

Explore the green side of the Gold Coast

Laura Southwell, Austravel Marketing Manager, heads to the Gold Coast, to discover what lies beyond this "Surfers Paradise".



Parlingbrook



Kangaroos at Kooralbyn



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You don't have to look beyond the vast golden beaches, surf lifestyle and 300 days of sunshine a year to see why the Gold Coast is such a popular holiday spot. But when you do, you're in for treat...

The Main Beach area, north of Surfers Paradise, has an incredible draw for its sophistication and opulence centred around the marina and the glamorous Palazzo Versace, famous for where the "celebs" stay having been kicked out of the jungle. After a night of indulgence in the glitz of the Palazzo, it was time to leave the coast behind, after all, I was meant to be discovering what else this area had to offer.

Just a short distance from the coast, the scenery of the Hinterlands changes dramatically. Lamington National Park, Australia's largest area of sub tropical natural preserve, houses 900 species of plants and extensive wildlife including 120 varieties of birds in this dense lush rainforest, giving way to unspoilt waterfalls and cooling streams. The landscape perfectly contrasts the scenes you have just left behind, but the close proximity of this diversity allows you take a leisurely pace, stopping off to take in the views and even sample some local wine at O'Reilly's Canungra Valley Winery. Its setting makes a great location for a picnic with any impromptu purchase from the cellar door.

Higher in the Hinterlands is the family owned and run O'Reilly's Rainforest Retreat. Here, they really know how to make you feel at home with their legendary Australian hospitality and tasty traditional home cooking. All this in a peaceful and tranquil natural setting make for a perfect retreat. You are given countless opportunities to discover the rainforest and for an amazing bird's eye view, we couldn't miss the famous Tree Top Walkway. For the ultimate escape I'd recommend opting for the newly opened luxurious Mountain Villas.

Close to O'Reilly's, the town of Beaudesert is like stepping back in time as you find historic buildings in an area of rugged landscape which provides a backdrop for traditional working cattle stations. We discovered an eclectic mix of pavement cafés, quirky arts and craft shops, historic trails and lots of friendly locals.

Still nestled in the Hinterland, about an hour's drive from the Gold Coast, Kooralbyn Hotel Resort offers "Australian experiences" including mustering demonstrations and 4WD tours. Set in 800 acres of pristine Australian landscape there'd be plenty to keep you entertained if you made this your base for a couple of nights.

Having taken in everything from wineries and wildlife to rainforest and retreats, we returned to Main Beach and to Shuck's on Teddar Avenue. A favourite with locals and visitors alike, the tempting menu of oysters invites you to "shuck me, suck me, eat me raw", reminding you that the Gold Coast not only has greenery and diversity, it also has a personality all of its own.

LEARN TO SURF – AUSSIE-STYLE!

"Lift your bum up" shouted Munga Barry, our instructor. Easy for him to say. He clearly didn't hear my cries of "does my bum look big in this" when I donned my wet suit. It was the only time in the trip that I wished I hadn't indulged in quite so much good food and wine on the Gold Coast.

But after ten minutes in the water with former World Championship Tour surfer, Michael 'Munga' Barry, you really begin to believe that if anyone is going to help you master that white board, it's him – the 'Godfather of the Ocean'! At the end of the lesson, slightly dishevelled, you cannot ignore the feeling of exhilaration and a sense of achievement this experience gives you, whether you do, or don't actually manage to stand up.

Heading to the local Surf Club for a well deserved breakfast is a perfect ending to this real Aussie experience. There's no better place to act like a local, re-living your best surfing moments – even if they are a little exaggerated – this really is a 'don't miss experience' for anyone visiting the Gold Coast.

Learn to surf with the "Godfathers of the Ocean" from £18pp for an hours tuition, bookable at Austravel.

Getting there: Fly with Emirates from London to Brisbane from £695 inclusive of taxes, valid for travel 16th August to 30th June 2008. One hour transfer to the Gold Coast from £12 per person each way.

Ask your Austravel Designer to tailor make a self-drive around the Gold Coast, stay on the Gold Coast from £39pppn with Avis car hire from £21 per day.

