

North Coast



As the New South Wales coast tumbles north, the distance between rugged headlands widens and the urban interludes shrink. This is where the shoreline really unfurls, baring sandy horizons, kilometres of empty beach and banks of national park. To the west, green hummocks of farmland ripple at the base of mountains and ancient rainforest.

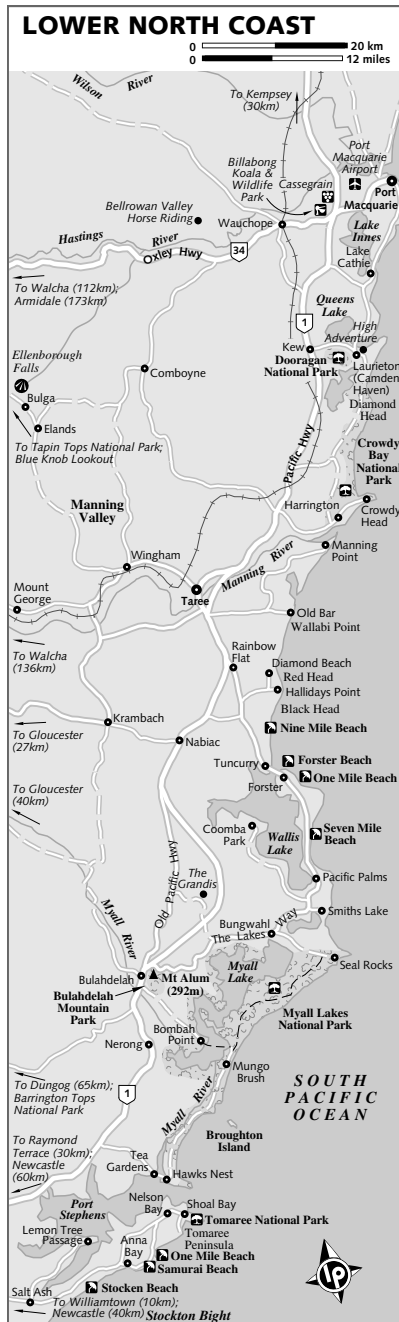
It's no wonder the stretch from Port Stephens to Tweed Heads is one of the most celebrated road trips in Oz, but for much of the journey the well-trodden tourist path is scarcely visible. Most folk make a beeline for Byron Bay, temptress of the north with her New Age glamour and halcyon tones. But the coast holds far more than a sea-change pursuit. Young families exhaust stimulus-needy rug rats with synthetic and natural fun in Coffs Harbour and Port Macquarie. Adolescent surfers (of all ages) cut their teeth in tiny surf settlements like Crescent Head and Angourie. Pernickety weekenders exploit gourmet cuisine, and cosy mountain cabins in hinterland towns like Dorrigo, Bellingen and Bangalow. Seasoned hippies create conformity-free utopias in Nimbin and beyond. Nature-lovers happily transgress in World Heritage national parks. And travellers and locals of any ilk make the most of that gorgeous shoreline.

Best of all, the resistance to development is strong in this enlightened neck of the woods. Locals here are fiercely protective of their exquisite home, and 'eco-friendly' is a tag worn with pride.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Tune in, tone up and take time out in **Byron Bay** (p186)
- Chart a course around the magnificent **Myall Lakes National Park** (p160)
- Hide out with the surf and sun in blissful **Seal Rocks** (p161)
- Enjoy long, boozy afternoons and glistening harbour views in **Port Macquarie** (p163)
- Work the pins and gorge on views in **Dorrigo National Park** (p173)
- Channel Satchmo at the **Bellingen Jazz & Blues Festival** (p172)
- Catch the East Coast sunrise first from the summit of **Mt Warning** (p210)
- Shop at the Far North Coast Hinterland's bustling **weekend markets** (p191)





LOWER NORTH COAST

Hovering just above Newcastle, the lower reaches of the North Coast are a meandering network of coastal towns with big sky, even bigger beaches and no attitude. It all starts with the beautifully haphazard waterways of Port Stephens, where whole neighbourhoods of urbanites relocate during school holidays. Beyond here, the quiet blue of Myall and Wallis Lakes hides tiny settlements in verdant pockets. The beach, peppered with undeveloped towns and impenetrable national park, zigzags its way north to cosmopolitan and pretty Port Macquarie.

PORT STEPHENS

☎ 02 / pop 8040

The bay of Port Stephens incorporates a string of coastal towns and has a true family feel. Scalloping shorelines gives rise to shards of empty beach, and the scattered communities, who share a passion for the environment, do a good job of keeping things low-rise. This is an area where 'eco-accredited' certificates are sported like badges of honour. Locals and holidaying couples with youngsters in tow aren't the only fans – the bay is home to some 160 resident dolphins and the odd passing whale.

Orientation & Information

Nelson Bay is the unofficial capital of Port Stephens, and home to the **visitors centre** (☎ 1800 808 900; www.portstephens.org.au; Victoria Pde). The area's most scenic beaches – Zenith, Wreck and Box Beach – back onto **Shoal Bay**, on the point, which is the next town along.

On the southern side of the Tomaree Peninsula is **Anna Bay**, another small town that has both surf and bay beaches. At the northern end of town, **One Mile Beach** is a gorgeous semi-circle of velvety sand and crystalline water, favoured by surfers, beachcombers and idle romantics...some of whom are nude by the time you reach **Samurai Beach**.

Sights & Activities

Tiny Anna Bay is backed by the magnificent **Stockton Bight** – the longest moving sand dunes in the southern hemisphere, stretching 35km to Newcastle. These rolling moguls look strikingly similar to the Sahara Desert, and it's possible to lose yourself entirely in their shimmering midst.

The restored 1872 **Inner Lighthouse** at Nelson Head's Little Beach has displays on the area's history and suitably evocative views.

To get closer to those views mount a trusty steed for a beach ride with **Sahara Trails** (☎ 4981 9077; Port Stephens Dr; 2hr ride \$90).

Local diving outfits include:

Dive One Nelson Bay (☎ 4984 2092; www.diveone.com.au) PADI courses \$470.

Pro Dive Nelson Bay (☎ 4981 4331; D'Albora Marina) PADI courses \$450.

Tours

Imagine Cruises (☎ 4984 9000; www.imaginecruises.com.au; 123 Stockton St; 2hr cruise per adult/child \$22/14) Eco-certified dolphin- and whale-watching tours.

Moonshadow Cruises (☎ 4984 9388; www.moonshadow.com.au; adult/child \$60/20) Twilight dinner cruises.

Sand Safaris (☎ 4965 0215; www.sandsafaris.com.au; 173 Nelson Bay Rd, Williamtown; tours from \$110) Eco-sensitive quad-bike forays out on the dunes.

Tamboi Queen Cruises (☎ 4981 1959; 1½hr cruises per adult/child \$17/9) Dolphin-watching cruises.

Sleeping

Winning Property (☎ 4984 0100; www.kdwinning.com.au; 19 Stockton St) has prolific holiday rental listings.

Melaleuca Surfside Backpackers (☎ 4981 9422; www.melaleucabackpackers.com.au; 2 Koala Pl, One Mile Beach; camping per person \$15, dm/d \$25/85) It's all mates and smiles at this excellent backpacker retreat spread across a large green property. Camping is 'free range' on a grassy oval and cabins are made of glorious rust-red timber. It's wheelchair-friendly and the koalas dig it too.

Leilani Haciendas (☎ 4981 3304; leilani@hunterlink.net.au; Gowrie Ave, Nelson Bay; apt \$110-180; ☎ ☎) This cute block of units has more colour than a Wiggles convention. The one- and two-bedroom apartments, with sun-filled interiors and sliding doors onto the back patio, are ideal for families.

O'Carrollyns Holiday Village (☎ 4982 2801; www.o.carrollyns.com.au; 36 Eucalyptus Dr, One Mile Beach; d from \$160; ☎ ☎) A dishy eco-resort, O'Carrollyns scatters its eight cabins throughout a mini forest, complete with ponds, birdlife, grunting koalas and frogs. Digs have mezzanine bedrooms and five-star energy ratings (meaning minimal energy to heat and cool) and are wheelchair-friendly.

Shoal Bay Resort & Spa (☎ 1800 181 810, 4981 1555; www.shoalbayresort.com; Beachfront, Shoal Bay; apt \$180-240; ☎ ☎) Praise be to the gods of pam-

pering, they surely had a hand in this classy number. A range of rooms treat fussy tushes and if you really want to impress the missus, opt for a Heritage Suite with ocean views and décor to die for.

Also recommended:

Colonial Ridge Resort (☎ 4982 0600; www.colonialridge.com.au; 4 Fleet St, Salamanda Bay; r from \$170; ☎ ☎) Kitsch and comfy cabins.

Halifax Holiday Park (☎ 4981 1522; Beach Rd, Nelson Bay; powered sites from \$32, cabins \$90-160; ☎ ☎) Excellent cabins and facilities.

Eating

RedNeds Gourmet Pie Bar (☎ 4981 1355; Shop 3/17-19 Stockton St, Nelson Bay; pies \$5; ☎ ☎) breakfast & lunch) The honey-chilli chicken, kangaroo teriyaki or two fat ladies seafood pies here will knock your socks off. There are more than 70 versions on the menu (and no ladies of any size are harmed in the making).

E10 On The Marina (☎ 4984 9700; Shop E10, D'Albora Marina; mains \$16-25; ☎ ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) This sunny, waterfront restaurant perfects casual dining with treats like Cajun-dusted calamari salad, mega burgers and fresh fish and chips. The sultry breeze off the water goes nicely with a crisp chardy.

Catch (☎ 4981 1555; Shoal Bay Resort & Spa; mains \$28; ☎ ☎) dinner) The ocean's elite find their way to dinner plates at this classy restaurant, and they arrive dressed for the occasion. Tempura nori of Atlantic salmon with blue swimmer crab and ginger mousse...you get the idea. Bring your manners and your appetite.

Zest (☎ 4984 2211; 16 Stockton St, Nelson Bay; 2/3 courses \$55/65; ☎ ☎) lunch Mon-Sat, dinner Wed-Sat) Port Stephens' finest restaurant dazzles even the harshest gastronomes with prosciutto-wrapped rabbit with tapenade filling or seared baby squid on strawberry and basil risotto. Dining is on an intimate deck with five-star service.

Also recommended:

AquaBlue Bistro & Bar (☎ 4984 9999; D'Albora Marina; mains \$20; ☎ ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Cosmopolitan bistro at the waterfront.

bite me now (☎ 0411 747 249; cnr Donald & Stockton Sts; meals \$10; ☎ ☎) breakfast & lunch) Healthy eats-on-the-run with attitude.

Getting There & Around

Port Stephens is an area, not a town, so when driving follow the signs for Nelson Bay.

Port Stephens Coaches (☎ 4982 2940; www.pscoaches.com.au) runs daily from all towns of Port

Stephens to Sydney (\$32) and services the coast to Newcastle.

Port Stephens Ferry Service (☎ 0412 682 117, 0419 417 689) departs Nelson Bay for Tea Gardens at 10am, noon and 3.30pm, returning at 10am, 2.30pm and 5pm (additional services over Christmas). The trip takes around an hour (return fare per adult/child \$20/10).

Shoal Bay Bike Hire (☎ 4981 9444; Cnr Shoal Bay & Government Rds, Shoal Bay) rents bikes to explore the good network of paths.

TEA GARDENS & HAWKS NEST

☎ 02

Tea Gardens is a small settlement with soft suburban alcoves and an abundance of stoic pelicans, which seem to revel in their capacity to sleep one-legged on a post. Across the bridge, Hawks Nest has impressive views out to Cabbage Tree Island and a smattering of modern accommodation.

The **visitors centre** (☎ 4997 0111; Myall Rd, Tea Gardens) is run by helpful volunteers. **CTC @ Tea Gardens** (☎ 4997 0749; Shop 4 Myall Plaza, Tea Gardens; per hr \$10) has internet access.

Activities

Hawks Nest Dive Centre (☎ 4997 0422; www.hawksnestdive.com.au) Snorkelling and diving.

Naturally Amazing (☎ 0409 993 470; half-day tours per person from \$49) Small-group 4WD tours to Barrington Tops, Stockton Bight and more.

Sleeping & Eating

Tea Gardens Club Inn (☎ 1800 635 790, 4997 0911; www.bestwestern.com.au/teagardens; Yalinbah St, Tea Gardens; r from \$90; 🍷) Behind the Bowls Club, this sturdy motel has good-sized rooms with creature comforts and spas. Some rooms have sliding doors right onto the bowling green – you can watch the greenkeepers battle with the birds in the morning.

Ocean Side (☎ 4997 0941; www.oceansidehawksnest.com.au; Cnr Boomer & Bennet Sts, Hawks Nest; apt \$140–180; 🍷 🍷) Flashy and revamped, this place offers very comfortable apartments, some with spas, some with hot tubs (we'll let you spot the difference). All rooms have spiffy insides and the facilities are excellent.

Aqua (☎ 4997 0966; Cnr Boomer & Tuloa Sts, Hawks Nest; mains \$15–25; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This eatery touts itself as a cosmopolitan café, and boy does it bring home the bacon. Menu creations include artichoke and hokkien noodle stir-fry or pesto-stuffed, free-range chicken roulade.

Pie Man (☎ 4997 1733; Shop 3, 17–19 Stockton St; pies \$4; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon–Fri) Taking the humble pie to a fine art, this bakery offers variations like spaghetti bolognese, curry beef and spicy chicken. As for the sausage rolls...Lord help us.

Also recommended:

Hawk's Nest Beach Caravan Park (☎ 1800 072 244; www.hawksnestcaravan.com.au; Booner St, Hawks Nest; camp sites/cabins \$31/77) Near a good surf beach.

Mum's (☎ 4887 1162; 46 Marine Dr, Tea Gardens; mains \$17; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Outstanding seafood.

MYALL LAKES NATIONAL PARK & AROUND

☎ 02 / pop 1160

These stunning lakes form the largest natural freshwater system in NSW. Pooling in deep blue basins, they weave around clumps of forest and small settlements. The **Lakes Way** ribbons its way through the scenery and is a magnificent drive.

Canoes, sailboards and runabouts are available at **Bombah Point**. Here you'll also find **Bombah Point Eco Cottages** (☎ 02-4997 4401; www.bombahpoint.com; 969 Bombah Point Rd; d per 2 nights \$440), which makes an environmentally friendly and romantic getaway.

Alternatively, **Eco Point Myall Shores Resort** (☎ 1300 769 566; www.mysallshores.com.au; Myall Lakes National Park, Bombah Point; camp sites \$26, cabins \$95–260; 🍷) has a huge range of cabins and villas.

There is a track from Bombah Point to Seal Rocks, but it's testing, even with a 4WD, and the park rangers are rather unsympathetic to over-ambitious drivers.

The **Bulahdelah visitors centre** (☎ 1800 802 692, 4997 4981; cnr Pacific Hwy & Crawford St) is just opposite the road to Myall Lake. Looming over the town is **Mt Alum**, the largest aboveground deposit of alum (a salt used in dyeing, medicine and manufacturing) in the world. The mining has ceased and the mountain is now the **Bulahdelah Mountain Park**, with some walking tracks to historic sites. The entrance is a couple of blocks back from the highway, on the same street as the police station.

The tallest tree in NSW, the 400-year-old **Grandis**, towers over dense rainforest not far from Bulahdelah and is an awesome sight. To reach it, take the signposted turn-off 12km from Bulahdelah.

The **National Parks & Wildlife Service** office (NPWS; ☎ 6591 0300; www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au; The

Ruins Camping Ground, Booti Booti National Park, The Lakes Way, Pacific Palms) has information on the many local national parks, including **Booti Booti National Park** (admission per vehicle per day \$7). The view from Cape Hawke here is a 360-degree panorama of the confluence of lakes, ocean, forest and teeny towns. On sunny days the horizon is lost and the water is so crystalline you'll want to sprout wings and jump in.

SEAL ROCKS

This idyllic cove embodies the Australian ideal of utopia – few people, magical views, great surf and little to do but swim and sit. Surrounded by national parks and boasting the odd whale, it's the perfect spot for urban fugitives. The **historic lighthouse** is well worth the walk to witness the rocks that have claimed many ships over the past 150 years.

The **Seal Rocks Camping Reserve** (☎ 1800 112 234, 4997 6164; www.sealrockscampingreserve.com.au; camp sites/cabins from \$25/70) has tidy cabins, a manicured-to-bowling-green-perfection lawn and a blissful location right on the beach.

Turn right at the general store for the intimate **Treachery Camp** (☎ 02-4997 6138; www.treacherycamp.com.au; 166 Thomas Rd; camp sites/cabins from \$12/77), with lovely timber cabins and secluded camping.

FORSTER-TUNCURRY

☎ 02 / pop 18,000

Forster and Tuncurry are twin towns separated by the sea entrance to **Wallis Lake**. This is a great spot for water babies to wade a while, with a string of spectacular beaches providing unhurried and unpretentious coastline. In winter you can slip into the ether here without fear of tourist tack or prices, but summer sees the lakes come alive with water sports, screaming kiddies and sunburnt adults.

Orientation & Information

Forster (*fos-ter*), on the southern side of the entrance, is the big brother of the pair. The Lakes Way leads into town from the south, first becoming MacIntosh St then turning sharply left into Head St, which runs east to a large roundabout that marks the town centre.

The helpful **visitors centre** (☎ 6554 8799; Little St, Forster) is just beside the lake. There's internet access at **Leading Edge Computers** (☎ 6555 2065; Shop 3, cnr Head & Beach Sts; per hr \$6).

Sights & Activities

Tobwabba Art (☎ 6554 5755; www.tobwabba.com.au; 10 Breckenridge St, Forster; admission free; 🍷 10am–4.30pm Mon–Fri) is owned by the Worimi people of the Great Lakes region. The centre exhibits their paintings and artefacts.

For local history and a look at a classroom of yesteryear, visit the **Great Lakes Historical Museum** (☎ 6554 3012; Capel St, Tuncurry; adult/child \$2/50c; 🍷 10am–2pm Wed, 1–4pm Sun).

Beaches are of the highest quality in this area, with **Nine Mile Beach** the pick of the surf spots, **Forster Beach** a good family option with its swimming pools, and **One Mile Beach** also popular.

Kids love a good adventure park, and Forster-Tuncurry has two: the **Big Buzz Fun Park** (☎ 6553 6000; The Lakes Way; adult/child \$25/15; 🍷 10am–4pm Sat & Sun) is big on water slides, while **Ton O Fun** (☎ 6554 3090; Ton O Fun Rd, adult/child \$33/21; 🍷 10am–4pm Sat & Sun) has quad bikes and water slides.

More activities include:

Amaroo Cruises (☎ 0419 333 445; www.amarooocruise.com.au; 2hr cruise \$40) Shark and sea-turtle spotting.

Boomerang Rainforest Tours (☎ 6554 0757; tours per person \$80–95) Excellent small-group 4WD tours.

Dive Forster (☎ 6554 7478; www.diveforster.com.au; Fisherman's Wharf; per adult/child \$60/30) Cruises and dolphin swims.

Sleeping & Eating

Forster Dolphin Lodge YHA (☎ 6555 8155; www.yha.com.au; 43 Head St, Forster; dm/d \$25/65) Catering to backpackers (well, the handful who come), families and the lone traveller, this hostel has snug common areas and friendly staff. Some rooms have en suites.

Barkley Inn (☎ 6555 2552; www.barkleyinn.com; 38 Head St, Forster; s/d \$85/90; 🍷 🍷) A comfy option, the Barkley has neat and petite rooms with plenty of sunlight and furniture from the recent past. Most rooms have tree-lined windows and it's a stroll to town.

Lakeside Escape Bed & Breakfast (☎ 6557 6400; www.lakesideescape.com.au; 85 Green Point Dr; s/d incl breakfast \$135/165) It's well worth getting out of town, with its motel mania, to spend a few nights in this pleasant B&B in the small Green Point fishing village. Rooms have spas and gorgeous lake views.

Forster Beach Caravan Park (☎ 1800 240 632, 6554 6269; www.escapenorth.com.au/forstercaravanpark.htm; Reserve Rd, Forster; camp sites/cabins from \$22/55) This sprawling park manages to maintain spick-and-span

order. It's backed by the mighty breakwall and has decent villas and cabins.

Wharf Bar & Grill (☎ 6555 7200; 1/32 Wharf St, Forster; mains \$26; ☎ lunch & dinner) Grills like salt-and-pepper tempura whiting or prosciutto-wrapped chicken breast stuffed with macadamias keep this restaurant in fine form, as do the second-storey water views.

More eats:

Casa del Mundo (☎ 6554 5906; 12 Wharf St; mains \$15-30; ☎ lunch & dinner) Nooky Spanish joint dishing up tapas and sangria.

Forster Beach Kiosk (Beach St; snacks \$5; ☎ breakfast & lunch) Beachside burgers, rolls and sandwiches.

Getting There & Away

Busways (☎ 1300 555 611) runs down to Bulahdelah (\$30). **CountryLink** (☎ 13 22 32), **Greyhound** (☎ 13 14 99) and **Premier Motor Service** (☎ 13 34 10) all stop in Forster-Tuncurry.

THE MANNING VALLEY

This valley extends west from the Manning River delta (between Old Bar and Harrington) through farmland to Taree and Wingham, then north through forests to the plateau containing Bulga and Comboyne. There are better coastal options to the north and south, but the rainforests and national parks are rewarding to investigate.

Taree

☎ 02

Although it's the largest town in the Manning Valley, Taree offers little to the visitor and with the **Big Oyster**, its coveted landmark, retired to car-sales duties, the town should be used as little more than a reference point.

The **visitors centre** (☎ 1800 182 733, 6592 5444; 21 Manning River Dr) is on the north side of town.

Motels are out in force along the Old Pacific Hwy and you're sure to pick up a cheap deal during the week.

Wingham

☎ 02 / pop 4670

This is the oldest town in the area and its English influence is reflected in a large, central green square that now features the **Log** (a 16m, 19-tonne log representing the town's timber-felling origins) and a replica **Vampire fighter jet** commemorating the 50th anniversary of the RAAF.

Down by the riverside lies **Wingham Brush**, a subtropical floodplain rainforest where

you can take to the boardwalk and see flying foxes.

If you need to hang the boots here, the **Wingham Motel** (☎ 6553 4295, fax 6553 4878; 13 Bent St; s/d \$80/90; ☎) has decent little rooms right near the guts of town.

Bent on Food (☎ 6557 0727; www.bentonfood.com; 22 Bent St; mains \$12; ☎ breakfast & lunch) is quite the hip café, serving meals like smoked pork loin stuffed with mango. You can also pick up cheeses, relishes and coffee to go.

THE COASTAL WAY

This meandering route has sweet, sleepy towns and good surf beaches. The first section consists of **Black Head**, **Red Head** and **Diamond Beach**.

The next offering comes at **Old Bar**, which has a long surf beach. Just south is **Walabi Point**, where there's a lagoon for swimming. **Manning Point**, a hamlet serving the oyster farms along the river, is 12km up the coast.

Just across the river – but a hefty drive because there is no bridge shortcut – is **Harrington**, a lovely sneeze of a town with another lagoon and respectable surf beaches nearby. The **Harrington Hotel** (☎ 02-6656 1205; 28 Beach St; mains \$15; ☎ lunch & dinner) is a beauty. The expansive bistro has glorious water views and upstairs there are wonderfully creaky old pub rooms (\$45).

Crowdy Head is the prettiest of these towns, with sweeping views from the 1878 lighthouse out to sea and overlooking the Crowdy Head National Park.

You can take the unsealed but well maintained road to **Diamond Head** through the **rainforest** and, if you desire, pitch a tent at one of the camp sites (\$6), but bring your own water.

Wedged between Dooragan National Park and the ocean is **Camden Haven**, which constitutes Laurieton, North Haven and Dunbogan villages. These quaint towns cluster around the wide sea entrance of **Queens Lake**.

Laurieton Lookout, inside **Dooragan National Park**, is 5km up a winding wooded road. The views from the top are jaw-dropping. Right in front is a bird's-eye view of Camden Haven, and a walking track descends down the mountain for 2km.

Your final march up the coastline will take you past the biggest town, **Lake Cathie** (cat-eye), on a lake with safe beaches ideal for youngsters. The road then enters the sprawling outer suburbs of Port Macquarie.

PORT MACQUARIE

☎ 02 / pop 41,141

Port, as it's affectionately known, reclines over a spectacular headland at the entrance to the subtropical coast. Renowned for a handsome and undulating shoreline, it has a placid ambience that belies its population. Although this is the largest town between Newcastle and Brisbane, you'd never guess it – the urban tentacles here are well hidden behind the pretty harbour. The palm-lined centre has a touch of the cosmopolitan about it, enhanced significantly by a bevy of good restaurants and swank places to stay.

Orientation

The city centre corners on the mouth of Hastings River. A string of magnificent beaches rolls south and a spread of suburbs follows.

Information

NPWS office (☎ 6586 8300; 152 Horton St)

Port Surf Hub (☎ 6584 4744; 57 Clarence St; per hr \$7; ☎ 9am-7pm) Internet access.

Visitors centre (☎ 1300 303 155; www.portmacquarie.info.com.au; cnr Gordon & Gore Sts) Excellent info on the greater Port Macquarie area.

Sights

HISTORIC BUILDINGS & MUSEUMS

Convict labour has produced some striking architecture throughout the town. The 1824 **St Thomas' Church**, which sits on a hump of a hill, and the 1869 **old courthouse** (☎ 6584 1818; cnr Clarence & Hay Sts; adult/child \$2/50c; ☎ 10am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) down in town are water warriors. The 1835 **Garrison shopping precinct** (cnr Clarence & Hay Sts) has been renovated – some say spoiled – and now houses 21st-century shops and cafés.

The 1836 **Port Macquarie Historical Society Museum** (☎ 6583 1108; 22 Clarence St; adult/child \$5/4; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat) has a rich stock of 19th-century household items and excellent exhibits of local characters. There are also one-tonne Victorian-era frocks and frightening dentistry tools. Up on the point, the old pilot's cottage (1882) houses the **Maritime Museum** (☎ 6583 1866; 6 William St; adult/child \$4/2; 10am-4pm Mon-Sat) with wreck relics, photographs of early navigators and a room devoted to Matthew Flinders' cat Trim.

The **Alma Doepel** (☎ 6581 8000; Lady Nelson Wharf; adult/child \$3/1; ☎ 9am-4pm) is a resplendent three-masted trading vessel built in 1903, now

spending its retirement as Port Macquarie's centrepiece.

OTHER SIGHTS

For those looking for answers beyond the horizon of the Pacific Ocean, sneak a peek through the telescope at the **observatory** (☎ 6583 1933; Rotary Park, William St; adult/child \$5/4; ☎ 7.15-9.30pm Wed & Sun, 8.15-10pm during daylight savings).

Timbertown (☎ 6586 1940; www.timbertown.com.au; Oxley Hwy, Wauchope; entry by donation; 9.30am-3.30pm) is a heritage theme park suited to families, with old dust-swept streets, intimate shops and the old (working) steam train. Admission is free but you pay for rides.

WINERIES

Several wineries are scattered around the Port Macquarie area. Its reputation as the region's pioneering vineyard has made **Cassegrain** (☎ 6582 8377; www.cassegrainwines.com.au; 764 Fernbank Creek Rd; ☎ 9am-5pm), 15km out of town, a favourite. **Ca Marche Restaurant** (☎ 6582 8320; mains \$30; ☎ lunch & dinner) here has won awards and is worth the trip.

More wineries to visit include:

Bago Vineyards (☎ 6585 7099; www.bagovineyards.com.au; Bago Rd, Wauchope; ☎ 9am-5pm)

Douglas Vale Historic Vineyard (☎ 6584 3792;

www.douglasvalevineyard.com.au; Oxley Hwy, Port Macquarie; ☎ 9am-1pm Wed-Sat)

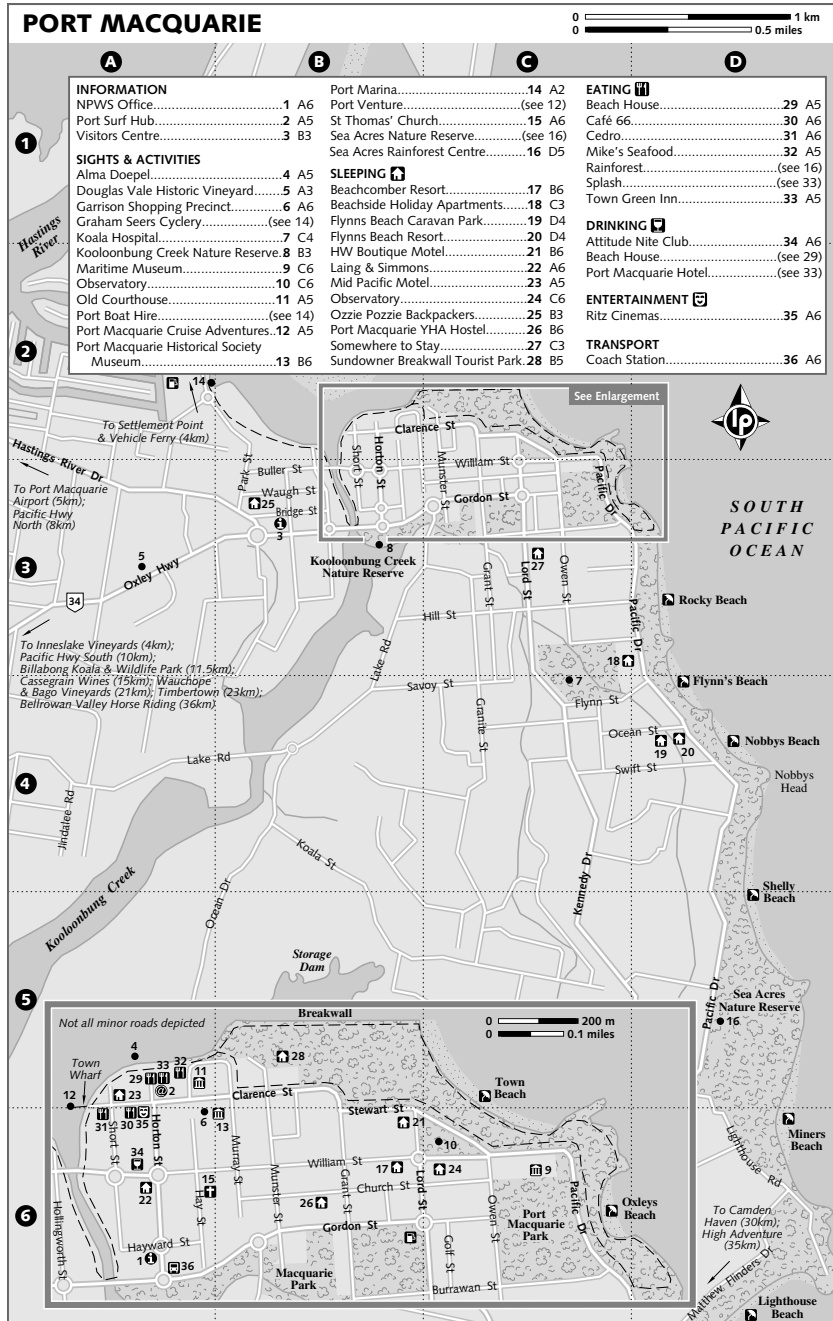
Inneslake Vineyards (☎ 6581 1332; The Ruins Way, Port Macquarie; ☎ 10am-5pm)

WILDLIFE & NATURE RESERVES

Port Macquarie shares its beautiful gum trees with one of Australia's icons, the koala. Unfortunately, people's housing needs have seen these little fellas' land rights diminish and, with that, their own homes. While searching for their lost oasis, many end up at the **Koala Hospital** (☎ 6584 1522; www.koalahospital.org.au; Roto House, Lord St; admission by donation; ☎ feeding time 8am & 3pm), which you can visit to cheer the little battlers up (no flash photography).

If hand-feeding fighting-fit koalas, kangaroos and the odd emu appeals, **Billabong Koala & Wildlife Park** (☎ 6585 1060; 61 Billabong Dr; adult/child \$12/8; ☎ 9am-5pm) is a wonderful family experience. Patting times are 10.30am, 1.30pm and 3.30pm.

The **Kooloobong Creek Nature Reserve** (cnr Gordon & Horton Sts; admission free) encompasses 50 hectares of bush and is great for bird-watching. There are trails, a lake, boardwalks and a cemetery.



Sea Acres Rainforest Centre (☎ 6582 3355; Pacific Dr; adult/child \$10/6; ☎; 9am-4.30pm) protects 72 hectares of coastal rainforest alive with birds, goannas, brush turkeys and, unfortunately, mosquitoes. There's a wheelchair-accessible boardwalk and excellent guided tours.

Activities

A walking track curls around the headland and offers splendid views with your morning exercise. You can get offshore with **Port Boat Hire** (☎ 6583 8514; Port Marina), which rents vessels from \$25 per hour for two people.

High Adventure (☎ 0429 844 961; www.highadventure.com.au; 10 Rosewood Crt, Laurieton; tandem flight from \$110) delivers adrenaline and dramatic landscapes courtesy of hang-gliding.

Readers rave about **Bellrowan Valley Horse Riding** (☎ 6587 5227; www.bellrowanvalley.com.au; Crows Rd, Bellrowan Valley; 2hr per person \$75), which organises guided horse-riding trails in the hinterland, about 30 minutes drive from Port Macquarie.

Edge Experience (☎ 0427 324 009; www.edgeexperience.com.au; full-day tours from \$85) offers adventure combo-tours that mix mountain biking and abseiling, as well as vineyard and jazz tours.

More active pursuits:

Graham Seers Cyclery (☎ 6583 2333; Port Marina; half-/full-day hire \$25/40) Bike hire.

Port Macquarie Surf School (☎ 6585 5453; www.portmacquariesurfschool.com.au; 2hr lessons per person from \$40)

Scuba Haven (☎ 6559 5530; www.scubahaven.com.au; PADI courses \$400)

Tours

Australian Wilderness Tours (☎ 6587 7144; adult/child \$99/59) Small-group 4WD wilderness tours.

Port Macquarie Cruise Adventures (☎ 6583 8483, 1300 555 890; www.cruiseadventures.com.au; Town Wharf; 3½hr per person from \$35) Dolphin- and whale-watching tours.

Port Venture (☎ 1300 795 577, 6583 3058; Town Wharf; 2hr cruise per person \$25) River cruises.

Sleeping

For holiday apartment rentals, get in touch with **Laing & Simmons** (☎ 6583 7733; www.portrealstate.net; cnr William & Horton Sts).

BUDGET

Ozzie Pozzie Backpackers (☎ 1800 620 020, 6583 8133; www.ozziepozzie.com; 36 Waugh St; dm \$25, d without/with bathroom \$55/65; ☎) This small, charming and

colourful hostel is just the ticket to make you feel like one of the crew. Dorms with wide, steel-tubed bunks arrange themselves around a wee courtyard, with spotless bathrooms and kitchen and a cosy TV room.

Port Macquarie YHA Hostel (☎ 1800 880 008, 6583 5512; www.yha.com.au; 40 Church St; dm/d \$23/55; ☎) Homier than nanna's spare room, this sunflower-yellow weatherboard has neat four- to six-bed dorms, a sociable lounge and an open kitchen. It's family-friendly and the owners are unfailingly caring.

Flynns Beach Caravan Park (☎ 6583 5754; www.flynnsbeachcaravan.com.au; 22 Ocean St; camp sites/cabins from \$30/90; ☎) Get back to the bush in this well-treed pocket of a park. Dappled sunlight filters through the eucalypt canopy, settling on tidy cabins, grassy camp sites and good amenities.

More options:

Somewhere to Stay (☎ 6583 5850; wizbangent@hotmail.com.au; Cnr Lord & Burrawan Sts; r \$90;

☎) Cheerful and cheap.

Sundowner Breakwall Tourist Park (☎ 1800 636 452, 6583 2755; www.sundownerholidays.com; 1 Munster St; camp sites \$25-47, cabins \$75-290; ☎) Fabulous facilities.

MIDRANGE

Basic motels pepper Port's outskirts.

Mid Pacific Motel (☎ 1800 024 894, 6583 2166; midport@bigpond.com.au; cnr Clarence & Short Sts; r \$110; ☎) An oldie but a goodie, this medium-rise motel sits right on the grassy esplanade and has vibrant little rooms with kitchenettes and lovely views. The staff are super friendly.

HW Boutique Motel (☎ 6583 1200; www.hwport.com.au; 1 Stewart St; apt \$125-165; ☎) A handsome full-service hotel, HW has renovated a dowdy shell and turned its units into chic and spacious rooms with gorgeous views. Rooms have wi-fi and broadband and some have glossy spas.

Beachcomber Resort (☎ 6584 1881; www.beachcomberresort.com.au; 54 William St; r \$135-175; ☎) This low-rise condo-block has spiffy apartments with kitchenettes and bright, open living spaces. Some of the units have water views and the complex has a pool and barbecue courtyard AND two old-school video arcade games – ace!

Beachside Holiday Apartments (☎ 6583 9544; www.beachsideholidays.com; 48 Pacific Dr; apt \$140-190; ☎) Right across the road from Flynn's Beach, these apartments are spacious, have

balconies and face either the ocean or the pool. There's also a lovely rooftop barbecue for sundowners and snags.

Observatory (☎ 1300 888 305; 6586 8000; www.observatory.net.au; 40 William St; apt from \$155-240; (P) (♿) (♿)) Oh so schmick, these as-new apartments are like showroom models. Soft colourings, suede couches and glass doors that open onto balconies with huge ocean vistas make them extremely comfortable. The same-sameness of them is a tad clinical, though.

TOP END

Flynns Beach Resort (☎ 1800 833 338; www.flynnsbeachresort.com.au; cnr Pacific Dr & Ocean St; apt \$180-275; (P) (♿) (♿)) Holiday Inn meets boutique style in these two-bedroom apartments. Some have pool-and-tennis-court views, some have water views, all have sleek kitchens, cheerful décor and oodles of room. The complex is also extremely secure.

Eating

Mike's Seafood (☎ 6583 7721 Shop 4/13 Hay St; mains \$11; (♿) lunch & dinner) We love the slogan – 'It's all good!' And it is. Mike's is a great little takeaway specialising in paper parcels of fishy goodness. Tuesday is 'buy one get another for a buck' night.

Cedro (☎ 6583 5529; 70 Clarence St; mains \$10-15; (♿) breakfast & lunch) Punters sun themselves on the patio here while the kitchen whips up Moroccan lamb or roast pumpkin, haloumi and pesto burgers. This spot begs for beautifully languid weekend brekkies.

Beach House (☎ 6584 5692; Horton St; mains \$18; (♿) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Take in the water views from the sea of seats outside and launch into a lunch of salmon and Caesar salad, Malaysian curry or an overflowing fisherman's basket. Stick around for beer and a burger, oysters and wine or a gourmet pizza for dinner.

Town Green Inn (☎ 6583 1011; cnr Clarence & Horton Sts; mains \$15-20; (♿) lunch & dinner) The bistro in the old Port Macquarie Hotel is a stylish and bright space serving scrummy fajitas, tuna steaks and korma prawn pizzas. Or you could even grill your own steak.

Splash (☎ 6584 4027; 3/2 Horton St; meals \$25-30; (♿) lunch & dinner) Is there such a thing as five-star Mod Oz? Yes there is! It tastes like seaweed and dashi crusted yellowfin tuna with spiced vegetables and snow-pea leaf salad, and it's served at this intimate and uncomplicated restaurant.

Also recommended:

Cafe 66 (☎ 6583 2484; 66 Clarence St; mains \$10-20; (♿) breakfast & lunch) Massive Italian menu; family-friendly.
Rainforest (☎ 6582 4444; Sea Acres Rainforest Centre; mains \$15; (♿) breakfast & lunch) Beautiful leafy setting and fine café fare.

Drinking & Entertainment

Beach House (see Eating), hogging an enviable position right on the grassy esplanade, is a beautiful pub perfect for a beer in the sun in the late afternoon. As the wee morning hours draw near folk head inside and mingle on the low-slung black leather couches.

Port Macquarie Hotel (☎ 6583 1011; cnr Horton & Clarence Sts) The old man of Port's pubs, this place simmers with afternoon drinkers and picks up for live bands on weekends and trivia on Sunday.

Attitude Nite Club (☎ 6583 5466; Galleria Bldg, William St; admission \$5) Even a dress code doesn't prevent this club from ending up loud, beery and sticky in the early morning. Perfect for a younger crowd.

Ritz Cinemas (☎ 6583 8400; cnr Clarence & Horton Sts) It's all mainstream releases, but there are cheap tickets on Wednesday, Friday and Sunday.

Getting There & Around

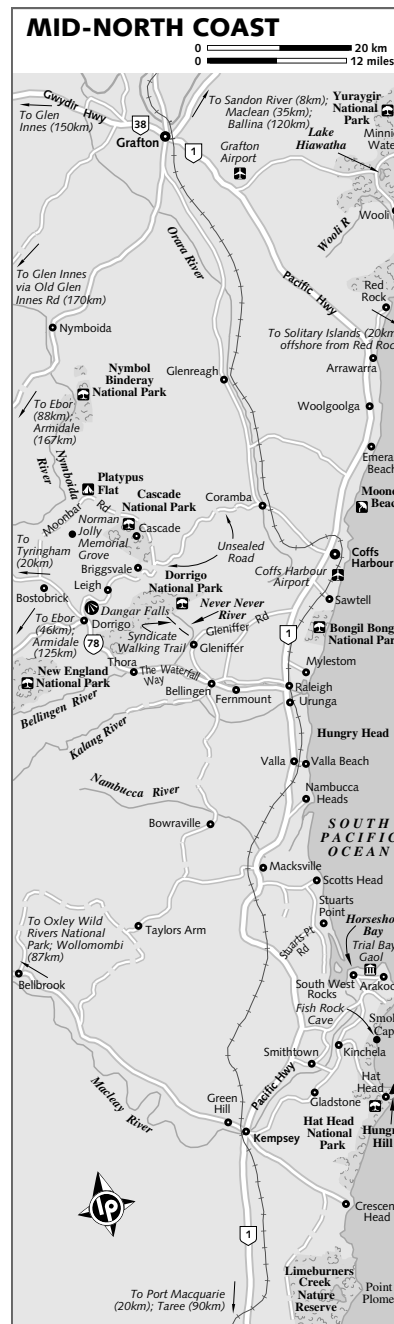
QantasLink (☎ 13 13 13) flies to Sydney.

Greyhound (☎ 13 14 99) and **Premier Motor Service** (☎ 13 22 32) both run to Sydney (\$66) and Coffs Harbour (\$44). **Keans** (☎ 6543 1322) runs three times a week to Tamworth. The coach station is on the corner of Horton and Gordon Sts.

The **Settlement Point ferry** (\$3 per car, passengers free) operates 24 hours. A 10-minute trip on a flat punt gives you access to the north beach and Pilots Beach.

MID-NORTH COAST

As the coast climbs further north, the pace of life becomes increasingly languid. Quiet towns in varying stages of sun-blissed slumber dodge in and out of national parks and station themselves above astonishing views. Inland, the woody towns of Dorrigo and Bellinger cultivate gourmet cuisine, thespian legacies and acclaimed festivals. In the background lie the humbling World Heritage rainforests of Dorrigo National Park. Turning all of this on its head is brash Coffs Harbour, with an abundance of cheap, raw-adventure activities.



KEMPSEY

☎ 02 / pop 8460

Kempsey, a large rural town serving the farms of the Macleay Valley, is a gateway of sorts to the western rainforests and the eastern coastal towns. From Kempsey comes a couple of facts that will hold you in good stead at any pub trivia competition.

The town is the home of the **Akubra hat** – if you want to know more, there's a video at the excellent **visitors centre** (☎ 1800 642 480, 6563 1555; Pacific Hwy), which shares the space with the **sheepshearers museum** (adult/child \$4/2), on the south side of town.

The late Slim Dusty was born here and, presumably, got his inspiration for songs like 'Duncan' from this unassuming town. Plans have been laid for the **Slim Dusty Heritage Centre** (☎ 6562 6533; www.slimdustycentre.com.au), although they haven't made it to vertical stage yet. You can give them a shove via a donation. If you still need more Slim-mania you can head to the **Pub With No Beer** (☎ 6564 2100; Taylors Arm Rd) about 60km northwest of Kempsey. Slim's aria to the pub became the biggest-selling single in Australia in 1958. And it actually does serve beer.

All critters large and small are welcome at **Ned's Bed Horse-O-Tel** (☎ 6565 0085; www.nedsbed.com; 123 Kawana Lane; d/horse/dog \$100/17/11; (♿) (♿)), where self-contained units sit on a sizable plot of land. Our competition, **Lonely Pooch**, rates the place very highly.

Alternatively, **Moon River Motor Inn** (☎ 6562 8077; 157 Pacific Hwy; s/d from \$55/70; (♿) (♿)) is a wee shrub of a spot with 33 comfortable rooms.

Fredo Pies (☎ 6566 8226, 75 Macleay St, Frederickton; pies \$3; (♿) 7am-7pm) perfects the Oz institution by filling golden casings of pastry goodness with crocodile, kangaroo, beef and just about any other filling you can imagine.

Greyhound (☎ 13 14 99) and **Premier Motor Service** (☎ 13 22 32) run daily to Coffs Harbour (\$45) and Sydney.

CountryLink (☎ 13 22 32) trains run to Grafton and Sydney.

CRESCENT HEAD

☎ 02 / pop 1200

In surfing circles, this is where the Malibu surfboard gained prominence in Australia during the '60s. Now younger generations are living the surfing legacy this town cherishes. It's wonderful to watch the longboard riders surf the epic waves of **Little Nobby's Junction**

when the swell's up. Crescent Head itself is an intimate town that caters mainly for family getaways and the odd backpacker who has ventured off the beaten track.

For holiday rentals try **Point Break Realty** (☎ 1800 352 272, 6566 0306; www.pointbreakrealty.com.au).

Mediterranean Motel (☎ 6566 0303; www.crescentheadaccommodation.com.au; 35 Pacific St; s/d \$110/130; ♿ ♿) is the best motel in town. It has a Mediterranean restaurant (mains \$20; open breakfast, lunch and dinner), comfy and spotless rooms in the main building, and cute 'surf shacks' out the back (from \$120) that sleep eight.

Right at the mouth of the river, **Crescent Head Holiday Park** (☎ 6566 0261; Pacific St; camp sites/cabins from \$30/115) is a lovely spot to pitch a tent.

The turn-off to Crescent Head is near the visitors centre in Kempsey. **Busways** (☎ 1300 555 611) runs to and from Kempsey.

HAT HEAD NATIONAL PARK

This coastal park of 6500 hectares runs north from near Hat Head to **Smoky Cape** (south of Arakoon), protecting scrubland, swamps and some excellent beaches backed by significant dune systems. Birdlife is prolific on the wetlands. Rising up from the generally flat landscape is Hungry Hill, near Hat Head, and sloping Hat Head itself, where there's a walking track.

Surrounded by the national park, the village of **Hat Head** is much smaller and quieter than Crescent Head. **Hat Head Holiday Park** (☎ 02-6567

7501; camp sites/cabins \$16/60) is close to a beautiful sheltered bay. You can camp (per person \$3) at Hungry Head, 5km south of Hat Head. There are pit toilets but no showers or water.

The park is accessible from the hamlet of Kinchela, on the road between Kempsey and South West Rocks.

SOUTH WEST ROCKS

☎ 02 / pop 6000

Jutting into the Tasman Sea on a hooked headland, South West Rocks is off the highway and the tourist trail. Crass commercial development has been capped in the rising folds of eucalypts and endless shoreline, and the housing boom of mansions fit for small nations is relegated to newer fringes.

Sights & Activities

The area is great for divers, especially **Fish Rock Cave**, south of Smoky Cape. **South West Rocks Dive Centre** (☎ 6566 6474; 5/98 Gregory St) and **Fish Rock Dive Centre** (☎ 6566 6614; www.fishrock.com.au; 134 Gregory St) both offer two dives for around \$120.

Sleeping

Rock Pool Motor Inn (☎ 1800 180 133; www.rockpoolmotorinn.com.au; 45 McIntyre St; r/ste from \$135/165; ♿ ♿) 'Motor inn' usually summons visions of a tired structure with dated rooms, but this is actually a pleasant, four-star hotel. Fresh rooms contain contemporary colours, cable TV, kitchenettes and plush little bathrooms.

Heritage (☎ 6566 6625; www.heritageguesthouse.com.au; 21-23 Livingstone St; d incl breakfast from \$130; ♿) This renovated 1880s house has lovely, old-fashioned rooms with discreet mod cons. Some also have spas. Choose from the simpler rooms downstairs or the more lavish versions upstairs with ocean views.

Horseshoe Bay Beach Park (☎ 6566 6370; www.horseshoebaypark.com.au; Livingstone St; camp sites/cabins \$26/70) In a central position right on the sheltered Town Beach, the 82 sites and 12 cabins here are usually booked out over summer holidays.

Eating

Riverside Tavern (☎ 6566 5700; 92 New Entrance Rd; mains \$15-22; ♿) lunch & dinner) The wooden decking at the bow of this waterfront pub catches plenty of afternoon sun and lazy lunchers. The food is scrubbed-up pub nosh: chicken and corn fajitas or lemon-scented calamari. There's also a kid's menu.

Geppys (☎ 6566 6169; cnr Livingstone & Memorial Sts; mains \$20; ♿) dinner) This cosmopolitan restaurant sizzles up Mod Italian with a splash of Mod Oz...Mod Ozaloin. Tuck into sashimi of yellowfin tuna with wasabi mayo or mud crab cooked in Singapore chilli. Live jazz and blues fill the room on Wednesday nights.

Hermitage restaurant (☎ 6566 6625; 21-23 Livingstone St; mains \$25; ♿) breakfast & lunch daily, dinner Fri & Sat) Serves carnivorous concoctions such as a whopping 400g eye fillet with scallops and prawns.

More eateries:

Seabreeze Hotel (☎ 6566 6909; Livingstone St; mains \$8-18; ♿) lunch & dinner) Great pub food and alfresco dining.

South West Rocks Seafood (☎ 6566 7703; Livingstone St; basket \$6) Fish and chips.

Getting There & Away

Cavanaghs (☎ 6562 7800) has two runs daily to and from Kempsey, leaving from the town bus stop at Horse Shoe Bay.

TRIAL BAY & ARAKOON STATE RECREATION AREA

Imposing and profoundly historic, Trial Bay occupies the west headland of the town, and the **Trial Bay Gaol** (☎ 02-566 6168; adult/child \$5/3; ♿ 9am-4.30pm) dominates the area. Pity (or perhaps envy) the wretched souls incarcerated here during the 19th century; they had to endure breathtaking views of the ocean, forests and freedom. Actually it's been mostly unoccupied, aside from a brief interlude in WWII when it housed Germans. Today it's a worthwhile museum.

The **Arakoon State Recreation Area** is behind the gaol and the camp sites are basic but picturesque. Great food and views are on offer at the **Kiosk** (☎ 02-6566 7100; Trial Bay; mains \$15; ♿) breakfast & lunch). From South West Rocks it's a pleasant walk to Trial Bay along the beach: look out for the **love shack**, formerly a fisherman's abode, about halfway between the two.

NAMBUCCA HEADS

☎ 02 / pop 8000

Spacious, sleepy and unspoilt, Nambucca Heads is strewn over a dramatically curling headland where estuaries from the Nambucca River interlace. It has beautiful butterfly beaches and lucent water. Although the town seems to be in a constant state of refurbishment, nothing seems to change.

The Nambucca (which means 'many bends') Valley was occupied solely by the Gumbainggir people until European timber cutters arrived in the 1840s. There are still strong Aboriginal communities in Nambucca Heads and up the valley in Bowraville.

Orientation & Information

The town is just off the Pacific Hwy. Riverside Drive runs alongside the estuary of the Nambucca River, then climbs a steep hill to Bowra St, the main shopping street. A right turn onto Ridge St at the top of the hill leads though the old part of town to the beaches.

The **visitors centre** (☎ 6568 6954; cnr Riverside Dr & Pacific Hwy) is very helpful and doubles as the main bus terminal.

Sights & Activities

Of the numerous lookouts, **Captain Cook Lookout**, with its 180-degree views, best exploits the staggering views.

The only patrolled beach in town is **Main Beach**. **Beilby's** and **Shelly Beaches** are just to the south, closer to the river mouth – where the best surf is – and can be reached by going past the Captain Cook Lookout.

For boating enthusiasts, **Beachcomber Marine** (☎ 6568 6432; Riverside Dr) rents various vessels by the hour or day – call for rates.

The **V-Wall** is a clever snapshot of life: grafted memoirs of newlyweds, newly-borns and travellers who've left their colourful mark. For art of a similar genre, the **Mosaic Wall** (Ridge St) in the town centre was made by a local artist from materials such as tiles and broken crockery.

Worth a visit is the **Headland Historical Museum** (☎ 6568 6380; Main Beach; adult/child \$2/50c; ♿) 2-4pm Wed, Sat & Sun) with local-history exhibits, including a collection of more than 1000 photos.

Sleeping

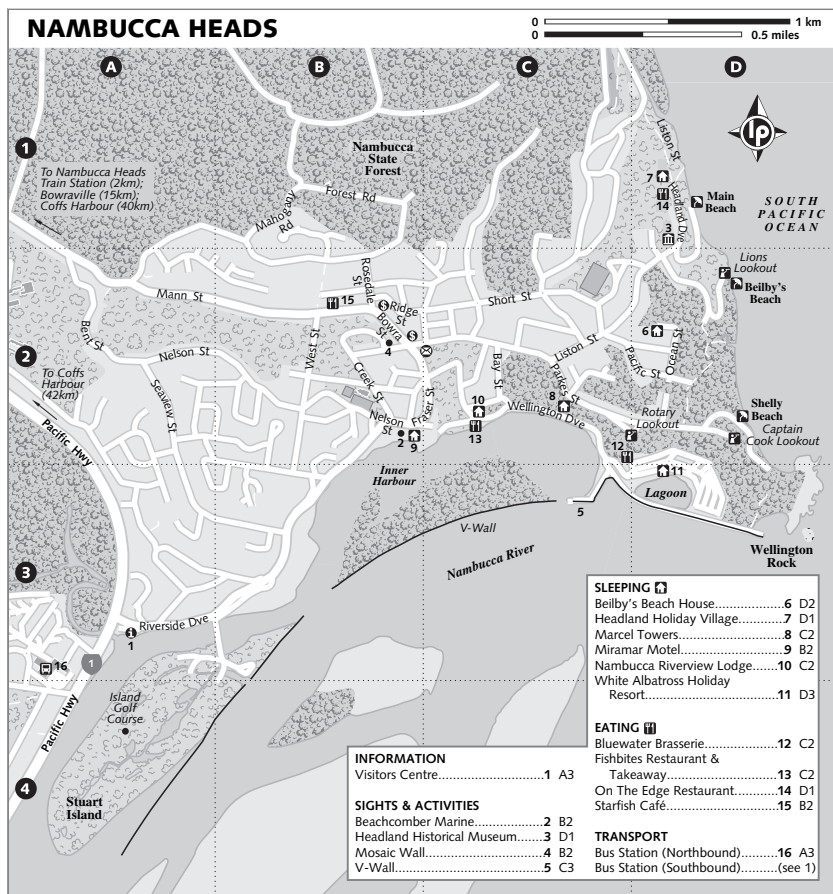
Typical of this stretch of coast, you'll need to book ahead in summer.

Beilby's Beach House (☎ 6568 6466; www.beilbys.com.au; 1 Ocean St; r incl breakfast \$70-110; ♿ ♿ ♿) The owners speak English, French and German, but even if you don't want to test your linguistic mettle it's worth staying for the comfortable rooms. It's near the beach and has a buffet-style, all-you-can-eat breakfast. Children welcome.

Miramar Motel (☎ 6568 7899; 1 Nelson St; s/d \$80/85; ♿) Above a plunging valley, this motel has breezy, generous rooms with leafy outlooks. It's clean, quiet and comfy.

LOCAL LAND RIGHTS

In 1996, Crescent Head became the first town on mainland Australia to experience the effects of the Mabo decision, which, in 1992, overrode the doctrine of *terra nullius* (which maintained that Australian land was owned by no-one) and recognised that rights to native title existed under Australian law. The government recognised that the Dunghutti people had native-title rights on 12.4 hectares of land. The land in question has been turned into a residential subdivision (the Dunghutti people were reasonably compensated), so while it may be hard to spot this historic piece of land on a drive through the town, it is strong in essence.



Nambucca Riverview Lodge (☎ 6568 6386; www.here.com.au/riverview; 4 Wellington Dve; s/d \$90/115; 🗺) What a humble moniker for Nambucca's oldest pub. Built in 1887, this double-decker hotel has eight unique rooms, all with balconies and views. Each is stuffed with charming furniture, plus a TV, DVD, VCR and lounge.

Headland Holiday Village (☎ 6568 6547; www.headlandtouristpark.com.au; Liston St; camp sites/cabins \$19/85) Literally on the peak of the headland, this grassy knoll has an enviable position and infinite ocean vistas. It has clean and orderly facilities and decent cabins.

Also recommended:
Marcel Towers (☎ 6568 7041; www.marceltowers.com.au; 12-14 Wellington Dr; apt \$95-125; 🗺) Compact apartments.

White Albatross Holiday Resort (☎ 6568 6468; www.white-albatross.com.au; Wellington Dr; camp sites/cabins from \$35/80) Prime sites and cabins and great views.

Eating

Starfish Café (☎ 6569 4422; 5 Mann St; mains \$14-28; 🗺) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Starfish's modern menu of seafood, steaks and fusion specials complements the gorgeous views from the back veranda. Live music occasionally tops the act.

Fishbites Restaurant and Takeaway (☎ 6569 4444; 1 Wellington Dr; mains \$23; 🗺) lunch Tue, Fri & Sun, dinner Tue-Sun) This ambient waterfront restaurant infuses local seafood with Asian flavours, like ginger prawn tails in coriander batter or oysters

with ginger, mirin and soy. Next door, the takeaway focuses on unfussy fish and chips.

On the Edge Restaurant (☎ 6569 4494; Headland Dr; mains \$25; 🗺) dinner Wed-Sat, brunch Sun) Behind a small, slate-coloured exterior lies one of Nambucca's finest spots to satiate your hunger. The menu is a powwow of full-bodied ingredients (try bacon-wrapped eye fillet with parsnip pudding) served to candlelit tables.

Bluewater Brasserie (☎ 6568 6394; V-Wall Tavern; Wellington Dr; mains \$18; 🗺) lunch & dinner daily, breakfast Sat & Sun) A legion of outdoor tables on the wide balcony at this unfussy tavern makes for long, boozy lunches and balmy dinners. There's salads, steaks and seafood, it's family-friendly, and mums eat free every Monday.

Getting There & Away

Keans (☎ 6543 1322) runs three times a week to Tamworth (\$65).

Premier Motor Service (☎ 13 34 10) and **Greyhound** (☎ 13 14 99) charge around \$70 to both Sydney and Byron Bay.

The train station is about 3km out of town. **CountryLink** (☎ 13 22 23) has trains to Coffs Harbour and Sydney.

URUNGA

☎ 02 / pop 2000

Urunga is a comely family retreat, with safe river beaches, good fishing and an innocent atmosphere. Hungry Head, just down the coast, is popular with surfers.

The informative **Bellingen Shire visitors centre** (☎ 6655 5711; Pacific Hwy) is on the highway, just before you reach the river.

The **Ocean View Hotel** (☎ 6655 6221; 15 Morgo St; s/d incl breakfast \$40/70) is the most prominent building in town. It offers simple accommodation and fine views and is good for a meal (mains \$15; open breakfast, lunch and dinner).

Urunga Heads Holiday Park (☎ 6655 6355; Morgo St; camp sites/cabins \$20/50; 🗺) is next to the Urunga Lagoon in the centre of town.

MYLESTOM

☎ 02 / pop 380

Mylestom is just north of Urunga and is another attractive, unassuming place. It has promising beaches on one side and a wide, influential river on the other.

Just south of the Raleigh Bridge, **Raleigh Winery** (☎ 6655 4388; www.raleighwines.com; 36 Queen St, Raleigh; 🗺) 10am-5pm Wed-Sun) produces good dry whites, rosés and liqueurs.

North Beach Caravan Park (☎ 6655 4250; Beach Pde; camp sites/cabins from \$20/40), next to the waves, is a family affair with clean facilities.

BELLINGEN

☎ 02 / pop 2500

Scattered around the banks of the Bellingen River, this charming hill town has an ever-green hue tempered by seasonal colours. Thick with gourmet cuisine and accommodation, Bellingen has a confident, laid-back personality, and artistic and alternative lifestyles are the norm.

The valley was part of the extensive territory of the Gumbainggir people until European timber cutters arrived in the 1840s. Until tourism boomed at Coffs Harbour in the 1960s, Bellingen was the most important town in this area.

Information

Bellingen Book Nook (☎ 6655 9372; 25 Hyde St) Glorious for avid bookworms.

Technicality (☎ 6655 1121; 7d Church St; per hr \$6) Internet access.

www.bellingen.com The excellent community website.

Sights & Activities

To get a feel for the place, head to the magnificent **Hammond & Wheatley Emporium** (Hyde St), formerly an old department store. It's been very well restored and now houses a shop selling very stylish duds, as well as an art gallery and café.

The historic **Old Butter Factory** (☎ 6655 2150; 1 Doepel Lane; 🗺) 9.30am-5pm) houses craft shops, a gallery, opal dealers, a masseur and a great café.

From December to March a huge colony of flying foxes descends on **Bellingen Island**. It's an impressive sight when thousands head off at dusk to feed (best seen from the bridge). There's also an interesting walk to **rope swings** into the river, near the YHA hostel.

Bellingen Canoe Adventures (☎ 6655 9955; 4 Tyson St, Fernmont; day tours per adult/child \$77/39) operates wonderful guided canoe tours on the Bellingen River. You can also hire canoes (half-/full-day per person \$33/55) or take one of its full moon tours (per adult/child fully clothed \$20/15).

Heartland Didgeidos (☎ 6655 9881; 2/25 Hyde St) sent the first 'didge' into space. The indigenous owners also know a thing or two about quality, with a growing international reputation. You can make your own didge here.

On the second Saturday of the month the **Natural Produce Market** holds court at the Bellingen Showground. On the third Saturday of the month the **Community Market** does the same at Bellingen Park.

Festivals & Events

Stamping Ground (www.stampingground.com.au) A festival of international dance performances in January.

Bellingen Jazz & Blues Festival (www.bellingenjazzfestival.com.au) Features a strong line-up of jazz names in late August.

Global Carnival (www.globalcarnival.com) A multicultural mix of music and performances in early October.

Sleeping

Bellingen YHA (☎ 6655 1116; www.yha.com.au; 2 Short St; dm/d \$24/60; 📶) Bellingen's award-winning YHA attracts backpackers via the grapevine and then keeps them here with a tranquil, engaging atmosphere inside a renovated weatherboard house.

Maddefords Cottages (☎ 6655 9866; www.maddefordscottages.com.au; 224 North Bank Rd; d \$135; 📶) These polished mountain cabins have cosy interiors with country furnishings and big, sunny windows. Timber balconies overlook a private valley tumbling below, and your first night includes a sizable brekkie hamper.

Rivendell Guest House (☎ 6655 0060; www.rivendellguesthouse.com.au; 10-12 Hyde St; d incl breakfast \$140;

📶) Right in the thick of things, Rivendell has three large en suites and a twin with its own bathroom across the hall. All rooms have French-door access to a shady veranda, and in winter the open fire is deliciously toasty.

More accommodation options:

Casa Belle Country Guest House (☎ 6655 0155; www.casabelle.com; 90 Gleniffer Rd; r incl breakfast \$185; 📶) Lavish Tuscan villa.

Koompartoo Retreat (☎ 6655 2326; www.koompartoo.com.au; cnr Rawson & Dudley Sts; d \$145; 📶) Delightful chalets.

Eating & Drinking

Boiling Billy Coffee House (☎ 6655 1947; 7 Church St; mains \$7-14; 📶 breakfast daily, lunch Mon-Sat) Gourmet sandwiches, Moroccan tagines and spicy Bombay curries are dished up amid terracotta hues and a beautifully blithe atmosphere. The divine smells drift all the way to the wicker seating out the front.

Relish Bar & Grill (☎ 6655 1003; 77 Hyde St; meals \$8-15; 📶 lunch & dinner) Within the heritage-fronted Federation Hotel, this spot has the aesthetics of a chic, inner-city bar yet the atmosphere of a warm country hotel. The side veranda hosts live music and happy punters when the sun's out.

Riverstone Cafe (☎ 6655 9099; Shop 3, 105-109 Hyde St; mains \$14-18; 📶 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Suck in the scent of fresh coffee while you pore over artsy

tomes; this café-cum-bookshop-cum-music store titillates the taste buds and senses in a hip little package. The creative fare includes sake lamb with shitake mushrooms.

No 2 Oak St (☎ 6655 9000; 2 Oak St; mains \$32; 📶 dinner Tue-Sat) The front window has donned culinary awards, but otherwise this renowned restaurant is utterly modest. Housed in a timber cottage, it specialises in Mod Oz with a French twist. Mains include slow-braised duck leg with caramel pears, button mushrooms and roast pumpkin.

More suggested eats:

Lodge 241 (☎ 6655 2470; 117-121 Hyde St; mains \$16; 📶 breakfast & lunch) Great organic and vegetarian food.

Swiss Patisserie (☎ 6655 0050; 7B Church St) Scrummy Swiss-Oz bakery hybrids.

Getting There & Away

Keans (☎ 6543 1322) has twice-weekly services to/from Coffs Harbour, Dorrigo and Armidale.

AROUND BELLINGEN

There are some beautiful spots waiting to be discovered in the surrounding valleys. The most accessible is the tiny hamlet of **Gleniffer**, 10km to the north and clearly signposted from North Bellingen. There's a good swimming hole in the **Never Never River** behind the small Gleniffer School of Arts at the crossroads. Then you can drive around Loop Rd, which takes you to the foot of the New England tableland – a great drive that words don't do justice to.

If you want to sweat, tackle the **Syndicate Ridge Walking Trail**, a strenuous 15km walk from Gleniffer to the Dorrigo Plateau, following the route of a tramline once used by timber cutters. There's a very steep 1km climb on the way up. To get to the start, take the Gordonville Rd, turning into Adams Lane soon after crossing the Never Never River. The walking track commences at the first gate.

DORRIGO

☎ 02 / pop 1000

The winding road from Bellingen to Dorrigo is less than 30km but reveals as dramatic a mountain pass as you'll find in NSW. In parts the northern side opens up to reveal thick-cut valleys cloaked in rainforest, with mist settling low. Dorrigo itself is a small and traditional T-junction of a country town, preserved beautifully by cool air and affable locals.

The **visitors centre** (☎ 6657 2486; 36 Hickory St; 📶 10am-4pm) is run by volunteers who share a

passion for the area. The town's main attraction is **Dangar Falls** which cascade over a series of rocky shelves before plummeting into a pristine gorge. A lookout provides Kodak moments, and you can swim beneath the falls if you have a yen for glacial bathing.

Sleeping & Eating

Gracemere Grange (☎ 6657 2630; www.dorrigo.com/gracemere; gracemere@dorrigo.com; 325 Dome Rd; s/tw without bathroom \$35/70, d with bathroom \$80) Oz hospitality doesn't get any warmer. Cosy bedrooms upstairs have slanted, attic-style roofs and the en-suite double has a skylight for views of the twinkling canopy. Rates include a continental breakfast and the owner is a gem.

Dorrigo Hotel (☎ 6657 2016; fax 6657 2059; cnr Cudgery & Hickory Sts; hotel/motel \$55/65) The charm of this almighty pub's exterior is somewhat withered on the inside and the hotel rooms with shared bathrooms have a slightly smoky ambience. Nevertheless they have more character than the motel rooms, and no-one's arguing with the price. The bistro (mains \$8-14; open lunch and dinner) whips up tasty pub nosh.

Misty's (☎ 6657 2855; www.dorrigo.com/mistys; 33 Hickory St; r incl breakfast \$95) Misty's self-contained cottage dates from the 1920s and has a gorgeous antique kitchen and bedroom. The bathroom is thankfully renovated and breakfast comes in the form of a generous hamper.

The main event, however, is **Misty's restaurant** (☎ 6657 2855; mains \$26; 📶 lunch Sun, dinner Wed-Sun) housed inside a lead-light weatherboard. Expect culinary delights such as grilled salmon with saffron and vanilla cream. The food, presentation and service are impeccable, and all achieved by a two-man team.

More sleeping and eating options: **Dorrigo Mountain Resort** (☎ 6657 2564; www.dorrigomountainresort.com.au; Waterfall Way; camp sites/cabins \$20/62) Bird's-eye views. **Lookout Motor Inn** (☎ 6657 2511; Maynard Plains Rd; s/d \$75/95; 📶) Standard motel rooms and sensational views.

Getting There & Away

Twice a week **Keans** (☎ 6543 1322) heads to/from Bellingen, Coffs Harbour and Armidale.

DORRIGO NATIONAL PARK

The most accessible of Australia's World Heritage rainforests is simply spectacular and a must if you're in this neck of the woods. The

A THESPIAN LEGACY *Justine Vaisutis*

'He's nicked off,' said the waiter, of the chef. Under different circumstances I might have found this disconcerting, but I'd just packed an entire steak (medium-rare) into my belly and there was barely room for coffee. It was well past dining hour and the handful of other patrons appeared to be in similar states of cuisine-coma. Truth be told I had actually seen the chef scamper across the road throughout the evening, but small Australian towns are cauldrons of eccentricity, and I just let it slide. Turns out it was the eve of opening night, and the mad dashes were to final rehearsals at the tiny theatre across the road. Chef was one of the leads in the latest production from the **Dorrigo Drama Club** (☎ 6657 2243).

Dorrigo's population simmers beneath 1000, but the aptitude of its drama club proves that big things do come in small packages. This theatrical troupe has entertained audiences for almost a century and performs once or twice a year at the **Old Gazette Theatre** opposite **Misty's** (see opposite). Fortunately the key players have changed numerous times, so their rendition of *Hamlet* doesn't include an uncomfortable authenticity. The club's longtime patron, Ralda Nash, strutted the boards reciting the Bard in London for decades before overseeing things in Dorrigo. All the performers are local, competition is tight and the calibre of talent high. Hang around town for a few days and you'll discover that beneath Romeo, Horatio or Lady Macbeth lies a publican, chef or perhaps mechanic. It's a lucky dip with the emphasis on lucky – for the audience, that is. If you get the opportunity to see the Dorrigo thespians in action you will find yourself witnessing one of those rare treats of Australiana that make TV producers green with envy. You may want to book an early dinner, though.

DETOUR: AN ANCIENT FOREST MEANDER

Northwest of Dorrigo, the rippled landscape is quilted in farmland and a medley of gold and green. Just past Bostobrick, Moonbar Rd is a dirt track veering off to the north. It navigates old-growth forests and pockets of three national parks. About 8km in, a sign directs you to take a track to the left to the Norman Jolly Memorial Grove, where an 800m walking track meanders through 600-year-old tallow wood trees. Some 5km further north on Moonbar Rd will place you at Platypus Flat in the Nymbol Binderay National Park, with remote and basic camping.

Moonbar Rd continues to loop its way around the two-house settlements of Cascade and Briggsvale and through Cascade National Park. It then heads south again to skirt Junuy Juluum National Park and finishes at Dangar Falls.

Moonbar Rd is almost 45km long and traverses rugged and ancient forests. It's a bumpy ride in parts and best travelled in a 4WD in wet weather, but a 2WD will be fine otherwise.

turn-off to the park is just south of Dorrigo. The **Rainforest Centre** (☎ 02-6657 2309; Dome Rd; ☎ 9am-5pm), at the park entrance, has information about the park's various ecosystems and can advise which walk to conquer given the weather and time of year. The track that best reveals the rainforest, featuring two waterfalls and trees up to 1000 years old, is the 6.6km Wonga Walk. It begins right next to the **Skywalk**, an elevated walkway in front of the rainforest centre that sits above the rainforest canopy and provides jaw-dropping views. It's well worth making the drive down to the **Never Never rest area** in the heart of the national park, from where you can walk to waterfalls or begin longer walks.

COFFS HARBOUR

☎ 02 / pop 49,678

Leaning gum trees dominate the Coffs Harbour skyline, and this scenic city nestles delicately at their base. It's a hugely popular holiday destination for families, due to a string of fabulous beaches. The town makes a good stab at appealing to everyone and settles successfully on the 'middle Australian' market. Consequently its attractions swing heavily in favour of water-based fun, wild action sports, unabashed kitsch and encounters with soft and fuzzy wildlife. According to one website, the CSIRO has somehow scientifically declared Coffs Harbour's climate the best in Australia. No arguments here.

Orientation

The town is split into three areas: the jetty (which isn't on the water), town centre and beaches. The Pacific Hwy turns into Grafton St and then Woolgoolga Rd on its run north through town.

Information

Jetty Village Internet Shop (☎ 6651 9155; Jetty Village, Harbour Dr; per hr \$6; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat, to 4pm Sun) Internet access.

Main post office (Park Beach Plaza Shopping Centre) **Planet Games** (☎ 6652 5188; Max Murray Mall, 20 Gordon St; per hr \$6; ☎ 10am-7pm) Internet access.

Visitors centre (☎ 1300 369 070, 6652 1522; www.coffscost.com.au; Pacific Hwy) Exhaustive information.

Sights

Clumps of indigenous scrub and rainforest mingle with foreign foliage at the **North Coast Botanic Gardens** (☎ 6648 4188; Hardacre St; entry by donation; ☎ 9am-5pm), which hugs a curve of Coffs Creek. Paths crisscross beneath the canopy, kookaburras laugh from up high, and there's a vast grassy lawn begging for Frisbee action.

Coffs' main claim to fame is a ferocious, concrete **Big Banana** (☎ 6652 4355; www.bigbanana.com; Pacific Hwy; ☎ 9am-4.30pm), hailed by many as a national icon. After purchasing the all-important souvenir banana key ring, you can go ice skating (\$12, without bananas) or tobogganing (\$5, not on a banana).

Clog Barn (☎ 6652 4633; www.dogbiz.com; 215 Pacific Hwy; per adult/child \$5/4; ☎ 7.30am-5pm) is a bizarre miniature Dutch village with windmills and a clog barn with a ridiculously large range of collectable spoons. It makes the Big Banana look sophisticated. Kids will like it, adults will be bamboozled.

At the **Pet Porpoise Pool** (☎ 6652 2164; Orlando St, beside Coffs Creek; adult/child \$25/13; ☎ 9am-4pm, shows 10am & 1pm) dolphins, penguins and sea lions all interact with the public during acrobatic shows. It's a hit with all ages.

Coffs Harbour Zoo (☎ 6656 1330; Pacific Hwy; adult/child/fam \$16/8/40; ☎ 9.30am-4pm) has koalas,

pythons and echidnas on display. As far as zoos go, this one's pretty good.

Muttonbird Island, at the end of the northern breakwater, is occupied by some 12,000 pairs of muttonbirds from late August to early April, with cute offspring visible in summer.

GALLERIES

Coffs Harbour City Gallery (☎ 6648 4861; cnr Coff & Duke Sts; ☎ 10am-4pm Wed-Sat) embraces the work of regional artists as well as contemporary international work. The curatorship is thoughtful and doesn't shy from social themes.

BEACHES

Sweeping **Park Beach** attracts plenty of swell, along with punters and lifeguards, from October to April. **Jetty Beach** is just south and a safer option. **Diggers Beach**, to the north, is partially nudist and sensational (for the surf). **Moonee Beach** lies 14km further north and **Emerald Beach** is a further 6km.

Activities

Valery Horse Trails (☎ 6653 4301; www.valerytrails.com.au; 758 Valery Rd, Valery; 2hr ride \$45), has 60 'well disciplined horses' and plenty of acreage to explore the surrounding hills.

Liquid Assets (☎ 6658 0850; www.surfracting.com; 38 Harbour Dr; half-/full-day per person from \$40/125) keeps thrill junkies giddy with surf or white-water rafting, river kayaking and platypus spotting on the Nymboida River.

Coffs City Skydivers (☎ 6653 2067; www.coffscentral.dnet.tv/CoffsCitySkyDivers; Coffs Harbour Airport; tandem jump \$320) obliges all urges to fling yourself from a plane.

A gravel track fringed by clumps of gum trees and utilised by dog-walkers and joggers skirts Coffs Creek and provides the perfect opportunity to do as the locals do.

More active options:

East Coast Surf School (☎ 6651 5515; www.eastcoast.surfschool.com.au; Diggers Beach; 2hr lesson per person from \$50) Adult and kids' surf camps.

Jetty Dive Centre (☎ 6651 1611; www.jettydive.com.au; 398 Harbour Dr) PADI courses from \$215.

Tours

Mountain Trails (☎ 6658 3333; tours per person from \$65) Award-winning ecofriendly 4WD tours. A reader fave.

Spirit of Coffs Harbour Cruises (☎ 6650 0155; www.spiritofcoffs.com.au; International Marina; 2hr tours per person \$49) Whale watching.

Festivals & Events

Gold Cup (☎ 6652 1488) Early August – Coffs' premier horse race.

Coffs Harbour Food & Wine Festival Last weekend in October.

Pittwater to Coffs Yacht Race New Year – starts in Sydney and finishes here.

Sleeping

Pacific Property & Management (☎ 1800 658 569; 6652 1466; www.coffsholidayrentals.com.au; 101 Park Beach Rd) has holiday rental listings.

BUDGET

Aussitel Backpackers Hostel (☎ 1800 330 335, 6651 1871; www.aussitel.com; 312 Harbour Dr; dm/d \$22/60; ☎ ☎) In an oversized brick house, this hostel has a relaxed ambience, homely dorms and a shady courtyard. By night it brews a party atmosphere. Diving is offered (PADI courses from \$245), as is kayaking, skydiving and rafting.

Coffs Harbour YHA (☎ 6652 6462; www.yha.com.au; 51 Collingwood St; dm/d from \$24/70; ☎ ☎ ☎) Readers rave about this snazzy hostel, and why wouldn't they? The staff are like family, dorms and en-suite doubles are spacious and modern, and the TV lounge and kitchen are immaculate. You can hire surfboards and bikes as well.

Ocean Palms Motel (☎ 6652 1264; www.oceanpalms.motel.com.au; cnr Ocean Pde & Park Beach Rd; s/d \$65/70; ☎ ☎) Behind a high brush fence and towering palms, this cheerful motel has quiet rooms with kitchenettes and glass sliding doors. The central lawn and pool are family-friendly.

Also available:

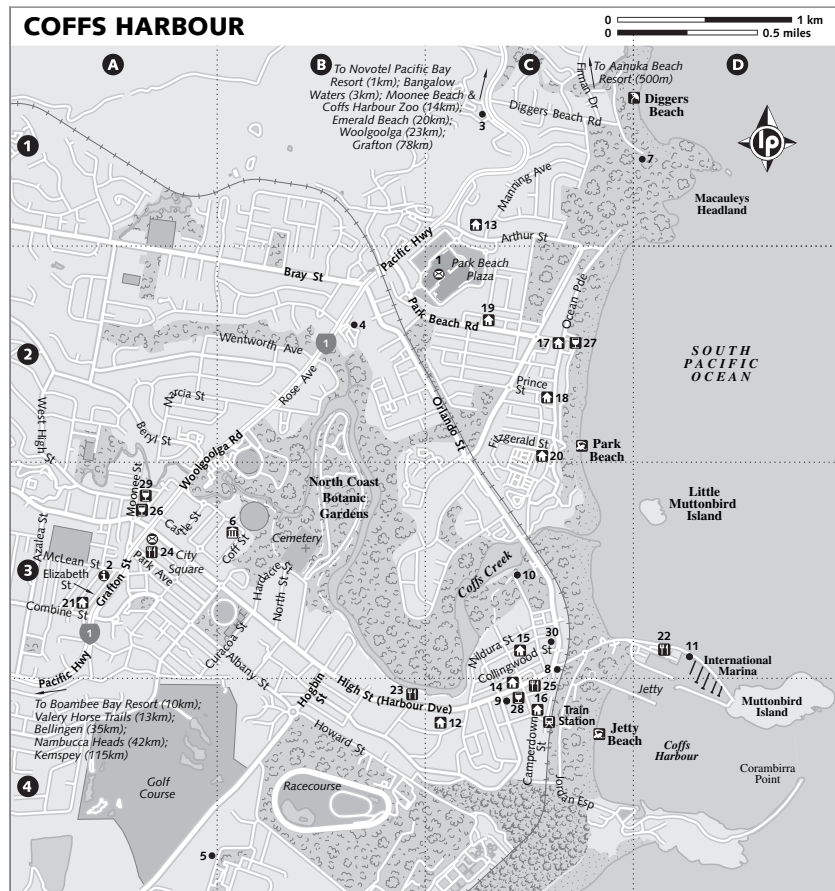
Ocean Parade Motel (☎ /fax 6652 6733; 41 Ocean Pde; s/d/tr \$60/70/88; ☎ ☎) Nifty motel with friendly owners. Good wheelchair access.

Park Beach Holiday Park (☎ 1800 200 111, 6648 4888; www.parkbeachholidaypark.com.au; 1 Ocean Pde; camp sites \$25, cabins \$64-130; ☎ ☎) Prim and trim; fine cabins and sites.

MIDRANGE

Caribbean Motel (☎ 6652 1500; caribbean@stayingcoffs.com.au; 353 High St; d \$90-200, f \$130-220; ☎ ☎ ☎) Close to the jetty and the marina, this motel complex has modern rooms, some with balconies or spas, plus great-value one-bedroom suites with kitchenettes. All have enough space to swing numerous bunches of bananas.

Bangalow Waters (☎ 6653 7999; www.bangalowwaters.com.au; 95 James Small Dr, Korora; apt \$130-160;



P **☺** **☺** The 12 mock-Balinese *bures* at this private retreat overlook a lagoon and have atmospheric interiors, two bedrooms and full kitchens. Some also have spas. Week-long stays attract significant discounts.

Observatory Holiday Apartments (☎ 1300 302 776, 6650 0462; www.theobservatory.com.au; 30-36 Camperdown St; apt \$140-170; **P** **☺**) Some have window spas with ocean views, some have balconies, and some have enough room for six people. All the apartments at this quiet, compact block are bright and airy with sunny décor.

Anuka Beach Resort (☎ 6652 7555; www.aanuka.com.au; 11 Firman Dr; r \$170, apt incl breakfast from \$215; **P** **☺** **☺**) Lodged in luscious leafage, this classy resort has excellent studios and apart-

ments, all with spas and dishy interiors. It sits right on a quiet neck of Diggers Beach and has a restaurant and tennis courts.

More midrange options:
Boambee Bay Resort (☎ 6653 2700; 8 Barber Cl; apt \$150-180; **P** **☺** **☺**) Spacious (but dated) apartments and a tropical setting. Good disabled unit.

Quality Inn City Centre (☎ 6652 6388; www.citycentre.com.au; 22 Elizabeth St; s/d \$125/135; **P** **☺** **☺**) Reliable rooms with wi-fi access and good facilities.

TOP END

Novotel Pacific Bay Resort (☎ 1300 363 360, 6659 7000; cnr Pacific Hwy & Bay Dr; r \$180-230; **P** **☺** **☺**) The colossal Novotel sprawls its way around a nine-hole golf course, and its restaurant is

| INFORMATION | | SLEEPING | | Starfish Café.....(see 24) | |
|--|-------|--------------------------------------|-------|--|----------|
| Jetty Village Internet Shop..... (see 8) | | Aussietel Backpackers Hostel..... 12 | C4 | That Fabulous Delicatessen & Café..... | 24 A3 |
| Post Office..... | 1 C2 | Barracuda Backpackers..... | 13 C1 | The Crying Tiger..... | 25 C4 |
| Visitors Centre..... | 2 A3 | Caribbean Motel..... | 14 C4 | Tide & Pilot..... | (see 22) |
| | | Coffs Harbour YHA..... | 15 C3 | Vibes at the Jetty..... | (see 25) |
| SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES | | Observatory Holiday Apartments..... | 16 C4 | | |
| Big Banana..... | 3 C1 | Ocean Palms Motel..... | 17 C2 | DRINKING | |
| Clog Barn..... | 4 B2 | Ocean Parade Motel..... | 18 C2 | Coffs Hotel..... | 26 A3 |
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| East Coast Surf School..... | 7 D1 | Quality Inn City Centre..... | 21 A3 | Plantation Hotel..... | 29 A3 |
| Jetty Dive Centre..... | 8 C3 | | | | |
| Liquid Assets..... | 9 C4 | | | | |
| Pet Porpoise Pool..... | 10 C3 | EATING | | | |
| Spirit of Coffs Harbour Cruises..... | 11 D3 | Fisherman's Co-op..... | 22 D3 | | |
| | | Mangrove Jacks..... | 23 B4 | | |

so big it has palm trees on the inside. Rooms are suitably fabulous and facilities include a day spa and a kids club.

Eating

CITY CENTRE

Everything downtown shuts in the evening.

That Fabulous Delicatessen & Café (☎ 6652 5855; City Sq; mains \$8; ☺ breakfast & lunch Mon-Sat) Yes, actually it is all fabulous at this European-style deli. Nibble on dolmades, dips and gourmet cheeses, or tuck into Turkish rolls stuffed with chilli-blasted chicken (ouch!).

Starfish Café (☎ 6651 5005; City Sq; mains \$8-13; ☺ breakfast & lunch Mon-Fri) The coffee and people-watching are first class at this popular café. Fresh quiches, pastas and salads are changed daily, but they all take second billing to delectable burgers (try the pumpkin, basil, sun-dried tomato, char-grilled zucchini and hummus one).

MARINA

Fisherman's Co-op (☎ 6652 2811; 69 Marina Dr; meals \$7-10; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The place to head for grilled or battered catch of the day in a cardboard box. Ask what's freshest – New Zealand and southern seafood is sometimes served. You can also buy fish uncooked.

Tide & Pilot (☎ 6651 6888; Marina Dr; mains café \$6-12, restaurant \$20-30; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This cosmopolitan institution sizzles the who's who of the deep with finesse; herb and goat's cheese-crusted swordfish on roast garlic, for example. The casual 'lower deck' specialises in infussy fish and chips.

JETTY

Crying Tiger (☎ 6650 0195; 384s Harbour Dr; mains \$10-20; ☺ dinner) Swimming in ambience and fragrant

smells, the Crying Tiger keeps inquisitive diners happy with red duck curry, or king prawns in lime leaf and coconut. You can turn the chilli gauge as high or low as you like.

Vibes at the Jetty (☎ 6651 1544; 382 Harbour Dr; mains \$15-25; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) This trendy restaurant nails Mod Oz with salt-and-pepper squid with raspberry vinaigrette, or double-roasted duck with cumin and orange cognac glaze. The back courtyard is bliss on balmy evenings.

Mangrove Jacks (☎ 6652 5517; The Promenade Centre, Harbour Dr; mains \$25; ☺ breakfast & lunch daily, dinner Tue-Sat) Overlooking a quiet bend of Coffs Creek, this restaurant serves sultry dinners like lamb shanks slow-cooked in shiraz, honey seeded mustard and sun-dried tomatoes. Brekkie and lunch are far more casual.

Drinking

Plantation Hotel (☎ 6652 3855; Pacific Hwy) Underneath the glossy façade of neon lights, mirrored walls and colourful wedge seating, the Plantation is still a pub at heart, so beer, live rock and the occasional 'Miss Indy' quest are still mainstays. It's a good spot to meet the young and local drinking constituency...or Miss Indy.

Hoey Moey Pub (☎ 6852 3833; Ocean Pde) The kind of place that may leave you deaf in one ear and with a layer of stick from the carpet on your shoes, the Hoey Moey isn't too proud to turn thongs away. Pool comps, live music and terrifying karaoke sessions are nightly norms.

More entertainment:
Coffs Hotel (☎ 6652 3817; cnr Pacific Hwy & West High St) Bands and DJs till late on weekends.
Pier Hotel (☎ 6652 2110; cnr Hood & High Sts) Classic 1930s local, complete with grizzly regulars.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Virgin Blue (☎ 13 67 89) and **Qantas** (☎ 13 13 13) fly to Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne. **Brindabella Airlines** (☎ 1300 668 824) flies to Newcastle and Port Macquarie.

BUS

Buses leave from the visitors centre.

Greyhound (☎ 13 14 99) and **Premier Motor Service** (☎ 13 34 10) stop in Coffs; fares include Port Macquarie (\$45) and Byron Bay (\$55).

Keans (☎ 6543 1322) has two services a week to Bellingen (\$15), Dorrigo (\$19) and Armidale (\$25). **Busways** (☎ 6652 2744) has three buses daily to Bellingen (\$8). **Ryans Buses** (☎ 6652 3201) runs to Grafton (\$20) twice daily.

TRAIN

CountryLink (☎ 13 22 32) trains head to Grafton, Sydney and Casino.

Getting Around

All the major car rental companies are in town.

Coffs Bike Hire (☎ 6652 5102; cnr Orlando & Collingwood Sts; per day \$25) rents mountain bikes.

For a cab, **Coffs District Taxi Network** (☎ 13 10 08) operates a 24-hour service.

COFFS HARBOUR TO GRAFTON Woolgoolga

☎ 02 / pop 3800

A less developed coastal town just north of Coffs, Woolgoolga is renowned for its surf and sizable Sikh community. As you drive in, there's the impressive Sikh **Guru Nanak Temple**, the *gurdwara* (place of worship). Don't confuse it with the **Raj Mahal**, an Indian-influenced decrepit concrete extravaganza with two giant elephant statues over the front and a tacky emporium inside. If you drive straight through town up to the point, you'll get a magnificent view of the **Solitary Marine Reserve**.

About 5km south of Woolgoolga and signposted off the Pacific Hwy, the small **Lake Russell Gallery** (☎ 6656 1092; www.lakerussellgallery.com.au; 12 Smiths Rd, Emerald Beach; ☎ 10am-5pm) exhibits work by local artists and has coffee and cake to fuel the cultural concentration. The gallery sits on the verge of a lily-padded pond and boasts two private and very indulgent cottages (double rooms including breakfast \$250) with air-con.

The **Woolgoolga Beach Caravan Park** (☎ 6654 1373; Beach St; camp sites/cabins from \$35/60) right on the beach can't be beaten on position.

On the beachfront, **Bluebottles Brasserie** (☎ 6654 1962; cnr Wharf & Beach Sts; mains \$23; breakfast & lunch daily, dinner Thu-Sat) serves fine seafood and vegetarian gems like spiced cous cous with roasted tomatoes and goat's cheese. On sultry summer afternoons you can catch live jazz here.

Red Rock

☎ 02 / pop 290

Red Rock, a site that's sacred to the Guna-warri tribe, is a sleepy village with a beautiful inlet and gorgeous surroundings. Soak up the sun or catch a fish while camping at **Red Rock Caravan Park** (☎ 6649 2730; 1 Lawson St; camp sites/cabins from \$13/65).

Yuraygir National Park

Yuraygir (20,000 hectares) is the southernmost in a chain of coastal national parks and nature reserves that runs almost all the way north to Ballina. The beaches and bushwalking paths are gorgeous. The park is in three sections, from **Red Rock** to the Woolli River (turn off the highway just north of Red Rock); from the township of **Woolli** to the Sandon River (turn off the highway 12km south of Grafton); and from near **Brooms Head** to **Angourie Point** (accessible from those towns). There is no vehicle access between the sections; on foot you'd have to cross the challenging Woolli and Sandon Rivers.

Walkers can bush camp and there are basic camping areas (per person \$5) at **Station Creek** in the southern section; at the **Boorkoom** and **Illaroo** rest areas in the central section; on the north bank of the Sandon River; and at **Red Cliff** at the Brooms Head end of the northern section. These are accessible by car; there is also a walk-in camp site in the northern section at Shelly Beach.

Woolli

☎ 02 / pop 300

Woolli's beauty is its backdrop – Yuraygir National Park on land and the Solitary Islands Marine Park offshore. This means you are encircled by wildlife and crisp waters.

On the June long weekend the locals hold their big event, the **Goanna Pulling Championships**, which is devoid of reptilian participants but involves locals using their leather-strapped heads in a tug-of-war. You couldn't write this stuff.

The **Wooli Hotel Motel** (☎ 6649 7532; North St; s/d \$66/76) has a gorgeous paved beer garden, good pub nosh (mains \$10-18; open lunch and dinner) and standard motel rooms.

The **Solitary Islands Marine Park Resort** (☎ 1800 003 031, 6649 7519; North St; camp sites/cabins from \$21/70) has a mouthful of a name and lovely cabins in a scrubby bush setting. Kayak rental is available for \$15/25 per half-/full-day.

Solitary Islands Marine Park

This group of five islands is the meeting point of warm tropical currents and cooler southern currents, making for a wonderful combination of corals, reef fish and seaweeds. Dubbed the 'rivers of life', this is the best area in which to dive or snorkel (look out for extremely rough conditions).

FAR NORTH COAST

As the Pacific Hwy enters its final NSW run, loftier hills increase their ground cover, and each sign of civilisation is laced with New Age nuance. The string of national parks and fishing villages that stumble up the coast to Ballina are exquisitely beautiful. Coupled with the beaches and divine subtropical climate are rivers rich in depth and colour; the striking blue Clarence River is one of the most beautiful Down Under. By the time you reach Byron Bay, with its good looks and copious activities, the holiday hype gears up a notch. This region ticks to the tourist dollar, and backpackers, surfers, families, romantic couples, yuppie weekenders, rugby fanatics, yoga gurus, gastronomes and everyone else gets in on the act.

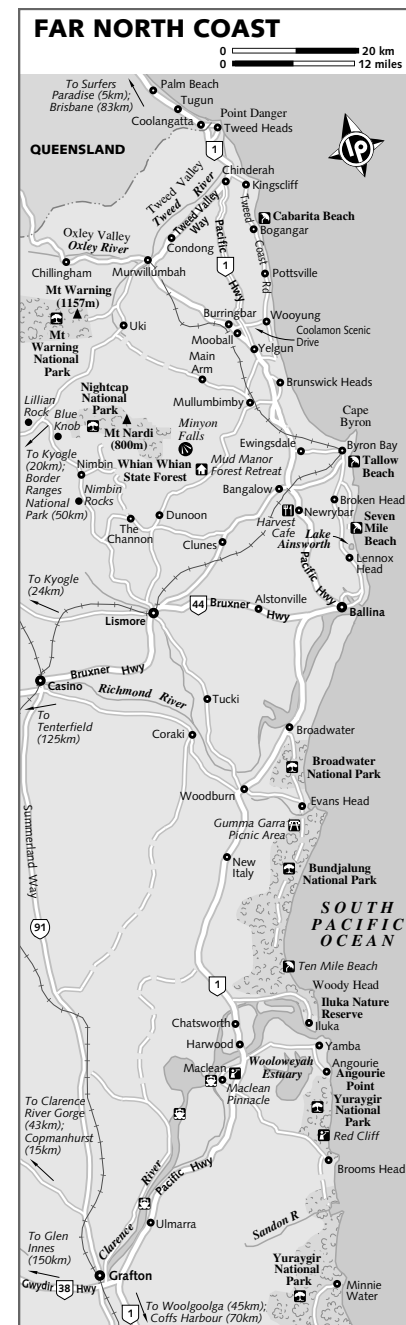
GRAFTON

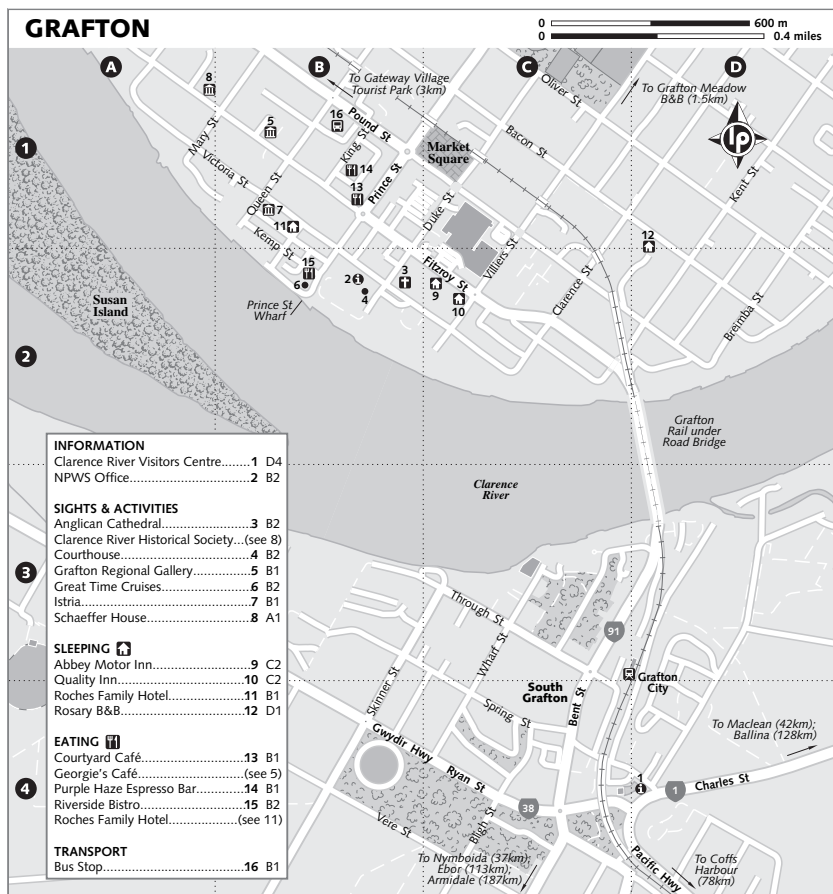
☎ 02 / pop 18,500

Nestled into a quiet bend of the Clarence River, Grafton is a charming grid of wide streets awash with hanging evergreens, grand pubs and splendid old houses. Heritage buildings line the avenues, and an aimless wander is a delight in itself. The town has 24 parks and, in late October, is carpeted in mauve flowers from the prolific Brazilian jacarandas.

Orientation & Information

The Pacific Hwy bypasses the town and you enter over a lovely old double-decker (road and rail) bridge.





Clarence River visitors centre (☎ 6642 4677; www.clarencetourism.com; cnr Spring & Charles Sts) On the highway south of the town.

NPWS office (☎ 6641 1500; Level 3, 49 Victoria St)

Sights & Activities

Victoria St is the focal point of days gone by with the **courthouse** (1862), **Roches Family Hotel** (1870), **Anglican Cathedral** (1884) and private residence **Istria** (1899) providing glimpses of 19th-century architecture.

The small but excellent **Grafton Regional Gallery** (☎ 6642 3177; 58 Fitzroy St; admission by donation; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sun) hosts quality works from galleries around NSW. Exhibits include indigenous pieces, photography and stunning jewellery. Further up, **Schaeffer House** (1903)

is where you'll find the **Clarence River Historical Society** (☎ 6642 5212; 190 Fitzroy St; adult/child \$3/1; ☎ 1-4pm Tue, Wed, Thu & Sun), which claims to have the largest public showing of Wedgwood in NSW.

Susan Island, in the middle of the river, is home to the largest fruit bat colony in the southern hemisphere. Their evening departure is a spectacular summer sight. Access to the river is by boat or canoe; you can hire a tinny from **Seelands Boat Hire** (☎ 6644 9381; 67 Old Punt Rd; per day \$60), 6km north of Grafton, or just sit on the banks and marvel.

Several outfits cruise the lower Clarence River including **Great Time Cruises** (☎ 6642 3456; Prince St Wharf; 2hr cruise incl lunch from \$15), which takes you around Susan Island.

Festivals & Events

Horse Racing Carnival (www.racenet.com.au/grafton) Every July; one of the richest in Australia.

International Philosophy, Science and Theology Festival (www.pstf.com.au) Held in June, the event to discover what the golly 'it' is all about.

Jacaranda Festival (www.jacarandafestival.org.au) Late October to early November; Australia's longest-running floral festival.

Sleeping

Roches Family Hotel (☎ 6644 2866; www.roches.com.au; 85 Victoria St; s/d \$30/40) This historic hotel has been spruced up with a lick of new paint and a flourish of potted trees. The quaint and made-over rooms upstairs share a TV lounge and new bathrooms. Ask for a room with French doors to the glorious old balcony.

Grafton Meadow B&B (☎ 6643 2331; www.graftonmeadow.com; 95 Crown St; s/d incl breakfast \$70/85) At the end of a cul-de-sac, with horse paddocks to one side, this modern homestead has lovely rooms with balconies or courtyards, and classic jacarandas out the front.

Abbey Motor Inn (☎ 6642 6122; fax 6643 1615; 59 Fitzroy St; s/d \$76/86; ☎) So retro it's cool again, the Abbey Motor Inn is a slice of 1960s Australiana, right down to the chocolate vinyl swivel chairs and beseeching air-con (but not the free wi-fi access). Everything is in mint condition.

Rosary B&B (☎ 6642 2292; johnmelenhorst@bigpond.com; 41 Bacon St; s/d incl breakfast \$75/90; ☎) This beautifully cluttered Federation home has stood its ground since 1905. The rooms are comfortable and it's close to Grafton's main shopping area.

Also available:

Gateway Village Tourist Park (☎ 1800 012 019, 6642 4225; www.thegatewayvillage.com.au; 598 Summerland Way; camp sites/cabins from \$27/95; ☎) Massive holiday park with excellent facilities.

Quality Inn (☎ 6640 9100; www.qualityinngrafton.com.au; 51 Fitzroy St; r from \$120; ☎) Modern rooms and self-contained units.

Eating

Purple Haze Espresso Bar (☎ 6642 8866; Shop 6, 4 King St; mains \$7; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Fri) Jimi Hendrix would stick out like a punk at a Tupperware convention here, but he wouldn't mind the no-fuss, great-value lavish wraps, cooked brekkies and strong coffee. If he was lucid (and alive) he might grab a table in the sun.

Courtyard Café (☎ 6642 6644; 120 Fitzroy St; mains \$9-15; ☎ breakfast & lunch) Tucked behind a beautiful sandstone building, this sheltered café whips up delights like seared lemon prawns with mint and ginger yoghurt or peppered beef fillet with asparagus and kumera salad.

George's Café (☎ 6642 6996; 158 Fitzroy St; mains \$20; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Sat) Inside the Grafton Gallery, George's serves a creative menu to tables in the central courtyard. Daylight meals of fresh, deli-style salads and sandwiches make way for finer treats at night.

For a generous counter meal settle into a booth at **Roches Family Hotel** (mains \$10-15; ☎ lunch & dinner) or the Crown Hotel's **Riverside Bistro** (☎ 6642 4000; 1 Prince St; mains \$12-18; ☎ breakfast & lunch daily, dinner Mon-Sat).

Getting There & Around

Busways (☎ 6642 2954) has several daily services to Yamba. **Ryans Buses** (☎ 6652 3201) has four buses daily to Coffs Harbour. **Greyhound** (☎ 13 14 99) and **Premier Motor Service** (☎ 13 34 10) stop at the train station and travel to Byron Bay (\$45) and Coffs Harbour (\$35).

CountryLink (☎ 13 22 32) has trains to Sydney and Casino and buses to Coffs Harbour (\$13).

There's an interesting route from Grafton to Armidale via Nymboida and Ebor, passing turn-offs to Dorrigo and the New England and Cathedral Rock National Parks. Heading west to Glen Innes, the Gwydir Hwy passes through the superb Washpool and Gibraltar Range National Parks.

Grafton Radio Taxis (☎ 6642 3622) operates a 24-hour service.

CLARENCE RIVER VALLEY

The Clarence River rises in Queensland's McPherson Ranges and runs south through the mountains before thundering down a gorge in the Gibraltar Range west of Grafton. It then serenely meanders northeast to the sea at Yamba, watering a beautiful and fertile valley along the way.

The delta between Grafton and the coast is a patchwork of farmland in which the now immense and branching Clarence River forms about 100 islands, some very large. If you're driving, the profusion of small bridges and waterways makes it hard to keep track of whether you're on an island or the mainland.

This is the start of sugar-cane country and also the beginning of Queensland-style domestic architecture: wooden houses with

high-pitched roofs perched on stilts to allow air circulation in the hot summer. The burning of the cane fields (May to December) adds a smoky tang to the air.

INLAND FROM GRAFTON

The Clarence River can be navigated as far upstream as the village of **Copmanhurst**, about 35km northwest of Grafton. Further up, the Clarence River descends rapidly from the Gibraltar Range through the rugged **Clarence River Gorge**, a popular but potentially dangerous site for white-water canoeing.

Private property flanks the gorge. Land on the south side is owned by the Winters family, who allow day visitors and have cabin accommodation at **Winters' Shack** (☎ 02-6647 2173; s/d/f \$25/50/70). Access is via Copmanhurst. It's best to ring first to get permission and to arrange for the gates to be unlocked.

On the north side, **Wave Hill Station** (☎ 02-6647 2145; www.wavehillfarmstay.com.au; per person \$25) has accommodation in the beautifully rustic Dingo Dam Cottage, and regular horse-riding trips to the gorge (per person per hour from \$25).

MACLEAN

☎ 02 / pop 3250

Some might say, given the tartan power poles, Maclean takes its Scottish heritage a little too seriously. That said, the town does sweep alongside a lazy sprawl of the delta in vaguely Celtic fashion, and with your Glenmorangie goggles (firmly) fastened, you might mistake the Clarence River for a Highlands loch. The **Lower Clarence visitors centre** (☎ 6645 4121; Pacific Hwy) is on the southern entry to town.

To take in the beautiful surrounds, head up the hill to **Maclean Lookout**. The **Maclean Historical Society** (☎ 6645 3416; www.macleanhistory.org.au; cnr Wharf & Grafton Sts; adult/child \$3/1; ☎ 1-4pm Wed & Fri, 10am-4pm Sat) tells you all about the town's Scottish roots.

The small but innovative **Witzig Gallery** (☎ 6645 2804; 80 River St; admission free; ☎ 10am-4pm) specialises in contemporary works from Papua New Guinea and Australian surf art.

The 1867 **Historic Gables B&B** (☎ 6645 2452; gables@northnet.com.au; 2b Howard St; d \$95) is a charming Federation house with six bedrooms, an open fireplace and a wide veranda for epic sunsets over the Clarence.

Alternatively, **Motel Maclean** (☎ 6645 2473; www.motelmaclean.com; 65 Cameron St, Old Pacific Hwy; s/d \$60/70; 🚽) has decent rooms.

YAMBA

☎ 02 / pop 6500

'Yamba, it's yours' greets you in cheerful font as you enter this gem of a town. If only, beaches on three fronts, kilometres of grassy esplanade, stunning views and a warm and charming population would make a perfect kingdom. Fishing rods are a fifth appendage of the town folk.

Activities

Yamba Kayak (☎ 6646 1137; www.yambakayak.com.au; pick-up at Gorman's Restaurant at Yamba Bay; half-day \$55) operates on demand. To use the motorised version, **Yamba Boat Hire** (☎ 6645 8525; Boat Harbour Marina; full day for 8 people \$120) has simple, square boats. There's a **community market** at the Yamba Oval on the fourth weekend of each month.

Sleeping

Pacific Hotel (☎ 6646 2466; 18 Pilot St; dm \$45, r without/with bathroom \$60/100) Gorgeously situated overlooking the ocean, this fabulous pub corners the budget and midrange markets with bright, four-bed bunk rooms and handsome hotel rooms with million-dollar views.

Pegasus Motel (☎ 6646 2314; pegasusmotel@yambansw.com.au; cnr Yamba & Angourie Rds; r/apt \$80/95; 🚽 🚿) Applause all round for this excellent motel, which defies boring stereotypes. Standard rooms are fancied up with smart and fresh linen and décor, and 'courtyard suites' are one-bedroom apartments with kitchenettes and private courtyards. All rooms are a steal.

On The Rocks (☎ 6646 1760; www.ontherocks.com.au; 6 Ocean St; r/apt per 2-nights from \$370/400; 🚽 🚿) Bondi, eat yer heart out! These genteel studios hover right over the ocean and come with plenty of glass to exploit the views. The milky-white interiors are chic and polished and scream (quietly) 'romantic getaway'.

More options:

Calypso Holiday Park (☎ 6646 8847; www.calypsoyamba.com.au; Harbour St; camp sites/cabins from \$23/70; 🚽 🚿)

Eco Point Angourie Resort (☎ 6646 8600; 166 Angourie Rd; apt \$140-299; 🚽 🚿) Appealing, eco-certified complex with sleek apartments.

Eating

Caperberry Cafe (☎ 6646 2322; 17 Yamba Rd; mains \$5-11; ☎ breakfast & lunch) Offering sophisticated food in humble surrounds, with heart-kicking coffee and more Turkish toasties than the mother country. Overflowing frittatas, bakes, salads and a mean lamb burger are also on offer.

Restaurant Castalia (☎ 6646 1155; 15 Clarence St; mains \$20-30; ☎ breakfast Sat, lunch Fri & Sat, dinner Mon-Sat) Relaxed yet stylish, Castalia has built a name for itself with fancy bush tucker like kangaroo striploin with bush spices and beetroot relish. The inventive menu is worthy of several visits.

More eating options:

Clarence River Fish Co-op (☎ 6646 2099; Yamba Rd; meals \$10; ☎ breakfast & lunch) Takeaway fish and chips for less than \$10.

Pacific Hotel (☎ 6646 2466; 18 Pilot St; mains \$15-25; ☎ lunch & dinner) Outstanding views and delicious pub grub.

Getting There & Away

A passenger-only ferry (adult/child \$5/3, four times daily) runs to Iluka, on the north bank of the Clarence River.

Busways (☎ 6642 2954) and **Countrylink** (☎ 13 22 32) buses go to Grafton (\$11), Lennox Head (\$14) and Byron Bay (\$15).

ANGOURIE

☎ 02 / pop 626

Five kilometres south of Yamba, this tiny surf haven climbs a pretty headland and beckons seasoned surfers (who wear helmets and leap off rocks) with epic breaks. Less hardened surfers can cool off in the **Blue Pool**, a quarry next to the beach filled with fresh water from a spring.

Frangipani (The Crescent; mains \$24; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) is an edgy and atmospheric restaurant with fine food along the lines of salmon steak with caper butter terrine or chicken saltimbocco with prosciutto.

ILUKA

☎ 02 / pop 1860

Iluka is a carbon copy of Yamba but less developed due to its distance from the Pacific Hwy. Anglers love this area, as do nature enthusi-

asts. The town acts as a gateway to the World Heritage-listed **Iluka Nature Reserve**.

BUNDJALUNG NATIONAL PARK

This 4000 hectares of coastal land has 30km of unspoilt beaches for surfing and swimming. The entrance is 60km north of Grafton or 55km south of Ballina and there are four main areas.

The **Gumma Garra** picnic area has creeks, islands, rainforests and a midden that can be seen by the river. You can get there via Evans Head on the Bundjalung road. The second is **Black Rocks & Booroora** picnic area and camping, which is tucked in behind the sand dunes of the 10-mile beach. You can sit in the shade of the tucker tree. The third area is the **Woody Head Camping Area** (☎ 6646 6134; camping per person \$8, cabins \$55-77), which has rock pools, lovely picnic tables, camp sites and self-contained cabins. It's 6km north of Iluka. The fourth area is **Shark Bay**, where you can bushwalk and swim. There's a photogenic lookout here with views of the coastline all the way around to Cape Byron.

EVANS HEAD

☎ 02 / pop 2610

Evans Head is a great way to escape the hectic tourist lifestyle present in its northern counterparts. Locals endearingly call it 'the jewel in the crown'. It has an intense prawn and fishing industry.

The **Silver Sands Caravan Park** (☎ 6682 4212; Park St; camp sites/cabins from \$18/60) is orderly and populated by permanent residents. Cabins are militarily clean (and organised). For a pub room, try the **Hotel Illawong** (☎ 6682 4222; Evans Head; s/d \$35/55) and for a motel room try **Pacific Motor Inn** (☎ 6682 4318; 38 Woodburn St; r \$68-75).

Cafe Spirit (☎ 6682 4055; 18 Oak St; mains \$10-15; ☎ breakfast & lunch) is a funky little eatery, with

DETOUR: ITALY ON A SHOESTRING

About 40km north of Iluka on the Pacific Hwy, the **New Italy Museum** (☎ 02-6682 2622; admission by donation; ☎ 10am-3pm) follows the Marquis de Ray's ambitious plan to colonise New Guinea (known as New Ireland) with 340 unwitting Italians. Many died on the journey and, because de Ray failed to discuss his plan with the original inhabitants of the island, more of the group died from headhunters, starvation and disease once they reached 'paradise'. After making their way to Sydney in 1888, the surviving members relocated to New Italy. Sadly none remain in the area, but the museum is a tribute to the migrants' strength and resilience. As for de Ray - unsurprisingly he was consigned to a lunatic asylum in France. Adjoining the museum is a coffee shop and licensed Italian restaurant.

tables inside and out, serving toasted sambos and good cooked breakfasts.

Evans Head is 10km east of the highway; turn off at Woodburn.

BROADWATER NATIONAL PARK

Extending from north of Evans Head to Broadwater, this small coastal park (3750 hectares) protects a 7km stretch of beach backed by coastal heath. You can drive through the park on the roads between Evans Head and Broadwater. Camping is not allowed in the park.

BALLINA

☎ 02 / pop 34,700

With Byron above and the idyllic fishing villages south of the Richmond River below, Ballina is planted somewhere between a commercial centre and a wannabe tourist lure. This is actually the town's saving grace as it has maintained a coastal ambience without tarding itself for the holiday bucks. For travellers it's a pleasant spot for a day or two to explore the waterways and the kilometres of esplanade. Urban sprawl is rearing its head in ready-made suburb developments on the

outskirts, but you won't encounter the effects in town.

Orientation & Information

The Pacific Hwy approaches from the west and turns into River St, the main drag.

Ice Creamery Internet Café (☎ 6687 5783; 178 River St; ☎: 8.30am-9pm; per hr \$6) Internet access.

Visitors centre (☎ 6686 3484; cnr Las Balsas Plaza & River St)

Sights

Beyond the visitors centre, the **Naval & Maritime Museum** (☎ 6681 1002; Regatta Ave; admission by donation; ☎: 9am-4pm) has a remarkable collection of model ships, ranging from bottle-sized 17th-century trading vessels to replica aircraft carriers up to 2m in length. There's also the remains of a balsawood raft that drifted across the Pacific from Ecuador as part of the Las Balsas expedition in 1973.

White and sandy, **Shelly Beach** is patrolled, and glassy **Shaws Bay Lagoon** is popular with families.

Just north of Ballina, the **Thursday Plantation** (☎ 1800 029 000; Pacific Hwy; admission free; ☎: 9am-5pm)

has a teatree maze and specialises in high-quality therapeutic products. It is well worth a visit.

The **Big Prawn** (Pacific Hwy) is beached unceremoniously next to a transit centre at the town's southern entry. It's quite fabulous in its absurdity and exacts equal measures of fear and laughter. It could also be a pinup for a campaign about the dangers of nuclear power.

Activities

Ballina is renowned for its great walking and bike tracks, so hiring a bike can be rewarding. **Sunrise Cycles** (☎ 6686 6322; Hogan St; per day \$20) and **Jack Ransom Cycles** (☎ 6686 3485; 16 Cherry St; per day \$17) both offer bike hire.

Ballina BBQ Boat & Tinnie Hire (☎ 0403 810 277; cnr Brunswick St & Winton Lane; per 30min/half-day \$55/80) has tinnies for fishing and catamarans for the more adventurous.

Richmond River Cruises (☎ 6687 5688; www.ballina.com.au/rccruises; Regatta Ave; 2hr tour per adult/child \$24/10; ☎: 10am & 2pm Wed, 2pm Sun) has morning and afternoon tea cruises along the Richmond River on a double-decker vessel. It's also wheelchair-friendly.

Tours

Ballina Kayak Tours (☎ 6685 3722; www.ballina.com.au/kayaks; per person \$55) Three-hour kayak adventures with the chance to spot bottlenose dolphins.

Ballina Ocean Tours (☎ 6680 7906; www.ballina.com.au/oceantours; per person \$75) Small-group whale-watching tours.

Baysail (☎ 1300 857 443, 6626 6889; www.baysail.net.au; per person \$85) Whale-watching tours.

Explorer Experience (☎ 6681 4111; www.explorereperience.com.au; half-/full-day tours per person \$85/160) Small-group hinterland tours in a 4WD coach.

Sleeping

Ballina Travellers Lodge YHA (☎ 6686 6737; 36-38 Tamar St; www.yha.com.au; dm \$22, d \$55-65; ☎: ♿) In a quiet residential street, this lodge has a super-tidy setup with airy motel rooms and an excellent hostel wing. All rooms are modern and spotless, and there are bikes and bodyboards available for hire.

Ballina Lakeside Holiday Resort (☎ 1800 888 268; 6686 8755; www.ballinalakeside.com.au; Fenwick Dr; camp sites/cabins from \$27/70; ☎: ♿) None-too-subtly disguised as a suburb, this park has roads, sparkling cabins and amenities, and a great location right on the lake. It *doesn't* have too much privacy and is teeming during holidays.

Ballina Heritage Inn (☎ 6686 0505; www.ballinaheritageinn.com.au; 229 River St; s/d \$100/120; ☎: ♿) In the centre of town, this tidy inn has neat, bright and very comfortable rooms that are a significant leap in quality from the nearby confluence of motels. Ballina's best midrange option.

Brundah (☎ 6686 8166; www.babs.com.au/brundah; 37 Norton St; s/d incl breakfast \$135/185; ☎: ♿) This comely white B&B has three gorgeous en-suite bedrooms with plush beds and handsome chests, chairs and furnishings. Brekkie is a fully cooked affair, and there's a pretty garden in which to contemplate your navel.

Ballina Manor (☎ 6681 5888; www.ballinamanor.com.au; 25 Norton St; r from \$190; ☎: ♿) Ballina's best is a heritage-listed building filled to the hilt with restored 1920s furnishings, carpets and drapes. It used to be a school for fine young ladies and the structure itself has been beautifully maintained. Though antique in design, the three types of rooms are indulgent and extremely comfortable.

Also available:

Ballina Colonial Motel (☎ 6685 7691; www.colonialmotel.net; cnr Bangalow Rd & Skinner St; s/d \$70/85;

☎: ♿) Cheerful, charming and cheap.

Ramada Riverside (☎ 1800 006 362, 6681 9200; www.ramadariverside.com.au; Fawcett St; r/apt from \$130/210; ☎: ♿) Swiss apartments with that as-new scent.

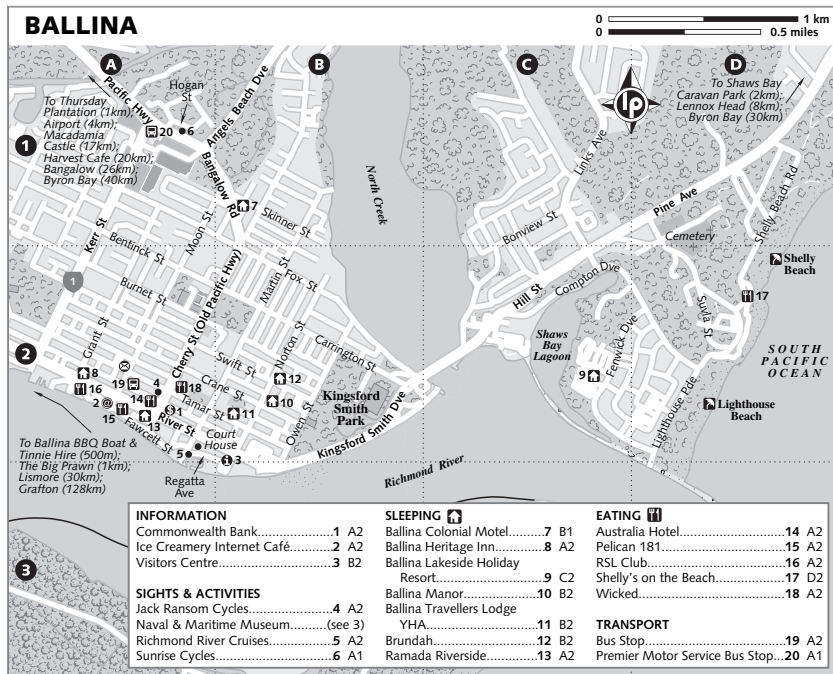
Eating

Shelly's on the Beach (☎ 6686 9844; Shelly Beach Rd; mains \$15; ☎: breakfast & lunch) This casual little café dishes up sensational food and superb views. The bacon-and-egg-and-paper brigade fills the tables early on weekend mornings, but it's worth losing a sleep-in for. Lunch is salads, sambos and the usual café fare.

Pelican 181 (☎ 6686 9181; 12-24 Fawcett St; mains \$10-20; ☎: breakfast & lunch) This sprawling upscale fish-and-chippery serves excellent seafood au naturel. Make sure you check out the overflowing prawn baguettes beneath the counter before settling on any decision. Dining is largely alfresco with right-on-the-water views.

Wicked (☎ 6686 2564; 37 Cherry St; mains \$24-30; ☎: dinner Wed-Sun) Pulling all sorts of flavours out of the hat, Wicked focuses firmly on seafood and delivers it with international flair. Mozambique peri-peri seafood, Boston clam chowder and Thai fish cakes all get a go on the extensive menu.

You can also tuck into pub grub for around \$15 at the architecturally fearsome **RSL Club**



(☎ 6686 2544; cnr Grant & River St; ☺ lunch & dinner) or the **Australia Hotel** (☎ 6686 2015; cnr Cherry & River Sts; ☺ lunch & dinner).

Getting There & Away

Regional Express (Rex; ☎ 13 17 13), **Virgin Blue** (☎ 13 67 89) and **Jetstar** (☎ 13 15 38) all fly to/from Sydney.

Greyhound (☎ 13 14 99) stops at the Big Prawn and **Premier Motor Service** (☎ 13 34 10) stops at Ampol Pied Pier. Both head to Brisbane (\$40), Coffs Harbour (\$45) and Sydney (\$97).

Blanch's Bus Service (☎ 6686 2144) operates a service to Lennox Head, Mullumbimby, Byron Bay and Bangalow. All stop on Tamar St.

CountryLink (☎ 13 22 32) buses head to Evans Head, Lennox Head and Lismore (all \$6). They also head to Casino (\$7) for train connections.

If you're heading to Byron Bay, take the coast road through Lennox Head. It's much prettier than the highway and much shorter as well.

AROUND BALLINA

Inland from Ballina, the closely settled country of the north coast hinterland begins, with winding, hilly roads running past tropical fruit farms, tiny villages and the occasional towering rainforest tree that has somehow escaped the wholesale clearing of the forest.

Macadamia-nut nuts may enjoy the café and gift store at the **Macadamia Castle** (☎ 6687 8432; Pacific Hwy; admission free; ☺ 8.30am-5pm), 1.7km north of Ballina.

Harvest Café (☎ 6687 2644; 18 Old Pacific Hwy, Newrybar; mains \$10-22; ☺ breakfast & lunch Tue-Sun), 20km north of Ballina, is a must for gastronomes. In 2004 it won a national award for the 'Best Breakfast Restaurant in Australia'. Their's spectacular eggs. For lunch you can tuck into Thai barramundi fish cakes with salsa or plum sweet-chilli pan-seared prawns.

LENNOX HEAD

☎ 02 / pop 4000

Flanked by picturesque coastline on either side, Lennox Head is a low-key, laid-back haunt of locals and surfers. Among the latter it's a must-stop destination due to a peeling right-hander off the point, and wetsuits sometimes outnumber the shorts-and-shirt brigade. **Lake Ainsworth** is a freshwater lake that is conducive to pleasant swimming and windsurfing. Swimming there can be some-

what beneficial to the skin as the dark colour is a result of teatree oil. If the wind's up, wind- or kite-surfing is the ticket, and **Wind & Water Action Sports** (☎ 6686 9555; www.windwater.net; sailboard longboard per hr from \$20; 1hr windsurfing lesson \$70; 3hr kite surfing lesson \$180) has a good line of equipment.

If you plan to stay awhile, it is worth getting in contact with the **Professionals** (☎ 6687 7579; www.professionals.com.au/lennoxhead; 66 Ballina St) for holiday apartments.

The YHA-affiliated **Lennox Head Beach House** (☎ 6687 7636; www.yha.com.au; 3 Ross St; dm/d \$28/70) has immaculate rooms and a great vibe. For \$5 you can use the surfboards, sailboards and bikes.

Clean and affordable **Lake Ainsworth Caravan Park** (☎ 6687 7249; www.bscp.com.au/lakeains; Pacific Pde; unpowered/powerd camp sites \$25/30 cabins without/with bathroom from \$78/95) is set on a compact stretch of flat, green grass right across the road from the beach.

At the other end of the scale, **Lennox Point Holiday Apartments** (☎ 6687 5900; www.lennoxholidayapartments.com; Pacific Pde; apt \$220; ☺ ☎) are slick, stylish and new. Plus they're opposite the beach and close to the Lennox Point Hotel.

The **Red Rock Café** (☎ 6687 4744; 3/60 Ballina St; mains \$10; ☺ breakfast & lunch; ☎) is nondescript from the outside but whips up a mean burger with homemade relish, as well as Vietnamese beef salads. For more good café food and chunky cakes try **Café de Mer** (☎ 6687 7132; Ballina St; mains \$7-12; ☺ breakfast & lunch).

Ruby's by the Sea (☎ 6687 5769; 17-19 Pacific Pde; bistro mains \$18, restaurant mains \$25; ☺ lunch & dinner daily) has two wings within the Lennox Point Hotel. The bistro cooks up plenty of fresh seafood including barbecued tiger prawn Caesar salad, and the finer balcony restaurant upstairs serves char-grilled cuttlefish with saffron and aioli or Peking duck crepes.

Premier Motor Service (☎ 13 34 10) stops here on request; pick-up is from the CountryLink coach stop. **Blanch's Bus Service** (☎ 6686 2144) has services to Ballina, Byron Bay and Mullumbimby on a Freedom pass (\$12 per day).

BYRON BAY

☎ 02 / pop 9000

The high green moguls of the Northern Rivers hinterland meet the coast in spectacular fashion at the region's most celebrated haunt. Byron's beauty precedes it and then deftly exceeds expectations. But it's the town's

escapism that has become the honey to roving bees. Deflated swarms of them bumble in to get drunk on the trademark New Age, laid-back, organic fusion lifestyle. They stay for a weekend, a week or for good (often in that order) to tune in, tune out, tone up and tan up. During the off season the mix is an ambling milieu, but come summer and school holidays it positively seethes.

Information

Accommodation booking office (☎ 6680 8666; www.byronbayaccom.net) Run by the visitors centre.

Backpackers World (☎ 6685 8858; www.backpackersworld.com.au; Shop 6, 75 Jonson St) Info and tours for budget travellers.

Byron Books (☎ 6680 9717; 3/1 Marvell St) Byron's best bookshop.

Byron Bus & Backpacker Centre (☎ 6685 5517; 84 Jonson St) For the lowdown on transport, accommodation and activities.

Global Gossip (☎ 6680 9140; 84 Jonson St; per hr \$6) Internet access.

Star Internet (☎ 6680 8199; Ste 1, 9 Fletcher St; ☺ 9am-9pm; per hr \$5) Internet access.

Visitors centre (☎ 6680 9271; 80 Jonson St) A wealth of information.

Sights

CAPE BYRON

George Gordon (Lord) Byron may have incessantly raved about walking in beauty like the night, but his grandfather did a little travel of his own, sailing around the world in the 1760s – Captain Cook named this headland after him. The views from the summit are spectacular, particularly if you've just burnt breakfast off on the climbing track from Clarke's Beach. Ribboning around the headland, it dips and (mostly) soars its way to the lighthouse. The surrounding ocean also jumps to the tune of dolphins and migrating humpback whales in June and July. Towering over all is the 1901 **Lighthouse** (☎ 6685 6585; Lighthouse Rd; ☺ 8am-sunset), Australia's most easterly and most powerful lighthouse. The walking track descends around the northeast side of the Cape, delving into **Cape Byron State Conservation Park**, where you'll stumble across bush turkeys and wallabies. En route, photo-hungry walkers can work the lens at **Captain Cook Lookout**. The track winds up at Lighthouse Rd and is a 4km round trip. You can also drive right up to the lighthouse and pay \$6 for the privilege of parking (or nothing at all if you park 300m below).

BEACHES

Main Beach, right in front of the thick of town, is the most popular spot for swimming and beautiful-people-watching. At its eastern end is **Clarks Beach**, good for small, peeling waves when the swell's right. For the famous breaks, keep walking to the **Pass**, which leads onto the **Watego's** and **Little Watego's Beaches**. Dolphin sightings are common at these spots. To the west of Main Beach, clothing is optional at quieter **Belongil Beach**.

South of **Cape Byron** are the hallowed sands of **Tallow Beach**, which stretch 7km down to a rockier section around **Broken Head** (named appropriately). Your next decent line of sand is **Seven Mile Beach**, running down to Lennox Head.

Activities

Kidz Klub (☎ 0429 770 147; www.kidzklub.com.au) offers excellent adventure tours, workshops, yabbing, bushwalking and school holiday programmes for kids aged four and up, plus baby-sitting for all little tackers. Rates are variable.

Once upon a time you wanted to run away and join the circus. Then you figured it was easier to just run away. But as luck would have it, you can still show mum and dad that you were serious by taking trapeze classes or circus skills workshops with **Circus Arts** (☎ 6685 6566; www.circusarts.com.au; 17 Centennial Circuit), located in Byron's Arts and Industry Estate, 2km west of town.

ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES

Byron is alternative therapy heartland. The *Body & Soul* guide, available from the visitors centre, is a handy guide to the host of therapies on offer.

Ambaji (☎ 6685 6620; www.ambaji.com.au; 6 Marvell St; prices from \$65; ☺ 10am-4pm Mon-Sat, 11am-3pm Sun) Craniosacral balancing, aqua balance healing and more.

Byron Ayurveda Centre (☎ 6632 2244; www.ayurvedahouse.com.au; Shop 6 Middleton St; prices from \$45; ☺ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Indian medicinal therapies.

Buddha Gardens (☎ 6680 7844; www.buddha gardens.com; 21 Gordon St, Arts Factory Village; prices from \$80; ☺ 10am-6pm) Balinese-style day spa.

Relax Haven (☎ 6685 8304; Belongil Beachouse, Childs St; prices from \$60; ☺ 10am-8pm) Float tanks.

Shambala (☎ 6680 7791; www.shambala.net.au; 4 Carlyle St; prices from \$35; ☺ 9am-7pm) Massage, reflexology, acupuncture and more.

BYRON BAY

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DIVING & SNORKELLING

A number of dive outfits in Bryon Bay take advantage of the town's close proximity to the **Julian Rocks Marine Reserve**. About 3km offshore, this reserve has been rated one of Australia's top 10 dive sites, with more than 600 species of fish plus whales, dolphins and turtles.

Outfits with good reputations:

Dive Byron Bay (☎ 1800 243 483, 6685 8333; www.byronbaydivecentre.com.au; 9 Marvell St; PADI courses from \$350, snorkelling \$50)

Sundive (☎ 1800 008 755; www.sundive.com.au; Middleton St; PADI courses from \$350; snorkelling \$45)

FLYING

Byron Airways (☎ 6629 0354; www.byronair.cjb.net) Tandem hang-gliding (\$110) and courses (from \$1050).

Byron Bay Gliding (☎ 6684 7572; www.byronbaygliding.com; Tyagarah Airport) Glider joy flights over the coast and hinterland from \$90 for 20 minutes.

Byron Gliding Club (☎ 6684 7627; www.byrongliding.com; Tyagarah Airport) Glider joy rides from \$80 plus lessons.

Skydive Byron Bay (☎ 6684 1323; www.skydivebyronbay.com; Tyagarah Airport) Tandem dives (\$275) and Australia's highest dive at 14,000 feet (\$390).

KAYAKING

A couple of companies offer great half-day kayaking tours for \$60 per person, in and around Cape Byron Marine Park. Exhibitionist dolphins are the main attraction, and the tours provide commentary and much-needed Tim Tams and coffee.

Cape Byron Kayaks (☎ 6685 4161)

Dolphin Kayaking (☎ 6685 8044; www.dolphinkayaking.com.au)

SURFING

Blackdog Surfing (☎ 6680 9828; www.blackdogsurfing.com; Shop 8, The Plaza, Jonson St; 3hr lesson \$60; 3-day \$135) Small group lessons and a special course for women.

Mojosurf Adventures (☎ 1800 113 044; www.mojosurf.com.au; half-day lessons per person \$65) Highly recommended. There's also five-day surf trips (per person \$635) which include accommodation and meals.

Samudra (☎ 6685 5600; www.samudra.com.au) All-inclusive surf-and-yoga from \$630 per two days per person. A reader fave.

Surfaris (☎ 1800 634 951; www.surfaris.com; Sydney-Byron Bay return trip \$549) More five-day surf trips including camping and meals.

NORTH COAST

NORTH COAST

Tours

The following offer small-group tours into the North Coast hinterland:

Byron Bay Eco Tours (☎ 6685 4030; www.byron-bay.com/ecotours; per person \$85) Small-group 4WD tours with excellent commentary.

Jim's Alternative Tours (☎ 6685 7720; www.jimsalternativetours.com; per person \$35) Entertaining tours (with soundtrack!) to Nimbin.

Mountain Bike Tours (☎ 1800 122 504, 0429 122 504; www.mountainbiketours.com.au; per person \$100) Environmentally friendly bike tours.

Festivals & Events

East Coast International Blues & Roots Music Festival (☎ 6685 8310; www.bluesfest.com.au) Held

over Easter, this international jam attracts high-calibre performers such as Michael Franti and Beth Orton. Local heavyweights also get in on the act. Book early.

Splendour in the Grass (www.splendourinthegrass.com) Held in July, this indie music festival gives punters a good run for their money, with funk, electronica, folk, rock, hip-hop and a host of other genres. Book early.

Byron Bay Writers Festival (☎ 6685 5115; www.byronbaywritersfestival.com.au) In July/August, this three-day event features workshops, writer forums and kids events. Top-shelf Australian writers attend.

Sleeping

It's essential to book accommodation during school holidays and summer. Useful contacts for holiday house rentals:

Byron Bay Accommodation (www.byron-bay.com/accommodation)

LJ Hooker (☎ 6685 7300; www.ljhooker.com; 4/31 Lawson St)

Professionals (☎ 6685 6552; www.byronbaypro.com.au; cnr Lawson & Fletcher Sts)

BUDGET

Main Beach Backpackers (☎ 1800 150 233, 6685 8695; fax 6685 8609; cnr Lawson & Fletcher Sts; dm \$25, d \$55-60; 📺) Size does matter. This small, personable hostel makes guests feel like more than a number with friendly staff, a sunny lounge, and dorms and doubles reminiscent of comfy bedrooms.

Belongil Beachouse (☎ 6685 7868; www.belongilbeachouse.com; 25 Childe St; dm/d from \$25/65; 📺) Tucked into a green pocket, this beachy warren has excellent self-contained cabins, clinically modern studio units and comfortable dorms. Pick of the bunch are the cosy, self-contained doubles.

Great Northern (☎ 6685 6454; Jonson St; s/d \$55/65) Though spartan, the rooms here enjoy an

overspill of character from the pub downstairs. You could end up a groupie for the night, as headlining bands also crash here. Either way you won't get much sleep on the weekends. All rooms have shared bathrooms.

Cape Byron YHA (☎ 1800 652 627; 6685 8788; www.yha.com.au; Cnr Byron & Middleton Sts; dm/d from \$26/70; 📺, 📺) This purpose-built hostel is one tidy ship and has five-bed, uncramped dorms with lockers and fans. The doubles and twins are also spacious and one has an en suite. The kitchen and TV room are snug, but there's a sunny courtyard to compensate.

Arts Factory Lodge (☎ 6685 7709; www.artsfactory.com.au; Skinners Shoot Rd; dm/d from \$30/85; 📺) This celebrated complex embodies Byron at its alternative best. Guests nurture their inner hippy at didgeridoo, yoga and meditation workshops, then bunk down in colourful six-to-12-bed dorms. Couples can opt for 'cubes' (aptly titled) or pricier en suites.

Also recommended:

Aquarius Backpackers Motel (☎ 6685 7663; www.aquarius-backpackers.com.au; 16 Lawson St; dm/d \$30/75; 📺, 📺) An urban castle with a myriad of dorms, doubles and motel rooms.

Clarks Beach Caravan Park (☎ 6685 6496; clarks@bshp.com.au; off Lighthouse Rd; camp sites/cabins from \$25/120) Tightly packed cabins and sites in a bush setting.

MIDRANGE

Amigos (☎ 6680 8622; www.amigosbb.com; 32 Kingsley St; s/d from \$80/100) Soaked in south-of-the-border flavours, this cute B&B has three bedrooms with crisp white linen and multicoloured Bolivian spreads. There's also a gorgeous cottage out the back with hammocks swinging nearby in the garden. An all-you-can-eat continental breakfast costs \$5.

Bamboo Cottage (☎ 6685 5509; www.byron-bay.com/bamboocottage; 76 Butler St; s/d from \$90/118) Featuring a lion's share of charm and global wall hangings, Bamboo Cottage treats guests to a handful of enigmatic rooms heavy on Asian overtones. Out the back is a semi-self-contained bungalow resembling the Taj's boudoir, complete with an elevated futon tucked behind romantic curtains.

Byron Bayside Motel (☎ 6685 6004; www.byronbaysidemotel.com.au; 14 Middleton St; s/d \$110/115) So the interior aesthetics won't bowl you over (floral patterns and raw-brick walls), but all rooms have small kitchenettes and full laundries, and for the central location it's a steal. The cleaning detail could win an international competition.

MARKETS OF THE HINTERLAND

Weekly Markets

- **Bangalow Farmer's Market** (Byron St; 📺 8-11am Sat)
- **Byron Farmer's Market** (Butler St; 📺 8-11am Thu & Sat)
- **Lismore Farmer's Market** (Lismore Showground; 📺 8am-noon Sat)
- **Rainbow Region Organic Markets** (Lismore Showground; 📺 8-11am Tue)

1st Weekend of the Month

- **Brunswick Heads** (Memorial Park; 📺 Sat)
- **Lismore Car Boot Market** (Lismore Shopping Centre; 📺 Sun)

2nd Weekend of the Month

- **Alstonville Market** (Alstonville Showground; 📺 Sun)
- **Channon Craft Market** (Coronation Park; 📺 Sun)
- **Lennox Head Lakeside Market** (Lake Ainsworth Foreshore; 📺 Sun)

3rd Weekend of the Month

- **Aquarius Fair Markets** (Nimbin Community Centre; 📺 Sun)
- **Ballina Markets** (Circus Ground; 📺 Sun)
- **Lismore Car Boot Market** (Lismore Shopping Centre; 📺 Sun)
- **Mullumbimby Museum Market** (Stuart St; 📺 Sat)
- **Uki Produce & Craft Market** (Uki Village Buttery; 📺 Sat)

4th Weekend of the Month

- **Bangalow Village Market** (Bangalow Showground; 📺 Sun)
- **Evans Head Riverside Market** (Recreation Reserve; 📺 Sat)

5th Weekend of the Month

- **Aquarius Fair Markets** (Nimbin Community Centre; 📺 Sun)
- **Lennox Head Lakeside Market** (Lake Ainsworth Foreshore; 📺 Sun)

Bay Beach Motel (☎ 6685 6090; www.baybeachmotel.com.au; 32 Lawson St; r \$165-185; 📺, 📺) Finally someone has realised that 'motel' and 'dowdy' needn't be joined at the proverbial hip. The standard motor inn rooms here have been transformed into sharp and sassy bedrooms with suede furniture, Asian-influenced bedspreads and contemporary bathrooms.

Oasis Resort (☎ 1800 336 129, 6685 7390; www.byronbayoasisresort.com.au; 24 Scott St; ste from \$195; 📺) This compact resort is engulfed by palms and has sizable one- and two-bedroom apartments with big balconies, or smart

'Tree Top Houses' (from \$305). All accommodation is spotless and kitted out in cheery décor.

More midrangers:

Breakfree Eco Beach Resort (☎ 6639 5700; www.ecobeachbyron.com.au; 35-37 Shirley Street; r from \$165; 📺, 📺) Fresh and funky.

Byron Lakeside Holiday Apartments (☎ 6680 9244; www.byronlakeside.com; 5 Old Bangalow Rd; r per 3-night stay from \$450; 📺, 📺) Suburb-style holiday village with superb apartments.

Wollongbar Motor Inn (☎ 6685 8200; 19-21 Shirley St; r \$95-140; 📺, 📺) A fine motel with spotless rooms. Good disabled rooms too.

TOP END

Beach Hotel (☎ 6685 6402; www.beachhotel.com.au; Bay St; r incl breakfast from \$250; ♿ ♿) This classy beachfront joint has 'Garden View Rooms' doused in forest greens and polished wood, with marble bathrooms, Thai silk cushions and gourmet cookies (it's the little touches...). Top of the food chain are the Ocean View Loft Rooms and the East Coast Suite.

More Top Enders:

Rae's on Watego's (☎ 6685 5366; www.raes.com.au; 8 Marine Pde, Watego's Beach; ste \$570-730; ♿ ♿) Superlative boutique hotel.

Seaview House (☎ 6685 6486; www.seaviewbyron.com; 146 Lighthouse Rd; d \$250; ♿) Cushy B&B with Byron's best views.

Eating

CAFÉS

Most of Byron's cafés close at 5pm.

Twisted Sista (☎ 6680 9100; Shop 1/4 Lawson St; mains \$8-15; ♿) breakfast & lunch) Gluttonous goodies such as oversized quiches, frittatas and salads tumble over each other in a mass of fresh and fabulous ingredients at this warm café. The sweets are too big for solo efforts.

Succulent Cafe (☎ 6680 7121; Marvell Lane; mains \$8-16; ♿) breakfast & lunch) And succulent the steak sandwiches, grilled mahi mahi salads and chilli prawn linguini are! This narrow café packs plenty of flavour and ingredients into a fresh menu. Mosaic-tiled tables and great coffee.

Bay Leaf Cafe (☎ 6685 8900; Marvell St; mains \$10-18; ♿) breakfast & lunch) This bohemian café has a small but excellent menu that makes a task out of choosing. Soups, pastas and Turkish bread sambos change daily, but expect the likes of chorizo and aioli linguini. Seats are perched at elevated, open windows.

Byron Orion (☎ 6685 6828; 5/2 Jonson St; mains \$14-20; ♿) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Orion's open-door policy stops passers-by in their tracks. It could be the delicious red vinyl walls and supper cocktails, but we're pretty sure it's the hot and spicy scents courtesy of Gujarati beef, rogan josh and vindaloo. Breakfast is decidedly Australian free-range eggs.

Casa Pepe (☎ 6685 7121; Shop 4, 14 Middleton St; lunch mains \$8-15, dinner mains \$18-26; ♿) lunch daily, dinner Sat & Sun) Hidden in a nondescript block of shops, this vegetarian restaurant is worthy of all dietary persuasions. Happy patrons sit in the sheltered courtyard and tuck into pizzas, pies, soups and tofu burgers for lunch and smart pastas and pizzas for dinner.

Also recommended:

Espressohead (☎ 6680 9783; Shop 13/108, Woolworths Plaza, Jonson St; mains \$10; ♿) breakfast & lunch) Fabulous coffee.

Mongers (☎ 6680 8080; 1 Bay Lane; meals \$9-15; ♿) lunch & dinner) Nifty café with delicious seafood and hand-cut chips.

RESTAURANTS

Balcony Bar & Restaurant (☎ 6680 9666; cnr Lawson & Johnson Sts; mains \$20-30; ♿) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Take up a voyeuristic seat overlooking the street action below, or embed yourself in an obese cushion. The Balcony dishes up Ottoman overtones and fabulous fare like a curry-rubbed BLAT (bacon, lettuce, avocado and tomato ciabatta) for breakfast, fresh fish with crushed Jerusalem artichokes and citrus butter for lunch, and midnight tapas to soak up the cocktails. The soundtrack is suitably somnific and the atmosphere cosy and chic. This place could teach any inner-city venue a thing or two about style.

Fresh (☎ 6685 7810; 7 Jonson St; mains \$20-27; ♿) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Serving up Mediterranean salads, spicy nasi goreng and Sumatran lamb, Fresh is an adaptable eatery and a favourite stomping ground for locals. Diners sip coffee outside in the morning sun and chatter over candlelight at night.

Dish (☎ 6685 7320; cnr Jonson & Marvell Sts; mains \$27-35; ♿) dinner) Ivy-clad walls and floor-to-ceiling glass create an atrium atmosphere at this dishy restaurant. The equally sophisticated cuisine includes Bangalow pork scotch fillet with roasted pistachio, chorizo and apple purée. The wine list is worthy of applause.

Fins (☎ 6685 5029; The Beach Hotel; mains \$35; ♿) dinner) Tucked behind the boisterous Beach Hotel pub, this elegant sibling serves fish tagines, Mauritian seafood sambals and tiger abalone. The marine mains are touted as the best on the coast, and celeb chefs pop in to prepare degustation nights.

More fine dining:

Boomerang (☎ 6685 5264; Shop 5, 2 Fletcher St; mains \$40-60; ♿) lunch Sunday, dinner daily) An inspired menu and wine list.

Olivo (☎ 6685 7950; 34 Jonson St; mains \$20-30; ♿) dinner) Chic and snug with global flavours from Europe.

The **Beach Hotel** (left) and the **Railway Friendly Bar** (opposite) serve great pub meals for \$10 to \$20 and you can also tuck into organic dinners

for \$15 to \$20 before no-nonsense beers at the **Buddha Bar & Restaurant** (right).

QUICK EATS

Organic (☎ 6680 7778; 11 Bay Lane; mains \$5-10; ♿) lunch & dinner) Proving unequivocally that it's not the size of the wave but the motion of the spatula, even the 'half pockets' at this cosy hole-in-the-wall eatery satisfy voracious patrons. Alternative climaxes include kofta, schnitzels and sublime Middle Eastern dips.

Cardamom Pod (Shop 8, Pier Arcade, 7 Lawson St; meals \$7-14; ♿) lunch & dinner) Fusing flavours from the subcontinent with an Aussie twist, this teeny gem serves excellent salads, curries and samosas at a handful of tables. The whole menu is vegetarian and you can vacuum your tofu and pumpkin salad here or get it to go.

More quick fixes:

Byron Street Burgers (☎ 6685 5234; Shop 8 Byron St; mains \$8-11; ♿) lunch & dinner) Organic veggie and meat burgers.

Earth 'n' Sea Pizza & Pasta (☎ 6685 6029; 11 Lawson St; mains \$15-25; ♿) lunch & dinner) Mind-blowing pizzas.

SELF-CATERING

Options for the DIY chef:

Byron Farmers Market (☎ 6685 9792; Butler St; ♿) 8-11am Thu & Sat) Great for picking up delicious local produce.

Green Garage (☎ 6680 8577; 68 Tennyson St; ♿) 7am-7pm) Organic goodies.

Santos (☎ 6685 7071; 105 Jonson St) Organic grocer.

Woolworths (☎ 6685 7292; Jonson St; ♿) 8am-9pm)

Drinking

Beach Hotel (☎ 6685 6402; cnr Bay & Jonson Sts) When this mother ship of pubs is full, it seems the whole of Byron and beyond has stopped in for a drink. Buzzing folk settle at alfresco tables with smacking beach views, or in the stadium-sized interior. Big, festive and fun.

Railway Friendly Bar (☎ 6685 7662; 80 Jonson St) This indoor-outdoor pub has a cosy interior and a front beer garden conducive to boozy afternoons. You're likely to spark up new friendships over an upturned keg, and there's live music most nights.

Great Northern (☎ 6685 6454; Byron St) You won't need your fancy duds at this brash and boisterous pub. It's loud and beery most nights and even louder when hosting headline acts. Touring bands pop in most weekends and local musos fill the midweek gaps.

Buddha Bar & Restaurant (☎ 6685 5833; Skinners Shoot Rd) Once fed, the young and funky mingle on leather lounges beneath wickedly low lighting in Byron's sultriest drinking hole. The global soundtrack traipses from hip-hop to Latino, with jazz and electronic pitstops along the way. DJs and acoustic sets also get a go.

More drinking venues:

Balcony Bar & Restaurant (opposite) Smooth and chic.

La La Land (☎ 6680 7070; 6 Lawson St) Soft couches, sinful lighting, slinky young things.

Entertainment

Cheeky Monkeys (☎ 6685 5886; 115 Jonson St) A backpackers' bonanza – cheap food, cheap drinks and cheesy tunes. Expect (dodgy) tabletop dancing, instant friends, long nights and easy, sleazy fun.

Cocomangas (☎ 6685 8493; 32 Jonson St) Sure, it's a little lacking in sophistication and style, but so are most of the patrons jumping to their heart's content on the dance floor. It's the stomping ground of twenty-somethings thrashing to indie rock, old school, techno and fusion.

Lounge Cinema (☎ 6680 9055; Skinners Shoot Rd; admission \$10) The Arts Factory's cinema screens Hollywood fodder as well as art-house flicks and classic reruns.

Shopping

Bim bam (☎ 6680 8813; Shop 3, 2 Fletcher St) This small gallery sells quality indigenous art and craft, some affordable for most wallets and some for the serious collector.

Cobblers at Byron (☎ 6685 6190; Shop 5, Feros Arcade) Hopeless shoe and leather addicts will struggle to keep their mitts off the fabulous boots, sandals, shoes, bags and wallets at this cobbler's.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The closest airport is at Ballina (see p186), but you're likely to get a cheaper flight into Coolangatta airport on the Gold Coast.

BUS

Long-distance buses stop on Jonson St. **Greyhound** (☎ 13 14 99) and **Premier Motor Service** (☎ 13 34 10) have daily services to Brisbane (\$40), Coffs Harbour (\$55) and Sydney (\$105).

Kirklands (☎ 6626 1499) has buses to Lismore and Coolangatta airports. **CountryLink** (☎ 13 22 32) has buses to Casino for train connections.

Blanch's Bus Service (☎ 6686 2144; www.tropicalnsw.com.au/blanchs) runs daily to Ballina, Lennox Head and Mullumbimby for less than \$10.

Shuttle services:

Airlink Byron Bay Airbus (☎ 6684 3232; www.airlinkbyronbay.com.au) Coolangatta Airport (\$35), Lismore Airport (\$40) and Ballina Airport (\$15).

Byron Bay Transport Services (☎ 6685 5008; www.byronbaytaxi.com) Ballina Airport (from \$15) and Coolangatta (\$36).

Getting Around

Byron Bay Bicycles (☎ 6685 6067; Woolworths Plaza, Jonson St) hires mountain bikes for \$28 per day.

Byron Bay Taxis (☎ 6685 5008) On call 24 hours.

BRUNSWICK HEADS

☎ 02 / pop 1860

Fresh oysters and mud crabs call the Brunswick River home, as do retirees and families who love the good beaches and fishing.

Chalet Motel (☎ 6685 1257; www.brunswickvalley.com.au/chaletmotel; 68 Tweed St; r from \$85; ☎ ☎) is the pick of the motels in town, with a towering garden and cute and colourful rooms.

Alternatively, **Brunswick Sails Motor Inn** (☎ 6685 1353; 26-28 Tweed St; r \$65-115; ☎ ☎) flags you down with a garish blue exterior and generically comfy rooms.

The **Terrace Reserve Caravan Park** (☎ 1300 762 072, 6685 1233; terrace@bshp.com.au; unpowered/powerd sites from \$21/24, cabins \$85-170), on the banks of Simpson Creek, has plenty of sites and snazzy cabins.

The splendid **Hotel Brunswick** (☎ 6685 1236; www.hotelbrunswick.com.au; Mullumbimby St; s/d \$40/70) has decent pub rooms, an ecofriendly bent and a magnificent beer garden that unfurls beneath flourishing poincianas. The Bruns serves great nosh (mains \$15-20; open lunch and dinner), there's live music on the weekends, and every Wednesday night you can watch a movie.

Yami (☎ 6685 0186; 1 Park St; mains \$8-14; ☎) breakfast & lunch daily, dinner Fri-Sun) is yummy. It's a decadent little spot with couches inside, tables in the sun and a tangy Middle Eastern menu.

Kirklands (☎ 6626 1499) has buses to Byron Bay, Lennox Head and Lismore. **CountryLink** (☎ 13 22 32) has buses to Byron Bay and Tweed Heads.

THE TWEED COAST

As the coastline bleeds into Queensland's (Qld) southern border, the development be-

gins to assert itself more distinctly. Concrete and mortar stake their claim on the beach with all the subtlety of a used-car salesman. But the territory remains less tarnished than the glitz of the Gold Coast, and surf culture still simmers within the cream-brick ghettos.

TWEED HEADS

☎ 07 / pop 55,860

Tweed Heads is in the grip of an urban-testosterone epidemic. High-rise apartment blocks are shooting up quicker than you can say Viagra, and bamboozled retirees and tourists potter past gaping construction sites where the milk bar used to be. But the beaches remain the area's best feature. The state border is an invisible line, and Coolangatta (Qld) and Tweed Heads (NSW) bleed into one.

Orientation & Information

Coming from the south, after the bypass road branches off, the old Pacific Hwy crosses the river at Boyd's Bay Bridge and becomes Wharf St, the long main street. You then meet Boundary St, which will veer to the right to take you up to **Point Danger** for sweeping views.

The **visitors centre** (☎ 1800 674 414; www.tweedcoolangatta.com.au; Centro Tweed Mall, Wharf St; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) is a small but helpful booth in the middle of the shopping mall.

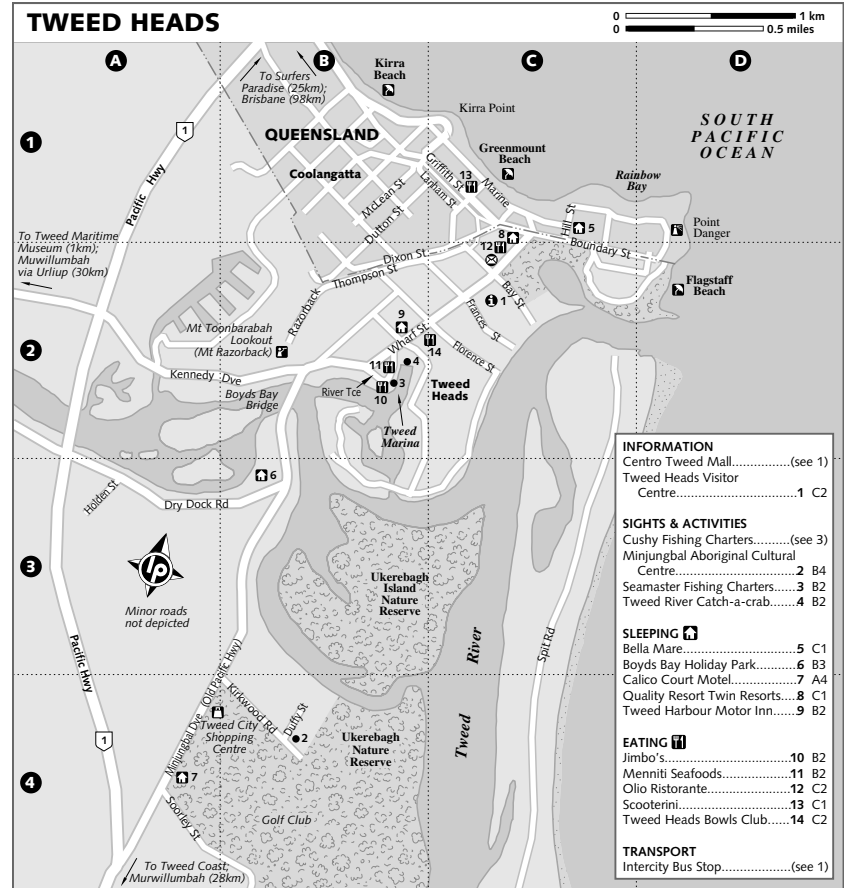
Sights & Activities

There are sweeping views back down the Tweed Coast and up to the glittering high-rises of the Gold Coast from the **Mt Toonbarabah Lookout** (Mt Razorback). But beaches are what you come up here for – **Kirra Point** is a big favourite with surfers. Further round, **Kirra Beach** is patrolled year-round.

The small **Minjungbal Aboriginal Cultural Centre** (☎ 5524 2109; cnr Kirkwood & Duffy Sts; adult/child \$15/8; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) provides an interesting insight into the traditional owners of the land, the Minjungbal people. Exhibits demonstrate their traditional lifestyle, the influence of Pacific Islander (Kanak) refugees, and the landscape prior to European arrival.

The **Tweed Maritime Museum** (☎ 5536 8625; Kennedy Dr; adult/child \$4/50c; ☎ 11am-4pm Tue, Thu & Fri, 1-4pm Sun) has an interesting array of things, with Boyd's fishing shed well worth a look.

Tweed River Catch-a-Crab (☎ 5599 9972; www.catchacrab.com.au; Dry Dock Wharf; tours incl lunch & fishing per adult/child \$90/54) operates very fun crab-catching-and-eating tours. For fishing charters try



Seamaster Fishing Charters (☎ 0415 593 901) or **Cushy Fishing Charters** (☎ 0418 631 076), both based at Tweed Marina on River Tce. Rates vary depending on duration of charter.

Sleeping

Some of the best accommodation is on the NSW side of the invisible state line.

Calico Court Motel (☎ 5524 3333; 29-33 Minjungbal Dr, Tweed Heads; r from \$75; ☎ ☎) This single-storey brick block offers decent motel rooms with light interiors, cable TV and a free bus to the local bowls club. The owners are also happy to accommodate families with cots and extra beds.

Bella Mare (☎ 5599 2755; www.bellamare.com.au; 5 Hill St, Coolangatta; apt per night/week from \$110/765; ☎ ☎) Neat and tightly packed.

This fancy apartment block is bathed in terracotta and Mediterranean hues. It houses cool and crisp apartments and villas with contemporary interiors and glistening mod cons.

Quality Resort Twin Resorts (☎ 5536 2277; www.twintowns.com.au; cnr Wharf & Griffith Sts, Tweed Heads; r from \$205; ☎ ☎ ☎) Some folk don't mind sharing a building with a small nation as long as there's a view. Which is why this alpha male of the high-rises, with its chic apartments, made-over hotel rooms and fabulous vistas, is popular.

Also recommended: **Boys Bay Holiday Park** (☎ 5524 3306; www.tchp.com.au/boysbay; 3 Dry Dock Rd, Tweed Heads; camp sites from \$24, cabins without/with bathroom from \$95/110; ☎ ☎) Neat and tightly packed.

Tweed Harbour Motor Inn (☎ 5536 6066; www.tweedharbourmotorinn.com.au; 135 Wharf St, Tweed Heads; r \$105; 🍷 🍷) Cheap and central.

Eating

Scoterini (☎ 5599 2298; Shop 1, Calypso Plaza, Griffiths St, Coolangatta; mains \$10-20; 🍷) breakfast & lunch) Protected from the condo invasion by curtains of clear plastic, this snug café churns out great salads, paninis and burgers. The coffee is strong and the grilled tofu, tomato and mushroom breakfast is fab.

Menniti Seafoods (☎ 5599 2343; 2 River Tce, Tweed Heads; mains \$10; 🍷) 10am-7.30pm) Super-fresh fish and chips and super prices in unfussy surrounds. Park yourself at one of the tables overlooking the marina and tuck into a daily special of red snapper, dory or calamari.

Olio Ristorante (☎ 5536 9500; Shop 3 & 4, 1 Wharf St, Tweed Heads; mains \$18-27; 🍷) dinner Tue-Sat) Olio keeps things casual with crocheted tablecloths and candlelight. But the menu is a lovely confusion of flavours: seafood skewers with brandy mango and roast capsicum sauce or duck in sour cherry sauce. There's also a kid's menu.

Also recommended:

Jimbo's (☎ 5536 2090; 118 Wharf St; Tweed Heads; mains \$22; 🍷) lunch & dinner) Classy fish and chips.

Tweed Heads Bowls Club (☎ 5536 3800; cnr Wharf & Florence Sts, Tweed Heads; mains \$15; 🍷) lunch & dinner) Great for cheap steaks and parmas.

Getting There & Around

Long-distance buses stop at the intercity bus stop on Bay St. **Premier Motor Services** (☎ 13 34 10) has buses to Byron Bay (\$24). **CountryLink** (☎ 13 22 32) also has buses to Byron Bay (\$15).

Surfside (☎ 5536 7666) runs the local yellow buses up to the Gold Coast and south to Brunswick Heads.

FAR NORTH COAST HINTERLAND

The undulating landscape of the Far North Coast Hinterland is a gorgeous tapestry of ecosystems. Native flora mingles with the johnny-come-latelies of foreign soil. Orchards roll into farmland, and dry eucalypt forests converge in small clumps. Twenty-two million years ago an eruption of lava from Mt Warning created the northern half of the hinterland, flattening the valley and enclos-

ing it with dramatic mountain ranges. The area's three national parks – Border Ranges, Mt Warning and Nightcap – are part of the Central Eastern Rainforest Reserves, which are World Heritage rainforests. This diverse backdrop perfectly mirrors the hinterland's rich culture. Kombi vans, hippies, galleries, sublime cuisine, great markets, tremendous B&Bs, exquisite country and incredible waterfalls all call the area home.

LISMORE

☎ 02 / pop 38,000

At first glance Lismore seems like any small town in rural Australia, seasoned with parochialisms and a surfeit of pubs. But closer inspection reveals a liberal supply of heritage and Art Deco buildings populated by an artistic community. Students from the Southern Cross University add to the town's eclecticism. Lismore is also one of the few places in Australia that reprocesses organic goods and will soon boast the largest worm farm in the southern hemisphere.

Information

NPWS office (☎ 6627 0200; 75 Main St, Alstonville) East of Lismore.

Visitors centre (☎ 1300 369 795; cnr Molesworth & Ballina Sts; 🍷) 9.30am-4pm) Internet access and extensive information.

Sights & Activities

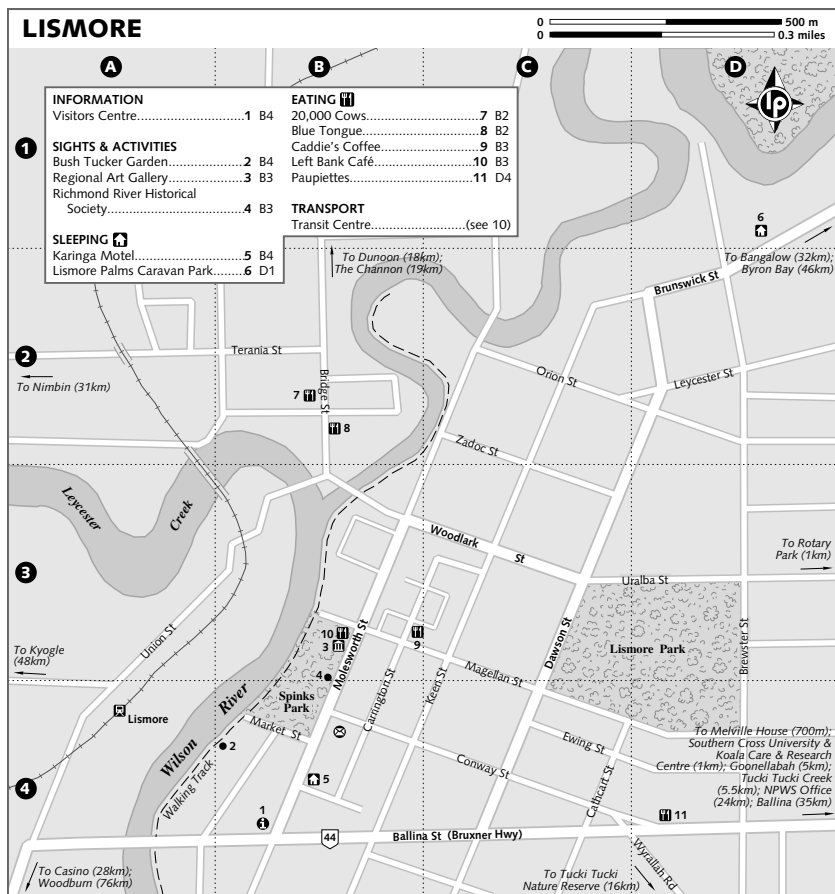
The **Koala Care & Research Centre** (☎ 6622 1233; Rifle Range Rd; admission free; 🍷) 9.30-10.30am Sat) is home to recovering koalas and well worth a visit (you can view animals from outside any time). To glimpse a platypus, head to **Tucki Tucki Creek** at the southern end of Kadina St in Goonellabah. Dawn or dusk yield the best opportunities to spot these enigmatic monotremes.

There are more opportunities to spot fuzzy, grey bums-in-the-gums at **Tucki Tucki Nature Reserve** (☎ 6627 0200; Wyrallah Rd). About 16km south of town, this reserve protects koala habitat and enables rangers to study the animals as part of a programme to conserve them in NSW.

For an insight into European settlement and indigenous tribes visit the **Richmond River Historical Society** (☎ 6621 9993; 165 Molesworth St; admission \$2; 🍷) 10am-4pm Mon-Fri).

The diminutive Lismore **Regional Art Gallery** (☎ 6622 2209; 131 Molesworth St; admission by donation; 🍷) 10am-4pm Tue-Fri, 10.30am-2.30pm Sat) has just





enough space for two visiting exhibitions, but the curators do it justice by showing excellent works.

A pleasant walking track skirts the river. Along the way you'll pass a **bush tucker garden**, which once nurtured the daily diet of the Widjabal people, who are the traditional owners of the land.

Sleeping

Karinga Motel (☎ 6621 2787; karinga@motorinn.net; 258 Molesworth St; s/d \$70/80; (P) (♿)) This central motel has a fancied-up façade and bright, clean and functional rooms. Each contains tea, coffee and toast facilities, and a bar fridge.

Melville House (☎ 6621 5778; 267 Ballina St; s/d from \$90/120; (P) (♿) (♿)) Chequered tiles in the kitchen,

antique clocks in the hall and cut glass on the windows: this excellent B&B is a slice of vintage Australiana. The sizable rooms are stocked with beautifully aged furniture, and some have an en suite. Helen, the friendly owner, manages at least nine holiday rental houses (for \$90 to \$160) in town – call her for details.

Lismore Palms Caravan Park (☎ 6621 7067; 42-48 Brunswick St; camp sites/cabins from \$18/65; (P) (♿)) The nicest of Lismore's caravan parks has ordered cabins right on the river and pleasant sites. The amenities are clean and the staff are friendly.

Eating

Blue Tongue (☎ 6622 0750; 43 Bridge St; mains \$8-11; (♿) breakfast & lunch Wed-Sun) On the quieter side of

the river in a wonderfully worn building, Blue Tongue whips up solid café fare. The BLATs, toasted Turkish sandwiches and fine coffee taste better when consumed in the sunny courtyard with its anarchic foliage.

Left Bank Café (☎ 6622 2338; 133 Molesworth St; mains \$10-18; (♿) breakfast & lunch Mon-Sat, dinner Fri & Sat) Attached to the gallery, this bright, open café serves artistic works of its own. In the umbrella-shaded courtyard or the glassy interior you can dine on rabbit sugo with papardelle, or zucchini, mint and feta frittata.

20,000 Cows (☎ 6622 2517; 58 Bridge St; mains \$15; (♿) dinner Wed-Sat) This vegetarian restaurant delivers international flavours with one-for-all and all-for-one social messages. Far right conservatives need not enter, and everyone else can enjoy the Yemeni pastries, Lithuanian kugelis, Egyptian dips, Thai soups, Indian curries and warm vibes.

Also recommended:
Caddie's Coffee (☎ 6621 7709; 20 Carrington St; meals \$8-13; (♿) breakfast & lunch Mon-Fri, to 2pm Sat) Bohemian café with gluten-free goodies.

Paupiettes (☎ 6621 6136; 56 Ballina St; mains \$15-25; (♿) dinner Tue-Sat) Superb Mod Oz menu and local produce.

Getting There & Around

Regional Express (Rex; ☎ 13 17 13) flies to Sydney.

Greyhound (☎ 13 14 99) has daily buses to Byron Bay (\$45). **Kirklands** (☎ 6622 1499) also runs to Byron Bay (\$14). **CountryLink** (☎ 13 22 32) buses head to Byron Bay and Murwillumbah. All leave from the transit centre.

There are also 24-hour **taxis** (☎ 13 10 08).

THE CHANNON

The Channon is an intimate village between Nimbin and Lismore. If you can, time your visit for the second Sunday of the month for 'the mother of all markets', according to local pundits.

Eternity Springs B&B (☎ 02-6688 6385; www.eterinitysprings.com; 483 Tuntable Creek Rd; camping per person \$12, s incl breakfast \$50-100, d incl breakfast \$80-160) A true eco-haven, this idyllic plot has cosy 'cubbies' with private verandas and share bathrooms, en-suite doubles filled with impressive art, and the very stylish, self-contained, one-bedroom 'Lotus Room'. The real beauty of Eternity Springs, however, is the spring water, solar power, permaculture, flushing compost toilets and organic breakfasts. At the back of the property is a splendid open-walled timber studio with views of the

surrounding valleys. Yoga workshops don't get any lovelier.

Havan's (☎ 02-6688 6108; www.rainbowregion.com/havan; Lot 1, Lawler Rd; s/d \$75/120) is a pretty eco-tourist retreat set in the heart of a rainforest.

NIGHTCAP NATIONAL PARK

Encompassing over 8000 hectares, this stunning national park contains diverse subtropical rainforests and wildlife. The bent-winged bat, red-legged pademelon (a relative of the wallaby) and endangered Fleay's barred frog all call the area home. With the highest annual rainfall in NSW, Nightcap has spectacular waterfalls, gorgeous green gullies and sheer cliff walls. The exposed rock pinnacles of the **Sphinx** can be seen from Lismore.

There are several access points and walks to suit all fitness levels. The short trek from the road to **Protestor Falls** (1.4km) ambles beneath thick palms and rainforest and around moss-carpeted rocks. There are also picnic spots and dramatic lookout points, including **Mt Nardi** (800m). The NPWS office at the visitors centre in Murwillumbah (p211) can supply detailed maps and advice on many walks.

NIMBIN

☎ 02 / pop 400

Landing in Nimbin is like entering a social experiment. It's as if the residents have transmogrified into a dreadlocked, tie-dyed society, milling in a jetlag of marijuana and the 1970s. This is overkill, of course, and Nimbin's residents are far more eclectic, but the town's experimental curiosity is the showcase of its tiny main street. Nimbin is not for everyone, and plenty of day-trippers wander the streets dazed and a little frightened (and not from the cookies). But once the tourist buses have hit the road the stereotypes melt and Nimbin's warm and diverse culture becomes more conspicuous.

Orientation & Information

Nimbin is very small and you'll find all points of interest on Cullen St, which runs through the centre.

Nimbin Connexion (☎ 6689 1764; www.nimbinconnexion.com; Cullen St; (♿) 9am-4pm) is at the northern end of town and has a wealth of knowledge, bike hire (\$20 per day) and internet access (\$6 per hour).

Any wwoofers out there? You're in luck. Nimbin is home to dozens of organic farms

and many host **Willing Workers on Organic Farms** (www.wwoof.org.au). Nimbin Connexion can help you get your hands dirty.

Festivals & Events

Nimbin Mardi Grass is held over the first weekend in May and delivers happy-high fun courtesy of the hemp olympix, hemp-themed street parades, hemp-based discussions and more scoobs than a uni dosshouse.

Sights & Activities

The wacky and wonderful **Nimbin Museum** ([☎](tel) 6689 1123; 62 Cullen St; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm) pays homage to crashed kombis in psychedelic garb and the pursuit of 'loving the child within yourself' and sticking it to 'the man'. Though minute, the museum instils the ethos of those who moved here in the 1970s. Actually, the ethos is still pretty thick today.

The **Nimbin Artists Gallery** ([☎](tel) 6689 1444; 49 Cullen St; ☎ 10am-4pm) packs an eclectic collection of pottery, prints, weaving, glass work and much more into a modest space.

The **Hemp Embassy** (Cullen St; ☎ 9am-5pm) features none-too-subtle displays that dispel myths about hemp and marijuana, and might be banned under (more) despotic regimes. Once you've been converted you can buy paraphernalia to get high. Smokers are welcome at the coffee shop next door.

Djanbung Gardens ([☎](tel) 6689 1755; www.earthwise.org.au; 74 Cecil St; admission free; 10am-3.30pm Tue-Sat) is a permaculture education centre, café and bookshop spreading good environmental practice.

The **Rainbow Power Company** ([☎](tel) 6689 1430; www.rpc.com.au; No 1 Alternative Way; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) designs and produces 'appropriate home-energy systems' that use nature's forces – the sun, wind and water – to generate electricity. The systems are exported to all corners of the globe.

At the old butter factory, the **Bush Theatre** ([☎](tel) 6689 1111) shows films several nights a week.

Nimbin hosts a colourful market on the third and fifth Sundays of the month.

Tours

See p190 for more tour options from Byron Bay.

Nimbin Tours & Shuttle Bus ([☎](tel) 6680 9189; www.nimbintours.com; \$5; ☎ tours 2pm Mon-Fri) One-hour tours of the Rainbow Power Company and Djanbung Gardens.

Grasshoppers Eco Explorer ([☎](tel) 0500 881 881; www.grasshoppers.com.au; tours per person incl lunch \$35) Day tours from Byron Bay. A reader fave.

Sleeping

Nimbin Backpackers at Granny's Farm ([☎](tel) 6689 1333; Cullen St; dm/d \$20/54; ☎) The hostel closest to town offers warm and colourful doubles and dorms, with enough room to swing a tofu cow. Most nights some sort of friendly drink fest takes place in the open-air lounge room. It's popular with bus tours.

YHA Nimbin Rox Hostel ([☎](tel) 6689 0022; www.yha.com.au; 74 Thornburn St; dm/d \$24/56; ☎) Tumbling down a landscaped native garden, this excellent hostel has clean and contemporary accommodation and great national park views. Dorms have four or eight beds, and one is suitable for wheelchairs. There are also safari tents.

Grey Gum Lodge ([☎](tel) 6689 1713; www.nimbinaustralia.com/greygumlodge; 2 High St; s/d from \$40/55; ☎) The rooms at this beautifully worn and creaky house fit better than your favourite jacket, and the high, comfy beds are the snuggly silver lining. Each room has a TV and en suite, and the back veranda provides outstanding conversations and sunsets.

More options:

Nimbin Tourist Caravan Park ([☎](tel) 6689 1402; 29 Sibley St; camp sites from \$19)

Rainbow Retreat Backpackers ([☎](tel) 6689 1262; 75 Thornburn St; camp sites/dm/d \$10/15/40) Rudimentary and serene retreat.

Eating & Drinking

Retro ([☎](tel) 6689 0590; 76 Cullen St; mains \$8; ☎ breakfast & lunch) A tidy café in a private corner pocket, Retro does great roast veggie wraps, frittatas, bakes, sambos and gluttonous sweets. It also serves stiff coffee.

Rainbow Café ([☎](tel) 6689 1997; 70 Cullen St; mains \$6-13; ☎ breakfast & lunch) Pack a healthy appetite for this Nimbin institution – you'll need room for the generous burgers, wraps, nachos and salads. Creative combos include tofu and peanut sauce or Mediterranean sweet potato salad. The sunny courtyard is a time vacuum.

Nimbin Hotel ([☎](tel) 6689 1246; Cullen St; mains \$15; ☎ lunch & dinner) Nimbin's local boozier cooks up hearty pub nosh à la steak or chicken parma. Wash it all down with a schooner on the back porch while appreciating the stunning views. On weekends it gets rolling with live music.

(Continued on page 209)

(Continued from page 200)

Nimbin Trattoria and Pizzeria ([☎](tel) 6689 1427; 70 Cullen St; mains \$10-20; ☎ lunch Thu-Sun, dinner daily) Outstanding pizzas worthy of gorging on and delicious pastas are churned out in ample supply at this toasty trattoria. Leave room for dessert.

Getting There & Away

The **Nimbin Tours & Shuttle Bus** (see p200) operates between Byron Bay and Nimbin (per person \$12).

You can also hitch a ride with **Walters Bus Company** ([☎](tel) 6687 8550) to/from Lismore (per person \$10).

AROUND NIMBIN

Nimbin Rocks, an Aboriginal sacred site, lies about 6km south of town, well signposted off Stony Chute (Kyogle) Rd. **Hanging Rock Creek** has falls and a good swimming hole; take the road through Stony Chute for 14km, turn right at the Barkers Vale sign, then left onto Williams Rd; the falls are nearby on the right.

See Nightcap National Park (p199) for information on Mt Nardi.

BANGALOW

☎ 02 / pop 1230

Beautiful Bangalow could make a painting weep with envy. Against a hilly backdrop, the ascending main street is a strip of old buildings populated by galleries, boutiques and fine eateries. There's a good **farmer's market** (open 8-11am Saturday) selling local organic produce. Just 14km out of Byron Bay, Bangalow makes for a lovely day trip, or even lovelier overnighter.

Sleeping

Riverview Guesthouse ([☎](tel) 6687 1317; www.riverviewguesthouse.com.au; 99 Byron St; r \$75-195) A stately Victorian house circumnavigated by a wide veranda and lush gardens, Riverview is a B&B pinup. Filled to tasteful sufficiency with antiques and classic cream colourings, it offers fine rooms and gourmet brekkies.

Village View Bed & Breakfast ([☎](tel) 6687 2619; terisu@hotmail.net.au; 11 Barby Cres; s/d incl breakfast \$120/130) This contemporary B&B dwells in the heights of Bangalow's residential pocket. It sleeps guests in a private cottage out the back, with spa, balcony and gobsmacking views of the surrounding green hills. The delectable breakfast will keep you going well after lunch.

Eating

Ate ([☎](tel) 6687 1010; 33 Byron St; mains \$16; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Creating more than just meals, this crafty café prepares food with passion. The result is inventions like crab spaghetti with capers, chives and tomatoes or osso bucco with Middle Eastern spices.

Upstairs from Ate is **Satiatè** (degustation \$50; ☎ dinner Tue-Sat) which does designer degustation and chic cocktails in exotic surrounds.

Utopia ([☎](tel) 6687 2088; 13 Byron St; mains \$16-24; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Contemporary jazz throbs softly in the background, lulling diners into sopor while they wait for gluten-free sausages with red pepper and mustard relish or Victorian mussels steamed with saffron. Yes – it is gastronomic utopia.

Urban Café ([☎](tel) 6687 2678; 33 Byron St; mains \$12-16; ☎ breakfast & lunch daily, dinner Thu-Sat) Casual and creative, this café specialises in fresh salads, sambos and burgers with deli ingredients, and fine coffee. There's live jazz, blues or country on the weekends.

MULLUMBIMBY

☎ 02 / pop 3200

Referred to as Mullum by most, this serene town is a coast-hinterland hybrid, drawing aesthetics and character from both. Wide streets with swaying palms are occupied by unhurried locals, and everything shuts on the weekends except the pubs and cafés, leaving little choice but to eat, drink and be merry. Mullumbimby is also a community centre for the valley, and consequently a good spot to stock up if you're going walkabout.

Orientation

Burringbar St is the main shopping street and runs off Dalley St, the main road through town.

Sights & Activities

Crystal Castle ([☎](tel) 6684 3111; Monet Dr; admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm) has tranquil, labyrinthine gardens, Australia's biggest stone-carved Blessing Buddha (15 tonne worth of enlightenment) and an impressive collection of crystals.

The **Brunswick Valley Historical Society Museum** ([☎](tel) 6684 1149; Stuart St; admission free; ☎ 11am-3pm Fri, 9am-noon third Saturday of every month) is housed in the old post office, itself worth a photo, and offers a comprehensive insight into days gone by.

Sleeping & Eating

Mullumbimby Motel (☎ 6684 2387; www.mullumbimby.motel.com.au; 121 Dalley St; s/d/tw \$75/80/85; ♿) Under a bank of foliage, this is a reliable budget option with generic but sizable motel rooms including cable TV and the odd ghostly and extremely comfortable easy chair.

Middle Pub (☎ 6684 3229; fax 6684 3121; 46 Burringbar St; r without/with bathroom \$35/90; ♿) Mullumbimby's social hub has clean and frugal rooms with fans and shared bathrooms, or quite fabulous hotel rooms with country-kitsch king-size beds. Beware the din from the weekend warriors downstairs.

Poinciana Café (☎ 6684 4036; 55 Station St; mains \$8-16; ☺ breakfast & lunch) Casually constructed around two stunning poinciana trees, this atmospheric eatery has a chic menu boasting a kicking swordfish, tomato and aioli burger. At the time of research the brand-new owners were still finding their dinner feet with promises of similarly delectable options.

Milk And Honey (☎ 6684 1422; 59A Station St; mains \$15-20; ☺ dinner Wed-Sat) The thin-crust, wood-fired pizzas toasted at this edgy little pizzeria draw diners from surrounding towns. The changing menu always features a good range of carnivorous and vegetarian delights.

Also recommended:

Café Ripe (☎ 6684 2915; 72 Burringbar St; mains \$9-14; ☺ breakfast & lunch) Genovese fish stews, Indonesian rendangs and hearty pot roasts.

Maca's Camping Ground (☎ 6684 5211; Main Arm Rd; camp sites \$10-15) Basic facilities on a macadamia nut plantation.

Getting There & Away

Blanch's Bus Service (☎ 6686 2144) runs daily to Byron Bay (\$5.60). **CountryLink** (☎ 13 22 32) has buses to Lismore (\$8.80) and Byron Bay.

WHIAN WHIAN STATE CONSERVATION AREA

Timber is still produced in this forest and is regarded as a prime example of how forestry resources can be best utilised and managed. The forest adjoins the southeast side of Nightcap National Park and is home to threatened species including the spotted quoll.

The spectacular **Minyon Falls** are found here, plunging 100m into a rainforest gorge and surrounded by a flora reserve with several walking tracks. Take a dip under the falls for an unforgettable experience.

The historic **Nightcap Track** (16km long) passes through both the state forest and Nightcap National Park; it was the original track used by postal workers and others in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. **Rummery Park** isn't far off the road down from the falls; it's a well-provided picnic spot with barbecues and cold showers. **Peate's Mountain Lookout**, just on from Rummery Park, has a great view from Jerusalem Mountain in the north, to Byron Bay in the east.

The **Mud Manor Forest Retreat** (☎ 02-6688 2205; www.mudmanor.com; r from \$120; ♿) is a perfect haven for those looking to escape the crowds. Built from mud bricks, this retreat has a permaculture garden and rooms with hand-crafted luxuries, spas and large decks.

UKI

☎ 02 / pop 210

Uki (*uke-i*) is a cute town overshadowed by the dominating peak of **Mt Warning**. It has a pretty warren of steep streets and a warm and alternative atmosphere.

The **Uki Café** (☎ 6679 5351; 1 Rowlands Creek Rd; mains \$7-12; ☺ breakfast & lunch daily, dinner Fri & Sat) has good food, a sweeping veranda and a toasty pot belly stove inside for winter afternoons. Across the highway, **Babareki Beads** (☎ 6679 5677; Room 4, The Buttery; ☺ 10am-3pm Wed-Mon) sells colourful and unique handmade jewellery and **Precious Earth** (☎ 6679 5885; The Buttery; ☺ 10am-4pm) runs come-one-come-all pottery workshops on Saturday mornings.

Midginbil Hill Country Resort (☎ 6679 7158; www.midginbilhill.com.au; Town Green; s/d incl breakfast \$95/135; ♿) is a working cattle farm right at the base of Nightcap National Park. It offers accommodation during school holidays and horse riding (per person \$50) as well as canoeing on the Clarrie Hall dam (per person \$30).

Alternatively, **Mount Warning Forest Hideaway** (☎ 6679 7277; www.foresthideaway.com.au; 460 Byrrill Creek Rd; d/stc from \$80/130; ♿) has comfortable, self-contained studios and suites in an isolated patch of rainforest about 12km southwest of Uki.

A few kilometres east, **Stokers Siding Pottery** (☎ 6677 9208; www.stokerspottery.com.au; 224 Stokers Siding Rd; ☺ 9.30am-5pm) is well worth the short side trip to see the beautiful pottery, glass work and wood work shaped by local hands.

MT WARNING NATIONAL PARK

Relatively small in size (2380 hectares), this is the most dramatic feature of the hinterland, with Mt Warning (1156m) towering over the

valley. The peak is the first part of mainland Australia to be touched by sunlight each day. This has resulted in 60,000 people each year making the steep 4.4km, five-hour round-trip trek to the summit from **Breakfast Creek** (don't forget a torch). Mt Warning is known to the Bundjalung people as Wollumbin, meaning 'cloud catcher', 'fighting chief of the mountain' and 'weather maker'. Although everyone does it, you should be aware that under Bundjalung law only specifically chosen people are allowed to climb the mountain, and consequently they ask you not to go out of respect. The unnerving European name was given to the peak in 1770 by Captain Cook to warn seamen of the offshore reefs.

You can't camp at Mt Warning, but the **Mt Warning Caravan Park & Tourist Retreat** (☎ 02-6679 5120; www.mtwarningholidaypark.com; Mt Warning Rd; camp sites/cabins from \$18/55) on the Mt Warning approach road is a viable option, with good kitchen facilities, budget and en-suite cabins and a well-stocked kiosk.

Wallers Bus Company (☎ 6687 8550) runs from Lismore (\$20) to the turn-off for Mt Warning every morning and runs past in the afternoon. Call for changing times.

MURWILLUMBAH

☎ 02 / pop 7700

Sitting pretty on the plateau of the Tweed Valley, Murwillumbah is surrounded by the NSW-Qld Border Ranges. Peppered with plenty of heritage façade and charm, the town's streets tumble on top of one another,

with stunning views of Mt Warning peeking around every corner.

Information

The **visitors centre** (☎ 6672 1340; www.tweedcoolangatta.com.au; cnr Alma St & Tweed Valley Way) has national park passes, information on accommodation and a great rainforest display.

Sights

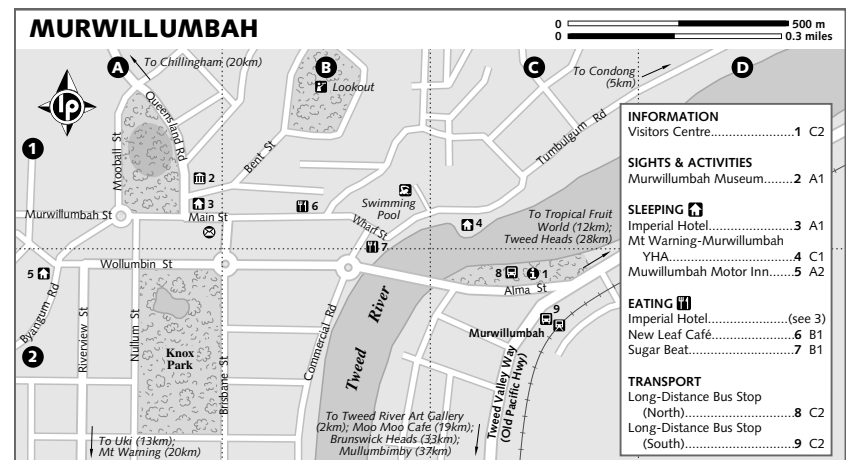
The exceptional **Tweed River Art Gallery** (☎ 6670 2790; www.tweed.nsw.gov.au/artgallery; cnr Mistral Rd & Tweed Valley Way; free admission; ☺ 10am-5pm, Wed-Sun) is an architectural delight and home to some of Australia's finest art works. Temporary exhibits complement the permanent fixtures and the spectrum includes portraits, indigenous work, photography, sculpture and woodwork.

Murwillumbah Museum (☎ 6672 1865; 2 Queensland Rd; adult/child \$2/1.50; ☺ 10am-4pm Wed-Fri) This small museum, housed in a beautiful old building, features a solid account of local history and an interesting radio room.

Just north of town, **Tropical Fruit World** (☎ 6677 7222; www.tropicalfruitworld.com.au; Duranbah Rd; adult/child \$32/25; ☺ 10am-5pm) allegedly has the world's largest collection of tropical fruit. This doesn't justify the melon of an entry fee because there's really only so much (PG) fun you can have with fruit.

Sleeping

Mount Warning-Murwillumbah YHA (☎ 6672 3763; www.yha.com.au; 1 Tumbulgum Rd; dm/d from \$25/54) Free



ice cream is generally enough to win any back-packer's loyalty but this hostel does it for kicks, not business. Bohemian cheer swims in the colourful waterfront house with eight-bed dorms. There's canoe and bike hire, and four-night stays attract free tours.

Imperial Hotel (☎ 6672 2777; fax 6672 8188; 115 Main St; s/d with shared bathroom \$30/45, d with bathroom \$55) These grand old pub rooms look like they haven't been altered since the opening ceremony – shabby chic without even trying. Snug interiors are aged like a good quaffing wine, with antique robes and floral bedspreads.

Murwillumbah Motor Inn (☎ 1800 687 224, 1800 023 105; www.murwillumbahmotorinn.com.au; 17 Byangum Rd; s/d \$84/96; 🚗 📺 📺) It's a little on the frumpy side but all rooms in this motel have cable TV and microwaves. There's also a pleasant courtyard out the back with a communal barbecue.

Eating

New Leaf Café (☎ 6672 2667; Shop 10, Murwillumbah Plaza; meals \$5-10; 🍳 breakfast & lunch) The food here is creative and vegetarian, with plenty of Middle Eastern flavours and salads on offer. Dine inside, alfresco, or take away.

Sugar Beat (☎ 6672 2330; Shop 2/6-8 Commercial Rd; mains \$10; 🍳 breakfast & lunch) Park yourself by the sunny window or settle into a corner of the long bench seating. Then tuck into tofu and veggie gado gado, sesame chicken with Japanese dressing or an equally elaborate salad or burger. Or just blow the diet and have cake.

Moo Moo Café (☎ 6677 1230; Tweed Valley Way, Moolball; mains \$8-11; 🍳 breakfast & lunch) Halfway between Murwillumbah and Brunswick Heads, this café takes cow kitsch to udder extremes. It also serves a decent sandwich.

Imperial Hotel (☎ 6672 2777; mains \$15; 🍳 lunch & dinner) The Imperial's sprawling bistro has a short but snazzy menu – tempura barramundi, freshly wrapped spring rolls or gourmet bangers and mash. It's pub grub through a sophisticated looking glass.

Getting There & Away

Greyhound (☎ 13 14 99) and **Premier Motor Service** (☎ 13 34 10) have daily services to Coolangatta/Tweed Heads and Byron Bay (\$15). **Kirklands**

(☎ 6626 1499) charges around the same for daily buses to Byron Bay and Brunswick Heads. **CountryLink** (☎ 13 22 32) buses run to Byron Bay, Tweed Heads and Brisbane.

BORDER RANGES NATIONAL PARK

The Border Ranges National Park, a World Heritage area (31,500 hectares), covers the NSW side of the McPherson Range, which runs along the NSW–Qld border and some of its outlying spurs. The park has large tracts of superb rainforest, and it has been estimated that a quarter of all bird species in Australia can be seen here.

The eastern section – which includes the escarpments of the massive Mt Warning caldera – is the most easily accessible, via the Tweed Range Scenic Drive. You can access the smaller central section from the Lions Rd, which turns off the Kyogle–Woodenbong road 22km north of Kyogle. The large and rugged western section is almost inaccessible except to well-equipped bushwalkers.

The **Tweed Range Scenic Drive** – gravel but usable in all weather – loops through the park from Lillian Rock (midway between Uki and Kyogle) to Wiangaree (north of Kyogle on the Woodenbong road). The signposting on access roads isn't good (when in doubt take roads signposted to the national park), but it's well worth the effort of finding it. The road is unsuitable for caravans and large vehicles.

The road runs through mountain forest most of the way, with steep hills and breathtaking lookouts over the Tweed Valley to Mt Warning and the coast. The adrenaline-charging half-hour walk out to the crag called the **Pinnacle** is not for vertigo sufferers! **Antarctic Beech** is, not surprisingly, a forest of Antarctic beeches, some more than 2000 years old. From here, a walking track (about 5km) leads down to **Brindle Creek**, where there is stunningly beautiful rainforest and a picnic area.

There is **NPWS camping** at **Sheepstation Creek** (per person \$3), about 15km north of the turn-off at Wiangaree, and **Forest Tops** (per person \$3), 6km further on. There are toilets but no showers and it's best to BYO water. There's free camping at Byrill Creek, on the eastern side of **Mebbin State Forest**.

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