

[COME, SIT, STAY.]

A BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY - THE BELLINGER VALLEY

Rainforests, waterfalls, splendid rural scenes, empty beaches and a lively, arty vibe make Bellingen and surround a wonderfully varied winter escape.

BY MELISSA RIMAC

Embrace or escape: that's our dilemma come winter. We relish winter's cosiness, the moody, parred-back visuals and weather that are perfect for exploring country Australia. However, for me, nothing sets the spirit quite so free as a run along the beach with our dogs.

Bellingen and its surrounds is a backdrop that lures artists, writers, musicians and lovers of contemplative, aesthetic pursuits and as a mix of country meets coast, ticked all the right boxes.

Situated about a half hour's drive south of Coffs Harbour—that's about 6 hours drive north of Sydney—the subtropical, extremely picturesque hinterland of the coastal town of Urunga is loaded with diversions for the travelling fur family, either as an escapist getaway or as an atmospheric stop-over whilst driving to Queensland.

Flanking the Bellinger River and wrapped by glowingly green pastures and rainforested mountains, Bellingen retains the feel of a working country town, even though it's close to vast beaches and estuaries. Farmers and cedar-getters and, happily, the late 1800s established this pretty township and early 1900s facades remain evocatively unaltered from when steam ships serviced the region.

Recently, Bellingen has had an influx of people seeking a more wholesome, less harried lifestyle. As a result, the supermarket stocks all manner of tofu, gluten free goodies and organic produce and hot stone massages, yoga and drumming classes abound. Hippy, without getting too dippy, Bellingen's cultural kudos outweighs its size; with a colourful live music, art and festival scene.

Although the locals are unmoved by a pair of out-of-town teenage upstarts, Onyx and his foster brother Pierre are exited to see so many scarf-wearing dogs awaiting their people at hitching posts outside stores.

Outside just about every café in Bellingen, is a dog attached to a person reading or chattering in the toasty suntraps. We linger at several art galleries, which display impressive work priced at a fraction of what city galleries would charge. The erstwhile haberdashery emporium exudes timeless charm, having lost none of its genteel elegance, lace ironwork, coloured glass and pressed metal ceilings.

Drapes of tropical vegetation brush our heads as we make our way to our home at Maddefords cottages. Inside, we're delighted to find farm fresh eggs and strawberries and a breathe-deeper rustic vista.

Although just a few minutes drive from Bellingen town, rural scenes and sounds surround us and there's plenty of space down on the river for Onyx and Pierre to run around. Onyx, who can't get enough of the clear, clean river swims out of our reach then develops a sudden case of hearing loss.

It takes the smell of our BBQ and the tempting sight of Sassy—the gorgeous Golden Retriever belonging to Marg and John, our hosts at Madderfords—aglow in the afternoon sun, tail wagging suggestively, to bring Onyx back. Every inch the golden girl (imagine a canine equivalent of a young Farrah Fawcett) with the bouncy effervescence of a cheerleader took just one shake



of Sassy's silky locks to create a love triangle that has our teenage doggie-boys wiggly at the prospect of a holiday fling.

That night, the ducks, frogs bats and cows staged on a sensational concert under an inky sky.

As we sipped our morning coffee in bed, we watched, mesmerised, as waterbirds gracefully took flight and landed on the river below.

We'd launch into most days by driving (for about 15 minutes) to the beach, along a curling country road shadowed by giant fig trees, past paddocks with small dams carpeted with purple waterlilies then along meandering inlets and oyster beds. Forgetting swimmers wasn't an issue here as we usually had North Beach to ourselves.

The hills surrounding Bellingen are laced with narrow roads coiling through the sort of gushing green vistas that bring cheese and butter ads to mind. Returning from the beach, we'd sometimes treat ourselves to the scenic loop through the hamlets of Valery or Glenifer.





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Making our way to the historic agricultural town of Dorrigo, situated about a half hour's drive from Bellingen, we watched rain clouds slide down the steep, deeply crumpled escarpment and stopped to wade in babbling creeks.

Set upon a vast, volcanic plateau fringed with basalt cliffs and rugged gorges, Dorrigo, home to one of the most extraordinary antiques shops we've ever seen, is a quintessential country town. Along with vintage cold climate gardens, the wide streets are lined with buildings reflecting the region's rich rural heritage. Locals not only acknowledge you, they initiate interesting conversations.

The air is bracingly crisp in these highlands and the views become quite magnificent out of town. If we had more time, we'd keep driving along the Waterfall Way, a scenic route that would take us back south through ruggedly beautiful country, more historic towns and yes, a succession of waterfalls. We settled on a loop that took in the older township of North Dorrigo and wowed us with scenes of frothy clouds nudging the edge of the plateau.

We pulled over constantly, and with Onyx and Pierre's noses cranking into overdrive, walked through a landscape dotted with dairy farms, photogenic abandoned buildings and sprawling timber farmhouses that got us talking about taking a sabbatical of creative seclusion. The silence was almost solid; broken only by parrots flapping close overhead and chorus of cows.

It's the sort of landscape and low-slung lapis lazuli sky that, were we in a movie, would have us breaking out into song and dance. Then, suddenly and subconsciously, we, like Onyx and Pierre, broke into a skipping, prancing gait that would put Julie Andrews to shame.

ONYX'S WATERFALL WAY TOURING TIPS:

ROOM WITH A MOOD
 Perfectly located with complimentary kayaks and a balcony that's ideal for candlelit dinners: www.maddefordscottages.com.au

CHOWING DOWN
 Bellingen is crammed with café's and eateries with outdoor tables; Many of which welcome dogs and are perfect for reading a book in the winter sunshine. Worth checking out are Tuckshop, Komba, Lodge 241, Big Sky Gallery.

KNOCKOUT WALKS
 Historic streetscapes of Bellingen and Dorrigo.

THE BOARDWALK AT URUNGA BEACH.
 Walks near Dorrigo which take in waterfalls (ask Marg at Maddefords for directions).

URBANE PURSUITS:
 Third Saturday of the month; the famed Bellingen Markets.

DOG MINDING:
 If you want to experience the region's World Heritage listed national parks, Dorrigo Pet Resort offers day boarding: ph (02) 6657 2425

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