



TRAVEL BYRON BAY

At your service

Craig Tansley discovers he doesn't have to venture far to get the most out of his North Coast idyll.

The humpback and her weeks-old calf show up about the same time as my surf coach – a few hours before my private chef and the day before my personal yoga instructor.

It's difficult to move from my easy chair on the balcony of a bedroom which faces out across the baby blue Pacific; a scattering of palm trees swaying on the gentlest of breezes the only things separating me from the handful of surfers lining the point at Wategos Beach.

Across the mirrored sea – 250 metres at most – a humpback whale is teaching her calf to breach. Again and again, the infant takes to the air with none of the measured grace of its mother, landing with a slap I can hear across the water.

A large pod of dolphins temporarily steals the limelight, surfing the ever-so-slow-moving swells, launching themselves high into the air in line with Mt Warning on the dusty pale blue horizon.

I could sit like this for hours, but I have a cavalcade of noted guests arriving to entertain me. This weekend I'm doing things differently. Everyone, it seems, has come to Byron Bay, but has it ever come to them? With the help of a concierge service, the best of Byron is coming right to my luxury three-bedroom beach house. The town's holiday traffic won't faze me here.

It begins with 1960s surf legend Rusty Miller knocking on my door on Saturday morning, dressed down in an old battered T-shirt, his unruly sun-bleached hair framing a wizened, 70-year-old face. A former US surf champ, Miller is official surf royalty. Even the cheekiest "grommet" in town gives Miller respect. He's also Elle Macpherson's surf coach; not that you'd ever hear it from him.

Miller takes me out for a surf as head-high waves wind in around Australia's most easterly cape. "It's a surf session I give, not a lesson," he says. "I just want to give people the surf 'stoke'. I don't want to just make you a good surfer, I want to

make you a good citizen in the water." Miller moves about the waves with the dexterity of a man 40 years younger. He calls me into the best waves and we surf together, yelling and hooting till the end.

As we dry off on the beach, I prompt Miller to name more of his clients. He says he can't remember; that they're all the same to him. "Who's that model who made it big in Italy?" he asks. Megan Gale. "There was the kid from TV, I don't know his name, I'll have to ask my wife." Ashton Kutcher.

You can add Paris Hilton and Baz Luhrmann to a long list of notables.

Surfing with Miller gives visitors an in-road into the Byron Bay scene that they just can't get any other way. He drives me to the Beach Hotel for a post-surf coffee (using a leg-rope to tie up his half-dingo dog) and I chat with a passing brigade of the town's surf pioneers. I grew up in Byron but there are characters I meet through Miller I've never seen in over 30 years. A "session" with Miller provides an invaluable insight into the community you'll never get at a surf school.

Miller drops me back at Wategos Beach in time for lunch but I won't be driving back into town to dine. In fact, I don't need a car at all. A private chef will prepare a seafood barbecue inside my beach house. Former Rae's on Wategos head chef Brendan Haras has cooked for Elle Macpherson, Tom Cruise, John Travolta and Penelope Cruz. Now it's my turn.

He turns up in shorts and an old T-shirt before donning his whites and preparing a feast of lobster, Queensland spanner crab, local snapper, Balmain bugs and green papaya salad. Haras has worked with celebrated chefs Tetsuya and Rick Stein and won four Chefs Hats and a gong for Restaurant Of The Year.

"People can have it as formal or informal as they like," he says as he throws the snapper on the barbecue. "For Elle [Macpherson] I'd rock up in shorts, T-shirt



Surfing legend Rusty Miller shows how it's done; the Watermark Residences; yoga on the beach; and a humpback pays a visit.



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and no shoes. She preferred it that way. I find out what sort of occasion you have in mind and cater for it. Anything's possible and you don't have to move a muscle."

From my dining table I watch whales and dolphins move about the Pacific Ocean; in the evening I watch the sun set into the distant ranges behind the bay and follow lunch with a Thai seafood banquet at Byron Bay's most acclaimed restaurant, Rae's on Wategos, a five-minute stroll away under a starry night sky.

I sleep with my glass doors wide open

beside a ludicrously loud ocean, waking early with the rising sun as my yoga instructor Stina knocks at the door. It's a cloudless morning and she takes me for a one-on-one Tatha session on the hard sand near the gentle waves just 50 metres from my bedroom.

She lays down a mat and I stretch out a few metres from the outgoing tide. "Let go of your thinking mind and connect with your breath," she tells me as I try to leave the city far behind. "Connect with the sounds around you; the ocean, hear it rise and fall, feel the sun on your face."

She coaches me through a gentle 60-minute session and when we're done, I breaststroke out past the breakers, lying on my back and looking up at the lighthouse that sits up high above my house.

At noon, a guide arrives to drive me to lunch in Byron Bay's hinterland at popular eatery, Harvest, in the tiny village of Newrybar, 20 minutes south-west of Byron. The hinterland of Byron Bay is every bit as evocative as the town itself. I'm

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driven along rarely visited tracks through old-growth rainforest where trees form cathedrals over the roadway and out to deserted waterfalls beside tiny hamlets, home to handfuls of alternative lifestyleists going about their simple living, far from the stress of the city.

Next morning, in the precious hours before I'm picked up to be taken back to the airport, I walk the 30 metres or so from my front door to the walking track that takes me through coastal bushland and out across the expanse of Cape Byron to Byron's famous lighthouse. Below us, in the clear blue of the Pacific, pods of dolphins perform tricks for those fortunate enough to be here on a Monday morning.

Byron Bay is famous across the planet and its charms have seduced the planet's biggest rock stars and movie idols, but when she comes delivered to your front door, you won't have to share her with anyone. **L&L**

The writer was a guest of Destination NSW.

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