

Lee Tulloch
travels back to her
childhood holiday
spot and discovers
a true-blue retreat
where she can relive
her halcyon days.

ENDLESS

SUMMER



PHOTOGRAPHY BY **TONY AMOS**

Halcyon House has
a Palm Springs-meets-
Greek islands vibe





Wax on: surfers
check the conditions
at Cabarita Beach



Retro chic: the former '60s-era motel has been reborn as a boutique resort; the Halcyon Suite (above and right); native grevillea (below) grows in abundance

CABARITA BEACH

in northern NSW is a long sweep of platinum sand, backed by a tangle of coastal bushland – banksias, casuarina trees, pigface – and punctuated by a headland with heart-stopping views to the north and south. Even with all the development along the shore, it's astonishing how many beautiful beaches curve down the coast for 50, 100 kilometres, and how devoid of people they are. In this respect, nothing much has changed over the decades.

I'M VISITING Cabarita for the first time since I was a child, when our family packed up the car and drove the coastal route from Melbourne to Noosa in search of sun and surf for the Christmas holidays. In recent years, whenever I've headed north it's been to Byron Bay, where there has been significant suburban sprawl.

Not so in Cabarita ("Cabbo" to the locals). It's that rare, almost mythical place – a seaside village that's still sleepy; a hold-out against the rash of housing estates south of Coolangatta, which is just a 15-minute drive away. Apart from a few modern houses and shops, it has an old-fashioned feel. Children run wild and barefoot on the grassy foreshore; grommets (young surfers) walk the sandy paths to the beach, carrying boards and trailing leg ropes; and fishermen stand in the shallows throwing long lines into the sea.

I'm in Cabarita wanting a classic beach holiday, lounging around with a book and taking therapeutic walks on the beach.



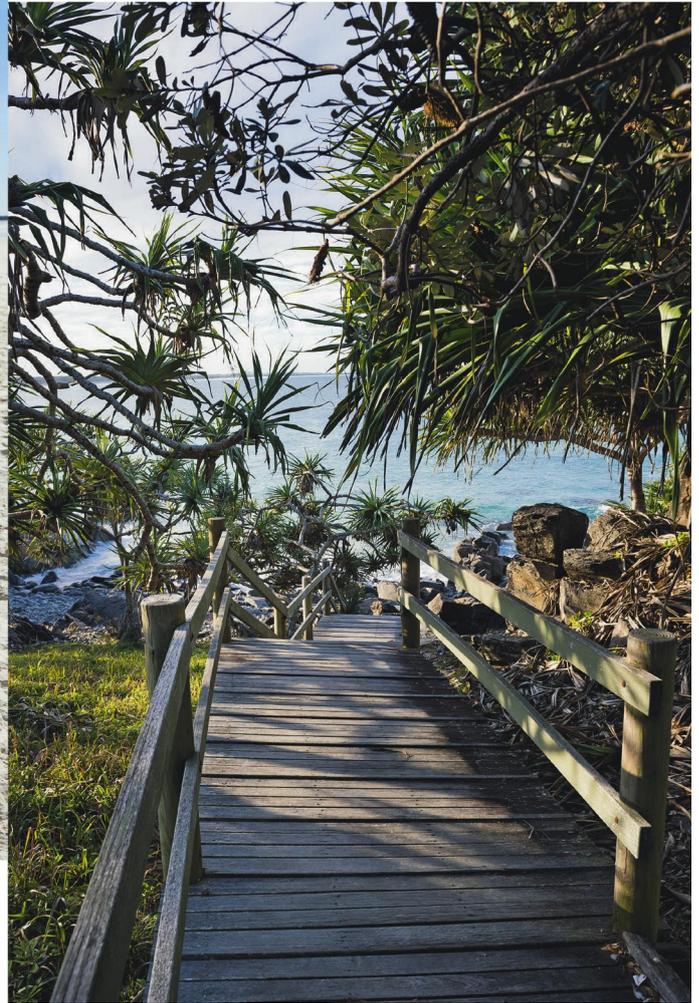
My husband, who has surfed since he was 10, is keen to catch a few waves. I like lazy, he likes active. Often it's tough to find a place to stay that suits us both, especially if we want a dash of luxury thrown in.

But now there's Halcyon House. Australia's newest boutique hotel sits behind Cabarita's sand dunes and scrub, framed by spiky pandanus trees. The whitewashed, Besserbrick '60s-era motel has been transformed into a resort that's more Palm Springs than Gold Coast in style. It's a little spot of heaven that caters to the sybarite in me while being only steps away from a beach that suits all levels of surfers.

The owners of Halcyon House, Brisbane-based sisters Elisha and Siobhan Bickle, aptly named their new hotel for the "halcyon days" of classic Australian vacations on the beach. They discovered the dilapidated 1960s Hideaway motel when looking for a retreat for their families (including the nine children



Smooth rider: surfing ambassador and instructor Joel Parkinson; boardwalks provide easy access to the beach



they have between them). Gradually, the idea of sharing their great find with others took hold and the building underwent an extensive renovation by architect Virginia Kerridge and interior designer Anna Spiro. An extra storey was added to make 21 rooms, the kitchen and dining areas were opened up and the pool extended. A crack team of hoteliers was then imported from Italy to manage Halcyon House before it opened in May.

At its heart the hotel is still the daggy, much-adored beachside motel Australians treasure, albeit glammed up and with a 21st-century price tag. Guests are welcomed with homemade ice-cream rather than Champagne. The acclaimed Paper Daisy – which is helmed by chef Ben Devlin and has already garnered a spot in *The Australian's* list of the Hot 50 Restaurants in Australia – offers a wonderfully nostalgic prawn and avocado sandwich for lunch. Bicycles are available for freewheeling on the boardwalk that runs for

kilometres along the shore, as well as Eskies and umbrellas for the beach. Local fishermen pull up to the bar for coffee on their way back from the surf. There's even a kookaburra on tap to wake you up in the morning.

While I stake my claim on one of the striped sun lounges by the pool, my husband, Tony, checks out the surf – naturally. There's a view of the beach break from the terrace of our suite and the swell is deemed “small but fun”. As it turns out, the North Coast beaches have been closed that morning because a pod of whales frolicking out to sea and a migrating school of fish have likely attracted sharks – not that this deters him.



FLIGHT PATH

QOL

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Joining my husband is surfer Joel Parkinson – the 2012 ASP World Champion and winner of 11 elite World Title events – who has been recruited as the hotel's surfing ambassador. When he's not competing on the pro tour, he's on hand to give surfing lessons to guests keen to learn how to stand up on a board,

improve their skills or just hang ten with one of the world's great sporting champions.

The hotel's Joel Parkinson Surf Experience sounds like a 1970s rock band. Parko, as he is affectionately known, grew up in the district, went to school at Palm Beach Currumbin State High School, was mentored after school by local surfing heroes such as Mark Occhilupo and now raises three young children on these shores. The morning he arrives at Halcyon House to surf, he's just dropped off his two daughters, aged 11 and seven, at school. The eldest is already taking after Dad and discovering the “addictive thrill” of surfing. As they say, there's obviously something in the water.

There's not much swell and the waves are small but both surfers paddle out. Parkinson takes the first wave, allowing Tony to watch. “He's the supreme stylist,” says Tony. “Some surfers push it really hard and their style is ugly but Joel has to be the smoothest surfer on the planet.” Over the course of the hour, Tony is impressed by Parkinson's ability to “really carve” even a very small wave. “As someone to learn from, he has such an easy, gentle manner and a way of imparting information without any ego or dogma.”



JUST SWELL

The best surf breaks, from Coolangatta to Byron Bay

Kirra: When it's "on", Kirra is considered the best surf break on the coast. Big swells make it suitable only for fit surfers as there is a lot of paddling. Millions of cubic metres of sand pumped out of the Tweed River almost ruined the banks but the barrels are back. Expect crowds.

Snapper Rocks: This right-hand point break boasts Superbank – one of the longest, most consistent and accessible

waves in the world, which can carry riders more than one kilometre. It's very crowded, making board collisions the main danger.

Duranbah: "D-bah" lies on the border of Queensland and NSW. It's a punchy beach break with power as the waves pour into the compressed beach between the Tweed River seawall and Lovers Rock, creating throaty barrels. This busy break has hosted major surfing events.

Cabarita Beach: A playful right-hander that's ideal for beginner surfers to advanced and suitable for both long- and shortboard riders. A good all-rounder.

Hastings Point: For experienced surfers mostly as the break can hold big waves and there are jagged rocks to negotiate. Can be dangerous because there's a lot of water moving around and a strong current.

The Pass: A long right-hander that's very popular with Mal riders. Located right in the middle of town in Byron Bay, it's very accessible, suitable for all skill levels and therefore tends to be packed.

Lennox Head: This right-hand point break is one for experienced surfers – definitely no novices. Board riders need to jump off the rocks in a big swell so it can be treacherous. But the fast, long, hollow wave is worth it.

Rooms with a view: Halcyon's whitewashed minimalism is set against tropical pandanus trees and an ocean vista



Parkinson offers advice to anyone thinking of tackling the district's beaches, which vary in suitability: "Unless you're ocean-savvy, you should think about having a lesson. You'll learn the basics and get better so much quicker. A lot of it is about knowing where to be in the ocean."

Like all surfers, Parkinson is cagey about giving away *all* of his favourite coastal breaks. His advice is to "just pull up" along any one of the dozens of unmarked access tracks that lead to the beaches. "There's usually no-one on the beach and when the waves are good, you've got them all to yourself. The tracks are goldmines."

As for me, I'm just happy to leave it to the surfers – lounging, instead, by the pool with a glass of Prosecco. ●



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