

TRAVEL

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At the end of the rainbow

Once a hippie haven, Byron Bay is now a well-manicured party town. But the alternative spirit lives on in nearby Nimbin and Rosebank, for better or worse

BY JACK HEWSON

CONTRIBUTING REPORTER, IN BYRON BAY, AUSTRALIA

I am woken shortly after 5am by two loud thuds.

"Rangers," a stuttered voice says outside. Horizontal and slumberous, I slide open the van door and meet Ranger Bob Beale's midriff.

He says I am parked in a no-overnight-parking area. It is "therefore" his job to mete out the maximum penalty fine of A\$300 (NT\$8,550).

Welcome to Byron Bay.

Sleeping in a van parked in the street, or "wild camping," is a popular accommodation choice for many of the backpackers who visit Australia every year. Despite being illegal, wild camping is often tolerated, ignored or goes unnoticed throughout much of the country. But not in Byron.

The image of a liberal utopia populated by surfing artists and activists tripping over themselves to welcome newcomers fades fast.

Driving into town it becomes apparent just how much energy is expended on keeping Byron presentable, a town that is as pretty as it is kempt. Pristine signposts and immaculately mown grass verges border the tourist route that twists through the surrounding farmland and remnants of the "Big Scrub," a once-sprawling rainforest that covered this region of New South Wales. It is a paradise pruned.

Byron's center consists of nine bisecting streets. The place is picture-perfect, like the contrived town in *The Truman Show*. The funky shop fronts, campervans and hordes of backpackers jar against the backdrop of what was, until only a few decades ago, a sleepy little seaside town.

Travel agents offer everything from tandem skydiving to gourmet food tours and scuba diving off Cape Byron, Australia's most easterly point. Just about every tourist whim is catered for. And in spite of the global recession, business appears to be booming.

DOWN TOWN

The closest Byron gets to a dingy corner is The Rails, a charmingly dog-eared watering hole housed in the refreshments lounge of the town's defunct railway station.

"I [first] came down here in 1952," says retired electrical engineer Jim Warburton, while supping a cold beer at the bar. "I was part of a surf club on the Gold Coast, and we came down for a carnival, there was a whaling station ... that was still operational."

Since his arrival, the town has transformed beyond all measure.

After white settlers arrived in the 1840s, a small community developed, sustained by the fishing, shipping, dairy, meat and whaling industries that would flourish and decline over the following century.

A new wave of young settlers arrived

shortly after the 1973 Nimbin Aquarius Festival, bringing with them the nascent liberalism, environmental ideals and hedonistic attitudes of that era.

"Yeah, I went to Nimbin. It was incredible," recalls the 72-year-old. "I was a hippie, a young graduate hippie in the hippie uniform, desert boots, goatee beard, bright red hair."

Over the following decades Byron Bay's reputation as a bohemian haven with world-class surf and a slower pace of life grew. Word traveled fast. Big business and an influx of moneyed residents keen to invest in the ballooning property market soon arrived.

"For me Byron Bay's been destroyed," says Warburton. "All those young people, mostly backpackers, they're all great ... but it's the claustrophobia and the yuppie rich, you know, the snotty stuck-up rich people have taken over and so you've got a cultural divide."

While hedonism is alive and kicking in the town's bars and clubs, only superficial indicators remain of the hippie subculture's alternative living ethos or commitment to sustainability. Byron has become a well-manicured party town.

The closest thing here to free love is the free barbecue, served up every Friday afternoon in the park by a church organization called Youth for the Mission.

"It's changed crazy," says Steve Clark, a British missionary who arrived in Australia in 1999. "Back then there were a lot more Aboriginals here, a lot more hippies ... Domino's [Pizza] and Subway would never have been here five years ago."

ANYTHING GOES

For those wishing to escape, a slew of bus companies offer trips through 80km of verdant hinterland to the small village of Nimbin.

"Little Nimbundjy, little clever man, that's what this place is named after," says Bundjalung artist Gilbert Waorie. "This was our country ... We're still around, don't worry, Bundjalung are out there bud ... but we're scattered ... All that land was taken off of my people."

The Bundjalung, like so many other Aboriginal groups across Australia, suffered greatly at the hands of the white settlers, who cleared their forestland to farm cattle. Many were murdered or displaced.

"[The white settlers] claimed this land was theirs, after they shot all my people," says the 47-year-old. "Our boys get on with the hippies compared with the cow-cockies [dairy farmers]. The cow-cockies just wanted everything ... The hippies, they just wanted the land to look after ... yeah they were alright when they showed up, but then the drugs took over."

Ask any resident "what's the worst thing about Nimbin?" and the response is unanimous: "the lane boys." Hanging out next to the chaotic mural-splattered Nimbin Museum on Rainbow Lane, a bunch of young skinheads dressed in tracksuits and trainers peddle overpriced weed to the tourists and aggravate many with their fractious antics.

"They're the sons of all the hippies. And they look like all neo-Nazis," says Waorie. "They make all this money, and they piss it up, and they get on the harder drugs you know, they get on the ice [methamphetamine], because the marijuana's not strong enough for them, and they start smashing this poor little town up."

Besides narcotics, there is plenty of creative energy pulsing through Nimbin's veins. Home to sustainable energy pioneers The Rainbow Power Company, a Permaculture Gardens center that teaches sustainable organic agriculture techniques, the Bush Theatre, a museum and three art galleries, the place has a lot going on for a one-street town. But the biggest tourist draw by far is its notoriety as a demented liberal bubble in which anything goes.

The edge that Byron Bay lacks, Nimbin possesses in spades. It reminds me of



Mount Warning, also known as Wollumbin, dominates Cape Byron's lush hinterland.

PHOTO COURTESY NIGEL RAYNARD

Glastonbury in the 1990s: The smell of dried beer commingling with body odor, incense, the occasional whiff of pot, and a skeleton crew of residents and regulars, several of whom appear to be experiencing psychotic episodes.

"We're still seen as a bit of a seedy drug dealing den," says Michael Balderstone, lease-holder at the museum and president of the Hemp Embassy, home of the Australian cannabis legalization movement, which sits opposite.

"[But] it's saved us from being developed over the last 15 years. That reputation ... The developers, we reckon, are very keen to clean it up, but they're struggling ... They've locked up and arrested so many people here in the last two years and it's made no difference."

For many, the Nimbin tourist experience is a relentless party binge, punctuated by lounging on the beach, snorkeling and the occasional bungee jump. Others seek self-discovery and inner peace. The hinterland's "Rainbow Region" offers an array of ashrams and retreats.

REST AND RELAXATION

Halfway between Nimbin and Byron, both geographically and atmospherically, is the small village of Rosebank. I arrived in search of the Rainbow Temple.

Constructed over 28 years and still a work in progress, the temple is a four-story multicolored timber pagoda with a rooftop view of the forest canopy, and a magical setting in which to relax, stretch out, meditate or swim in the nearby rivers and waterfalls.

"The temple's devoted to the story of life on Earth, a non-denominational

gathering center," says Guy Feldmann, the temple's owner, who moved to Rosebank in 1978.

"I had two kids, built a house, found out I was a carpenter and that I enjoyed building. And then I thought ... 'oh ... build a temple, yeah ... a rainbow temple.'"

Feldmann, 64, set about creating a gathering place in celebration of the world's plurality.

"I realized in all the religions of the world there was nothing really devoted to the truth of life ... You can't have one God which serves one people and another God which serves another ... So I built a temple devoted to that one exquisitely beautiful truth: that we are all one."

"Whatever inherent essential truth is, that's what the temple is devoted to, and the full name of the temple is the 'Rainbow Temple of ... Whatever,' whatever that truth is," says Feldmann.

Despite continuing problems with the neighbors, Feldmann remains optimistic about human nature and his door is always open, as long as guests "don't come drunken ... or excessively drugged out."

A\$30 night includes food and accommodation, but if funds are low, other tariffs are available. A\$20 gets you food and accommodation, but a couple of hours work will be expected, then there's A\$10, or as in the case of many, "if the energy is right," nothing.

Parking is included.

Runaway popularity has long since diluted Byron Bay's esoteric appeal, but for visitors looking for a slice of Australian beatnik life, especially those prepared to dig a little, out in the hinterland it is still there to be found.



▲ Guy Feldmann, far right, owner of the Rainbow Temple, surveys Whian Whian waterfall in Nightcap National Park, New South Wales.

PHOTO: JACK HEWSON

▼ Ziggy Marley, son of reggae legend Bob Marley, performs at the East Coast Blues and Roots Music Festival in Byron Bay, April 2007.

PHOTO: EPA



The Rainbow Temple.

PHOTO: JACK HEWSON