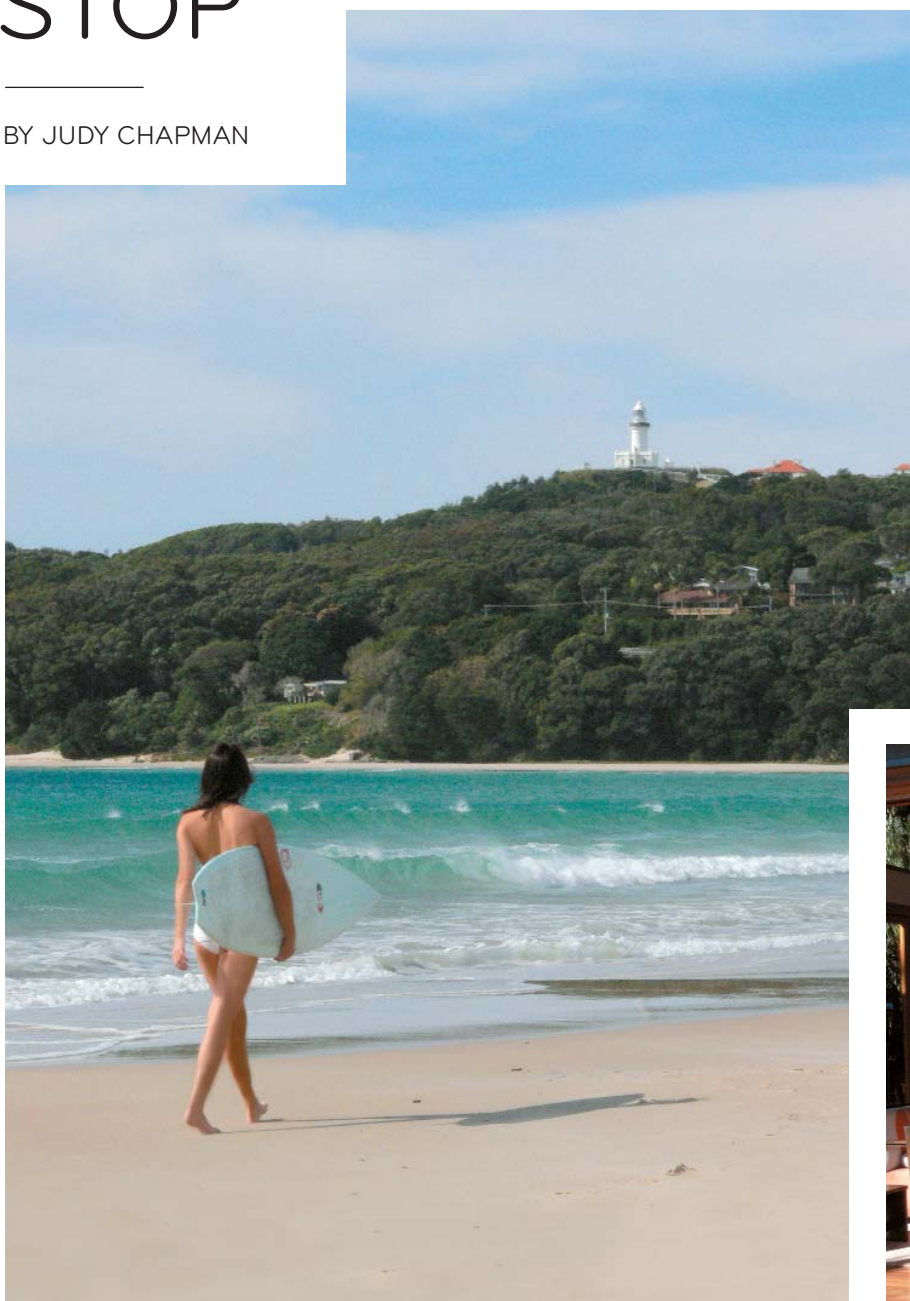


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BY JUDY CHAPMAN



Byron Beckons

Australia's sun-drenched Byron Bay has gone from hippie to hip

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN WE ALL KNEW EACH OTHER IN

Byron Bay, the New South Wales beach town where I grew up. I recall parties on the weekends when everyone seemed to show up—astrologers, musicians, artists, café owners, the lot. Returning to live here a year ago, I found that Byron had grown up too, though without losing any of the vibrancy of its earlier days. Instead of the '70s hippie haven of my youth, it had blossomed into one of Australia's hippest holiday destinations.

Originally known as Cavanbah—an Aboriginal word for “meeting place”—Byron Bay, a 90-minute flight north of Sydney, was a way station for much of its history. Even today it

SURF'S UP Clockwise from above left: Strolling down Main Beach; oysters at Fishheads; the open-air lobby of the Byron at Byron.

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GLASS ACT Clockwise from below: Hand-blown glass art at the Colin Heaney Studio; Red Ginger's tea lounge; hip togs meets vintage wallpaper at People of the Revolution.



retains a strong sense of its bohemian roots, as witnessed by its two biggest annual events: the Byron Bay Writers Festival, which celebrated its 10th anniversary in July, and the International East Coast Blues and Roots Festival, which draws thousands of visitors to the 9,000-strong town.

Not that anyone needs much of an excuse to spend time here. For one, it's staggeringly beautiful. The easternmost point on the Australian mainland, Byron Bay is set between lush volcanic hills and pristine beaches girded by dramatic headlands. The people, residents and visitors alike, make for a gorgeous sight too, whether the limber yogis stretching against the rising sun, or the toned and tanned surfies, or the cool mix of young Japanese, Israeli, and Brazilian beach bums in for a spell of sun and sand. For those passionate about surfing, the waves are good year-round; for everyone else, diversions include exploring nearby national parks, whale-watching, and kayaking with dolphins. Add to that a burgeoning array of excellent lodgings, restaurants, shops, and spas, and you have Down Under at its most uplifting.

WHERE TO STAY Despite initial opposition by the town's greenies (Byron is the only



place in Australia to have elected a Green Party mayor), the US\$33 million **Byron at Byron Resort & Spa** (77-97 Broken Head Rd.; 61-2/6639-2000; www.thebyronatbyron.com.au; doubles from US\$310) has turned out to be both eco-friendly and magical. Run by ex-Amanresorts managers Lyn and John Parche, the posh hideaway has 92 suites set on 18 hectares of beachfront rain forest. The mod-Oz restaurant, which extends out to a wooden deck, is likewise exceptional, and only recently opened to outside guests.

The seven stylishly simple suites at **Rae's on Watego's** (8 Marine Parade; 61-2/6685-5366; www.raes.com.au; doubles from US\$490) emerged from a makeover last year, updating the low-key glamour of the town's original celebrity retreat (Kate Hudson and Owen Wilson stayed here recently). Additions include a new spa, though the Thai-accented Australian dishes at its renowned beachside dining room, thankfully, haven't changed a bit.

Up in the hills is Olivia Newton-John's **Gaia Retreat & Spa** (933 Fernleigh Rd., Brooklet; 61-2/6687-1216; www.gaiaretreat.com.au; doubles from US\$1,500, including meals), a holistic hideaway where guests



de-stress in 20 earth-toned cottages and dine on organic cuisine in a Samoan-style longhouse.

Those looking for the privacy of a beach house have a host of oceanfront rentals to choose from. Among the best are the **Cape Beach House** (10 Kendall St.; 61-2/6685-5836; www.thecape.com.au; from US\$116 a night), for its chic all-white interiors, lap pool, and steam room, and the fabulous four-bedroom **Byron Bay Villa** (Watego's Beach; 61-2/9331-2881;

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www.contemporaryhotels.com.au; from US\$859 a night).

WHERE TO EAT Café culture abounds in laid-back Byron. The **Byronian Café** (58 Jonson St.; 61-2/6685-6754) draws an artsy following most mornings for its dandelion-soy latte, though a better bet for scenery is the **Pass Café** (Pass Beach; 61-2/6685-6074), which looks out over the sparkling water. Locals also love **Red Ginger** (2/111 Jonson St.; 61-2/6680-9779), a Shanghai-inspired teashop serving vegetarian dim sum and green-tea ice cream.

For the town's—some would say the entire coast's—best oysters, head to **Fishheads** on Main Beach (Jonson St.; 61-2/6680-7632). But the place to see and be seen is **Dish** (Jonson and Marvel Sts.; 61-2/6685-7320), where a sexy crowd downs Caprioskas and oysters against a backdrop of creamy-white interiors.

Farther down Jonson Street, **Olivio** (No. 34; 61-2/6685-7950) serves up casual Mediterranean fare and a great late-night cheese platter, while the **Balcony Restaurant & Bar** (7/3 Lawson St.; 61-2/6680-9666) is chock-a-block most nights with rambunctious patrons sinking cocktails and tapas. Set upstairs on the balcony of one of Byron's last remaining heritage buildings, its interiors are warm, rustic, and inviting.

WHERE TO SHOP Dozens of stores in Byron Bay offer elegant housewares, clothes, and jewelry imported from Indonesia, Brazil, and India. **Seminyak** (21 Fletcher St.; 61-2/6680-7404) carries beautifully made bed linens from Vietnam, while the labels at **People of the Revolution** (158 Jonson St.; 61-2/6680-9890), a newly opened fashion lair done up in vintage '60s wallpaper and chandeliers, range from sexy Brazilian togs to local street wear and eclectic accessories. A quirky, living-room-type space, the **Freckled Lounge** (Marvel and Fletcher Sts.; 61-2/6680-8444) is worth exploring also for its collection of Australian-made knickknacks, clothing, and bags.

The town and the surrounding shire are home to a thriving community of artists,

several of whom produce works for the **Cape Gallery** (2 Lawson St.; 61-2/6685-7659). Nearby, the **Colin Heaney Studio** (6 Acacia St.; 61-2/6685-7044) showcases the handblown glass creations of its eponymous owner. After you're done browsing the vintage jewelry and goblets at **Victoria Spring Designs** (4 Brigantine St.; 61-2/6680-7367), head to the **Medicine Wheel** (84 Jonson St.; 61-2/6685-8366) to stock up on flower essences while engaging in metaphysical conversations with herbalists and past-life readers.

SPA SCENE When it comes to spa culture, Byron Bay has always been light years ahead of the rest of Australia. Twenty years ago, Sydneysiders sneered at Byronians for their weekly reiki and color-therapy sessions; these days, they fill the town's tantric yoga workshops.

If you're not staying at Rae's or Byron at Byron, both of which house exclusive spa facilities, try **Buddha Gardens Balinese**

SPA SESSION A glass-tiled treatment room at Rae's at Watego's, below. Right: Upstairs at Balcony Restaurant & Bar.

Day Spa (21 Gordon St.; 61-2/6680-7844), a low-key sanctuary with a heated outdoor plunge pool, a sauna, and garden-flanked treatment rooms. Both **Quintessence** (8/11 Fletcher St.; 61-2/6685-5533) and **Pure Byron** (Shop 1, Jonson St.; 61-2/6685-5988) are reliable stops for aromatherapy massages, while the newly opened **Feel Good** (Shop 2/14 Bay St.; 61-2/6680-9887) offers therapist-free experiences like heated infrared massage beds. ☺

