[head] 23 things to know before you go to Byron Bay

[sell] A field guide to Australia’s ultimate beach town

[credit] By Penny Carroll

[intro] Byron Bay is not what it used to be. No shade intended: this small town on the north coast of New South Wales has always been a chameleon, and it’s simply shifting into its latest persona. Byron Bay is most famous for being the epicentre of Australia’s counter-culture, a lush coastal idyll cradled by an ancient caldera, where mung-bean munching hippies live happily alongside mad-keen surfers and people power kept McDonald’s from setting up its golden arches. But it wasn’t always this way: before the New Agers unfurled their prayer flags in the ’70s, it had a far less romantic reputation as a hub of sand-mining, cedar cutting, abattoirs and whaling.

These days, Byron – or the Bay, as locals call it – is evolving yet again, this time into a bohemian-luxe enclave for cashed-up tourists and celebrity sea-changers. You’ll still find traces of free spirit in town: crystal shops and vegan cafes wedged between upmarket boutiques and cocktail bars. It’s still a magnet for broke backpackers and slacker surfers, but it’s also teeming with entrepreneurs who boast about ‘board meetings’ on the water and corporate high-flyers turned yoga teachers. It’s everything and anything you want it to be.

I started visiting Byron six years ago and fell hard for the beautiful beaches, the relaxed pace and the turmeric lattes. A few trips in, I fell for one of the locals too, and inevitably made the move north from Sydney. Byron has only become more crowded and chaotic since then, but it’s just as seductive. Come and see for yourself.

1. **Take the back road.** There are two airports that service Byron Bay – the easiest option is to fly into Ballina Byron Gateway Airport (daily flights from Sydney, Melbourne and Newcastle) and book a transfer to Byron Bay. This will take you via The Coast Road, a scenic, 30-minute intro to the area that winds past windswept beaches, soft tea-tree forests and cane fields before meandering into town through the lush back door of Broken Head. Alternatively, you’ll find more flight options at Gold Coast Airport, but a longer and less joy-sparking transfer via the freeway. On the upside, if you arrive this way you’ll get to see the iconic “Cheer up, slow down, chill out” welcome sign and the jaunty new silver lighthouse/accidental dildo sculpture.
2. **Book ahead.** Byron is busy year-round these days, so it’s a good idea to plan well ahead for accommodation – essential if you’re here for one of the big music festivals, Splendour in the Grass, Bluesfest or Falls Festival. If you’re on a budget, the recently revamped [Byron Bay YHA](https://www.yha.com.au/hostels/nsw/byron-bay-and-surrounds/byron-bay-yha-backpackers-hostel/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIxMbJ28js4AIVg4RwCh2ruQ3QEAAYASAAEgIvWPD_BwE) hostel is a good, cheap option that’s centrally located; if you’re here for the ’Gram, [The Bower](https://www.thebowerbyronbay.com.au)’s beach-chic suites and stunning circular pool will rate highly on your feed. Beds filling up fast? More than 17 per cent of Byron’s housing is listed on holiday rental platforms like Airbnb, so you should have plenty to choose from.
3. **Byron Bay is small; the Shire is large.** Byron Bay is part of the greater Byron Shire, so pay close attention when searching for accommodation or you could wind up in a satellite suburb rather than in the town itself. Take The Byron at Byron Resort & Spa, for instance – it sounds like it’s smack bang in the centre of Byron, but it’s actually in the suburb Suffolk Park, a 10-minute drive from town. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing – in fact, it can be a blessing to be able to retreat from the Byron bubble – just something to bear in mind when booking.
4. **Wait for the whales.** Forget summer with its northerlies, week-long downpours and throngs of tourists. The best time to visit is during autumn and winter (March to August), when the weather is mostly idyllic, the surf is at its best, and the crowds ease off (a little). From May to October you’ll also be able to spot humpback whales cruising past on their annual migration.
5. **Get up early.** It’s worth it to soak up the sunrise from Cape Byron, the most easterly point of Australia. You can save time and drive up to the historic lighthouse (there are limited parking spaces and entry is $8), but then you’d miss out on the delightful [Cape Byron walking track](https://www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/things-to-do/walking-tracks/cape-byron-walking-track), which winds through rare littoral rainforest, past pristine beaches and across grass-covered cliffs to reach the stately 1901 lighthouse on the headland and sweeping views of the ocean. The full loop is 3.7km and takes around two hours to complete, but don’t be tempted to take the shortcut down the road on the way back – the second half of the track along Tallow Ridge is equally special.
6. **Learn the history of Cavanbah.** Cavanbah, the Aboriginal name for Byron Bay, means ‘meeting place’ and its history as a centre of celebration and ceremony is long and rich – but often overlooked by visitors. Few know, for example, that the lighthouse is built on a sacred initiation site, or that a 1000-year-old midden (an ancient garbage heap consisting of shells and tools) exists just behind the popular surf spot The Pass. In a story repeated across Australia, Byron’s indigenous people were persecuted, massacred and ultimately moved off their land after European settlement began. Thanks to a landmark native title agreement, however, the Arakwal National Park was created in 2001 and is managed by Arakwal people alongside the National Parks and Wildlife Service – the first agreement of its kind in Australia. To learn more about Cavanbah and its people, book a [Walk and Talk](http://arakwal.com.au/wp-content/uploads/LEISUREPROGRAM_Walk_With_Me.pdf) with an Aboriginal Discovery Ranger, look out for the educational signs throughout [Cape Byron State Conservation Area](https://www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/visit-a-park/parks/cape-byron-state-conservation-area) and take a moment to explore the Arakwal Room in the Lighthouse Keeper’s Cottage on the headland.
7. **Eat, sleep, beach, repeat.** Creamy white sand, glassy turquoise barrels, gently leaning pandanus palms – Byron’s beaches are the star attraction. Start at Main Beach, a patrolled spot good for swimming, and work your way down past Clarkes Beach to the Pass, an iconic peeling surf break that’s perfect for long and short boards, then around the corner to pretty Wategos, beneath the millionaires’ mansions. On the other side of the cape, Tallow Beach is a long and open beach break bordered by coastal heath, and its Cosy Corner below the headland provides shelter when the northerly winds pick up. To the left of Main Beach is Belongil, a slightly quieter stretch of sand with its surf break formed by the wreck of the SS Wollongbar. Bring a board or hire one (around $25 per day), take a surf lesson or a sea kayaking tour to spot dolphins and turtles, or simply spread out your towel under the palms. Bliss.
8. **Drink the Byron booze.** You’ll be craving a coldie after a long day in the surf. Raise a schooner or a middy (in NSW, that’s a 425ml or 285ml glass respectively) of [Stone & Wood](https://www.stoneandwood.com.au) Pacific Ale, a light and fruity beer made just down the road in the Arts & Industry Estate. If you like that drop, swing by their brand new brewery for a tour and a ‘tasting paddle’, or make a day of it and take in the nearby [Byron Bay Brewery](https://www.byronbaybrewery.com.au) as well – a good indoor option if rain has messed with your beach plans. If spirits are more your thing, head into the hills to [Cape Byron Distillery](https://www.capebyrondistillery.com), where their gins and macadamia nut liqueur are flavoured with ingredients foraged from the family-owned company’s regenerated rainforest. A tour of the distillery starts with a wander through the forest to taste native ingredients such as Davidson plum, and finishes with a cool cocktail overlooking the macadamia orchard.
9. **Get on your bike.** Traffic chokes Byron’s streets daily, and there are parking meters everywhere, at a steep $4 an hour. Cruising around on a bike is far less stressful. Some hotels provide them for free, or you can hire them cheaply (around $20 per day), and bike paths make it easy to explore.
10. **But, wheels are essential…** If you have the budget to hire a car for a day or two, it’s worth it – you can visit pretty hinterland villages like Bangalow, Newrybar, Mullumbimby and Federal, which each have their own unique personality, or drive out to Nimbin, the region’s colourful ‘alternative lifestyle’ capital, to visit the Hemp Embassy and explore Protestors Falls, a pristine pocket of rainforest saved from the logging industry. If you’re patient (and brave!), hitchhiking is still common in Byron. Bum a ride at your own risk.
11. **Wear what you feel.** There might be more famous faces and stylish surfer babes around these days, but Byron is still a place to explore and express who you are (or who you want to be), so bring your most colourful outfits and an open mind. The unofficial dress code is anything from Spell & The Gypsy Collective, a local label made good.
12. **Be prepared to wait.** In traffic, in the surf, for brunch. Did I mention this town gets busy? Go with the flow, settle in and enjoy the people watching.
13. **Eat like a local.** This could mean anything from nabbing the free falafels Lebanese restaurant Orgasmic Food uses to lure hungry tourists on Jonson Street, to slurping $1.50 oysters during [Balcony Bar](https://balcony.com.au/daily-specials/)’s weekly happy hour. But it really boils down to embracing the outstanding local produce, a result of the rich volcanic soils and subtropical climate. Menus read like a who’s who of Byron Shire farms and the weekly [farmer’s market](https://www.byronfarmersmarket.com.au) on Thursday mornings is so popular it regularly causes a traffic jam. Locals and visitors alike descend on Butler Street Reserve to do their weekly shop, picking up milk from Nimbin Valley Dairy, Coopers Shoot tomatoes and Bangalow pork direct from the supplier. If you miss the market, drive around the hinterland and you’ll spot makeshift farm stalls by the roadside, stocked with eggs, herbs, honey and whatever fruit and veggies are in abundance. Take what you need and leave your cash in the ‘honesty box’ attached.
14. **Head to the car park at sunset.** Sounds dodgy but this grungy spot overlooking Main and Belongil beaches is where you’ll find a drumming circle most evenings when the weather’s fine. The vibe is inclusive and the beats are addictive: slip off your thongs (flip flops) and dance to your heart’s content.
15. **Drink mushrooms.** Like everywhere in Australia, coffee is treated with utmost respect here, and there’s even a handful of local coffee growers and roasters in the region. But, this is also Australia’s wellness capital, so it’s the perfect place to shake up your order with medicinal mushroom-spiked brews and house-made nut milks. [Spice](https://www.facebook.com/spicebyronbay/), tucked between a souvenir shop and a convenience store on the busiest stretch of Byron’s main drag, is more of a cupboard than a café, but it offers a huge menu of weird and wonderful concoctions, from a reishi mushroom blend with cacao, cardamom and cinnamon, to milk made from pepitas. Don’t worry, you can get a straight-up latte too, if that’s your vibe.
16. **Eat Mexican.** It’ll be hard not to: Mexican is fast overtaking Japanese as the international cuisine of choice in Byron. Thanks to ocean currents that echo the Mexican Gulf Stream and local growers cultivating exotic produce, Byron is perfectly positioned to dish up authentic Mexican flavours. Score cheap, zingy tacos and jalapeno poppers at hole-in-the-wall [Chihuahua](https://www.facebook.com/ChihuahuaByron/) in Feros Arcade, washed down with a beer from the bottle shop (liquor store) next door, or head to [Chupacabra](https://chupacabra.com.au) in Suffolk Park to indulge in ceviche, slow-cooked pork, house-made tortillas and mezcal.
17. **Don’t get creative with parking.** It’s tempting, especially when space is at a premium and the beach is beckoning. But, trust me: rangers will find you and fine you, even if you’re hidden away down an unsealed road in a national park and your only crime is parking against the flow of traffic. (Yep, been there.) Ditto for illegal camping and littering (even [pouring out a cup of coffee](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4780456/Driver-fined-450-pouring-coffee-window.html) could cop you a hefty fine). Australian authorities are notoriously ticket-happy, especially in jam-packed tourist hubs like Byron where revenue is needed to support the over-burdened infrastructure, so don’t make the mistake of thinking you’ll get away with a few hours in that no-stopping zone.
18. **Follow the music:** From buskers holding impromptu concerts in alleyways to big-name acts, Byron’s music scene punches above its small-town weight. Where to soak it up all depends on your tastes – you’ll find starry-eyed folk crooners busking at Main Beach during the day or on Jonson Street corners in the evenings, a regular rotation of touring Aussie and international rock bands at [The Northern Hotel](http://www.thenorthern.com.au), and free, rollicking shows by mostly local acts every night of the week at [The Railway Friendly Bar](http://therailsbyronbay.com) (aka The Rails). The [Beach Hotel](https://www.beachhotel.com.au) (the Top Pub or The Beachy in the local vernacular), a sprawling venue overlooking the bay originally built by Paul Hogan and his sidekick John Cornell, has a regular reggae night on Mondays, plus cover bands, DJs and the odd ’90s nostalgia gig. Pick up the local free magazine The Byron Bazaar for a gig guide.
19. **Adjust your schedule.** Aim early in everything you do here – many cafes are resolutely shut by 2pm, and restaurant kitchens start to close around 10pm. You’ll find a handful of venues open till the early hours, but bar hop at your own risk. If you’re wandering around the streets late looking for fun, you could find yourself a victim of the lockout, where complying venues refuse entry after 2am, part of a voluntary agreement aimed at reducing alcohol-related violence in the area.
20. **Treat yourself.** Some of the best restaurants in Australia are clustered in and around Byron Bay, thanks to rock-star chefs chasing the ultimate work/surf lifestyle. You’ll need to book at least three months in advance for the headline act, the tiny, 14-seat Noma-esque [Fleet](http://fleet-restaurant.com.au) in Brunswick Heads, but others, like modern Spanish restaurant [St Elmo](https://stelmodining.com), [Raes Dining Room](https://www.raes.com.au/diningroom/) at the swish Raes on Wategos hotel, and [Harvest Newrybar](https://harvestnewrybar.com.au), which hosts a weekly ‘wild harvest’ night with a menu created around foraged native ingredients, are easier to get into and worth the spend.
21. **Strike up a convo with a local.** At the markets, in the pub, doing the lighthouse walk – many will lament that their town is overrun with tourists, before giving you directions to their favourite café, preferred healer and secret waterfall.
22. **Find the next big thing:** The [Arts and Industry Estate](https://www.facebook.com/Byron-Arts-Industry-Estate-161375483962867/) in west Byron is a hive of entrepreneurial spirit, buzzing with independent fashion labels, vintage boutiques, co-working spaces, yoga studios, smoothie bars, surf shops and homewares stores. It’s not flash, but its ramshackle appearance belies the creativity bubbling up around the mechanic workshops and warehouses. Skip the ritzy boutiques in town and do your shopping here (ideally on a weekday, it’s a ghost town on the weekends) – you can get there via the [solar-powered train](https://byronbaytrain.com.au) from the CBD or bike.
23. **Embrace the clichés:** Local legend says that the bedrock of Byron Bay is threaded with obsidian crystal, and it sits at the centre of several leylines, giving it a special energy. That it’s a transient place that attracts people who need healing. That women outnumber men here because of its divine feminine energies… You can take all that with a grain of Himalayan rock salt, but you’ll have more fun if you lean into it. Consult a psychic at [The Medicine Wheel](https://www.byronmedicinewheel.com.au), take a yoga class, buy a crystal and discuss the merits of meditation over an almond chai – you’ll be an honorary local in no time.

SUBS NOTE:

https://www.afr.com/real-estate/airbnb-takes-up-17pc-of-housing-supply-in-byron-20180925-h15tvd