

Travel feature – Yamba, New South Wales
Caravan and Motorhome magazine, Australia

*****INTRO*****

Having recently been voted one of Australia's favourite towns with the best climate in the world, we travelled to Yamba to find out what makes it so special.

*****COPY*****

After spending most of last year converting a 2006 Toyota Hiace Commuter (think maxi-taxi) into a campervan, it was finally time to embark on its maiden voyage. The water was plumbed in; the fridge was full to bursting and the whistling kettle was eagerly awaiting its inaugural brew. It was time to see what all the fuss was about. What has triggered a resurgence in the popularity of RVs and caravans in recent years? Is it the freedom to escape the daily grind at a moment's notice knowing that everything is packed up and ready to go? Or just the most economical way of exploring a fantastic country? Perhaps it's the realisation that it's a great way to meet like-minded people on your travels? It was time to find out.

Our camping experience thus far had extended to one short holiday travelling around New Zealand in a campervan, a trip we enjoyed so much it prompted us to build our own. We'd been looking forward to the first trip in our new campervan with great anticipation, with Yamba frequently being touted as a suitable destination. It's not surprising; in the last three years, this pretty and unassuming little town on the northern New South Wales coast has been quietly gathering accolades left, right and centre. It has been voted Australia's best town, Australia's number one holiday destination, and impressively, CSIRO has even rated its climate the best in the world. Furthermore, Yamba was fortuitously placed for us to meet up with Paul's parents, Jean and John, who were meandering their way up the east coast from Sydney in a rented motorhome. It would be the first time any of us had travelled in an RV in Australia and it looked like a family holiday was on the cards!

Yamba is located just under 300km south of Brisbane and almost 700km north of Sydney. Whichever direction you're travelling from, you're spoilt for choice when it comes to places to break your journey. The Pacific Highway is hemmed by a spectacular stretch of coastline on one side and by national parks and quirky country villages on the other.

If you're driving down the highway from the north, keep an eye out for the turn-off to Bangalow just south of Byron Bay. This pretty little village has regained a quiet charm since the highway, which used to cut the village in two, was sensibly diverted around the outskirts. These days the newly revitalised high street is lined with cafés and galleries and you can happily while away a morning browsing the boutiques and antique stores. If you happen to be visiting in May, remember to look twice before crossing the road lest you stumble across the annual Billy Cart Derby. On 20 May the high street is transformed into a race track as local children race their billycart creations raising funds for the community.

If it's a sea breeze you're seeking on your journey south, another option is to leave the highway at Byron Bay and take the coastal road to Ballina. Rather than following the crowds into Byron, we made our first pit-stop at the less charted Lennox Head. Labelled a sleepy village by the guidebooks, when we visited on a Thursday morning the vibe was lively and welcoming. A bustling strip of cafés and local shops is set back from the powdery white beach, while a smattering of locals and surfers congregate for their daily dose of sea air. We thought it was a fabulous place.

At the north end of the village is Lake Ainsworth, a freshwater tea tree tinged lake, and a small caravan park. Across the road, you can park up and enjoy some of the best views in the village. After a quick stretch of the legs it seemed an appropriate place to road-test our new whistling kettle. And very efficient it was too, with a particularly insistent whistle which caught the attention of a group of beginner surfers trooping back from their lesson. At one point they looked to be forming an orderly queue outside our van.

Fuelled up, we continued along the coast to Ballina. The signage as you leave the coastal road can be confusing, especially if your navigator is still admiring the stunning scenery and you may find yourself sailing back up the Pacific Highway in the wrong direction, as we did. Keep watching for signs to Maclean or Grafton and you should get back on track. Grafton is the region's centre, and has an excellent visitor centre which will guide you to the best spots. If you're lucky enough to be visiting in October you'll be greeted by a haze of violet as the annual Jacaranda Festival celebrates the town's famous purple blooms.

So what did we know about Yamba, other than its impressive awards cabinet and the fact that people return year after year? The town sits at the mouth of the Clarence River, which, along with 11 beaches offers some of the best estuary fishing on the east coast. Surrounded by the Yuraygir National Park, the area also caters for walkers, nature enthusiasts and bird watchers. It's the perfect place to recharge your batteries, be they your own or those in your motorhome. And over the next few days, that's exactly what we did.

While tourism is a major income source in the region, Yamba has steadfastly refused to be drawn into the commercialism that threatens to define some towns on the east coast; indeed, the best views are enjoyed by quiet residential streets rather than blocks of holiday apartments. It's unpretentious and unhurried, and the perfect place to discover – or rediscover – the joys of a motorhome holiday.

We chose the Calypso Holiday Park for its position on the banks of the Clarence River, a riverside location that immediately imparts a feeling of serenity. There are a number of caravan parks in the area, but you can't beat the Calypso for its proximity to everything Yamba has to offer.

Walking out of the site towards the beach you'll pass a monument dedicated to Matthew Flinders, the explorer who first sighted the Yamba coastline in 1799 but rejected it for being dangerous and turbulent. You don't know what you were missing Mr Flinders! Continue up a flight of steps to Pilot Hill and the Clarence River Lighthouse. The original 1866 tower was replaced in the 1950s with the modern lighthouse that keeps watch over Yamba beach today. You'll often see dolphins and surfers sharing the waves, and look out for whales between May and October. In the afternoon, make a beeline for the iconic Pacific Hotel on Pilot Street, which has been perched on the edge of a cliff overlooking Yamba's main beach since 1934, and is renowned for its panoramic views and fantastic local food.

If you want to venture a bit further afield, take a short ferry trip to the nearby fishing mecca, Iluka. Nestled on the opposite side of the river, Iluka is so laid back that time seems to pass in slow motion. Whether you're a recreational angler or a simply a fan of the freshest seafood baskets, fishing is the main drawcard. As the ferry from Yamba glides through the Iluka harbour, you might spot the fishing fleet return with the day's catch.

Visitors to Iluka are also enticed by the varied walks on offer; surrounded by the world heritage Bundjalung National Park and the largest remnant of seaside rainforest in NSW, the area hosts a number of accessible walking trails. You can pick up a map when you disembark the ferry. If you're feeling energetic, the Iluka Bluff lookout is worth a trip for its 360 degree views of pristine, deserted beaches fringed by lush green forests and the sight of sea eagles circling overhead.

If the thought of a slower pace of life appeals, a caravan park sits in prime position by the river and the village offers just enough essential provisions to cater for a week's holiday. We did hear a rumour circulating on the ferry that the local pub offers ten cent beers at happy hour, but at the crucial moment we were mid-hike up to the lookout and feeling rather more virtuous. I'm still wondering if it was true though; I rather think it might be. The passenger ferry between Yamba and Iluka departs several times a day from the terminal outside the Calypso.

Despite historic observations to the contrary, the waters around Yamba were incredibly calm and peaceful. You can hire rowing boats and kayaks from boat sheds at various points along the river, and we took the opportunity to launch our new inflatable kayaks. Waiting until the sun had dipped, we lazily paddled up the river enjoying the



beautiful reflections in the water.

Afterwards we retreated to the campsite, where people had gathered to watch the sun set over the river. With a drink in hand, a few al fresco nibbles and a communal mist of Aerogard drifting overhead to keep the local mozzies at bay, we felt this really is what it's all about. We'd well and truly succumbed to Yamba's charms and felt relaxed and rejuvenated.

*****END COPY *****