



Beyond Byron

There is more to the Byron Bay region in the hidden villages and rainforests of the Tweed Valley

WORDS CRAIG TANSLEY

There is a bridge painted in the colours of the rainbow outside the hippie hamlet of Uki, just up the road from a fourth-generation cattle farmer who sells “moo poo” for \$3 a bag. Around the corner there are glimpses of Mt Warning from the verandah of top regional restaurant Mavis’s Kitchen. The star here isn’t head chef Pepe though, it’s Darth Vader, a big, black Muscovy duck who patrols the place like a dog. Northern New South Wales’ most lauded art gallery (Tweed Regional Gallery and Margaret Olley Centre) is a 15km drive east, but I’m just as happy getting my culture fix at a

communal table at The Modern Grocer in Murwillumbah. Here writers, musicians and artists meet most mornings over coffee and turmeric lattes. “This is where we solve the problems of the world,” says local writer Madeleine Doherty. “If you want peace and quiet you can sit out back with the water dragons.”

While Byron Bay hogs the limelight on the Far North Coast of NSW, the hinterland that surrounds it is still overlooked by most travellers (with the exception of uber-trendy Bangalow). Visitors bypass The Tweed Valley as they beeline it to Byron from Coolangatta airport, but this is where you can experience

Australia’s Rainbow Region without a hint of pretence (or any crowds). Empty roadways take you along the rim of an ancient volcanic caldera, through the World Heritage-listed Gondwana Rainforest and into tiny villages that are home to an ever-increasing offering of galleries, cafés and restaurants.

There are towns here that only the local postie knows about; cute hamlets that could have been lifted out of fairy tales, hidden mostly behind blooming >>





jacaranda and poinciana. In Chillingham – blink and you’ll miss the place – there’s a pottery store by the bend of a slow-moving river and a general store where locals congregate over a takeaway brew. Buck Buchanan owns the farm beside the store, which offers free tours. Buck is one of the most innovative fruit farmers in Australia – his finger limes are sent off to Tetsuya’s and Matt Moran’s ARIA Restaurant every week, though he’s never eaten at either because you won’t catch him in a pair of shoes, or even thongs.

Creative heart

Just west, I drive beneath the Border Ranges with their kilometre-high sheer faces to the hamlet of Tyalgum in time for a classical music festival that attracts the likes of pianist Roger Woodward. The tiny main street is home to an eclectic gathering of silversmiths, furniture makers, fashion designers and bakers who run an alternative lifestyle co-operative.

I grew up around these parts; back then the scenery was the only thing that drew visitors, but these days farmers’ markets are held daily in the towns of the hinterland. The villages that looked destitute in my adolescence, such as Burringbar (just south of Murwillumbah), are now home to cheese factories, breweries, galleries and quirky cafés.

The beaches on the edge of the Tweed Valley are as picturesque as those in Byron Bay – though many are all but deserted. Those with fine-dining restaurants such as Fins (at Salt), Osteria (at Casuarina) and Paper Daisy (at Cabarita) attract bigger crowds. There is a gin and rum distillery (Husk Distillers), made famous thanks to social media assistance



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Take to the roads

from actress Margot Robbie, run by a farming family among the sugar cane plantations of sleepy North Tumbulgum. You can see Mt Warning from the front, while out back you’ll see the cane they use to fuel the rum.

The region’s best beer is made at Stone & Wood just across the highway, and the country’s best charred octopus is served in a tiny boutique restaurant (Potager – A Kitchen Garden) overlooking a winery and the Pacific Ocean.





The striking Queenslander that's home to Mavis's Kitchen. INSET: The region's pretty back roads. BELOW (left to right): At one of the many local farmers' markets, a local produce store.



PHOTOGRAPHY MAVIS'S KITCHEN, DESTINATIONNSW

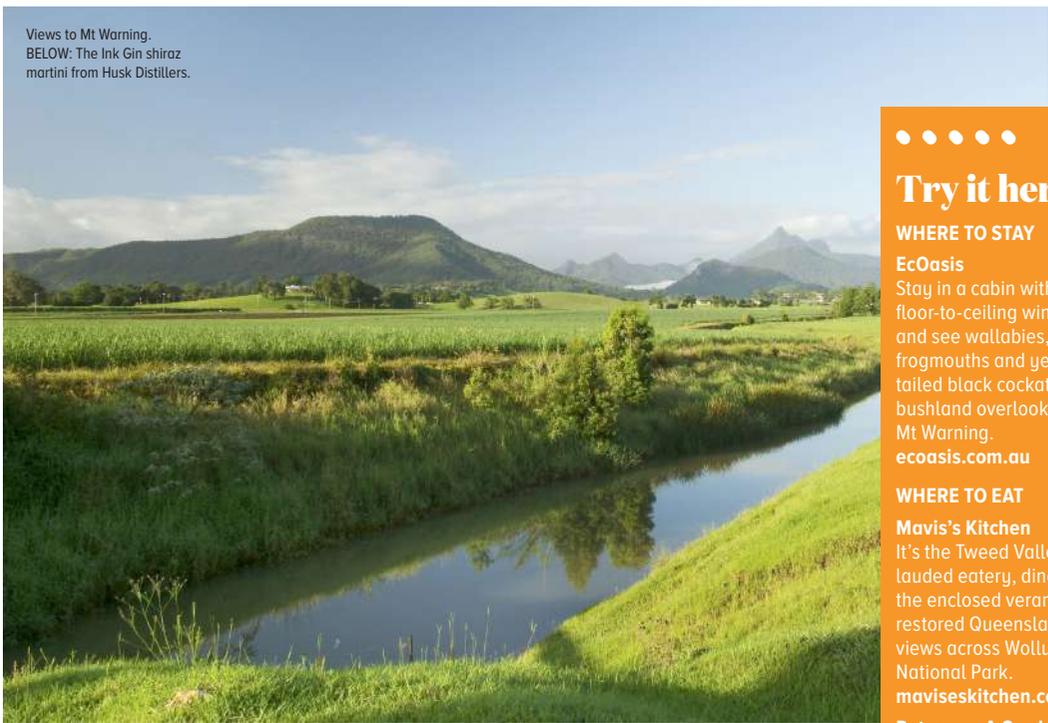


Mountain high

Murwillumbah is the springboard to the region, but it's left off all but the most curious of travellers' itineraries. It's an art deco town coming of age (after recovering from the worst floods in history in April), where farmers mix with Hare Krishnas and new-age types, while retailers such as Work 'N' Country Gear are fused with artisan patisseries, hipster barista/barber stores and a cinema screening arty films.

I'm basing myself in a cabin in the bush outside the town of Uki that looks across to Mt Warning. At 1156 metres, Mt Warning is the first place in Australia to catch the

sunrise. Local Indigenous know it as Wollumbin, or Cloud Catcher, a traditional place for boys to be initiated into manhood. It's the centrepiece to any Tweed Valley experience, the beacon that guides you home and, just like Uluru, it changes colour through the day. On the drive to the national park that surrounds it, rainforest grows above the road and forms a green cathedral that lets in a hint of sunlight. Wollumbin National Park is home to the world's highest concentration of ancient Antarctic beech forest, but it's just one of the national parks you can visit. Only a few minutes west, I drive into the lesser-known Border Ranges >>



Views to Mt Warning.
BELOW: The Ink Gin shiraz
martini from Husk Distillers.



Try it here

WHERE TO STAY

EcOasis

Stay in a cabin with floor-to-ceiling windows and see wallabies, tawny frogmouths and yellow-tailed black cockatoos in bushland overlooking Mt Warning.
ecoasis.com.au

WHERE TO EAT

Mavis's Kitchen

It's the Tweed Valley's most lauded eatery, dine out in the enclosed verandah of a restored Queenslander with views across Wollumbin National Park.
maviseskitchen.com.au

Potager – A Garden Kitchen

Swiftly becoming a favourite for local foodies, Potager is set in a quiet green valley that looks out to the beaches of the Gold Coast.
potager.com.au

The Modern Grocer

Become an intergral part of the eclectic Murwillumbah community at the best providore and coffee shop in town.
themoderngrocer.com

Tasting Plate food tour

Sample from the best farms, restaurants and distilleries the region has to offer on a Tasting Plate food tour.
tastingplatetours.com.au

National Park where you can view the region in its entirety. There are five World Heritage-listed national parks in the region and few places on earth contain quite so many ancient plants and animals.

Outside the Tweed Valley, there are more secrets to be found in Byron Bay's hinterland. I love the drive to Minyon Falls on the eastern edge of the Nightcap National Park; there's a 100-metre-high waterfall into a secret valley of tall, skinny Bangalow palms. Along the way there are still honesty fruit stalls by the roadside in communities such as Goonengerry and Federal, and the historic railway village of Eltham is home to arguably the best pecan pie in Australia (at Eltham Valley Pantry). The village of Bexhill has a unique open-air cathedral and the funky market at The Channon is one of the largest in regional NSW. The same stalls I remember still sell incense and tarot cards, buskers beat bongos so hard their



fingers bleed and forest folk dance like no-one is watching.

As farmer Buck says: "There's something about the soil in this hinterland. It's nearly perfect ... full of trace elements, zinc, iron, all of that. Maybe that's why we don't want for much out here. There are worse places to be." ✈

Travel info

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