

Australian adventure

A road trip from Sydney to Brisbane offers plenty of family fun in the sun, finds **David Whitley**

Australia Week

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Watsons Bay, Sydney

PICTURE: Destination NSW



The children revelling in the netting at the front of the Imagine Cruises boat yelp with excitement. The famously reliable dolphins of Port Stephens have been spotted, and they're ready to play in the wake.

The New South Wales destination is an all-action first stop on my family road trip from Sydney to Brisbane. Other fun-filled activities in the area (commissionable through Viator) include stingray encounters, sandboarding and quad biking over enormous sand dunes. But from there, serendipity and the joy of discovery take over along Australia's epic eastern coastline until you reach Queensland's capital.

This year marks 200 years since the first European colonists made their way to the Moreton Bay Penal Settlement. Originally established at Redcliffe on Moreton Bay, then moved a little inland to the Brisbane River a year later, the penal settlement was later renamed 'Brisbane'.

Thankfully, getting from Sydney to Brisbane is much more fun than it was two centuries ago. It's a 570-mile drive up the Pacific Highway, which runs parallel to the coast. It's wise to add a few extra miles to that, however, the north

coast of New South Wales is lined with adorable little beach towns and national parks. Every deviation from the highway brings a great find.

At Port Macquarie, the Koala Hospital brings heart-melting encounters with blind koalas that have survived being hit by cars. In Urunga, a giant, fish-filled swimming pool has been created in the lagoon, while a boardwalk stretches along the crystal-clear Bellinger River where it meets the warm ocean. At Emerald Beach, a walk around the Look At Me Now Headland brings plentiful encounters with kangaroos on the clifftops.

BEAUTIFUL BEACHES

The beaches are the best thing about New South Wales's north coast. Both the quantity and quality are extraordinary. You can pick any one from hundreds, and it would be a hyped-up highlight in any other country. Here, the surf rolls in, the white sand is backed by dunes and eucalypt forests – and there's barely a soul to be seen.

Everyone heading up the coast road seems to end up with one beach town they fall in love with. In our case, it's Yamba. Life here is all about the simple pleasures: ➤

DESTINATIONS

AUSTRALIA | ROAD TRIP



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Gold Coast; Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary; Urunga, New South Wales; Paradise Jet Boating, Gold Coast PICTURES: Tourism and Events Queensland



going to the bakery for lunch, playing in the surf for hours and tucking into fish and chips for dinner. By the main beach is what seems to be a signature addition to many North Coast towns – a big, free, public swimming pool hewn from the rocks and fed by the tides.

Perhaps the most famous beach town in New South Wales is Byron Bay, where Cape Byron serves as the easternmost point on the Australian mainland. The walk up to the lighthouse brings unexpected wildlife encounters, with brush turkeys scuttling through the bushes and adorable water dragons sunning themselves on the rocks.

In the shadow of Cape Byron's lighthouse, it's possible to see that Byron Bay's main beach is accompanied by several smaller ones. It's also clear that between Byron's boardshorts and floaty dresses, there's a wealth of activities on offer from a variety of local operators – once again, commissionable through Viator. In the water, novices attempt to stand on their boards during beginner surfing lessons, while kayak tours hang out with the dolphins beyond the breaking waves.

New in town

The Queen's Walk Brisbane, opening in phases throughout this year from April, is set to transform the city's central business district into a waterfront culture capital. It will feature new-build hotels (including a Rosewood), shops and more than 50 restaurants, plus cultural spaces in revitalised old buildings and pretty mangrove parks.

FABULOUS FOOD

From Byron, it's a short drive towards the Queensland border. Glorious sandy beaches at the likes of Kingscliff and Cabarita Beach are backed by the fertile, jungle-like greenery of the Tweed Valley. Tropical Fruit World in Duranbah is a prime example of the region's bounty, growing dozens of species of often-obscure tropical fruits. The cafe allows visitors to make their own ice cream with the likes of

black sapote (a type of persimmon), custard apple and dragonfruit, while the farm tour throws in a wildlife cruise between fruit tastings.

There's a change of tone after arriving on Queensland's Gold Coast. The coastal strip is often bold and glitzy, but it throws plenty of family-friendly entertainment into the mix. The expansive Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary brings wholesome vibes, allowing guests to hand-feed kangaroos and hold koalas.

More exciting, though, is zooming along the waterways in a jet boat. Paradise Jetboating's half-hour trip does involve spotting some wallabies on South Stradbroke Island, but it's mainly about twists, turns and high-speed stunts.

HIGH-OCTANE AUSTRALIA

There's more daredevilry during the Hollywood Stunt Driver Show at Warner Bros Movie World. This is one of several theme parks on the Gold Coast, but it's the one that puts as much emphasis on shows and parades as rides. Not that thrill-ride enthusiasts will feel short-changed – the DC Rivals Hypercoaster is the longest, tallest and fastest

coaster in the southern hemisphere. The initial 89° drop, in particular, is a white-knuckle test of nerve.

The Gold Coast slowly morphs into the southern suburbs of our final destination, Brisbane. The capital of Queensland has certainly come a long way from being a penal settlement, with a series of multibillion-dollar developments set to transform the skyline ahead of the 2032 Olympics.

At the end of an epic drive, though, nothing beats the amiable, easy-going nature of Brisbane's South Bank. Here, restaurants serving cuisines from across the world line up behind carefully tended gardens. More impressively, a giant lagoon pool stretches out along a man-made beach. Time for one last swim. **TW**

BOOK IT

Audley Travel sells a tailor-made, 16-day By The Beach trip that heads up the coast from Sydney to Brisbane, via Port Stephens and Byron Bay. Prices start at £5,480 per person, including flights, car hire and four to five-star accommodation. audleytravel.com