

THAT'S SO BYRON

Stereotyped or not, Byron Bay is a haven
for relaxed sub-tropical touring

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I'm full of trepidation as we drive into Byron Bay, practically holding my breath in hope that it lives up to the expectations and pictures in my mind. Yet I need not have worried – it truly is love at first sight.

After settling in at First Sun Holiday Park, we head off to explore the town that's within easy walking distance. Browsing through an eclectic shop with a mix of bohemian fashion and homewares, we overhear one of the sales assistants remark to the other, "That's so Byron". We can't help but chuckle to ourselves and the phrase becomes stuck in our heads. Anything that seems typically Byron Bay – from the clothes to the food to the people on the street – 'that's so Byron' becomes our catchcry for it.

Our caravan park sits on the beachfront at Byron Bay and has a magnificent outlook over the breakwater and towards Belongil Beach. In front of the park is the popular surf spot known as The Wreck. The name comes from the wreck of the *SS Wollongbar* – a steamer that was ripped from its jetty mooring in 1921 and became grounded in the shallows where it lies broken up to this day. The rudder of the ship is always exposed and it gets used as a jumping off spot, or resting place for bodyboarders while we're watching. At low tide the boilers of the wreck are exposed and look eerily like the ribs of a giant beast long dead.

This surf break is not only popular with experienced surfers, there also are daily processions of excited tourists eager to learn how to surf. We watch the ritual of groups being brought down to the beach, going through the basics of paddling and standing on the board while still on the sand, and then led out into the waves to have a go with varying degrees of success.

The beauty of being right on the beachfront is that every morning and evening we're lucky enough to witness some spectacular sunrises over Main Beach and sunsets into the hinterland. While you don't have to leave the caravan park to witness them, you'd be mad not to at least stroll along the beach. During the day, lifesavers patrol Main Beach and are easy to spot with their flags out and tent set up on the sand.

We walk around the bay to Clarke's Beach and The Pass, which is a surf break with constant small sets of waves that people on every type of watercraft imaginable are trying to catch. We spy surfers, bodyboarders, stand-up paddle boarders, kayak groups and even a rubber duckie that's heading out on a whale watching tour. If you climb the steps here

to Fisherman's Lookout you'll be rewarded with an incredible vantage point to watch all the action.

We head back towards Belongil Beach and from its sand the sheer size of the wreck becomes even more apparent. With stomachs grumbling, we stop in at the Treehouse on Belongil. Set back from the beach, this quirky establishment is full of eclectic furniture and décor that's almost an overload for the senses. Imagine a typical 1960s living room in a tropical beach house is given a warehouse-like renovation and you get the picture. We can't get enough of it and they have live music regularly, plus engaging and friendly staff, and also damn fine wood-fired pizzas. The truth is that the staff we encounter at every business – whether a café, hotel or shop – are welcoming and helpful in that relaxed Byron way.

You can't visit the town without checking out its most iconic feature – Cape Byron Lighthouse, which is situated on the most easterly point of Australia. Around 3km northeast of the town's centre, the lighthouse is accessible via a walking trail. You can also go by car, but with everyone keen to be there for a sunrise, finding a car park can be tricky. The walk from the parking areas to the lighthouse are also quite a steep and strenuous climb, but if you stop to periodically take in the view and catch your breath it's all worthwhile (just ignore the fit people running up and down past you). The expansive views on reaching the summit are spectacular, with Tallow Beach on the right and the lighthouse and keeper's cottage overlooking it. Even if the weather isn't kind to you, the far-reaching views will never disappoint.

Visiting the lighthouse on a Thursday morning means we're also nice and early to call in to the Byron Farmers' Market on our way back to town. It's on from 8am to 11am every Thursday and is another entertaining outing. The array of fresh foods and produce is amazing – from oysters, fruit and veggies to freshly baked goodies, sweet treats and hearty breakfasts and coffee. Enjoy them all while you sit and people watch and listen to chilled out singers and bands.

Though it's not all peace, love and organic chia. If you want indulgence of a different kind I'd have to recommend a visit to the Stone & Wood Brewery in the industrial area of Byron (insert exclamation of joy from the husband). The tasting room is open every day and, whether you're an avid beer drinker or just interested in trying something different and local, you'll love the tasting

Wander through the serene environment and find places to sit and contemplate

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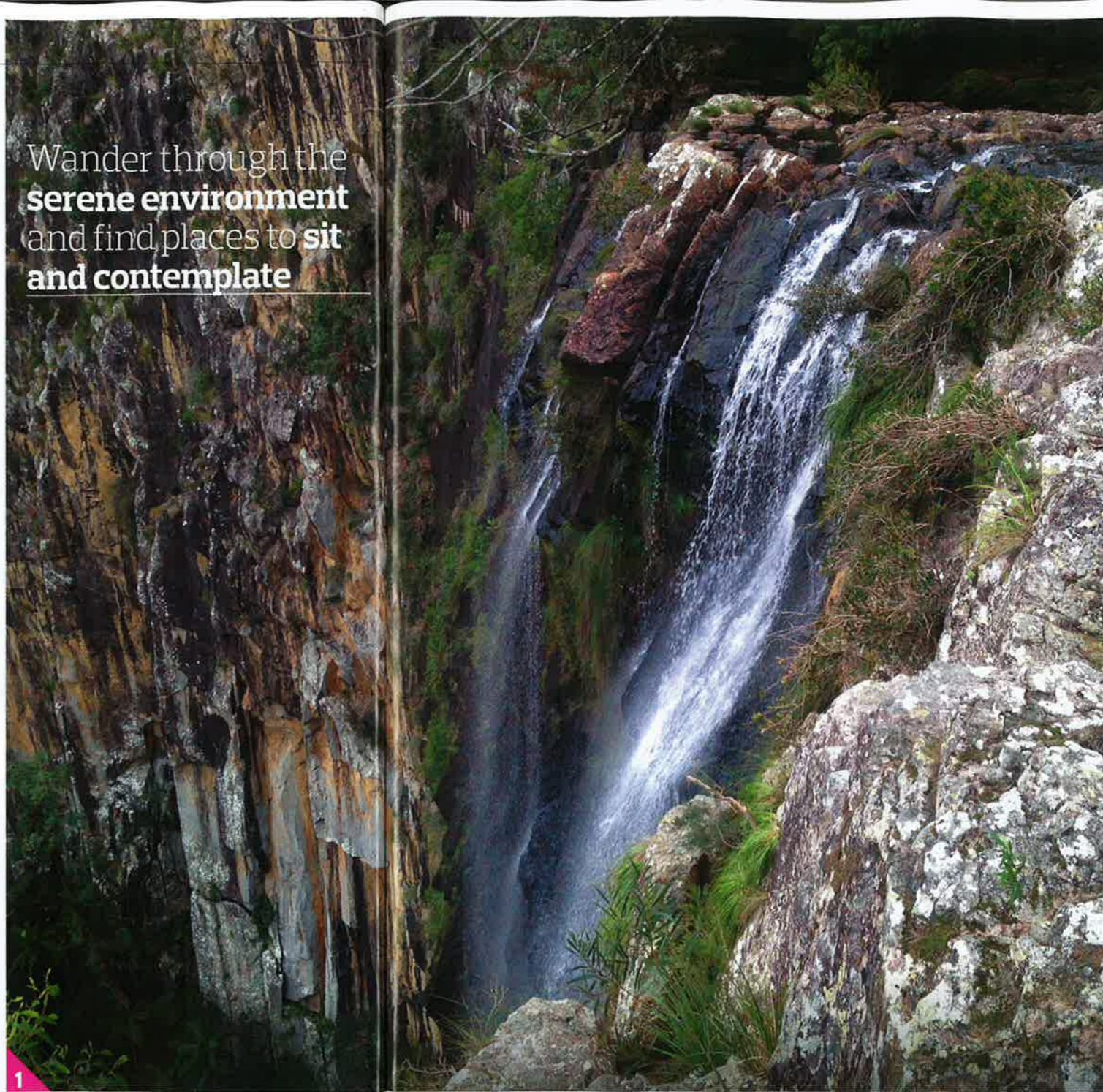
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We acknowledge that the Arakwal people are the traditional custodians of the Byron Bay region and so pay our respect to their elders, past and present.

DON'T MISS

- Witnessing a sunrise from the most easterly mainland point of Australia, Cape Byron.
- Visiting the Byron Farmers' Market for great food and entertainment.
- Walking around Crystal Castle and Shambhala Gardens for a day of serene hinterland views.
- Watching the surfers or joining up for a surfing lesson yourself!

BEST TIME TO VISIT

The mild mid-year weather was perfect for our visit. We experienced some grey and cloudy days but these gave us spectacular sunsets. It's also a perfect time to spot humpback whales.

FAST FACTS

- You can drive to Byron Bay's iconic lighthouse. Parking costs \$8 per hour near the top or \$4 per hour for parking further down the hill.
- The Byron Farmers' Market at Butler Street Reserve is on every Thursday from 8am. Pick up a coffee and breakfast and enjoy free entertainment while you shop or people watch.
- Walking to The Pass is an easy stroll along the sand from Main Beach and at the end you can climb a set of steps to Fisherman's Lookout and get a spectacular view over the beaches and surfers below.
- Surfing lessons are conducted daily by a number of different companies in Byron Bay offering private or group lessons. Lessons vary in time and cost but they all provide wetsuits, boards and hands-on instructions to get you up and on the waves.

MORE INFORMATION

First Sun Holiday Park – firstsunholidaypark.com.au
Byron Farmers' Market – byronfarmersmarket.com.au

paddle. This gives you a chance to try a number of beers from their handcrafted range while you sit in comfortable yet industrial surroundings. Of course, you can also buy more beers and other mementos while you're there.

To fully immerse yourself in the Byron experience, you can't go past the Crystal Castle and Shambhala Gardens, located a half-hour drive into the hinterland. This area is lush and tropical and at Crystal Castle you're surrounded by the best of it. The botanical Shambhala garden (a Sanskrit term meaning a place of peace, tranquillity and happiness) is laid out over five hectares.

You can wander through the serene environment at your own pace and find plenty of places to sit and contemplate, including on a smoky quartz throne at the centre of a spiral bush stone path. Apparently reclining on the smooth stone will allow you to "absorb the energy of the spiral for your spiritual wellbeing". While some may scoff at such things, you can't argue that these gardens, filled with crystals, sculptures and deity statues, are a tranquil way to spend a few hours and appreciate nature. At almost

four metres high, the biggest attraction is the giant Blessing Buddha statue. A pool of water and a lotus mosaic surround the 14-tonne piece, which is simply stunning, and oh-so-Byron.

While in the hinterland we take a drive to see Minyon Falls in Nightcap National Park. The dirt road leading to the top of the falls is a little on the rough side but is worth the effort when you arrive at the flat, grassy picnic area with car parking and barbecue facilities. We follow the boardwalk to the falls lookout and, with some trepidation, walk to the edge to look down 100 metres to the valley below. The waterfall doesn't disappoint either, cascading over the rugged rocky escarpment and disappearing down.

After a day of touring there's much to look forward to heading back to Byron Bay. The only difficult decision is what to do first. We can either watch the evening surfers from the caravan park while indulging in our purchases from the market and local brewery; or take a stroll along the foreshore to listen to the daily bongo drumming ensemble. In the end it's no contest, the bongo fun is calling us – after all, that's so Byron. **AGHRV**



CHILLED OUT The view looking west from Cape Byron Lighthouse's car park (above). The welcoming and chilled vibe of Byron Bay can be seen and felt everywhere in town (below).



You can't go there
without visiting its most
iconic feature – **Cape
Byron Lighthouse**

