



NOOSA vs BYRON BAY

Noosa and Byron Bay are Australia's most fashionable coastal resorts, with cerulean seas, long surfing beaches, and destination restaurants and galleries.

But which has the edge? *Ultratravel* puts the two towns to the test

words LYDIA BELL

BYRON BAY

Since the 1960s, white sand, crashing waves and glorious sunshine have been luring beach bums to the Byron Bay region, where the green Northern Rivers hills meet the coast, and where hippies and permaculturists came for spiritual enlightenment, to swim with dolphins and to be left alone. But in recent years Byron Bay's bohemianism has had an upward bent as wealthy hipsters join the fold. Today, art galleries, fusion cafés, slick spas and fashion boutiques are as commonplace as Tantric yoga classes, float-tanks and surf centres. And as Byron Bay grows up, so its influence trickles into the increasingly chic hinterland.

THE CROWD

Byron is catnip for dropouts (which, these days, might mean a hedge-funder turned restaurateur, boutique hotelier, organic farmer or spa therapist). The tie-dye-clad anti-frackers have fled to the hinterland, which now is home to a heady mix of upmarket lifestyles and true-blue hippies, leaving the cool Watego Bay to such starchy regulars as Russell Crowe, Elle Macpherson, Nicole Kidman and Baz Luhrmann.

THE BEACHES

Byron's cornucopia of perfect-break beaches are sheltered from the southerlies, fringed with cornflower-blue waters and remain uncluttered by buildings. **Tallow Beach** is a wild stretch, **Watego's** is a sheltered north-facing spot with **Rae's Fish Café** for lunch (raesonwategos.com), and **Whites Beach** perfect for peace. The latter is accessed from a dirt track off Seven Mile Beach Road, and is accessible only by 4WD and foot, but it's worth the trek to get to the beach often voted as the best in Australia.

THE HOTELS

Eco-chic **The Byron at Byron** (thebyronatbyron.com.au) is still hands down the best hotel in town (see review by Naomie Harris on page 41), with steel-framed rooms scattered through 45 acres of rainforest, a spa, friendly staff, and a Scottish chef, Gavin Hughes, who champions local produce. Newer, though, is hipsters' choice **The Atlantic** (atlanticbyronbay.com.au), whose fashionably refurbished vintage timber cottages have a stripped-down Scandi appeal. A quirkily bohemian boutique hotel on gorgeous Watego's

Beach is the starchy **Rae's on Watego's** (raes.com.au). High-profile visitors who want to be less visible turn to **Byron Bay Luxury Homes** (byronbayluxuryhomes.com), which can open the doors to the region's most exclusive beach villas, or the secluded **Byron View Farm** (byronviewfarm.com): a winsome cottage filled with global artefacts. For hippies looking for a dose of spiritual healing, Olivia Newton-John's gloriously laid-back **Gaia** is nearby (gaiaretreat.com.au).

THE RESTAURANTS

New in town is **Cicchetti** (cicchetti.com.au), which takes Italian small plates and wine very seriously (try the veal-stuffed olives and



porchetta pig roast); its chef, Enrico Semenzato, came from a Michelin-starred restaurant in Italy. Down the road at **St Elmo Dining** (stelmodining.com), Spain is on the menu but the wine list is global. On glorious Clarkes Beach, friendly **Byron Beach Café** (byronbeachcafe.com.au) serves up laidback but top-notch Aussie cuisine – and particularly delicious Asian salads. Some of the best restaurants are in the hinterland: **Uptown Café and Restaurant** (townbangalow.com.au) in hippyish Bangalow turns local ingredients into complex, light degustation treats. Equally fun is its downstairs spot **Downtown**, which specialises in cakes and brunch. At rustic Newrybar, **Harvest Café** (harvestcafe.com.au) draws crowds with its organic produce and contemporary dishes, as does **The Farm** (thefarmbyronbay.com.au), a new garden-to-plate café and cheese shop.

THE LATE HOTSPOT

Reborn after it burned down in a fire, the quirky

and popular nightclub **La La Land Byron** (lalalandbyronbay.com.au) hosts local musicians, burlesque nights and films.

THE HINTERLAND

The scenery in these rainforests can truly be described as epic: **Nightcap National Park** has spectacular escarpments, wild pools and dramatic falls, and **Mount Warning**, which dominates the hinterland landscape, was once a volcano. The best way to see the interior is in a helicopter with **Green Cauldron Tours** (greencauldrontours.com.au). Surfers – or wannabe surfers – should sign up for a one-on-one with the former United States champion **Rusty Miller** (rustymillersurf.com). Those who prefer land-based activities might head inland, where there is plenty for shoppers. Although the tie-dye brigade complain that **Crystal Castle** (crystalcastle.com.au), near the bohemian town of Mullumbimby, is a tourist attraction, the gardens – decorated with a stupa, Indian statues and towering chunks of semi-precious stones – are a treat to wander in. **Bangalow** is particularly good for shopping, with specialist boutiques such as **Island Luxe** (islandluxe.com.au), **Our Corner Store** (ourcornerstore.com.au) and **Raw Vintage** (rawvintage.com.au). Nearby **Lismore** is a favoured destination for vintage-store fans.

THE MARKETS

Nothing says Byron like the **Byron Farmers' Market** (byronfarmersmarket.com.au), held on Thursdays, when the community gathers to sample wheatgrass shots, organic produce and sets by live acoustic musicians. **Bangalow Market** (bangalowmarket.com.au), on the fourth Sunday of every month, is considered to be the best artisanal market in Australia: a place where artists, bakers, wine-makers, therapists, farmers and friends meet.

THE FESTIVALS

Byron Bay Bluesfest (bluesfest.com.au), held every Easter, is Australia's largest festival of Blues and Roots music; August's **writers' festival** is one of the best in the country (byronbaywritersfestival.com.au) and a successful international **film festival** is organised every March (bbff.com.au).

TAKING A LEAF
One of the many beautiful stretches of sand in the bay (above); the Bluesfest (left); a retro caravan room at The Atlantic; a starter using local cheese and herbs at Town in Bangalow; Elle Macpherson, heading off surfing

Main Photograph
MING NOMCHONG



*Art galleries, organic
fusion cafés and spas are as
commonplace in Byron Bay
as Tantric yoga classes
and surf centres*





NOOSA

Long, clean beaches, lush tropical rainforests, exceptional surf and a koala-studded headland are the backdrop to Australia's swankiest resort town. Sophistication, money and celebrity have been here a long while (hence the world-class restaurants and fashionable boutiques), but, this being Australia, there are a healthy number of flip-flops and board shorts to balance things out. This microcosmic paradise has surfing bays filled with dolphins, a national park with an everglade on which to kayak and bush in which to walk, and sunshine which warms the skin and soul all year.

THE CROWD

Well-heeled Noosa attracts off-duty sports celebrities, from Ironman world champion Pete Jacobs and tennis star Pat Rafter to rugby greats in training and Sir Richard Branson, who owns an island in the Noosa River. Plus, of course, chic linen-clad Brisbanites, here to walk, surf and sample world-class cuisine.

THE BEACHES

Each beach has a character of its own, and attracts visitors to match. Virgin surfers hang out at **Noosa Main Beach** – not only is it patrolled, but it's one of the few spots that face north, so waves are manageable. Dog-owners inhabit **Noosa Spit**, where their creatures are allowed off-leash. Lovers of wilderness and surf aim for the headland swathe of the national park – either to **Alexandria Bay** if they want to throw off their clothing, or to **First Point**, to surf on a perfect longboard break. **Sunshine Beach**, a nine-mile stretch of rolling surf, is backed with celebrity villas, and from the boardwalk of **Coolum Beach** walkers can watch whales breach.

THE HOTELS

The hotels in Noosa are less vibrant than the restaurants. But for straight-up contemporary luxury, **Seahaven Noosa** (seahavennoosa.com.au), which reopened in late 2013 after an £8.4-million refurbishment, has direct access to Main Beach and has rooftop penthouse apartments with panoramic ocean views. Reworked the same year, the **Sheraton Noosa** remains popular (sheratonnoosaresort.com); its two-bedroom apartment suits families, and its penthouse has great views. It's not going to win design awards but is the only five-star and is in the heart of Hastings Street, adjoined by Peter Kuruvita's **Noosa Beach House** (noosabeachhousepk.com.au), a favoured local hotspot for lunch. Villa companies offer sensational spaces for those

who like privacy: the five-level **Grandé Villa** at Outrigger Little Hastings (grandevillanoosa.com.au) has ocean views and the riverside **70 Noosa Parade** (accomnoosa.com.au) is moments from Hastings Street. Villa Getaways (villagetaways.com) also has access to top-end hideaways, such as **Villa 505**, sleeping 22 – a Balinese-style home situated on an island in the middle of the national park – and **Villa 518**, a modern, four-bedroomed waterfront home on Noosa Sound.

THE RESTAURANTS

These are no slim pickings. **Locale** (localenoosa.com.au), a modern Italian trattoria in the French Quarter, brings together two great chefs: Rio Capurso, from Lindoni's, and Brent Ogilvie, from Ricky's (rickys.com.au). Also on the river, **Embassy XO** (embassyxo.com.au) is known for its sophisticated Asian fusion, as is **Wasabi** (wasabisb.com), one of the country's top Japanese restaurants, which is just round the corner. **Berardo's Restaurant & Bar** (berardos.com.au) is the best place for seafood, **Sails** (sailsnoosa.com.au) the top pick near Main Beach, offering modern, light cuisine, and the laidback **Thomas Corner** in Noosaville (thomascorner.com.au) the place for fine Australian produce. Those who love big breakfasts will queue for a table at **Bistro C** (bistroc.com.au), a beachfront spot offering a feast of pulled pork, cornmeal, eggs, bacon jam, roast tomato, tortilla and chipotle sour cream.

THE LATE HOTSPOT

The upbeat **Miss Money Penny's** (missmoneypennys.com) in Hastings Street, opened by Sydney restaurateur Ben Walsh, is the place to hang out with a glass of cool Margaret River chardonnay. Those who prefer a lively scene should visit on Sunday: the day for Ibiza beach-style music and all-day cocktails. For something moodier, **Rumba Wine Bar** (sailsnoosa.com.au) is known for its wide range of wines, boutique spirits and shucked oysters.

THE HINTERLAND

There are endless possibilities for outdoor activities here. Surfing is the most popular activity (former world champion **Merrick Davis** has a school on Main Beach; learntosurf.com.au), although there is also fishing, paddle-boarding, diving, hiking, horse-riding on the beach, kayaking, camping and boating. Less active visitors might prefer the glut of upmarket shops, day spas and restaurants, as well as wineries,

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tearooms and artisanal producers in the hinterland, from Cooroy to Kin Kin. Dingo-filled **Fraser Island**, with its white sand, lakes and forests, is near enough for a day trip.

THE MARKETS

Foodies flock on Sundays to **Noosa Farmers' Market** (noosafarmersmarket.com.au). But for perhaps the best art, craft and produce in Australia, **Eumundi** (eumundimarkets.com.au) is just a 20-minute drive away and open on Wednesday and Saturday mornings.

THE FESTIVALS

May's **Noosa International Food & Wine Festival** (noosafoodandwine.com.au) is a serious affair for chefs, producers, wine-makers and foodies. September's **Jazz Festival** (noosajazz.com.au) is equally well regarded.



COOL COASTAL SPOTS
Noosa Beach House, Peter Kuruvita's restaurant (above); Tea Tree Bay and Noosa Heads (far left); a dish of fresh mussels and a bartender at the local International Food & Wine Festival



The VERDICT

BYRON BAY

A dream beach destination for the visitor who enjoys nothing more than surfing and vintage shopping, and a spot of lunch at the local market. In holiday season, when the town gets gridlocked, it's worth joining the local migration to the hinterland, where equally chic spots can be found.

THE BEACHES **10**
 THE HOTELS **9**
 THE RESTAURANTS **7**
 THE LATE HOTSPOTS **8**
 THE HINTERLAND **9**
 THE MARKETS **8**
 THE FESTIVALS **9**

NOOSA

A less arty but equally sophisticated town that is much smaller and much hotter than Byron Bay. The place for the older, well-heeled visitor who expects world-class food and wine, and who might enjoy walking in the outback or spotting koalas in Noosa National Park.

THE BEACHES **10**
 THE HOTELS **5**
 THE RESTAURANTS **9**
 THE LATE HOTSPOTS **7**
 THE HINTERLAND **8**
 THE MARKETS **9**
 THE FESTIVALS **6**