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The Coffs Coast: Australia's undiscovered stretch of coastline



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Even the horses around Coffs Harbour love the surf. Photo: HWH Stables

Surely it says something about the quality of the beaches – and the waves – around Coffs Harbour that even horses want to surf (I can see them too: hanging round outside cafes ... donned head-to-hoof in Quiksilver, scoffing hamburgers and hot chips, showing off to mares...)

My horse is taking me further and further out towards the head-high waves breaking along Coffs Harbour's Boambee Beach, and he doesn't look like turning around any time soon. The whitewater's rolling in past the top of my quick-dry boardshorts – I can feel the big gelding's feet underneath me kicking out like Geoff Heugill's might in a sprint to the finish.

"Some people reckon they could never get their horse to get in the surf," HWH Stables' owner and guide Chris Fenech says beside me. "But you can teach horses to love the surf ... if you start them young."



There are many empty beaches all along the Coffs Coast. Photo: NSW Tourism

The Coffs Coast is, for the most part, a vastly unheralded 90 kilometre stretch of subtropical coastline that tucks itself into tiny, hidden bays and out along strips of unbroken wide sandy beaches – and except for the odd surfer, you'll mostly have it all to yourself.

The Coffs Coast is actually one of the only places in Australia you'll see subalpine mountain escarpments, subtropical rainforest and a submarine underwater sanctuary, all in the one place. Squint your eyes a little and with all those mountains and all that blue sea you might be in Hawaii.

I'm wondering why it still seems so undiscovered: it's been almost a decade since my last visit and it's still as uncrowded here as I remember.

While the masses keep flocking right on past – riding the highway north to Byron Bay or the Gold Coast (or flying right over) – few still seem to turn off the four-lane highway that cuts through town, repelled perhaps by the plethora of fast food chains and cheap '60s-era motels that besiege the road. All the better, then, for those who stop.

I'm here surfing horses on a warm and cloudless Sunday morning at a beach just a few hundred metres from the main drag of town, and yet, there's just a bloke with a playful dog (who likes to run at my horse's legs) for company. This distinct lack of crowds will characterise my visit over the next three days; outside of major holidays, Coffs Harbour and its surrounds still remain to this day a virtual secret. Strange.

Back on the beach, Fenech proves to be the best kind of horse riding guide: one who trusts his riders to go beyond a leisurely stroll (but then, there's not much he doesn't know about teaching people to ride his horses, having worked extensively through the Kimberley at both El Questro and Home Valley Station): "Anyone can walk a horse," he tells me. "But that's boring, you want to ride a horse."

After a few minutes of instruction, he lets me canter down the beach at will. And so, with the waves rolling in beside me and the sun beating down on my face, and in boardshorts and drenched sandshoes and not much else (OK, the obligatory helmet), I take off south towards Sawtell.

Any time I feel hot under the helmet, I steer my horse into the waves for a sharp, short burst of salty H₂O. It's as close to feeling free as you'll likely feel anywhere on holiday, especially this close to Sydney.

At barely an hour's flying time from Sydney – or a 5½-hour drive on the Pacific Highway north – Coffs Harbour is perfectly positioned as a short break getaway for Sydneysiders. But growing up three hours north, in Byron Bay, I never was able to look beyond that ugly highway in and out of Coffs, and the '70s commercial area downtown that dominated the streetscape.



Surfers take to the empty perfect beaches along the Coffs Coast. Photo: NSW Tourism

It looked to me back then like any other nondescript urban centre – totally functional, totally necessary ... but completely charmless.

But Coffs Harbour is anything but charmless. Veer off that highway east or west and you'll find one of the country's best adventure locations – in an area where the mountains of the Great Dividing Range practically fall right into the Pacific. There are rainforests here, offshore islands, rivers, secret hamlets and soaring mountains.

The best way to get a fast overview, I'm told, is on the back of a Harley.



The Nymboida is a testing river with plenty of grade four and five rapids to challenge thrill-seekers. Photo: Liquid Assets

"It pulls like a freight train, this thing," driver David Laarhoven (but call him Laarz) tells me as I climb aboard his top-of-the-line, 1700cc Ultra Classic Harley Davidson.

"The best thing is you can smell everything around you, on a bike ... the gums, the sea, the rainforest, the cow shit."

We take off onto the old deserted Pacific Highway south, to near-forgotten farming villages along the Bellinger River, such as Mylestom, out across flooded gum plains and out to the green, mountainous hinterland, as the sun loses its sting on its slow arc west.

We make it out to rainbow icon, Bellingen, riding through its charming, rustic main streets where locals sit and sip latte-soy-dandelion teas. Then we ride the highway north, till we venture north of Coffs Harbour and I see the scattering of bays and the offshore Solitary Islands, a 71,000-hectare marine sanctuary.

We motor down narrow bitumen roads to one bay after another. At some there's so few people about that mobs of kangaroos gather by the sandy tracks to the beach, while at another a pod of dolphins 10-thick surf metre-high waves all the way to shore, past a surfer.

I'm keen to reacquaint myself with Coffs Harbours' hinterland, the region's truly hidden star. Aside from a brief interest in the hinterland when actor Russell Crowe chose here as his escape from the spotlight, Coffs Harbour's hinterland goes completely unnoticed. But just a few minutes from town (and the McDonalds along the highway) lies one of the most pristine ancient rainforest strips in Australia.

Coffs Harbour's rainforest-covered hinterland is almost entirely undeveloped – home to a eclectic community of arty types, farmers and hermits. The region is blessed with 11 national parks, 14 nature reserves, two Aboriginal areas and 37 state forests, along with 84,000 hectares of protected World Heritage Area.

The best way to see the rainforest here (few roads run through it) is by riding one of Australia's last genuine wild-river rafting tours through the heart of it. The Nymboida River is one of the only spots you can go white-water rafting on 100 per cent river-fed rapids in Australia (other businesses often operate below dams on regimented water flows which, to the purists, just doesn't cut it).

The ride out to the drop-in zone could be a tourist activity in itself. I journey past Crowe's Nana Glen property, and through tiny, green villages home to a handful of reclusive residents and past logging ghost towns reclaimed by the forest. The Nymboida flows for 180 kilometres south to north – the opposite way to just about every other river in Australia.

We jump in our raft and head downriver. The journey's graded moderate to challenging, there's plenty of Grade Four rapids and the odd Five to test your nerve.

I see birds skimming the water in search of insects, while a platypus surfaces near us, and above, escarpments stick out hundreds of metres all around. Though there's never too much time to admire the scenery – the Nymboida can be a tricky proposition, with rapids to negotiate with names like Lucifer's Leap and Devil's Cauldron.

We spend hours paddling and bouncing off solid rock walls at the ends of rapids. At times, the rainforest feels so close and untethered, I feel trapped by it, but then it opens out to reveal spread-out vistas where mountains run right above the river.

There's barely a dull moment in three days around Coffs – the local tourism board released a campaign documenting 101 Things To Do On The Coffs Coast – but even that's just getting started. I leave on a sunny day, after a solitary swim in the secluded bay beside my resort, one of so many empty bays north of town. As my flight banks hard right and we fly up above Boambee Beach, I see Fenech and his trusty steeds far below me, ready to surf perfect blue-water waves with no one around them for miles.