking around your porch in the morning, don't freak out," she adds. "He's just delivering muffins. We bake them fresh every day."

Our barn is nothing like a traditional barn. It's one of six two-bedroom, off-grid houses that sit on the crest of a hill, taking in the sunset and, to the east, The Pool Club and



OPPOSITE PAGE The Lair is home to an open fireplace and a collection of personality chairs. THIS PAGE FROM L-R One of the resident horses; inside one of the Sun Ranch barns; The Pool Club sits on the hillside overlooking the main dwelling.





main dwelling, which houses the Whiskey Lounge and The Lair, with four one-bedroom 'Rambler Rooms' attached on the eastern side.

If our barn looks modest from the outside, inside it's anything but. Walls clad with rich timber and recycled bricks give the space an air of Californian cool, while the most amazing light fittings I've ever seen cascade from the roof; dripping with wooden beads, they're the work of Australian artist Lana Launay. There's a book about the magical properties of mycelium on the coffee table and a bottle of natural wine in the fridge. The linen sheets feel so good, I make a note to ask the ranch barbies where they're from. *Is this real life?* I found myself wondering. It isn't, of course. But at Sun Ranch, escapism is what you sign up for.

As with many of history's bold and original ideas, there was "some wine involved" in the genesis of Sun Ranch, say co-creative directors Julia Ashwood and Jamie Blakey. While Blakey, the founder of Australian fashion label One Teaspoon, and Ashwood, a travel blogger turned hotelier, are the brains behind the project, 11 of their closest friends

from the worlds of hospitality, fashion, design, surfing and photography form the wider Sun Ranch team.

Before the wine became involved, there was a touch of kismet at play. Blakey and Ashwood like to think that the farmland found *them*. They hadn't been actively looking for a location, but after visiting the farm - which lies 15 minutes from Byron Bay and five minutes from the village of Bangalow - the vision began to shape itself.

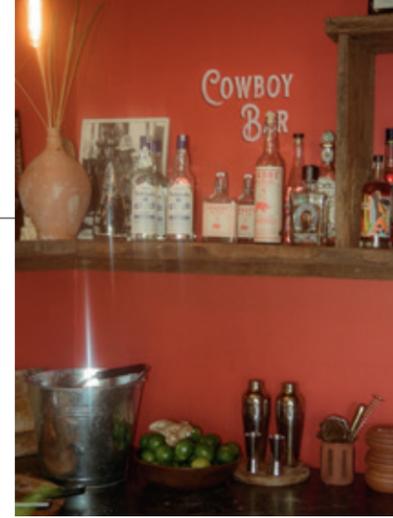
"It was a no-brainer," says Ashwood. "We sent out a text message to our mates along the lines of, *How 'bout it?* Luckily, everyone loved what they saw."

It wasn't Ashwood's first rodeo. A few years earlier she'd restored the nearby Eltham Hotel, which is now one of the area's coolest hangouts. But Sun Ranch presented the group with a different challenge. Convinced the world didn't need another cookie-cutter experience or predictable resort offering, they wanted to build something that surprised and delighted, a holiday destination that felt like somewhere *they* wanted to holiday. With a

contact book full of the world's most renowned art dealers and furniture merchants, as well as the region's best chippies, signwriters and landscape architects on speed dial, Ashwood and Blakey set about bringing their vision to life.

The property would take its cues from Californian ranches of the '70s, a design inspired by the farm's original homestead, which was long and single-level, typical of a 'longhouse' you'd find on a ranching property at that time. From there, they built the four Rambler Rooms, each of which opens onto a long swimming pool. The Lair, Whiskey Lounge and Cowboy Bar, where our welcome margaritas were prepared, and Field House, where farm-to-table dinners are held, comprise the ranch's communal spaces, while a full market breakfast is served to all guests in the kitchen each morning.

Yoga classes at no extra cost are available to all guests, while Sun Ranch also hosts a rotating offering of retreats and events, from breathwork workshops to outdoor-cinema screenings and themed dinners, which guests



can opt into and non-ranchers can also attend. The wood-fired sauna is accompanied by an ice bath, you can ride e-bikes around the property and, should you prefer to bathe in nature, then plunge into the 'Swingers Club', which isn't what it sounds like but rather a crystal-clear creek with a rope swing. Horse rides around the property are run by Byron's Zephyr Horses; aspiring cowboys can opt for a group or private ride, which ends in a sunset picnic.

IT'S ALL QUITE PARADISICAL, and I can see why Sun Ranch, with its 'leave your baggage at the door' philosophy and eclectic, Western-with-a-touch-of rock-n-roll aesthetic (its interiors photograph disarmingly well), has chimed so melodically with a generation of new-age travellers looking for a fashionable stay away from it all (the property, which is powered by rainwater, is also working to restore the habitats of koalas, platypuses and glossy/black-cockatoos native to the area).

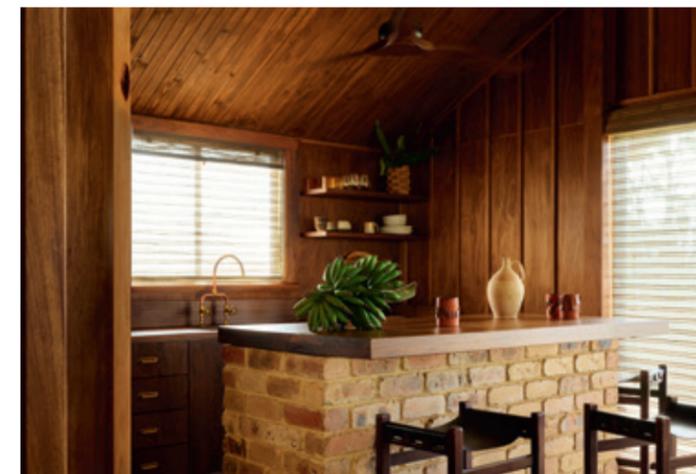
But with Byron Bay the holiday destination it is - the place with more hip hotels per square kilometre than any other Australian town or city - the question is: why are people so intrigued by what Sun Ranch has to offer, so desperate to book a stay?

Well, there's something to be said for the authenticity of creative endeavours that are designed with the creator as the client. Especially when said creators have impeccable taste and an appetite for good times. By designing somewhere they wanted

to hang out, Ashwood, Blakey and their mates - all arbiters of cool in their respective fields - have created a place that everyone else wants to experience.

And in the increasingly saturated world of travel, it's cutting through. ▣

You can plunge into the 'Swingers Club', which isn't what it sounds like but rather a crystal-clear creek with a rope swing



OPPOSITE PAGE A towering fig tree on the hill side. THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE Mezcal in the Cowboy Bar; a king-size bed in one of the barns; in-room reading material; exposed brick and panelled-timber walls in a barn kitchen.