

# ADVENTURE & TRAVEL



LAUREN BAMFORD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

## From Hippie to Haute

In Byron Bay, a free-spirited beach town on Australia's east coast, visitors are lapping up the new high-end offerings

BY GEORGE EPAMINONDAS

**A**N AVIAN SYMPHONY jolted me awake on my first morning in Australia's Byron Bay. The initial squalls emanated from several aptly named noisy miners. The startling screeches of rainbow lorikeets and black cockatoos followed, like an alarm with the snooze button mad-deningly out of reach. The final allegro came from a flock of cackling kookaburras outside my villa. I was slipping on a bathing suit by then, so they may well have been sniggering at my ghostly form.

Located a little more than an hour's flying time from Sydney, Byron Bay is a seductive confluence of surf culture, artisanal food, untrammeled natural beauty and abundant wildlife. In a nation of scenic coastal towns, Byron Bay, nestled in the fertile surrounds of northern New South Wales, cultivates an alternative allure. It's evident in the resistance to hotel chains, fast-food purveyors and high-rise buildings. In this haven of hippiedom, nut milk, organic cotton and healing crystals reign supreme.

More recently, the town added a filip of luxury to its mystical mix. Elements of Byron, a beachfront resort that opened last year, cost \$75 million and features 103 smart villas set among a lush 55 acres. "Your hotel looks a lot nicer than mine," observed a woman who thoughtfully shared her cab with me from nearby Ballina Byron airport on the previous afternoon. My first morning, tempting as the pool was—especially a trio of cantilevered daybeds suspended over shallow water—I clambered over a sandy ridge to explore over a mile of uninhabited beach frontage. After a swim in the bracing, bottle-green ocean, I ambled back to my villa, breezily decorated with modern furnishings and a free-standing tub. Later this year, the hotel plans to unveil another 100 rooms,



an eco-education center crafted from repurposed buildings and a self-propelled diesel train depositing guests in the town center.

In any case, picking up a rental car is advisable, since you'll want to scoot to neighboring hamlets. After a 10-minute drive from the resort, I reached the town center—with stores offering tie-dye bikinis, soy candles, evil eye amulets and indigenous art—and stopped to admire a wiry busker strumming his electric guitar atop a boulder. With his long dreads and circular sunglasses, he could have time-traveled from 1960s Haight-Ashbury. Tanned revelers filled the many cafes, but I had arranged to meet a friend at Three Blue Ducks, a short drive away. Set on a farm, the al fresco eatery serves fare such as breakfast bowls with grilled haloumi, poached eggs and baba ghanoush.

Long a sanctuary for surfers, spiritualists, artists and adventurers, Byron Bay now draws gastronomes too. Like Three Blue Ducks, many of the leading eateries are situated outside of town. On another afternoon, I joined the patrons at Harvest, in adjacent Newrybar, on its shaded veranda to tuck into dishes made from local produce and foraged ingredients. Byron Creek farm chicken was prepared with buttermilk and strawberry gum, a native spice, while dessert consisted of a roasted peach and sorbet infused with Stinking Roger, an aromatic herb with an unfortunate name. Across the road from the restaurant sits Newrybar Merchants, a fastidiously curated design store, with a focus on the output of home-grown artisans.

Paper Daisy in Cabarita Beach, a 30-minute drive north, proved an-



**LONELY SHORE NO MORE** Clockwise from top: Byron Bay's Main Beach; the pool at Elements resort; Paper Daisy restaurant at Halcyon House; Newrybar Merchants design shop.

nual MardiGrass festival each May, a protest march with dancing "ganja faeries."

On previous visits to Byron Bay, I kayaked out to sea on a guided tour, glimpsing dolphin pods and migrating whales, and snorkeled at Julian Rocks, a volcanic island rich in marine life including rays, turtles and wobbegongs. I devoted this stay to terra firma. One afternoon, I hiked up to Cape Byron Lighthouse—a picturesque tower constructed in 1901—hewing to an easy 45-minute trail from Main Beach. At the summit, I soaked up views of the coast, then made my way to the Arts & Industry Estate, a warehouse precinct just back from the town center, with workshops housing leather craftsmen, jewelry makers and organic cafes.

For all the artists and dream-catcher purveyors who still reside in the greater Byron region, gentrification has taken a toll: Propelled by deep-pocketed Sydney-siders and Melburnians nabbing vacation aeries, this free-spirited town is becoming a wealthy enclave. Its once-legendary tranquility is under threat, at least in the height of summer (November through January), with the incursion of "schoolies," marauding high-school graduates.

On the upside, Byron Bay, with its subtropical climate and exceptional food, has firmly transitioned from being a summer beach town to a year-round destination. Show up in autumn or spring, as I did, and you'll find it a romantic bolt-hole—not all that surprising for a place named for British admiral John Byron, grandfather of the poet Lord Byron. At Elements on my final night, I watched a few couples imbibe sundowners by the poolside firepits, the empty beach just beyond. I recalled Lord Byron's line about "pleasure in the pathless woods...rapture in the lonely shore"—and ordered another passion-fruit mojito.

### THE LOWDOWN // DROPPING IN ON AUSTRALIA'S BYRON BAY

**GETTING THERE** From Sydney, it's an 80-minute flight to Ballina Byron Gateway Airport on domestic carriers, including Jetstar and Virgin Australia.

**STAYING THERE** Elements, a beachfront resort in a verdant setting, includes a stylish restaurant, Graze, and luxurious spa with treatments such as a lemon myrtle body scrub (from \$340 a night, [elementsofbyron.com.au](http://elementsofbyron.com.au)). Halcyon House, located north of Byron Bay in Cabarita Beach, is a former surfer motel that's been granted a new lease on life. It has 21 individually decorated rooms and Paper Daisy restaurant helmed by talented chef Ben Devlin (from \$378 a night, [halcyonhouse.com.au](http://halcyonhouse.com.au)).

**EATING THERE** Three Blue Ducks comprises a restaurant, produce store, children's playground and working farm with hearty seasonal dishes (11 Ewingsdale Rd, Ewing-



sdale, [threeblueducks.com](http://threeblueducks.com)). Set on Clarkes Beach, Beach Byron Bay serves immaculate seafood (Lawson St, Byron Bay, [beachbyronbay.com.au](http://beachbyronbay.com.au)). Diners flock to Harvest for its picturesque setting, artisanal bakery and excellent native fare. (18-22 Old Pacific Hwy, Newrybar, [harvestnewrybar.com.au](http://harvestnewrybar.com.au)). Fleet, the region's most avant-garde restaurant, offers ever-changing tasting menus, sustainable wines and a convivial atmosphere (2/16 The Terrace, Brunswick Heads, [fleet-restaurant.com.au](http://fleet-restaurant.com.au)).

**TOURING THERE** The waters of Byron Bay abound in marine life, including bottlenose dolphins and humpback whales, best appreciated on a guided kayak tour ([capebyronkayaks.com](http://capebyronkayaks.com)). Located 45-minutes north of Byron Bay, Tweed Regional Gallery devotes a wing to still-life painter Margaret Olley (2 Mistral Rd, South Murwillumbah, [artgallery.tweed.nsw.gov.au](http://artgallery.tweed.nsw.gov.au)).