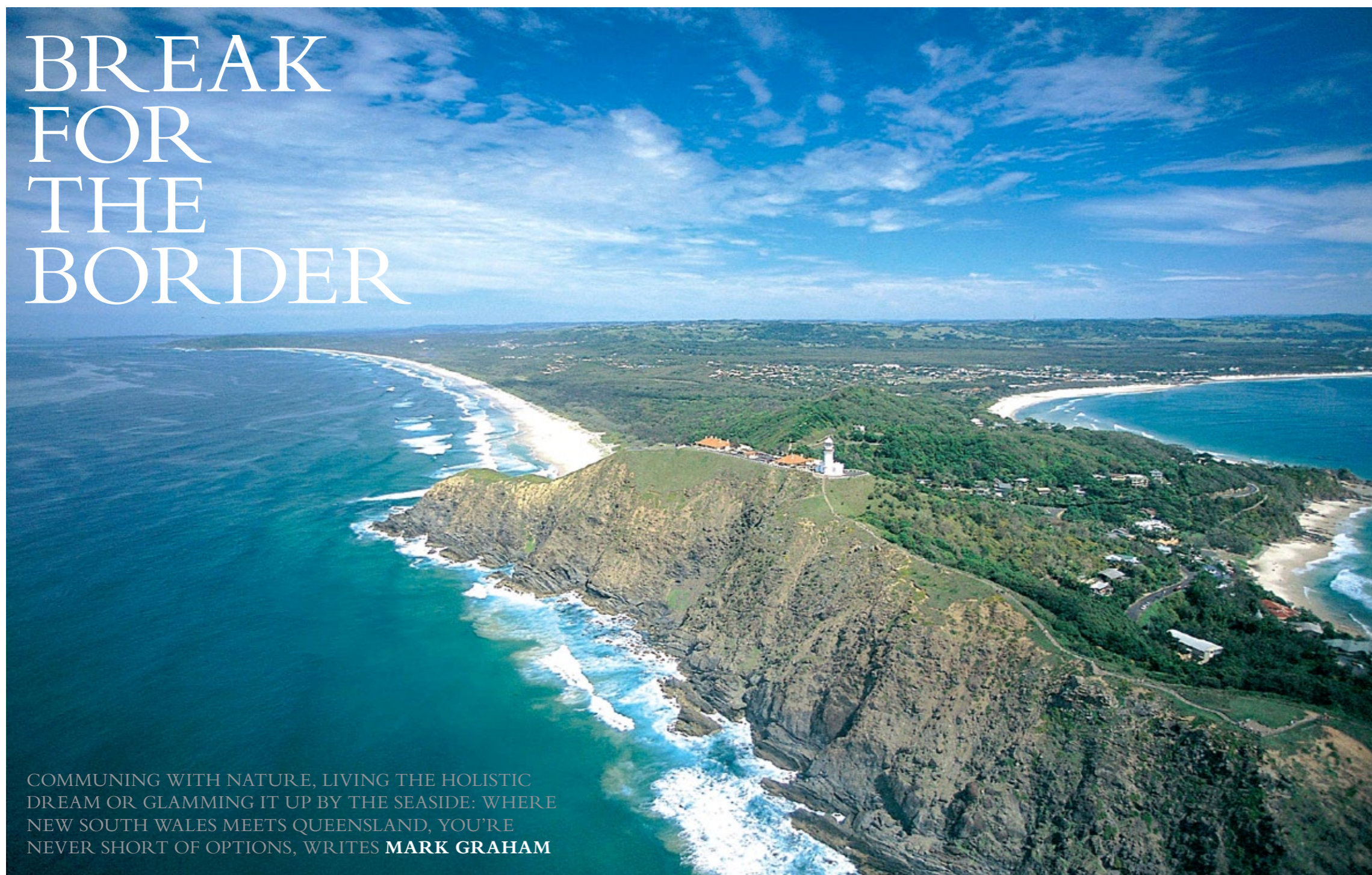


BREAK FOR THE BORDER



COMMUNING WITH NATURE, LIVING THE HOLISTIC DREAM OR GLAMMING IT UP BY THE SEASIDE: WHERE NEW SOUTH WALES MEETS QUEENSLAND, YOU'RE NEVER SHORT OF OPTIONS, WRITES **MARK GRAHAM**

HUGGING A TREE is optional. But for guests of The Byron at Byron Resort who do have the urge for a close encounter with one of the hundreds of rainforest specimens populating the grounds, a special trunk has been identified and approved by Aborigines as one that radiates particularly good karma.

"Karma" is a word that crops up a lot when Byron Bay is mentioned. The Australian town, near New South Wales' northern border with Queensland, is renowned as a haven for hippies and weekend alternative-lifestyle lovers, people who appreciate its bountifully rich natural blessings. The surrounding region has mystical rainforests that are thousands of years old; long, golden beaches where the ocean plays host to resident pods of playful dolphins and migrating humpback whales on their way to and from

Antarctica; and a bohemian human population that doesn't want the place to change.

Which is why there was a major fuss when the idea of building a resort in a rainforest, The Byron at Byron, was mooted. Even though the developer was an individual with strong environmental credentials, locals protested at the very notion of tampering with such a special spot.

They need not have worried. The Byron at Byron (www.thebyronatbyron.com.au) is a model of sensitivity; the luxury chalets are designed to be as eco-friendly as possible and to blend seamlessly into the natural habitat; there's no need for an alarm clock – a dawn chorus of delightfully diverse sounds from the rainforest's feathered population does the job nicely. Indeed, The Byron at Byron may be the only spa resort anywhere where guests can be

in the rainforest within a minute of their car leaving the highway, and where, if they walk the other way, they can be on a deserted, golden beach five minutes after closing their porch door.

Close encounters with nature are on the agenda everywhere in the region. Even in a built-up resort such as buzzy Surfers Paradise, a man-made seaside pleasure zone, nature in its rawest and most powerful form is never far away; during the breeding season, humpback whales are regular visitors to the bays, spouting, breaching and frolicking their way up the coast to their northern Australian mating grounds before heading back down to the cooler waters off Antarctica.

Their smaller ocean-going cousins, dolphins, tend to stay in one spot longer; Byron Bay alone hosts something



like 200 Flippers, charming, cheeky, playful creatures that like to join the surfer dudes in hitching a ride on powerful, beach-bound waves.

It is crystal clear why Byron Bay became so popular with the alternative set, as a place where like-minded spirits could come to commune with nature: save the whales, hug trees, meditate and sign up for sunrise yoga sessions, tarot card readings, vegetarian cookery classes or rainforest walks.

Almost every visitor becomes seduced by its manifold charms. Hotelier Jane O'Neile initially came for a holiday and was so enamoured that she sought work here, ultimately landing the job of director of sales at The Byron at Byron.

"It's a great place to chill out – the beaches here are divine and the rainforest is simply amazing," she says. "I came to visit and decided that I would really like to live here. I remember when I first arrived I would get very excited at seeing a whale and saying to people, 'Look, it's a whale!' And they would say, 'Yes, we know, we see them a lot.' You can get really caught up in the culture and activities here; I'm determined to learn how to surf."

O'Neile conducts tours of the resort rainforest with the awed wonder of a city convert, pointing out the aforementioned hugging tree, the most serene spot for practising early morning yoga and some of the rainforest's 50 species of birds, including eastern yellow robins, kingfishers, noisy pittas and bush turkeys. The Sydney native is just as enthusiastic when reciting the organic menu, or detailing the sustainability and recycling measures instituted by the management.

The Byron at Byron is one of a group of distinctive resorts under the umbrella of the Kiwi Collection of hotels (www.kiwicollection.com), an online luxury-hotel booking service that focuses on properties, from five-stars to small boutique hotels, chosen for their exclusivity, novelty value, romantic appeal or individuality. Among its inspectors is Bradley Cocks, senior vice-president for the Asia-Pacific region, a Canadian who initially moved to Australia for access to its great surfing waves. The great strength of the service, he says, apart from its nifty website, is that the properties – currently about 1,700 of them – are hand-picked, not lumped together by a hotel chain. "You can't always trust a brand; it can be hit and miss," says

Above: Infinity pool rainforest backdrop at The Byron. Left: Aerial view of Byron Bay



Right: Lobby, Palazzo Versace
Below: T'ai chi at Gwinganna



Cocks. "There are a lot of excellent independent hotels that don't have the marketing clout, and it can be hard for people to find them."

Three hotels in the New South Wales-Queensland border area serve to highlight the diversity of the properties in the collection. In addition to the eco-tranquillity of The Byron at Byron, there's the hyper-glam indulgest that is the Palazzo Versace in Surfers Paradise and, in the hills above Queensland's Gold Coast, the calm, holistic Gwinganna lifestyle retreat (www.gwinganna.com). This is a resort for people who are serious about their health and want to focus fully on recuperation. If Chris Vidal, who glories in the job title of retreat adviser manager, is anything to go by, the regimen works; she's a walking advertisement for clean living, well into middle age but with the

complexion and vitality of a woman decades younger.

"People come here and it does take them time to relax and appreciate the wonders of nature," she says. "It takes the body time to adapt and slow down. Your whole tempo winds down; you don't really want to go to the beach or even leave the grounds at all. Everything here is totally natural."

The range of treatments and massages could keep a guest experimenting for weeks. One of the more offbeat items on the menu is a musical offering from "therapist-facilitator" Craig Howorth, who draws up his own play list, has speakers built into a customised massage bed, and even sings along to parts of the treatment, with *Ave Maria* as a kind of grand finale. It's a long way from the traditional massage-room routine of ocean-sound mood music and silent masseur.

Ultimately, though, Gwinganna is a back-to-basics kind of place for individuals looking for a dose of grounded tranquillity. There are the options of hiking in the bushes and hills, lounging by the outdoor pool, playing tennis, learning about bee-keeping or attending healthy-cooking classes. Evenings centre around an early organic dinner (with caffeine-free drinks) followed by talk sessions and, for those who are not on too rigid a diet, organic wine.

A little further up the coastline, at another exclusive address, the atmosphere could not be more different. Palazzo Versace (www.palazzoversace.com) is a hotel where bling is the thing; it's a distillation of the good life as defined by the late Italian fashion designer Gianni Versace and his larger-than-life sister, Donatella.

The Surfers Paradise resort is decked out from top to bottom in Versace branding, from the candy-coloured sofas in the lobby to the sheets and the toiletries in the bathrooms. It's the kind of spot to book for a special occasion, to splash the cash and swish around in the company of other well-heeled and (mostly) beautiful people. The decor is Renaissance-a-go-go, featuring marble pillars and flooring galore, sumptuous sofas and glittering chandeliers.

Decadence is most definitely the name of the game here. Different zones of the 200-room complex are linked by ample lagoons; corridors are lined with pictures of sultry models; bedrooms come with huge, jet-spray bathtubs big enough for two; the restaurant wine list is replete with vintages to satisfy the most demanding oenophiles.

All that's missing at Palazzo Versace is a private beach, although there is a 90-berth marina for people who cruise in by private yachts, and guests who want to step back onto the sands of reality can stroll across the street to the main Surfers Paradise beach. More adventurous trips can be undertaken in the hotel's chauffeured Bentley Arnage.

It's just another of the many options in this most diverse of regions, where the forest meets the sea, an area popular with everyone from high rollers to nature lovers, from party animals to spa bunnies. Leave Palazzo Versace's uber-glam kitschery behind and it won't take long to be drinking in a Surfers Paradise dive bar, throwing chips in a casino, heading out to sea on a whale-watching expedition or up into the rainforest, communing with nature. One thing's for certain: around here, you'll never hear anyone complain about a lack of alternatives. ■