

Canberra Times

relax

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Byron wins us over

Still mourning the sleepy town that once was, **JULIA NICHOLLS** discovers (strangely) that there's enjoyment to be had in sheer luxury

Before The Byron at Byron opened almost seven years ago, I joined the chorus of people lamenting the region's move towards five-star resorts.

The beauty of Byron Bay had always been its laid-back atmosphere, sensitivity towards nature and, above all, the unique balance of chic and hippie.

It was thought a luxury hotel, even one that was being built by one of Australia's most well-known businessmen, Gerry Harvey, and was going to cost almost \$50 million, would upset the kilter of everything that made Byron Bay special – surely the glitz and glamour of such a place belonged an hour north up the highway on the Gold Coast?

But for years, I drove past the large hedge of The Byron at Byron completely oblivious to the fact that it was hiding the very hotel that inside my mind had manifested into a monstrosity of white-washed walls, glittering chandeliers and pretentious tourists.

Shortly after the resort opened in 2004, those who had vocally opposed the new hotel were all but silenced. In fact, hundreds of locals signed a petition a few years later supporting the expansion of the resort's restaurant.

And just as The Byron at Byron won over the locals, it has also won favour with guests from all around the world – including sceptical journalists who for years enjoyed nothing more than a relaxing holiday in the once sleepy seaside town of Byron Bay.

Last year, having jumped at the chance to escape the final week of Canberra's winter, I found myself driving beyond the hedges and was both surprised and pleased to find a stunning and unobtrusive resort.

Just as Harvey had promised all those years ago, The Byron at Byron works in harmony with the environment, having minimal impact on the 18ha of sub-tropical rainforest that surrounds it. The resort itself takes up just 10 per cent of the property, which is bordered by bushland and the pristine Tallows Beach.

And if that isn't enough to keep the most discerning tree-huggers among us calm, the resort continues to regenerate and maintain the environment, with The Byron at Byron's restoration team heading out every week to work and monitor the native plant communities, encouraging them to become self-sustaining.

Not to be out-done by the resort's eco-friendliness, the staff are eager to please from the moment of arrival, and none more so than managers John and Lyn Parché and executive assistant manager Scott O'Neile.

Friends of Harvey, the Parchés have been entrusted with the management of the resort since its opening, bringing with them an enthusiasm to make The Byron at Byron a success as well as more than 30 years of experience in the hospitality industry both in Australia and abroad.

While the Parchés are still very hands on with the everyday running of the property,

O'Neile, whose wife also worked at the resort, had been recently employed before our arrival to take on some of the work – a good thing considering how popular the place is.

After an introduction and an assurance that we will be well looked after (a promise given to all guests, not just the media) and a quick glimpse of the infinity pool, restaurant and bar, we are taken to our one-bedroom deluxe spa suite.

The Byron at Byron offers 92 of these loft-style suites (a choice of superior or deluxe spa), housed in small groups around the property. Each is accessible by a timber boardwalk, and is designed to capture the best nature has to offer.

The suite we have is open-plan, but sliding doors offer privacy when needed. The lounge and kitchen area is flanked by enclosed balconies, which offer views of nothing but rainforest, and the stand-alone egg-shaped bath is as inviting as the "California"-style king-sized bed.

The artwork is inspired by nature, and no luxury is overlooked – but then who has time to watch a plasma TV (or two) when relaxation is the order of the day.

In fact, the biggest challenge at The Byron at Byron is just how to spend the day.

The hustle and bustle of the town – boasting award-winning fare, beach-side bars and boutique shops – tempts you to visit and is just 10 minutes away (the resort offers a

shuttle service), but those looking to relax can take advantage of the resort's facilities.

Of course the 25m infinity pool is hard to go past, even in a north coast winter. Day beds surround the pool and service from the bar, which includes food, means you can while away the hours with a good book or magazine and a dip in the pool.

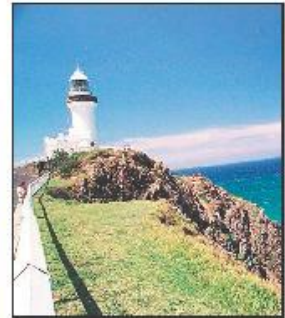
For those looking for a little more action, there is the meditation walk through the rainforest. Private timber boardwalks meander across the property, culminating at picturesque Lake Tallow and taking in the various ecosystems – Bangalow Palm Rainforest, Paperbark Forest and Coastal Cypress Pine Forest, as well as native animals and birds.

Tallows Beach is also just a short walk away, or those with a little more energy can tackle the more challenging walk up to the Byron Bay lighthouse and most easterly point of Australia.

Other activities on offer at the resort include tennis, trips to the farmers market with the chef, gymnasium, guided walks through the rainforest, bicycle hire, daily yoga and sessions at The Byron at Byron Spa and Wellness Centre.

While morning yoga with Sheldon on the resort's expansive timber balcony to the sounds of birds is hard to beat, the day spa offers an unrivalled chance to relax.

In 2010, it launched a new signature spa menu inspired by nature and uses iKOU eco



Opposite page: the reception area of The Byron at Byron sets the tone for the rest of the resort. This page: the restaurant and timber veranda make a backdrop to the resort's infinity pool. Left, and, above, the iconic Byron Bay lighthouse.

products and Pevonia Botanics.

There is an enticing range of facials and massages but for a real treat try the signature Byron spa experiences, such as the Native Flora Journey, which includes foot restoration treatment, a full body massage and scalp treatment, as well as "Native Clay Hot Oil Treatment", where therapeutic oil is poured into a ring of native clay placed on the lower back to release tension from the sacrum, spine and hips.

Topping off the Byron at Byron experience (and well worth a visit, even if you're not staying at the resort) is its restaurant.

Gavin Hughes, who trained in his home country of Scotland, has been head chef at the restaurant since it opened, joining the resort

after working in Sydney at Aqua Luna, The Bathers Pavilion and Aqua Dining.

While the menu changes seasonally, one thing you are sure to be served up is fresh, local produce. Hughes and his team are passionate about local cuisine, so the menu includes such temptations as Bangalow feta, locally caught prawns, Byron Bay Kurobuto Berkshire pork and Alstonville chickens.

Lunch (if you've managed to get off your pool-side lounge) is served in a laid-back atmosphere in the restaurant or on the veranda overlooking the rainforest and pool.

Dinner, while more formal, is still relaxed and offers either an alfresco menu or degustation. Whichever you choose, it's sure to be memorable – particular if it's finished

off with one of the team's mouthwatering desserts, such as a pina coloda parfait or chocolate and pistachio bombe.

The Byron at Byron is the kind of place that really deserves more than just a night if you are going to experience all the resort has to offer. After all, how can you fit yoga, meditation walks, beach jaunts, swimming, cycling, a trip to the day spa and a full complement of meals in a day?

Sounds exhausting. Especially as the true order of the day at The Byron at Byron is relaxation and luxury.

It's a true awakening for the senses in this once sleepy seaside town.

Julia Nicholls and her husband were guests of The Byron at Byron Resort and Spa.

If you go:

Enjoy a well-deserved summer break with this limited Summer Days Special at The Byron at Byron Resort and Spa. With flights to Ballina/Byron from Sydney starting at \$49, it's the perfect excuse to get away! For February only prices start at \$279 per room per night in a Standard Suite, including complimentary yoga class daily.

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