

Sun, surf and sandcastles

IT MAY BE JUST AN HOUR NORTH OF BRISBANE, BUT THE SUN-DRENCHED SUNSHINE COAST FEELS LIKE A WORLD AWAY WITH ITS LAID-BACK LIFESTYLE CENTRED AROUND PRISTINE BEACHES, AND LUSH RAINFORESTS

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Which do you prefer: the Gold Coast, or the Sunshine Coast?" It's a question I've been asked a few times since I moved to Australia. It's not a trick; it's just a way for the locals to gauge your personality.

Apparently you're either a lover of the bright lights and soaring towers of the Gold Coast, or you prefer to live life at a slower pace, on the sun-drenched, low-rise beaches that stretch north of Brisbane. But me? I'm definitely a Sunny Coast girl, all the way... >>



Main image, beautiful Main Beach in Noosa



The Sunshine Coast is just an hour north of Brisbane, but it feels millions of miles from the city. Averaging seven hours of sunshine a day, and with a sub-tropical climate that averages a balmy 25.2 degrees Celsius, it's easy to see why tourists and locals flock here all year round.

With attractions to suit all tastes, including nine national parks, the world's second largest rock (Mount Coolum), spectacular waterfalls, lush rainforests, rows of laid-back cafés and some buzzing little hinterland towns, you'd be hard pushed to find anywhere else offering such variety.

THEN AND NOW

More than half a decade ago, my husband Matt and I explored the Sunshine Coast in a camper van. Now we're back. This time we aren't backpackers taking a gap year; we are recent migrants to Australia and parents to five-year-old twins, Lincoln and Reuben,

and Evangeline, a headstrong two-year-old.

As we drive in, I'm pleased to discover Noosa is as I remembered – smart, fashionable and bustling. There are rows of cafés and bars to choose from on the main drag of Hastings Street, but we decide on an ice cream parlour for some softly whipped ice creams. Clutching our

“ I DISCOVER THAT NOOSA IS AS I REMEMBERED – SMART, FASHIONABLE AND BUSTLING ”

cones, we head to the beach as we lick the drips from our hands.

It's a good job I have the kids and melting ice creams to juggle as it stops me from venturing into the shops. The closest I get is a quick glance at a beautiful lamp in a window. When Matt spies the A\$800 price tag, he tugs me away and I don't argue.

Some of the accommodation on offer in Noosa is just as swanky as the boutiques. Richard Branson's Australian home, Makepeace Island, is a private hideaway just a few minutes upstream from Noosa Heads. The heart-shaped island caters for you and up to 21 of your friends exclusively. The Bali-inspired barefoot paradise includes

a 15 person hot spa and a spectacular lagoon pool. Private islands don't, however, come cheap.

For something a little more modest, the five-star Outrigger Little Hastings Street Resort and Spa is just a stone's throw from the cosmopolitan hub. Its apartments are perfect for families looking for more space than the average >>

6 top Sunshine Coast attractions

1 AUSTRALIA ZOO

Australia Zoo is a sprawling wildlife attraction that is great fun for all ages. Feed a kangaroo, hold a snake, watch the crocs or visit the 24-acre African savannah. Entry costs A\$59 (£29) for an adult and A\$35 (£17) for a child, with student, pensioner and family tickets also available.

■ www.australiazoo.com.au



The croc shows at Australia Zoo are great fun to watch

2 UNDERWATER WORLD

Underwater World is situated at Mooloolaba Wharf, moments from the Esplanade. With seven marine zones and 13 educational presentations daily, it gives you the chance to get up close with the creatures of the deep. Entry costs A\$39 (£19) for an adult and A\$26 (£12) for a child, with family tickets and online discounts also available.

■ www.underwaterworld.com.au

Kids walk through a tunnel at Underwater World



A fun ride at Aussie World

5 AUSSIE WORLD

With over 30 rides and attractions, Aussie World offers a fun day out. There are rides for kids under 100 centimetres too – find a list of these on the website. Entry costs A\$37 (£18) for an adult or child, with family tickets available.

■ www.aussieworld.com.au

3 THE GINGER FACTORY

The attraction offers the Ginger Story and Super Bee tours, plus the Ginger Train and the Overboard boat ride, as well as shops, a café and tropical garden walks. Superpass Entry, which gives you entry to everything, costs A\$41 (£20) for an adult, A\$34 (£16) for a child, with family tickets also available.

■ www.gingerfactory.com.au



The Gingerbread Man at The Ginger Factory

4 EUMUNDI MARKETS

The artisan markets take place whatever the weather on Wednesdays from 8am until 1.30pm and Saturdays from 7am until 2pm. Visit for handmade items, organic fruit and veg, delicious food and drink stalls and more. The markets are accessible with a buggy.

■ www.eumundimarkets.com.au



Shopping at the Eumundi Markets

6 SURF LESSONS

Noosa Main Beach is a great spot to learn how to surf and instructors promise to have kids up on their feet by the end of the day. Prices vary depending on whether you take part in a group lesson or a private lesson.

■ www.visitsunshinecoast.com.au/see-and-do/adventure-and-sports



Get the kids learning how to surf in Noosa



The family-friendly Novotel Twin Waters Resort

hotel room. It's not all high-end luxury though - there's accommodation to suit all budgets here. Noosa Caravan Park and the Big4 Noosa Bougainvillia Holiday Park both offer comfortable units as well as camping pitches at a reasonable price.

As we emerge from the shady path onto Main Beach, the breath is knocked out of me. I'd forgotten just how beautiful it is here.

The boys run off to hunt for creatures in the rocks and Evangeline (who is a little fish) makes a dash at the water fully clothed. After having fun dodging the waves, we write our names in the sand and run around the quiet beach chasing one another. Then it's time to get back in the car for the next leg of the journey.

FAMILY ATTRACTIONS

By the time we arrive at The Ginger Factory, it's starting to rain. Luckily it's mostly undercover so

we buy tickets that include the educational tours as well as unlimited rides on the train and boat.

The popular 40-year-old attraction occupies nine hectares and is the world's largest operating ginger factory theme park. It's across the road from Nutworks and the Chocolate Factory, so you could easily hit both attractions in one day. Unfortunately we don't have time after our beach trip.

"Look, there's the bee-man!" exclaims wildlife-obsessed Lincoln, running after the tour guide.

Surprisingly, my usually wriggly five-year-olds sit transfixed, absorbing facts about how bees work, how the girl bees do everything and how the community functions in the hive.

According to my boys, the best part is seeing 'bee man' don a suit and go into the room with a hive. He gets surrounded by angry bees and is stung when one sneaks into



Images (clockwise from left), beekeepers share the inner secrets of a bee hive, visitors explore the park, and inside the factory - all at The Ginger Factory

the cuff of his suit. At the end of the session, 'bee man' asks if anybody has any questions. Lincoln dances around with his hand in the air, eager to learn more.

The Ginger Tour doesn't capture their attention in the same way (although they love seeing the giant vats of ginger), but they enjoy the tasting session at the end.

pancakes) we're back in the car driving to Australia Zoo. Living only an hour away, we are already annual pass holders at the zoo made famous by the crocodile hunter, Steven Irwin.

Given its sprawling size (110 acres with over 1,200 animals), we discover more with every visit. The boys run straight to the crocodile

let them go in. While they go off to have fun petting the club's pink guinea pig, Princess Marshmallow (yes, really), we head to the bar overlooking the lake for a quiet dinner. We sit down and overhear two couples chatting at the table next to us.

"Yeah, we come here every year. We only live down the road, but why go away when this is on our doorstep" says the man, waving out to the lake and the beach beyond.

"We get the best bits of a holiday without the worst bits of getting there. Our mates and family come up for the weekend to join us. We can hop back if we forget something. It doesn't get better than this. The kids are happy, so we're happy."

I smile. When the locals choose to holiday at home, you know you've picked a good spot. >>>

"THE BEST PART IS SEEING 'BEE MAN' DON A SUIT AND GO INTO THE ROOM WITH A HIVE"

I get a few moments of peace to browse the gift shops while Matt walks the kids through the shady gardens for some quiet time.

We break up the day with the train and the boat ride (which the kids never tire of), the playground and café pit stops. By the time we finally prise the children off the boat - with the lure of a gingerbread man - it's time to head back to the hotel.

Our base is the family friendly Novotel Twin Waters Resort. Built around a lake, it's set up for families looking to relax and have fun both on and off the water. As it's late and the kids are exhausted, we make the most of the on-site take away and have an early night. After breakfast (involving endless

enclosure, and on the way spot a member of the wildlife team walking around with a koala to pat.

After some obligatory roo feeding, watching as many live shows as we can cram in (the Wildlife Warrior show in the crocoseum is as must-see, along with the crocodile show), a wander around the African savannah and a quick stop on Bindi's Island to see the cheeky ring-tailed lemurs, we get slightly lost in the huge gift shop, which proves an expensive mistake. The kids come away with new rubber snakes and crocodiles though, so they're happy.

Back at the hotel, we decide make the most of the kid's club as the boys have been pestering us to



A red kangaroo with her joey at Australia Zoo



Find plenty of laid-back cafés in Mooloolaba



Organic fruit and veg at Eumundi Markets

Then I realise that, technically, we are locals now too.

I could easily have stayed at the resort for another week to fully unwind (by unwind, I mean take more bike rides, go out on the lake in canoes again and try the huge inflatable playground in the water which looks incredible), but our short break is drawing to a close.

After checking out, we head to the bustling Eumundi Markets. The artisan markets are one of the largest in Australia, with over 550 stalls. While Matt takes Evangeline off for a nap in the buggy, the boys and I weave our way down the bustling lanes.

They aren't impressed when I try to dawdle over handbags and jewellery, but the bribe of some freshly pressed organic fruit juice buys me enough time to pick up some unique mementos.

Travelling with kids is all about balance, so after shopping it's time



The surf beach at Mooloolaba

to run off some energy in the park before hitting the road again.

BEACH FUN

Mooloolaba is great for young families. The beach is backed by a vibrant array of shops and laid-back cafés, and the water is calmer than some of the other surf beaches.

family learning to surf together. I make a mental note to look into that for our next trip.

Before leaving we take a quick paddle. I look at my kids dodging the waves and squealing in excitement with every splash. I think back to our last visit to the area seven years ago. The Sunshine



Cuddle up with a koala at Australia Zoo

“YOU CAN SWIM IN SHELTERED WATERS WHILE WATCHING THE TRAWLERS COME IN”

One of the best kept secrets is Mooloolaba Spit, where you can swim in sheltered waters while watching the trawlers come in with their day's catch. We're starving though, so we head to the beachfront surf club for views of the ocean and some fish and chips.

Afterwards, we walk off our meal on the sand. As we build sandcastles during the last of the evening sun, we watch a young

Coast hasn't changed much, but I have. The region has a lot more to offer than I ever realised.

As we get in the car Reuben asks: "Mummy, are we going back to our new home," referring to our hotel room.

"No, we're going back to our real home," I explain. His tears start to roll. "But I like our NEW home better". It looks like we'll be coming back soon. 🇺🇸