

*Ballin
Barr
Bay*

Ballina,
Bangalow,
Byron & beyond



Local travel writer **Kim Wildman** explores the Far North Coast of NSW in search of the three Rs.

Fringed by golden beaches and wrapped in the cocoon of nature, the Far North Coast of New South Wales has long been renowned as the home of the three Rs: rest, relaxation and rejuvenation. Yet despite living in one of Australia's most envied locations, I've rarely had the opportunity to enjoy its rewards. With a break in my busy schedule coming up, I decide it's finally time to cash in, and set off in search of good food, great scenery and maybe a few Rs along the way.

My journey begins in Ballina at the mouth of the Richmond River. I remember stopping off here as a kid while travelling down to Sydney on a family holiday. We were only there for a half-hour morning tea break and we pulled in near the water to enjoy the view. Apart from a few pelicans, the only real attraction in Ballina at the time, I remember, was the Big Prawn. Not anymore.

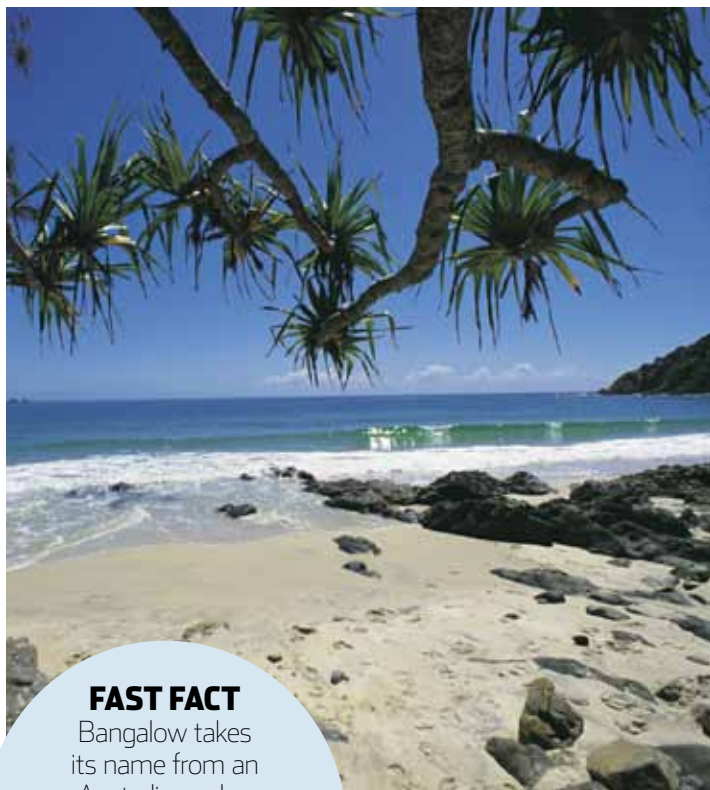
In recent years, the sleepy holiday town has awoken from its slumber. Gone is the Big Prawn (though rumours abound that it's set to be reincarnated) – instead, visitors are attracted to Ballina's newly gentrified waterfront, river cruises and pathways for cyclists and walkers.

After a stroll along the riverside promenade, I adjourn for a coffee at The Point. From its seat right on the river under the Ramada Hotel and Suites, the restaurant offers one of the most visually stunning dining locations in Ballina. Lovely as the view is, though, it's time I move on – so it's into the car and northwards along the Pacific Highway towards Byron Bay.

Most people who drive up (or down) the Pacific rarely take their eyes off the gleaming white sands and blue waters off the coast to see what lies beyond the tarmac. From verdant valleys to peaceful villages, ancient rainforests and craggy escarpments, the Far North Coast's hinterland has long since taken over from Byron Bay as the new 'promised land'.

As a resident of the town, I may be a little biased, but if there was to be a capital of this new 'promised land', it would have to be Bangalow. Once deemed as a country backwater, Byron's quiet country cousin, hidden in the hills some 10 minutes' drive inland from the coast, has certainly come of age.

Previously part of the Pacific Highway, the main street is today filled with chic boutiques and ☺



FAST FACT

Bangalow takes its name from an Australian palm, *Archontophoenix cunninghamiana*, which is native to New South Wales and Queensland.

top-notch restaurants and cafés – such as Satiare, set up by former Tetsuya’s chef Shannon Debrecey, which was awarded one Chef’s Hat by *The Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide* 2010 – an eatery that wouldn’t look out of place in Sydney or Melbourne.

Squeezed in between you’ll find a CWA shop selling knitted teddy bears and lace doilies, an old-fashioned hardware store and a small family-run grocery store.

In spite of its leanings towards big-city sophistication, Bangalow is one town that relishes its country heritage. Here, the events that locals most look forward to each year are the Billycart Derby in May that celebrates the opening of the Pacific Highway bypass; a fabulously over-the-top cabaret produced and performed by residents in July; and the annual agricultural show each November.

If it’s a little retail therapy you’re after, Bangalow is the place. A few of my favourites include Lazybones Emporium (www.lazybones.com.au) for vintage-style clothing and homewares; Aurora Design Studio (www.auroradesignstudio.com.au) for beautifully designed sustainable products, including jewellery, clothing and gifts; and Little Peach (www.littlepeach.com.au) for Japanese clothing and collectables.

From Bangalow, the scenic Old Bangalow Road winds up through the hills, twisting and turning its way to Byron Bay. Located on the easternmost tip of Australia, this mesmerisingly beautiful coastal hamlet, with its stunning beaches and balmy climate, has long been a haven for sun-seeking holidaymakers. A one-time hippie hangout, today it attracts everyone from laid-back surfers and backpackers to celebrities and cashed-up urbanites, all keen to count Byron’s blessings as their own.

Brash, bold and brimming with shops, cafés and galleries, Byron has much to lure visitors to its town



centre. But Byron’s biggest drawcard are its beaches. There are 15 in all: Main Beach, The Pass and picture-perfect Wategos (where Elle Macpherson surfs) are hot favourites, but drive five minutes south of the town centre to Suffolk Park and you’ll have a magnificent seven-kilometre strip of sand – Tallow Beach – all to yourself.

For the energetic, there are plenty of activities that will get your heart racing. You can go skydiving and hang-gliding, kayak with dolphins and learn to surf. You can stretch your legs on the five-kilometre Cape Byron Walking Track, which leads up to one of the country’s most photographed lighthouses. Officially, the track starts at Wategos Beach, but it’s possible to begin from the centre of town on the path that backs Main Beach.

Byron’s egalitarian spirit is epitomised by its dining scene, which ranges from casual toes-in-the-sand beach cafés to fine-dining establishments. Longstanding ☺

Opening page: Byron Bay Lighthouse.

This page, clockwise from top: Wategos Beach, Byron Bay; aerial view of Byron Bay lighthouse; Satiare in Bangalow.

Fact File

HOW TO GET THERE

Rex Regional Express (131713, www.rex.com.au) flies regularly between Sydney and Ballina, with connecting shuttle buses servicing Bangalow (www.bangalowlimousines.com.au) and Byron Bay (www.airlinkbyronbay.com.au).

WHERE TO STAY

Ramada Hotel & Suites

2 Martin Street, Ballina
1800 826 181 www.ramadaballinabyron.com.au

The Byron at Byron

77-97 Broken Head Road, Suffolk Park, Byron Bay
1300 554 362 www.thebyronatbyron.com.au

Bangalow Guesthouse

99 Byron Street, Bangalow
02 6687 1317 www.bangalowguesthouse.com.au

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

Satiare

33 Byron Street, Bangalow
02 6687 1010 www.ate.net.au

The Beach Café

Clarke's Beach, Lawson Street, Byron Bay
www.byronbeachcafe.com.au

The Point Restaurant

2 Martin Street, Ballina
02 6618 1188 www.thepointballina.com.au

WHAT TO DO

Learn to surf

Byron has some of the safest beaches and best surf spots in Australia. For a lesson, try Black Dog Surfing, Shop 8, The Plaza, Jonson Street, Byron Bay
02 6680 9828 www.blackdogsurfing.com

Bicycle tours

Explore the many pathways of Ballina by bicycle. Bikes can be hired from Jack Ransom Cycles, 16 Cherry Street, Ballina
02 6686 3485

MORE INFORMATION

Ballina Visitor Information Centre

Corner River Street & Las Balsas Plaza, Ballina
02 6686 3484 www.discoverballina.com

Byron Bay Visitor's Centre

Old Stationmaster's Cottage, 80 Jonson Street
www.visitbyronbay.com



FAST FACT

Byron Bay was originally known by the local Aboriginal people as Cavanbah. It only gained its modern moniker in 1894.

favourite The Beach Cafe, overlooking Clarke's Beach, buzzes from sun-up to sundown. Most folk come to drink in the view – there aren't too many places where you can watch dolphins and whales frolic while sipping your latté – but the menu, too, is well worth a look.

The biggest and best-known of the area's markets is Byron Bay Market, held on the first and third Sundays of the month; a smaller Artisan Market is held every Saturday night from 5pm to 9pm. For the best fresh produce, don't miss Byron Farmers' Market, held each Thursday morning on Butler Street Reserve.

After a long drive, I'm in need of a little re-energising, so it's on to the Spa and Wellness Centre at The Byron at Byron to rediscover my inner Zen. Hidden under a canopy of subtropical rainforest near Tallow Beach, this world-class day spa has an expansive menu of treatments including heated stone massages and Moor mud body wraps, as well as the only Vichy shower in Byron – you can even have your tarot read post-treatment.

Knots kneaded, I retire to the hotel's deck and recline in one of the comfy chairs overlooking the pool. There's something very appealing about this setting; it's so serene but I can't quite put my finger on it. Then I understand why: I've finally found my three Rs. 🌊

Above, and below:
Well-known Byron Bay Market; popular Lighthouse Beach, Ballina.

