



The lifeguard station on Main Beach, Byron Bay, opposite Tallow Beach, seen from Cape Byron

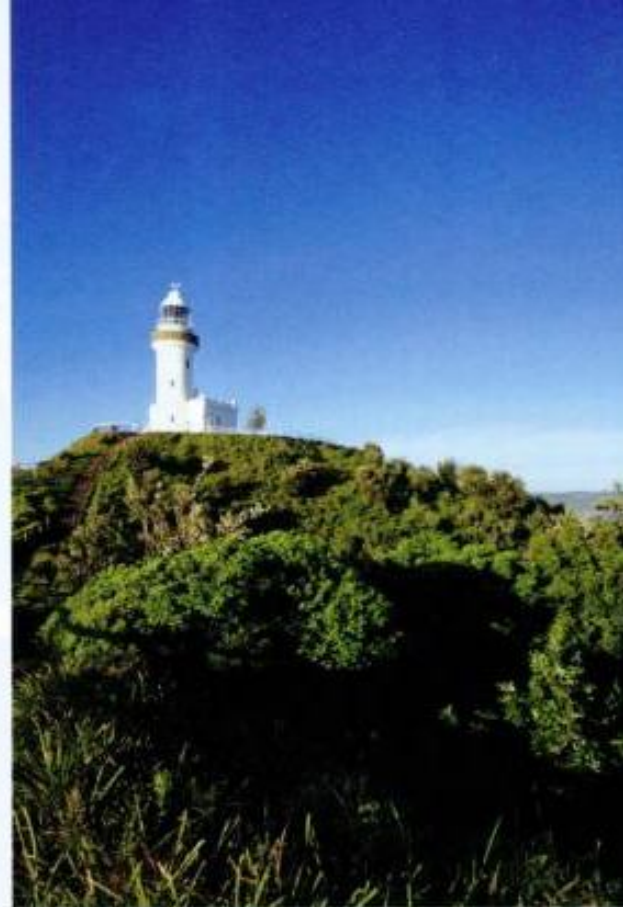
SPELLBOUND

There's magic at work in Byron Bay on Australia's east coast. People who go there tend to have life-changing experiences. So what makes this small seaside community so special? David Leser, a resident, explains. Photographs by David Woolley





The eco-friendly Byron at Byron Resort & Spa. *Right,* Cape Byron lighthouse



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HIS IS A STORY I swore I would never write. It's about a little jewel under a lighthouse, where the rainforest meets the sea, where pods of dolphins frolic in turquoise waters and migratory whales breach and sigh out in the Bay, where surfers, hippies, musicians, writers, farmers, teachers, artists, film-makers, fishermen, stockbrokers, you name them; where all these and more have gathered for some great modern-day experiment in living.

Who'd believe such a story? A New Jerusalem on the most easterly point of Australia with the perfect wave, the perfect climate, the perfect soil; with sunkissed, friendly people; with a Green mayor and a politically conscious community; with fine dining, smart cafés and bookshops; with music, arts and literary festivals, with a goulash of massage and alternative health therapies so diverse you could spend an entire month floating from one to the other.

It is also a sacred Aboriginal meeting place. A woman's place. A healing place. A place where the counter-culture rubs up against the city. A place where Australia first meets the sun and the streets are named after poets and the plumber takes his shoes off at the door.

So, yes, I never wanted to rhapsodise in print this way because, as I say, I never thought anyone would believe me; but secondly, and much more importantly, I never wanted to contribute to the potential ruination of a place I love. Especially



as I happen to live here. So what changed? Well, for one thing, the secret has been out about Byron Bay for some time now. In 2006 an estimated 1.6 million visitors came to this little town of 9,000 people on the coast of northern New South Wales, reaffirming its growing place as one of the most desirable destinations in Australia outside 'the House, the Rock and the Reef' (Sydney Opera House, Uluru and the Great Barrier Reef.)

I HAVE A NUMBER OF THEORIES as to why this is, and sex and magic are high on that list. Let me take the latter first. In Byron Bay, magic still seems possible. People fall in love here. People get well here. People come to give birth here. People come to die here. Truly. People swim with dolphins and commune with nature here. People organise Uncle Projects for fatherless boys and hold Fatherhood Festivals here. People have parties and ceremonies: rainforest dances, Aquarius Balls, Kundalini Shakedowns, Path of Love retreats, Lascivious Evenings and salsa and samba nights the likes of which I have never seen before (although it's true, I've not yet been to Brazil).

And there is music here unlike any place ever I've known, and I don't just mean the roar and crash of the Pacific, or the eternal melody of birdsong. There is a musician living on every hill, live music seven nights a week and festivals, such as the annual East Coast Blues & Roots Music Festival, and Splendour in the Grass, bringing to the region some of the world's greatest artists. In the last few years I have seen James Brown, Jackson Browne, Jack



Lake Ainsworth near Lennox Head, just south of Byron. Opposite, clockwise from top left: the pool at Gala; hang-gliding over Tallow Beach; the terrace at The Byron at Byron; sea-kayaking off Cape Byron. Right, balcony bar at The Byron at Byron



Johnson, Sarah McLachlan, Michael Franti, Ben Harper, Emmylou Harris, Bo Diddley, Taj Mahal, Joan Armatrading, Coldplay, David Gray, Bob Geldof, Gomez and Moby all perform here, among others. (Moby was said to have gone skinny dipping at The Byron at Byron Resort, and the joke around town for the next two weeks was 'Has anyone seen Moby's dick?' There were no confirmed sightings.)

So there are songlines (the dreaming, journeying trails of the Aborigines, something like ley lines) here, which is unsurprising considering this is also Bundjalung country, Aboriginal land dating back 40,000 years. There are sacred sites integral to the Aboriginal people's creation myths, among them the mighty Wollumbin, or 'Cloud-Catcher', the mountain that looms out of the Nightcap Ranges on the border between Queensland and New South Wales. Given the name Mount Warning by Captain James Cook in 1770, this towering peak is the plug in the middle of what was once the largest shield volcano in the world, the oldest link to the original supercontinent known as Gondwanaland. Although Wollumbin has not been active for more than 20 million years, the evidence of its former fury and bounty is everywhere.

Everything and anything, from mangoes to macadamias, grows here in the red alluvial soil, and when you drive through the emerald hinterland and down to the aquamarine waters of the coast, you are passing through the remains of what was once known as the Big Scrub, a rainforest wilderness teeming with sassafras, sandalwood, myrtles and thousand-year-old cedar trees. This was the first industry of the Byron region: a cut-throat timber business of merchants and mill owners who assigned cedar cutters – former convicts and emancipists – to level these once-glorious forests for British and American export.

It was the first act of slaughter in Byron. Many others were to follow, not least the massacre of Aboriginal communities in the mid 19th century. One group of 100 was shot and pushed off a cliff near here; another group had their damper (soda

When you find a place in the world that so far has resisted the pressure to become the same



Riding on Seven Mile Beach and, opposite, cricket on Clarks Beach

as everywhere else, your life can feel transformed



bread made in the outback) poisoned with arsenic. To understand how the Byron region became the centre of the countercultural movement in Australia, a place of deep healing for people the world over, it is important to understand this murderous history. Aboriginal communities were destroyed, forests plundered, and the denuded land cleared and turned over to grazing. Byron Bay became a hard-boiled little town of farmers, meatworkers and then sand miners, and, by the middle of the 20th century, the site of the main whaling station in Australia. But ever since the early 1970s, a major reconciliation process has been underway, with both the land and its original inhabitants. This is key to the Byron story and it is best understood through the Aquarius Festival of 1973, an arts and music festival that turned this region into the Woodstock of the South.

Californian surfers had discovered Byron Bay in the late 1960s, but it was the hippies and the alternative lifestylers of the 1970s who discovered the lush, rolling hills above the bay. Alienated by the values of materialism, appalled by the wanton destruction of the rainforests, and spurred on by the American protest movement of the 1960s, thousands of young Australians descended on the coast of northern New South Wales to smoke dope and to chart new ways of living and loving. (In the nearby town of Nimbin, where the Aquarius Festival was held, there is still an annual 'Mardi Grass' with bong-throwing and joint-rolling competitions, and a 'cannabis cup' for the winner.)

From these rebellious beginnings came the anti-logging movement, the permaculture movement, the demand for 'intentional communities' or



communes, for eco villages, farmers' markets, wildlife corridors, worm-farm waste systems and all the back-to-nature simplicity trends that would inspire late 20th-century Green politics and the urgent clamour of today for action on climate change.

'I think Byron Bay is an example to the world,' Australia's first popularly elected Green mayor, Jan Barham, told me over dinner. 'We are surrounded by protected areas. To the east a marine park, to the north and south nature reserves, and on our western boundaries, national parks. This is a bountiful bubble of nature here and it seems to grab people's senses.'

When Jan Barham was elected mayor four years ago, there was widespread enthusiasm for her unashamedly Green agenda. Today, however, there is considerable disquiet over the shabbiness of the town centre and her opposition to development, which many see as a knee-jerk reaction. 'They have been one of the worst councils ever,' local estate agent Chris Hanley says of Barham's council, on a morning walk to the lighthouse. 'They don't know how to rule for everybody and they don't know about good governance. They also can't see that some business people aren't all bad.' President and co-founder of the Byron Bay Writers Festival, and pro-Green himself, Hanley is probably one of the most erudite estate agents you could ever hope to meet. Able to quote Balzac as easily as a fisherman can mark his way through the snapper reefs, Hanley believes that the council has failed on the issues of basic infrastructure.

His views are widely shared. Ed Ahern, a local businessman and the president of community group Byron United, says: 'If we put bike tracks in,

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Kite-surfing at Tallow Beach. *Opposite, clockwise from top left:* Gaia Retreat & Spa; Jan Barham, the Green mayor of Byron Bay; lounge in the Samoan-style longhouse at Gaia Retreat; Rusty Miller, surfing champ and instructor



BYRON BAY LOWDOWN

WHERE TO STAY

The Byron at Byron Resort & Spa. 77-97 Broken Head Road, Suffolk Park (00 61 2 6639 2000; www.thebyronatbyron.com.au). Beautifully decorated suites are set in 45 acres of rainforest of white cedar, Bangalow palm, plum myrtle and paperbark; guests awake to the mating call of the whipbird and the derisive laugh of the kookaburra. It's a five-star luxury resort with a 25-metre pool, spa, yoga and wellness centre, dining room and bar in the rainforest. It was blessed by a Buddhist monk, an Aboriginal elder and an Anglican minister. This is my favourite place, and Barry Humphries', too. Suites from A\$360 (about £175)

Rae's on Watego's. Watego's Beach (00 61 2 66 855 366; www.raes.com.au). Rae's is the epitome of bohemian sophistication, where celebrities come to chill out in secluded Indonesian and Moroccan-inspired suites overlooking the beach, and a spa with Italian mother-of-pearl walls. Suites from about £295

Gaia Retreat & Spa. 933 Fernleigh Road, Brooklet (00 61 2 6687 1216; www.gaiaretreat.com.au). Co-founder Olivia Newton-John describes Gaia as 'where barefoot meets Armani'. Set in the hills above Byron

Bay, it is exquisite. Enjoy the light, spacious bungalows, organic food and activities including yoga, meditation, tennis, pilates and tai chi. There is a heated saltwater swimming pool and, at the Annala Day Spa, everything from craniosacral balancing and sound healing to body wraps. Doubles from about £680 per person for three nights, including spa use and treatments and all meals

First National (www.byronbayfn.com.au) has holiday properties to rent. Check out **Beachbound at Watego's** (www.beachboundatwategos.com.au) or **Cockatoo House** (www.byron-bay.com/cockatoo)

WHAT TO DO

Walk through the rainforest to Australia's easternmost point, then **swim** at Watego's, The Pass or Main Beach.

Yoga with Kaz Toupin (www.byronbubble.com).

Dolphin kayaking with Go Sea Kayak (www.byronbayseakayak.com.au); guide Delta Kay can accompany you and point out places of Aboriginal significance.

Dolphin-spotting: on Watego's you can see them resting with their calves.

Private surfing lesson with Rusty Miller (www.byronbay-guide.com.au).

Snorkelling off Julian Rocks (www.byronbaydivecentre).

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if we beautify the parks, if we establish a bypass, that would bring more people here, and the Greens don't want that. They don't want tourists.'

Barham counters: 'There is nothing like being misunderstood. It is a very difficult thing to do in a place like this but I am trying to deliver on sustainable objectives. That means no over-development and no environmental destruction.'

BY THE MID-1980s, it was the turn of film-makers and writers to discover the fragrance of sub-tropical Byron, spurred on by the creators of *Crocodile Dundee*, the actor and writer Paul Hogan, and writer and producer John Cornell. The two decided to settle in the area, and Cornell invested heavily in it.

Since then the town and its surrounding hinterland has become a lure for the thousands of sea-changers all seeking an alternative lifestyle, but not necessarily one disconnected from the city. In that sense Byron Bay, with its exclusive resorts and spas, with its multitude of restaurants, cafés, bars and pubs, its preponderance of middle-class refugees, has long since ceased to be a cliché of the hippie town that it once was.

'This is the first successful urban culture outside of our main cities,' writer and long-time resident Craig McGregor tells me at Succulent Café, our favoured Moroccan-style breakfast haunt. 'It may even be our first deconstructed mini-city, with its own satellite townships up and down the coast and in the hinterland, all of them revolving around the glitzy centre which Byron has become.'

Perhaps this is why so many of the country's – and the world's – rich and famous choose to holiday here. 'This is the pinnacle, here,' says Vincent Rae, the owner of the romantic and ultra-exclusive Rae's on Watego's, over a meal of fresh grilled snapper, salad and chilled Western Australian Pierro Chardonnay. 'It's Champagne surfing. There are dolphins in the water and the water is crystal clear. I get Americans and English staying here and they're just totally blown away.'

Among the apparently blown-away are Tom Cruise, Russell Crowe, Nicole Kidman, Billy Zane, Kate Winslet, Kate Hudson, Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris

Martin, Robert Plant and Keith Richards. 'We don't really push the celebrity thing,' Vincent adds. 'It tends to take care of itself. They just keep coming back.'

So it would seem. Supermodel Elle Macpherson had just left Rae's after a week of pampering and yoga, as well as surfing lessons from the inimitable Rusty Miller, the 1964 US surfing champion. Rusty is one of the original Byron Bay characters who takes delight in teaching visiting English merchant bankers, Hong Kong hedgefunders and international supermodels how to ride the glassy swell.

'Watego's Beach is one of the best places in the world to learn to surf,' he says, with his trademark impish grin and Californian drawl. 'You are sitting out on the tip of the continent and the waves are gentle, consistent and well-formed. I stick people's bodies, head, mind and souls into the water here and their lives are never the same again.'

It could be the refrain for Byron Bay: 'Never the same again.' When you hang-glide above the Cape over the most easterly point of Australia; when you kayak with dolphins; when you listen to the sigh of the breakers; when you watch the whales on their migratory path to the warm waters of the north; when you walk through ancient rainforests which no longer echo to the crash of cedars; when you find a place in the world that so far has resisted the pressure to become the same as everywhere else, your life can feel transformed.

'Don't we all come down to the sea as lovers?' John Cheever once wrote. Yes, we do, but particularly so in Byron Bay, where even the jutting granite rocks out at sea (Julian Rocks) carry the tale of mythical eloping Aboriginal lovers.

'This was always a shagging place,' the local historian, Eric White, told me a few years ago, just before he died. 'There was more sex here than you could poke a stick at from the 1900s onwards. Trains would come through. Couples would head to the Cape with a blanket and a pocket knife so that they could dig a hole in the grass and have their love sessions on the side of the hill. I took my wife, who was the daughter of a lighthouse keeper, up there for moonlit picnics. It was out of this world.'

And it still is.

corn.au), where there are turtles and more than 400 species of fish.

Hang-gilding over Cape Byron (www.totaltravel.com.au).

Markets selling organic produce and crafts held on the first Sunday of every month in Butler Street, Byron Bay, and every fourth Sunday of the month in Bangalow.

Drive to Mullumbimby, Milyn Falls, Brunswick Heads or Bangalow

WHERE TO EAT: BREAKFAST

Succulent Café, 8 Byron Street (00 61 2 6680 7121).

Byron Beach Café, Clarkes Beach, Lawson Street (00 61 2 6685 8400; www.byronbeachcafe.com).

The Balcony Bar & Restaurant, Lawson/ Jonson Streets (00 61 2 6680 9666; www.balcony.com.au).

Offshore Bistro + Bar, 42 Lawson Street (00 61 2 6685 5355; www.offshorebistro.com.au).

WHERE TO EAT: DINNER

Olivo, 34 Jonson Street (00 61 2 6685 7950). Mod Oz food that veers towards French. Dinner about £40 for two without wine.

Dish, Jonson/Marvel Streets (00 61 2 6685 7320). Has a fabulous raw bar and hearty Mod Oz dishes. About £45

for two without wine. **Orient Express Eatery**, 1-2 Fletcher Street (00 61 2 6680 8808). Best Asian food between Sydney and Brisbane. Try the Fisherman's Catch: mussels, squid, prawns and fish, wok-steamed with chilli jam and coconut sauce. About £40 for two without wine.

BODY AND SOUL

In Australia's 'healing capital' you'll find every conceivable therapy from tantric bodywork and clairvoyancy to all kinds of massage. My favourite is a deep-tissue rub-down at

Quintessence (www.quintessencebyron.com.au) or a treatment at **Buddha Gardens Day Spa** (www.buddhagardensdayspa.com.au).

GETTING TO BYRON BAY

Qantas (08457 747767; www.qantas.co.uk) flies from Heathrow to Brisbane via Singapore from £1127 return.

Brisbane is a two-hour drive from Byron Bay.

Virgin Atlantic (08705 747747; www.virginatlantic.com) flies from Heathrow to Sydney from £812 return.

Virgin Blue (00 61 7 3295 2296; www.virginblue.com) flies from Sydney to Ballina (near Byron Bay) from £85.

Weather to go: Byron Bay

Summers are warm to hot, but not unbearably so, and winters are never severely cold. The climate is warm-temperate with moderate rainfall throughout the year. **Best month: October**

 Sunshine	 Temperature	 Rainfall	 Humidity
8hrs	16°C min 27°C max	64mm	Medium