



SOUL FOOD

Guests are home on the ranch at this cowboy-chic Byron Bay property

DENISE CULLEN

The pungent scent of smouldering sage greets us as we mosey down for breakfast at Sun Ranch, a boutique hotel tucked away in the Byron Bay hinterland. The smudge stick, a staffer tells us, is purifying the communal space ahead of a yoga session, which will be followed by a tea ceremony, writing workshop and wood-fired sauna and ice-bath session. The dozen yoga participants chatting excitedly on the lawn are not overnighters – they’ve paid to attend the morning’s activities – but as in-house guests, we’re welcome to join. We have other plans, however. First up: the health-conscious buffet breakfast laid out in the curvilinear kitchen.

The previous afternoon, we’d driven through the farm-style gates onto the 22ha Sun Ranch property, which has as its tagline “the hotel of good times”. It opened in September last year with invited media treated to a 36-hour hoopla involving flame-licked food, sound healing, live music, wine tasting and poolside gatherings. Things have settled down since then, with the atmosphere during our stay more relaxed country retreat than frenzied New Age rave. I sense the property is still settling into its post-launch groove.

Upon arrival, staff greeted us with salty margaritas before showing us around and sharing its history. We learn that three years ago, co-founders Jamie Blakey and Julia Ashwood rallied a bunch of mates to help buy a 1980s farmhouse and transform it into high-end accommodation.

They sought to hit playful rather than stuffy notes, while also riffing on the woo-woo elements of the Northern Rivers region’s alternative lifestyle. For example, a dowser spent two days on site to identify energy patterns and underground water sources. When he found “three interconnecting energy circles” at a location high on a hill, that spot became Stoney Ridge Healing Circle, and is now marked by giant boulders and a fire pit.

The original farmhouse was transformed over two years into what is now the Rambler Long House, with eye-catching communal areas and five guestrooms, some with provocative names like Wam Bam and Gettin’ Lucky. Half a dozen two-bedroom off-grid barns were then installed on the ridge line.

After breakfast, we leave the yoga crowd to their downward dogs and head to Byron Bay in search of horses. Down a sandy road out the back of Byron Arts and Industrial Estate, we pull up at Zephyr Horses stables, set on 40ha adjacent to the Tyagarah Nature Reserve. For this morning’s ride through native tea tree forest, I’m paired with Guinness, a chunky 11-year-old Clydesdale rescue named for its dark lustrous coat. In single file, we follow our guides over gently trickling streams and through tannin-stained sandy flats, accompanied by the sound of waves breaking on the beach nearby. When a group of experienced



Main pool at Sun Ranch in the Byron Bay hinterland, top; stylish interiors, above right; Three Blue Ducks store, above centre; riding with Zephyr Horses, above



riders decide to canter, those (like me) who are less confident in the saddle take an alternative route that involves much ducking under low-hanging branches.

“That’s why we call it Limbo Way,” our guide says brightly.

Back at the ranch, our room bears the relatively tame moniker of The Rattler. We use an old-fashioned key to open the frosted glass door to a riot of colour, with deep indigo walls and ceiling and a polished stone floor. To the right is a mosaic-tiled bathroom with rain shower, while down a hallway, past the minibar stocked with ethically sourced and local items, there’s a king-sized bed dressed in natural linen.

Out on the semi-private deck, past a set of pool gates, sun loungers are perched atop crazy paving alongside an al fresco shower and steps leading to the 15m pool. There’s a second, larger basalt stone pool with Bondi Icebergs-style bleachers and straw umbrellas located a short stroll up the hill, but I take the path of least resistance and slide into the welcoming waters just outside our room. I watch clouds drift overhead as I float. It’s utterly quiet. If I hadn’t spotted a pair of Birkenstocks neatly placed beside the steps of the room next door, we could be the only guests on the property.

Onsite food options are limited to poolside snacks such as prawn rolls and sourdough toasties, or share plates such as lasagne and salad, so after towelling off, we head back into town for dinner. Our destination is Moonlight, an intimate new Japanese-style hibachi grill and wine bar tucked away in a side street just off Byron Bay’s main drag. In keeping with the region’s philosophy, it focuses on biodynamic wines apparently chosen according to the lunar cycle, though I’m not entirely sure what that means.

We pull up seats overlooking the kitchen and select the set menu, which romps through raw items such as watermelon sashimi before hitting its stride with hibachi-grilled dishes. Steak and fries served with sweet but punchy kimchi bearnaise are an unexpected showstopper and something I’d seek out again.

After checking out of Sun Ranch the next morning, we head to The Farm Byron Bay, where pig farmer Travis Osborne leads a tour of the 34ha property, which operates on regenerative agriculture principles. Here, a collective of growers and producers raise free-range chickens, graze contented Black Angus cattle, tend gardens, sell seedlings, and more.

We stop beside a muddy paddock filled with sows and piglets. “Pig, pig, pig, pig, pig!” Osborne calls, grinning as the animals rush towards him, grunting and squealing.

Lunch is served at the onsite restaurant Three Blue Ducks, where we dine on sweet potato hummus, just-baked flatbreads, coal-roasted Moreton Bay bugs, and fresh salad leaves plucked from the gardens we’ve just toured.

It’s all deeply satisfying, providing nourishment for the soul as well as the stomach. I voice that thought aloud. It’s then, I realise, that the region’s woo-woo is rubbing off on me.

Denise Cullen was a guest of Sun Ranch.

IN THE KNOW

Sun Ranch is at 17 Byron Creek Rd, Coopers Shoot, about 15 minutes by road from Byron Bay. It’s two hours from Brisbane Airport and 25 minutes from Ballina Airport; from \$650 a room per night (two-night minimum) including breakfast.

sunranch.com.au

The 1½-hour forest trail with Zephyr Horses costs \$175 a person.

zephyrhorses.com

Moonlight is open daily from 5pm; the set menu is \$89 a person with matching wine (\$39) or sake (\$59).

moonlightbar.com.au

The Farm Byron Bay is open daily, with farm tours at 10.30am Friday to Sunday; \$15 a person. Three Blue Ducks is open daily for breakfast, lunch and takeaway.

thefarm.com.au
threeblueducks.com