

PrivatAir *the magazine*



ISSUE



An aerial photograph of the Byron Bay coastline in Australia. The image shows a long, curved white sandy beach meeting the ocean. The water transitions from a shallow turquoise near the shore to a deep blue further out. In the foreground, there are green, grassy hills that drop down to the beach. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds. The overall scene is bright and scenic.

ROCK 'N' SURF

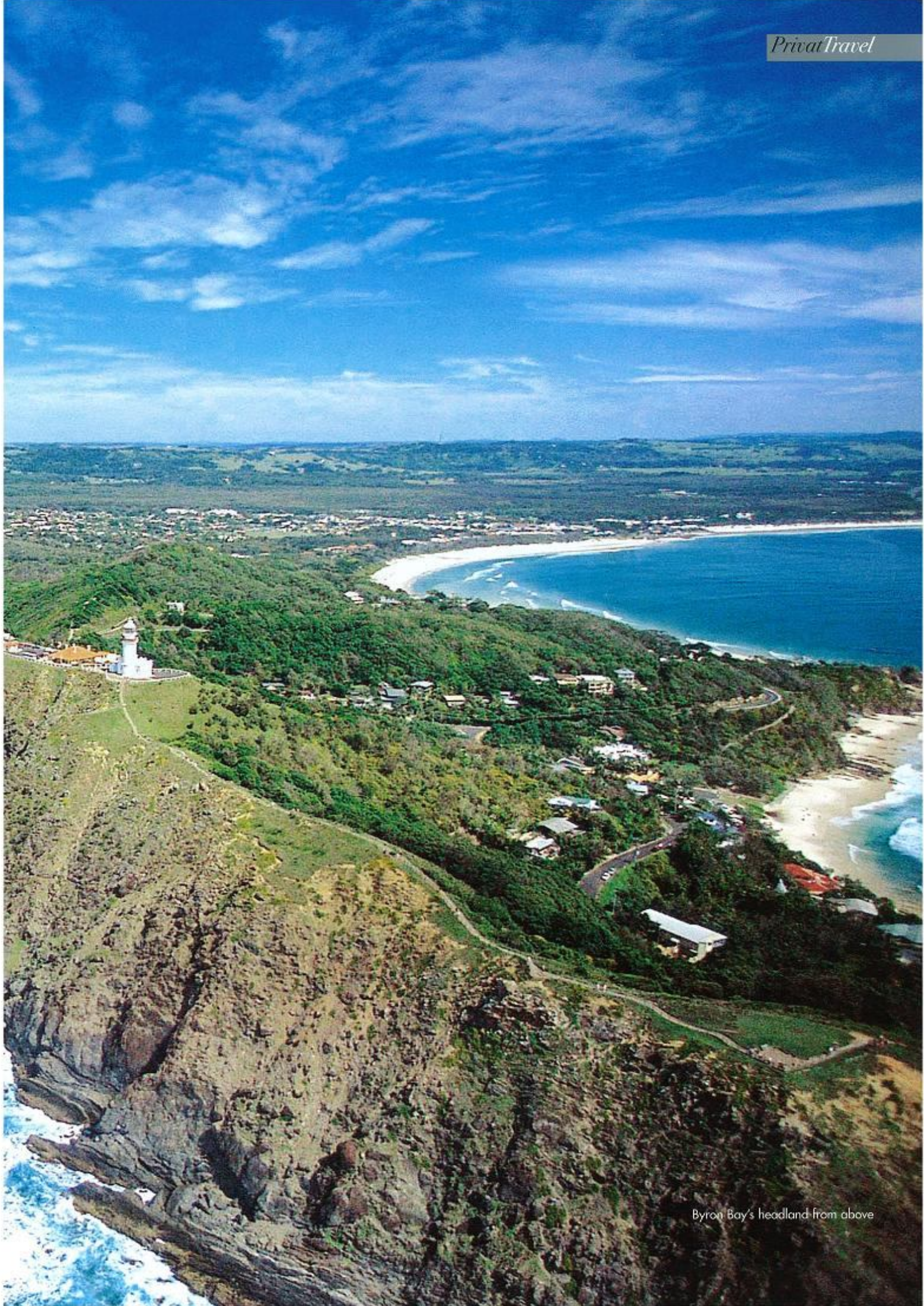
The sleepy, hippy town of Byron Bay is a small but sparkling jewel in Australia's crown. But what lies behind its enduring charm?

Words **[REDACTED]** by Glenn A. Baker

Perhaps because it is the easternmost point of the continent – a convergence theory readily embraced by the more cosmically inclined – Byron Bay exerts such a pull, is so alluring and punches, as a recreational destination, so far above its weight.

This town – for indeed that is all that it is – is populated by just 9,000 people but visited each year by more than a million and a half, placing it as a tourist attraction in an upper echelon also occupied by Sydney Opera House, the Great Barrier Reef and Uluru. The vast Australian coastline is replete with sufficient bays, beaches and townships to fuel any and all sea change fantasies but none have so captured the imagination that they loom in the consciousness as large as this anciently important settlement, so stubborn in its resistance to commercialisation that McDonald's has never been allowed entry and its finest (and now essential) resort hotel had to sidestep significant opposition to entrench itself into the fabric of the place.

The less cosmically inclined – and it sometimes seems as if they are in scant supply in these parts – will identify the draw cards as a writers' and international film festival, a world-ranked Blues & Roots music festival, spectacular surf breaks that had Californians and Hawaiians all undertaking pilgrimages in the 1960s and the best



Byron Bay's headland from above



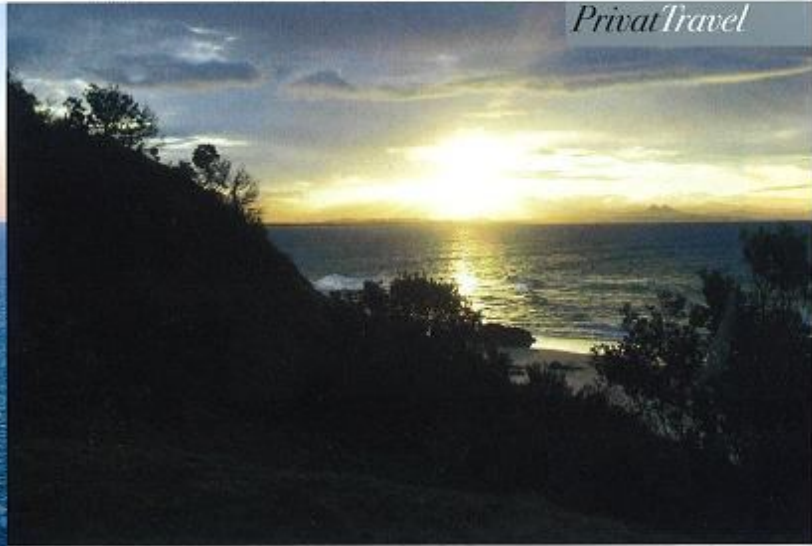
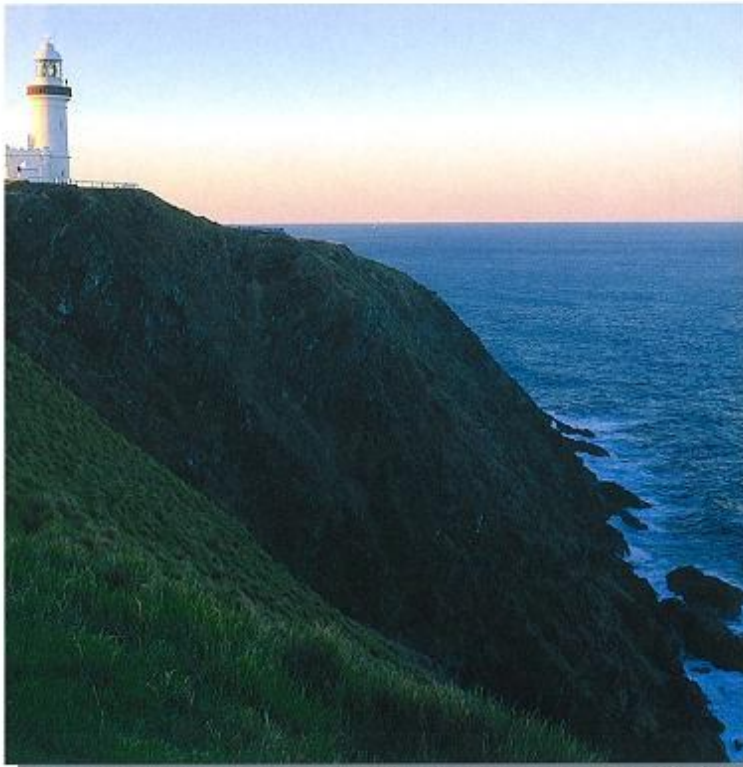
whale-watching on the eastern seaboard. Not to mention cafés and restaurants, recording studios and a sound production school, a flying trapeze college, bookshops, chilli and cookie companies, 30km of unsullied beaches pretty much devoid of any building, the remnants of primeval rainforests and volcanic calderas, macadamias and mangoes sprouting forth from rich, red alluvial soils and a lush wet and green hinterland sweeping up and away from the coast. This is dotted with communities of craftsmen and women, musicians, writers, film-makers, farmers and businessmen tired of the turmoil – captains of industry and young entrepreneurs both.

With a higher proportion of baby boomers than any other town in Australia, Byron is famed for its laid-back bohemian lifestyle, as the home of the idle fisherman, the active horticulturalist, the eager environmentalist, healers, therapists, masseurs and yoga masters. All of whom make space for waves of mingling visitors that run a remarkable gamut from families frequenting caravan parks, to young pub ragers, to the hiking/diving/riding/skydiving set, to well-heeled global wanderers seeking to be submerged in sumptuous surrounds. Inexorably, the whole world comes to Byron Bay.

Thousands of years ago, the Bunjulong and Arakwal aboriginal people came to what they called Cavvanbah to trade, tell tales and find marriage partners within sight of Wollumbin (or 'cloud catcher'), the imposing mountain lifting out of the Nightcap Ranges on the border between New South Wales and Queensland, a sacred site that had been seismically active perhaps 20 million years ago. Described as 'the plug in the middle of what was once the largest shield volcano in the world', it ended up on early explorers' maps as Mount Warning after



Captain James Cook sailed by in 1770. Now Cook, as every Australian schoolchild is taught, sailed further, more frequently and more effectively than any seaman of his age but, it needs to be said, there was something rather prosaic about the way the good captain named that which he came upon. Generally it was after his sponsors, titled gentry of the day back home in his green and pleasant land, the aristocratic Admiralty, or the officers and specialists sailing with him. In New Zealand he bestowed the Bay of Islands upon one discovery because it was a bay with a lot of... islands. Cavvanbah became Byron Bay in honour of navigating vice-admiral John Byron, who happened to sire the man who would in turn sire Lord Byron the poet. Maybe there



Above: the lighthouse overlooking Cape Byron; right: the sun sets over the bay. Facing page, top: a surfer takes advantage of the spectacular waves; below: the grounds of the Byron at Byron Resort & Spa

was some prescience on Cook's part because, as tourism literature now points out, the fast-living and flamboyant Lord Byron would surely feel right at home today in the destination that shares his name.

John and Lyn Parché came to Byron Bay to establish a carefully integrated resort complex for the retail magnate Gerry Harvey. This followed many years spent managing prestige properties such as Heritage in Brisbane, Sukhothai in Bangkok and Amanresorts' Milton Park, as well as acquiring Aman properties in Sri Lanka and Northern Australia.

'Elements of the community were suspicious,' Lyn recalls. 'Here's one of Australia's most successful businessmen bringing tens of millions of dollars into this sleepy little hippy town. Some were scared that we were bringing the Gold Coast to Byron, which was understandable. We earned their trust and demonstrated our intentions were honourable and responsible.'

And successful, immediately. With wide, covered verandahs, spacious cane lounges and trundling ceiling fans, the Byron at Byron

'A shining example of how big business and a loving vision can create a retreat from the pressures of the modern world'

Resort & Spa soothed the soul upon arrival, and what is now 92 plush apartment eco-suites with two enclosed balconies amplified the ambience, as did the 45 acres beneath a rainforest canopy with a boardwalked paperbark lagoon, almost primeval in appearance (where some come to be married). One reviewer hailed it as 'a shining if somewhat camouflaged example of how modern architecture, big business, and a loving vision can create a retreat from the pressures of the modern world in a delicate and protective community'. It was soon nominated by *Condé Nast Traveller* as 'one of the world's best new resorts' and was ranked as one of the world's best new hotels at Australia's Luxury

Travel Awards. For the promoters of the International East Coast Blues & Roots Music and Splendour in the Grass festivals, the opening meant that their star performers no longer had to be ferried in from hotels up to an hour away on Queensland's Gold Coast area, or two hours north in Brisbane. Soon, the likes of Brian Wilson and Moby were in residence and, with a hundred locals employed and a fine restaurant under a top Sydney chef dishing up Bangalow sweet pork, Yamba prawns, sea scallops, Astonville chicken and fish from the waters that surround Byron, the community was captivated. Also impressed was Jan Barham, Australia's first popularly elected Green mayor, whose platform was that her town is an example to the world. 'We are surrounded by protected areas,' she has said. 'To the east, a maritime park; to the north and south, nature reserves; and on our western boundaries, national parks. This is a bountiful bubble of nature and it seems to grab people's senses.'

Byron Bay and its premier hotel have certainly grabbed and stirred comedian Barry Humphries' senses. The famed wandering wit has offered: 'The resort is a paradise for relaxation where I can recover my spirits with a variety of spa treatments, enjoy the warmth of not only the weather but the fabulous staff and enjoy the food, comfort and ambience of this luxurious haven. When I visited recently I bumped into an old friend from Melbourne, the highly regarded Dame Edna Everage from Moonee Ponds, who just adores the Byron. For the first time in history, we were in cordial agreement.'

Many guests enjoy the morning choir of bird, insect and frog that greets them, and seek out the natural splendour with a splash of spirituality that seems to be integral to the Byron Bay region. These guests can often be found down on adjacent Tallow Beach, strolling about the Suffolk Park township, on a sunrise balloon ride or kayak exploration, taking a complimentary yoga class or knocking some tennis balls around, pottering about the Byron Bay Golf Club, or visiting the iconic lighthouse on the imponderably ancient Cape Byron headland. There are pods of dolphins frolicking almost constantly, and whales, mostly humpback, moving north mid-year to breed and back south around September and October, with new offspring, to feed and fatten on Antarctic krill. Fishermen on deep sea charters are wont to return with wondrous tales of unplanned encounters. Not just with whales and dolphins, but with manta rays and sea turtles.

Although the full realisation would not sit easy with the counter-cultural Byron of today, it was this virtual whale highway that not so much established as perpetuated the township. The arrival of the first white settlers in the region in the late 1840s would not be for the



Above: the boarded walkway to exclusive rooms, popular with the stars, within the Byron at Bryon Resort & Spa; below: Michael Stipe of REM in concert at Byron Bay



Surfers found that natural breaks propelled perfectly formed waves toward a mostly pristine coast

better, as far as the environment was concerned. As the official history documents: "The first industry in Byron was cedar-getting, the "red gold" from the Australian red cedar, *toona australis*. The timber industry is the origin of the word "shoot" in many local names – Possum Shoot, Coopers Shoot and Skinners Shoot – where the timber-cutters would "shoot" the logs down the hills to be dragged to waiting ships." With a jetty built in 1888 and a rail connection eight years later, Byron became a dairy centre and an abattoir town; a famously malodorous one at that. Sand mining came and went between the wars and then, from 1954 to 1962, a brutally efficient whaling station put the poor working-class town on the map.

Whaling was Australia's first primary industry – by 1845 some 26,000 had been taken. In three years before the outbreak of WWII

there were 12,000 kills, mostly on the west coast and in Antarctic waters. With stocks depleted, it was thought to be over, but when it seemed to be subsiding in the west, it burst into life on the east coast. As a town veteran recently put it in a documentary: 'Byron Bay was already an abattoir town, so the whaling was just another industry based on animals and meat and boiling down. People here were used to that. That was their work.' Fortunately, it would never be their work again. For when the whalers departed and the rank smells lifted, the habitat sent out its call and tourism took over as guarantor of the town's future prosperity. Dig up the journals of the early longboard surfers from all over the world and you'll find entries, in tones of reverential awe, on Watego's, the Pass and Cosy Corner, where natural breaks propelled perfectly formed waves toward a mostly pristine coast. They were the first to come in search of their own concept of nirvana; others came to enjoy a place to hang out without being hassled, or red hot sets from some of the greatest roots-related artists in the world (performing visitors have included James Brown, Coldplay, REM, Taj Mahal, Arctic Monkeys, Queens of the Stone Age, John Mayer and Jack Johnson).

Compact and cheerful, the town itself, with its horse-shoe shaped beach surrounding the bay, has nightlife and daytime diversions aplenty, but more richly rewarding is the drive up into the looming silhouetted hinterland, through the green forests of the hills and mountains, to small towns, intimate accommodations, art studios, permaculture and alternative medicine practitioners, produce stalls, fragrant airs and crusty, charismatic characters. No matter from whence you came, it's another world. ■