

Exploring the best of South East Queensland

Campervan magazine, UK

<Body copy>

Beautiful one day, perfect the next. Queensland on Australia's east coast can be relied upon to deliver almost year-round sunshine, miles of golden sand and consistently amazing seasonal produce.

It's also a land of extremes and contrasts. Home to the world's cuddliest koalas and most venomous snakes (not to mention those witchety grubs), you can experience cyclones one week and bushfires the next. The weather and geology can differ wildly in villages just a few kilometres apart. Even in the small pocket of South East Queensland, primarily renowned for its popular surf beaches, you'll find imposing mountain ranges, sub-tropical rainforests and vast national parks teeming with wildlife.

It's a campervanner's dream. The roads are wide, the traffic is steady, there are plenty of scenic campsites, and the sun is nearly always shining.

Five years ago we converted a Toyota Hiace into a campervan to explore our adopted home state from a different perspective. South East Queensland covers the area surrounding Brisbane, with the relaxed Sunshine Coast to the north, the proudly exuberant Gold Coast to the south and a wide array of mountains and valleys to explore in the hinterland. Last year we had three memorable trips to discover the real diversity between the mountains and the coast – with a few wineries thrown in along the way.

The coastline is undoubtedly Queensland's biggest selling point. A spectacular stretch of powdery white sand, dazzling blue water, surfers, sailors, swimmers. It's full of life. You can genuinely sense the vibrant, positive energy that crashes onto the sand with every wave. I love it.

And with campsites occupying the most enviable real estate next to the sand dunes, campervanning is one of the best ways to soak up that energy. Unsurprisingly we

found our campervan was drawn to the balmy sea air most weekends, often coming to rest at our favourite spot, 60 miles north of Brisbane.

The waters around Mooloolaba and Maroochydore are a playground for watersports enthusiasts, with windsurfers, kitesurfers and paddleboarders all competing for the best waves. The local surf lifesaving club is keenly involved in surf sport carnivals, which provide hours of entertainment if you're walking along the beach, and simply watching the surf rescue boats practising their drills is a great spectator sport.

Maroochydore is also home to our favourite campsite in Australia; Cotton Tree Caravan Park overlooks the beach where the Maroochy River meets the ocean. Whether you think waves are for surfing, fishing or photographing, it's a wonderful spot.

There is direct beach access from several points in the campsite; you're greeted with crashing waves on one side, sheltered waters on the other and white sand all around. The Maroochydore Surf Club is only a five-minute walk away for great food and views, as well as the promise of the ubiquitous 'meat platter' for the winner of the daily fundraising raffle.

If you find yourself on the Sunshine Coast on a rare day when the weather is less kind, try one of the local attractions. There are plenty of places that showcase the Aussie sea-life you were hoping to see in the ocean, along with the wildlife you're quite happy to see behind a little fence, at Mooloolaba's Underwater World and Steve Irwin's brilliant Australia Zoo.

But if you're game enough to reprogram your GPS and tear yourself away from the sea and surf altogether, the rewards of heading inland are well worth it.

Last year as autumn was creeping in and Brisbanites were swapping board shorts and flip-flops for woolly scarves and Ugg boots (daytime temperatures did dip as low as 18 degrees) we headed up to the Glasshouse Mountains.

Only a few miles west of the Sunshine Coast – but feeling a world away – the deep eucalypt forests of the Blackall Range are a sharp contrast to the dazzling beaches visible in the distance. The serene landscape is dotted with quirky country villages

nestling among rainforest and pineapple plantations, and brushed with a hint of autumnal colours so absent along the coast.

The tranquil scene is interrupted only by 15 imposing volcanic peaks. Discovered by Captain Cook on his first voyage up Australia's east coast, the Glasshouse Mountains were so named because they reminded the explorer of the glasshouse furnaces in his native Yorkshire. And notwithstanding the abundance of fresh pineapples, aspects of the landscape are certainly reminiscent of the green and pleasant fields of England.

The mountains themselves have brilliant Aboriginal names, such as Tibrogargan, Coonowrin and Beerburrum, the latter being the only one Captain Cook chose to climb. That was a good enough endorsement for us and we followed the sign promising a breathtaking lookout at the end of a short stroll. The views at the top were stunning and the stroll was indeed short, but at an almost vertical incline, it managed to fulfil our exercise quota for an entire week. (Perhaps that's why Cook decided that one mountain was plenty and made a swift exit back to his ship).

We resumed our journey feeling rather more virtuous – despite needing to devour a reviving pack of chocolate digestives once back in our campervan – and able to justify relaxing into the slower pace of life.

Our first stop was Maleny, which, along with Montville, is one the main towns in the region. If your calves allow after your morning bushwalk, it's a great place to while away a couple of hours browsing around independent book shops, local craft centres and organic grocers. There is a strong community vibe and you could happily spend your weekly food budget at the local produce markets and cooperation dairies.

By contrast Montville embraces its tourism credentials and flaunts its reputation as the hinterland's premier supplier of European cuckoo clocks. Not being in the market for any new timepieces on this trip, we checked out the local art galleries scattered along the main street, tested a bit of touristy fudge, and sat in a sunny café for the rest of the morning, enjoying a hot chocolate and some more stunning views.

The scenic drives and rolling hills around the Glasshouse Mountains make it perfect campervanning country, and we found a couple of lovely campsites in the village of Mapleton – both within walking distance of the best pub in the area. The Mapleton Tavern sits at the top of a hill alongside a smattering of shops, and the panoramic

views from its wraparound verandah stretch across the Blackall Range to the twinkling lights of the Sunshine Coast.

The only campsite I'd researched before travelling to Mapleton was in a review for Lilyponds Holiday Park, which gave particular praise to its showers for being able to 'fit most European males, even those over 1.9-metres tall'. We hadn't found a better recommendation so arranged to stay there first. When we arrived I curiously sent Paul (as the only European male in our party, albeit a bit shorter than 190cm) to inspect. He reported back that the showers were fine, although perhaps not grand enough to warrant their own review.

Of much greater relevance were the avocado trees, which surround many of the pitches and were laden with fruit when we were there, all free to take. As luck would have it, I found a bag of Doritos tucked away in our campervan pantry, and after swapping recipes with our neighbouring van for the best guacamole recipe, we were nicely set up for the afternoon.

Being used to Queensland temperatures, it was a different experience camping in the mountains and by late afternoon I felt justified in pulling on my English thermals. The sliver of sun that had been moving across our pitch disappeared with the last of the Doritos, so we headed down the road to the Mapleton Tavern: the perfect country pub from which to watch the sun set.

Having risen to the challenge of camping in cooler weather, we took the opportunity over Christmas to deviate once again from our well-worn route to the coast. With two weeks off work we ventured even further inland to Queensland's Granite Belt. Three hours south west of Brisbane in the Great Dividing Range, the Granite Belt has a rich agricultural history and is popular for its wineries and abundant seasonal produce. The climate is cooler and drier than Brisbane and the higher altitude is perfect for growing all kinds of fruits; there are orchards and vineyards at every turn. As one national park rolls into another, the waterfalls and lookouts along the route lend themselves to a really pleasant campervanning journey.

We designed our campervan with day trips and long weekends in mind, so this festive trip was our longest so far. Everything worked beautifully though; the fridge held enough food (mostly leftover turkey and cold chipolatas), and our narrow shoe

cupboard found its true calling as a wine cellar. So we redistributed the shoes and made way for some of Queensland's best vintage.

Our first stop was a campsite a short drive from Warwick and just steps away from the stunning Queen Mary Falls. It's a great spot for exploring some of the best bushwalks and waterfalls in the Granite Belt; it's teeming with wildlife and is a must-see for bird enthusiasts.

We had wallabies playing next to our pitch and koalas and kookaburras peering down from the tree above. Tropical birds swoop through the site and you can hand feed king parrots, lorikeets and rosellas.

Queen Mary Falls are part of Main Range National Park near the border with neighbouring state, New South Wales. Also nestled in the same rainforest are Browns Falls and Daggs Falls, providing lots of lookouts and photo opportunities. The bushwalks around the falls vary: some short and languorous, others more challenging, with the odd precarious stepping stone and a bit of tarzan swinging around trees. Overall it provided the perfect antidote to the rush and hype of the previous Christmas weeks.

After three days of fresh air we drove south to Stanthorpe in the heart of the wine region. We set off armed with a list from a friend of the key attractions to make time for: the famous maze, the jumping police dogs academy and, last but not least, the giant granite frog. We decided to begin with the wineries.

We didn't get off to the most auspicious start when the acclaimed Boireann Winery had a sign up saying, 'Wine sold out, please return at Easter', and the highly recommended Summit Wines was barely visible thanks to a sudden summer storm.

Undeterred (and rejuvenated by a cup of tea while sheltering in the campervan) we plodded on through more national parks, stopping at many smaller wineries on the way. We tasted lots of wine (although not nearly as much as was offered), we bought lots of wine (thanks to our shoe cellar) and we took lots of photos of wine and vines.

The only other wine region we have visited in Australia is Margaret River, which produces world-renowned wines and is generally a much wealthier region. The wineries around Stanthorpe are certainly smaller and less luxurious than those in Margaret River, but they're friendly and welcoming and we were pleasantly surprised by the quality and variety on offer.

It's not all about the wine and the waterfalls in the Granite Belt though. As the name implies, there is plenty of granite around, and in Warwick you can do a short walking tour of the historic granite buildings.

The best evidence is in the impressive Girraween National Park, (meaning 'place of flowers' in the Aboriginal language) which features huge granite boulders and 'the Pyramid': a steep, rocky cliff-face which is not for the faint hearted, but affords panoramic views at the top. So says Paul anyway, I found the views panoramic enough at the bottom – it was 35 degrees!

Back on the highway and there are plenty of other treats to keep you occupied if you need a break from hill climbs and wineries: lavender farms, olive farms, cherry farms, apple orchards, soaperies and all manner of gourmet produce outlets. It's the perfect location for a foodie escape.

If you ever visit Queensland, it is tempting to spend all your time cruising up and down the coastline, parking your campervan next to an amazing beach and staying there for your entire trip. But you'd be missing out on so much. Less than an hour inland a different world awaits. The air is fresh, the campsites feel like miles from anywhere, and you never know what wildlife will greet you in a morning: koalas, parrots, and I've heard there's a giant granite frog lurking somewhere...