

WHERE TO STAY

INSIDER REPORTS ON THE BEST SPOTS TO BED DOWN. EDITED BY LYDIA BELL



LUSH UP NORTH

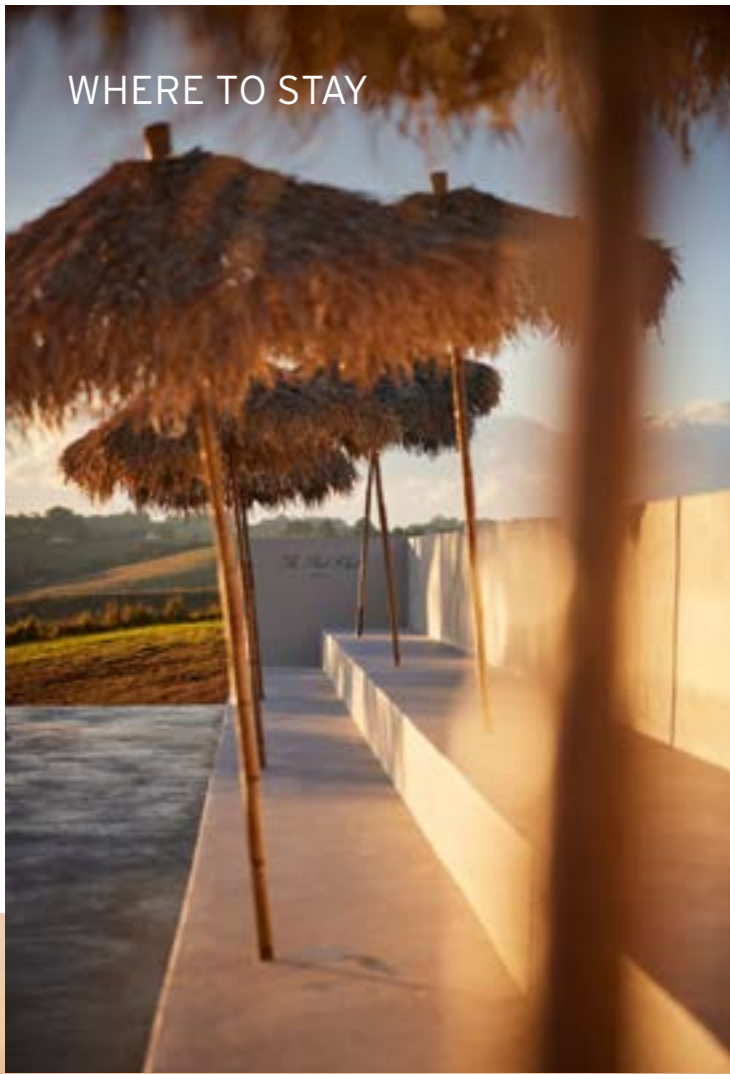
AS NEW SOUTH WALES'S ORIGINAL FLOWER POWER TOWN BLOSSOMS INTO MATURITY, THE "BYRON BAY EFFECT" IS TRICKLING TO OTHER PARTS OF THE COAST

BY CHLOE SACHDEV

Pool area at Sun Ranch, Byron Bay

PHOTOGRAPH: ANSON SMART

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IT'S EARLY ON WATEGOS BEACH, BYRON BAY. A steady stream of surfers are making their way to the arc of biscuity sand for their first paddle of the day. Rising from the blue ripples is an amphitheatre of green valleys. A short amble from here is the lighthouse marking Australia's easternmost tip, with views across the coast stretching to the banana and macadamia plantations and beyond. Byron Bay is the jewel of the North Coast of New South Wales – and since the Age of Aquarius it has attracted hippies, healers and surfers caught between the beauty of the headland and hinterland.

It was 30 years ago that the tourism tide in Byron Bay started to turn in a more glamorous direction. Local Ruth Harris sold her grand and eccentric Spanish mission-style villa by the sea to Vincent Rae, who turned it into waterfront hotel Raes on Wategos. With unconfirmed whispers that Salvador Dalí designed either the garden or pool, it has always emanated a frisson of mystique. Then, in 2014, Australian tycoon Antony Catalano and his family took over, turning this bright white building with its sloped curves into a striking seven-suite hotel with colourful textiles, handmade tiles and reams of marble. Rae defined a certain kind of coastal chic on a landmark chunk of lawn overlooking pristine Wategos Beach. Today free-range linen-clad families picnic and play on the manicured grass out front.

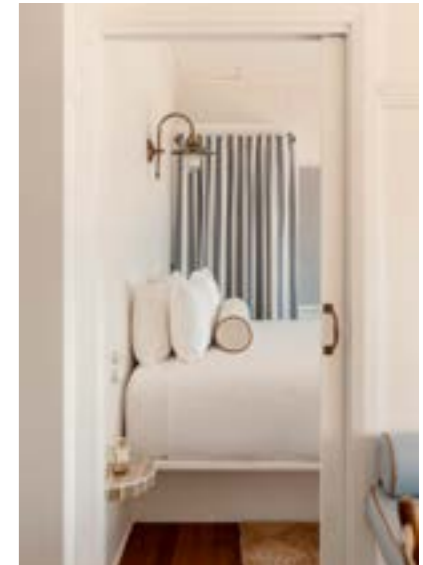
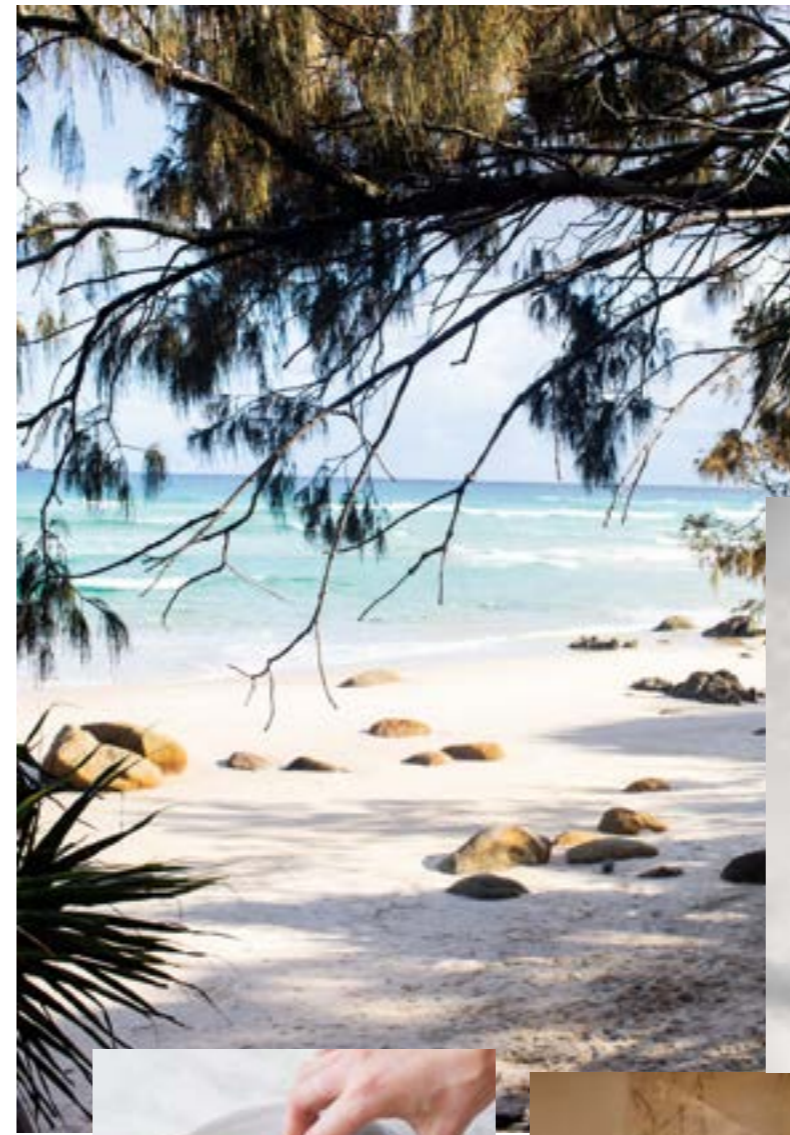
Where cosmic travellers, then backpackers, used to toil Byron's fields for free board just to be part of life in this hippy-go-lucky region, as in most free-loving counter-culture spots (such as Ibiza and Marrakech), the dreamers ultimately led to the developers. These days the groovy surf town is a haute-hippy utopia for touring Hollywood stars and bare-foot billionaires. On the spindly road from the main drag of Byron Bay town centre down to the privileged pocket of Wategos Beach, for every

A FEW CREATIVE TYPES, LURED BY CHEAPER PASTURES, HAVE DECAMPED FROM THE CITIES AND TURNED HEADS

stuffed creaking combi van, there are now three G-Wagons neatly brandishing anti-fracking bumper stickers. Either way, all vehicles still pause at the hairpin bend to glance at the reliable right-hand swells down at The Pass, a slice of frothy beach between Clarkes and Wategos that always has a line-up of keen bobbing surfers.

Every few years or so whispers of “the new Byron” start to spread, perhaps instigated by fresh openings on a hitherto untapped coastline where a few creative types, lured by cheaper pastures, have decamped from the cities and turned heads. Noosa, over the border in Queensland, and even far-flung Tasmania have been in the running. But nothing has ever been quite like Byron Bay. Lately what's happened instead is that the stardust has scattered a little to some of the more under-the-radar sun-soaked North Coast spots between Sydney and Byron, where the seas are as blue and the hinterland looms with subtropical rainforests, lost valleys, rugged mountains, rivers and waterfalls. Travellers once powered up the trucker-heavy Pacific Highway in a rush to embrace Byron's crashing waves and free-loving spirit, but now the 10-hour road trip has some stays of note.

Sea Sea Hotel is a surf lodge in the quiet seaside town of Crescent Head owned by George Gorrow, the founder of fashion label Ksubi, and his wife, Cisco Tschurtschenthaler. Their first hotel, The Slow in Bali, transformed the relaxed surfy village of Canggu into a microcosm of creative cool. For this latest project, near Port Macquarie, Gorrow is hoping to channel the same vibrations with a hotel and creative commune where like-minded travellers can drop in and tune out. ➤



PHOTOGRAPHS: ELISE HASSEY; MADELINE JOHNSON; MORGAN MAASSEN; ANNA PHAN; KARA ROSENLUND; CHRIS SEARL

Clockwise from top left: a Byron Bay beach; balcony at Il Delfino; surfer; Il Delfino room; Basq House; surfboards there; crab raviolo at Raes on Wategos. Opposite, from top: Sun Ranch's pool area; surfing at Byron Bay's The Pass

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Further along the coast there's Il Delfino, a supremely stylish inn in Yamba, a sleepy fishing town. Carved into the cliff, it is seemingly snatched from the Mediterranean.

Byron is also upping its game. In the past year, the town has welcomed openings that rival those in Melbourne or Sydney, in Hotel Marvell and Basq House, both a skip from Main Beach, which is still a humdinger of a spot to watch the sunset. On the same strip, The Atlantic, a charming weatherboard hotel, has been refreshed with spacious new rooms and a magnesium pool surrounded by lush gardens filled with scampering lizards. Then there's the shopping precinct Jonson Lane, a concrete slab once unthinkable in this anti-capitalist town. It houses a snapshot of new-generation makers and designers – including the leisure-sports label Nagnata and Deiji Studios, which blends floaty linen loungewear and sleepwear – and a handful of grown-up restaurants slinging seasonal small plates and natural wine, such as Bar Heather and Pixie. In an equally modern industrial park on the other side of town, local creatives mingle with beloved Aussie brands. St Agni and Zulu & Zephyr have their flagship stores here, and Comma, the newish design-forward modern bathhouse and spa, is a haven of saunas and magnesium hot tubs, cold plunges and treatment rooms.

Away from the coast, the hills hide the rambling homes of the one per cent. Connecting inland towns such as Newrybar and Bangalow are charming villages that appear stopped in time, but are lined with stylish boutiques, selling everything from local ceramics to handmade knife sets, and pharmacies stocked with French night cream from the Marais. Cafés and low-waste restaurants with young-gun local chefs peddle plant-based menus and herbal ashwagandha drinks. At Sun Ranch – the sprawling 55-acre good-time ranch that opened in the hinterland last year – fired up by sound healing and crystal-charged energy work, visitors feel it in their bones: Byron is still very much “the new Byron”.

BYRON AND BEYOND

NORTH COAST OPENINGS OF NOTE

IL DELFINO, YAMBA

Set in the sleepy fishing village of Yamba between Coffs Harbour and Byron, this former seaside cottage carved into the cliffside has been transformed into a clutch of stylish suites and a bungalow, each named after a shimmering Italian seaside destination: Ravello, Ischia, Portofino, Cinque Terre and Scopello. The hotel's owner, Sheree Commerford, is a local who has made a name for herself over the years as a globetrotting designer, stylist and blogger. She has instilled the seaside inn with personal touches, including finds from her travels, such as vintage Italian lamps, ceramics and trinkets from local makers, and hand-painted murals by her friend and cofounder of Australian mega label Sass & Bide, Heidi Middleton. The five light-filled residences have crisp white linen, striking red-and-white day beds, kitchenettes and balconies that peer over the Pacific Ocean. There is no need to leave because it's already the most spellbinding spot in town. *Doubles from about £470; ildelfino.com.au*

SUN RANCH, BYRON BAY

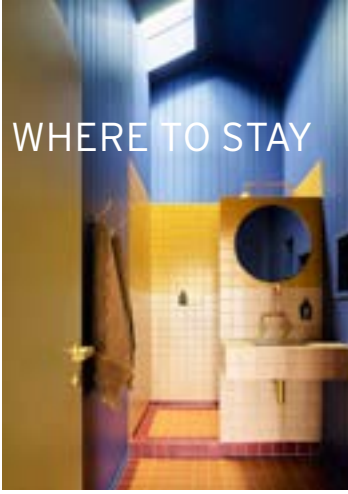
This sprawling hotel on 55 acres in the Byron Bay hinterland is a take on the California and New Mexico ranches of yesteryear. With rooms, suites and family-friendly two-bedroom barns, the whole place is a riot of maximalist tones, textiles and patterns, with opulent velvet sofas, twirling terracotta flooring, beaded chandeliers and ➤



Clockwise from this picture: room at Swell Hotel; Il Delfino's exterior; palms there; caravan kitchen at Swell. Opposite, from top: Tallow Beach, Byron Bay; Il Delfino suite balcony



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Clockwise from top left: bathroom at Sun Ranch; pool there; Hotel Marvell terrace; exterior of Copperstone; kitchen there

colour-clashing walls. It's owned by two best friends: Jamie Blakey was behind the popular Australian rock 'n' roll denim brand One Teaspoon, and Julia Ashwood is a content creator and cofounder of some of the region's buzziest pubs and restaurants (The Eltham, You Beauty and Ciao, Mate!). Together the pair have infused the ranch with all the ingredients for a rollicking good time: sauna, ice bath, electric bikes, horses and, up on the hill, a 25-metre magnesium pool. Since opening, Sun Ranch has had long-table dinners, funky fondue nights, live acoustic gigs and record-listening parties where non-hotel guests mingle with out-of-towners. *Doubles from about £650; sunranch.com.au*

COPPERSTONE, BANGALOW

This property is one of the latest private havens to have popped up in the country folds of Bangalow. Down a kilometre-long driveway and lined with bush, the house appears as a mauve speck in the landscape. On 48 acres of land, with its own dressage ring and stables, this is the creation of Tom and Emma Lane, a husband-and-wife duo who made waves with their now-sold low-slung terracotta home on a macadamia farm in the hills close by. "Byron is the transient and famous coastal town, but Bangalow, only 15 minutes inland, still feels like a secret with a more well-heeled country vibe," says Emma. Their new five-bedroom holiday rental on an old fruit farm is part Argentinian homestead, part Australian farmhouse, with lashings of Italian pink-hued travertine, candelabras and chandeliers thrown in for good measure. The result is a moody and romantic take on a country ranch. *From about £2,800 for exclusive use with a five-night minimum stay; therangeestates.com.au*

RAES ON WATEGOS, BYRON BAY

The news that has the town talking is the great Raes expansion. The iconic seven-suite hotel on Wategos Beach has brokered a deal to take over the tired but palatial Victoria's hotel. A minute around the corner from Raes' original site, with two grand buildings surrounded by palms and twisted pandanus trees, the property stretches the hotel's footprint to 18 suites and three pools. Interiors mastermind Tamsin Johnson is behind the boho-coastal luxe refurb, which has lots of quirky cane, sandstone floors, sculptural lights and huge inside-outside suites with timber headboards hand-carved by a Byron maker. Playful wall accents, mid-century vintage furniture, handblown glass mirrors and colourful ceilings complete the extension. The original building still houses the main restaurant, spa and Cellar Bar, which means that, come high summer, as guests flit between the properties, this already zhuzh-y enclave is set to sizzle. *Doubles from about £425; raes.com.au*

HOTEL MARVELL, BYRON BAY

In the thick of Byron Bay, this tangerine-tinged hotel draws a crowd for its open-air rooftop bar, which feels like it's atop a skyscraper in the low-rise town, serving fruity cocktails and crowd-pleasing snacks, such as prawn rolls and ceviche, to tourists and drop-in locals. The rooftop pool – the only one at a hotel in Byron – is a raised rectangular slab as close to the sun as is possible. Downstairs the newly opened Byron Bay Oyster Bar & Seafood Restaurant is the spot for Australian and New Zealand produce plucked straight from the sea. The concrete and timber-clad rooms, going up to two-bedroom suites, are pared back, minimal spaces. *Doubles from about £255; hotelmarvell.com.au* ➤

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SWELL HOTEL, BYRON BAY

Set in town, and only 2,300 feet from Main Beach, this former motel has been transformed into an easy-going 16-room boutique hotel. It has a nostalgic '70s vibe – all crushed velvets and timber – in earthy colours that cleverly diffuse the bright sun into syrupy light. There are surfboards for hire, an ice bath, a cedar sauna and a pink marble-tiled magnesium pool and bar lined with bamboo-fringed umbrellas. A little converted caravan in the garden serves simple breakfasts, including sourdough crumpets and chia puddings, followed by no-fuss antipasto boards and boozy tropical-twist cocktails. The hotel's Instagram advertises the happy hours and live acoustic gigs that are held in the garden every once in a while. *Doubles from about £207; swellhotel.com*

BASQ HOUSE, BYRON BAY

Smack bang in the middle of Byron Bay, this place may not be reinventing the wheel – it follows the blueprint of the type of premium hotel found in Melbourne or Sydney – but that's the point. Basq House is owned by two friends from Melbourne who wanted to create a smart and comfortable stay for well-travelled millennials who still hear the siren call of the holiday town. Bedrooms are spacious and modern, and some have balconies. Communal areas, including the living room and library, tick all the boxes: chunky oversized furniture, sculptural lighting, loungey sofas. And the pool in the middle of the hotel, with its scattering of day beds, cabanas and pink parasols, is occupied by slumbering guests in deep recovery from the night before. There isn't a restaurant, but the central location more than makes up for it. *Doubles from about £200; basqhouse.com.au*

SEA SEA HOTEL, CRESCENT HEAD

In the wave-lashed town of Crescent Head – the midpoint between Sydney and Byron – the new surf lodge by George Gorrow, founder of fashion label Ksubi, and his wife, model Cisco Tschurtschenthaler, might tempt visitors to stay for a while. This is the couple's second property. Their first, The Slow in Canggu, Bali, is a tropical brutalist hangout frequented by the psychedelic surf crowd on the circuit between Costa Rica, LA and, well, Byron. Gorrow describes Sea Sea and its 25 rooms as "more of a clubhouse than hotel", infused with a 1970s surf-shack vibe, with warm wood interiors, sepia-toned concrete floors, low-lying beds, mismatched furniture and one-off pieces from surfers such as photographer Peter Crawford and artist Ozzy Wrong. Tunes courtesy of surf rock radio station Reverberation blare through custom speakers, and drinks are by Sydney-based natural and sustainable wine seller P&V Wine + Liquor Merchants. There's also a space for gigs and exhibitions. *Doubles from about £238; seaseahotel.com*

Clockwise from bottom right: room at Sea Sea Hotel; beach and garden there; pool deck at Basq House; communal area there

