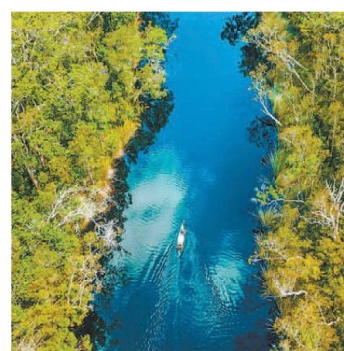


# Bright expectations

Beyond the beach, these sunny locales offer more than sea and sand



Clockwise from left: Noosa Heads is a resort enclave on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, Australia. Famous Hastings Street offers plenty of stores for shopping. The Noosa Everglades is a perfect spot to canoe or kayak. The town, two hours north of Brisbane, has a surf-chic lifestyle. MITCH DANN (RESORT); JESSE LINDEMANN (SHOPPING, EVERGLADES); MARK FITZ/TOURISM AND EVENTS QUEENSLAND (SURFERS)



## Doug Wallace finds a laid-back vibe and chic eats in a corner of the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, Australia

I've always been envious of people who have a "happy place." They've hit on a travel destination that strikes a chord, one they want to return to again and again – a Caribbean beach, a forest campground, a European country villa. While I visit a family cottage that means a lot, I hadn't had this type of lightbulb moment until I arrived in Noosa Heads, a resort enclave on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, Australia.

With white-sand beaches, surf-ready waves, abundant national parks and a mountainous hinterland full of nooks and crannies to explore, the Sunshine Coast is a postcard. Noosa, which sits at the top of the region, about two hours north of Brisbane, is often referred to as the Relaxation Capital of Australia.

Rather than a whirlwind tour, visitors here curb their obsession with time and give their road trips a more leisurely pace, connecting with the people, the diverse nature and the satisfying culinary culture – this is a foodie paradise for sure. On first impression, I find equal parts beachside luxury and outdoor adventure – truly, the whole of Queensland is a nature-lover's dream. Everyone is so laid-back. I also detect an icing of sophistication in Noosa that is neither haughty nor false, despite all the linen-clad shoppers on the town's famous Hastings Street and the expensive sunglasses ringing the condo pools.

"Our locals are a real mix – some born and bred here and others from all over Australia who have moved to the region for our lifestyle," Susan Ewington, who works at the local tourism board, says. And although there is this posh veneer, the crowd isn't all fancy. "We also get a good number of backpackers travelling in Australia who stay in Noosa for a few months." That sounds like happy place to me. Cue my long lunches and sunset cocktails.

Accommodations are varied – every-

thing from eco villas, houseboats and farm stays to arty hotels, lakeside cottages and luxury condos, but there are no high-rises because of strict development rules.

After a day or two, I can clearly see why people gravitate to the maze of waterways here, to open up a business or indulge in a creative whim, to semi-retire or to just escape from the city for a while. Tourists are drawn to Noosa, but not overburdening it – not yet, anyway.

Many visitors come for the food alone. The appeal goes beyond fresh seafood and local produce from a fertile interior: Several celebrity chefs have opened award-winning destination eateries, lured by the upscale demographic and the agreeable, surf-chic lifestyle.

I'm not in Noosa five minutes before I'm shaking hands with pâtissier Adriano Zumbo at the front of his pastry shop, Zumbo Test. He was host of Australian baking reality show *Zumbo's Just Desserts* and opened a test kitchen in Noosa in 2022 to soak up the Sunshine Coast sun and get creative with cakes. Ex-MasterChef Australia contestant chef Matt Sinclair grew up vacationing in Noosa and now runs the inventive Sum Yung Guys restaurant with a group of friends. Absolutely everything that goes into the restaurant's Southeast Asia-inspired dishes is made from scratch and it shows.

Before lunch at ALBA Noosa, chef Peter Kuruvita tied a lobster bib on me himself, almost as if he had nothing else to do. Also an author and media personality, and host of five TV series, Kuruvita recently opened ALBA, which incorporates a fine-dining room, pizzeria, gourmet shop and cooking

school. His specialty is showcasing Sunshine Coast seafood with Sri Lankan flavours. I exit the experience with a little tin box of spices from the provedore, complete with recipe cards that turn my kitchen into curry heaven when I return home. (Deep-fried curried eggs for brunch!)

All the good food has to be worked off, of course. The Noosa North Shore yields 80 kilometres of beach and wilderness, plus a subtropical landscape to explore. The Noosa Biosphere Trails are perfect for hiking and biking, horseback riding and critter spotting: The region is home to more than 3,000 species of wildlife, 700 of which are native, from wild koalas to black cockatoos and microbats (a.k.a. flying foxes). You will also find dolphins, loggerhead turtles, sea eagles and pelicans. The Noosa Everglades – about 40 minutes from Noosa Heads – is one of only two everglade systems in the world, the perfect spot for a few hours of kayaking.

But the real draw is the beach. At 7 a.m., I'm out on the national park trail, just me and a handful of people getting their run in before work, but then I notice about 200 surfers in the water to my left. Soon, they are quickly running past me on the trail, back to their starting point, to surf it again. I see all ages on the water. It's a real "this is what life is like here" moment.

There's little wonder that so many Australians have made Noosa their Shangri-la. They came for the waves or a quieter beach life and now either live here or return as often as they can. Living in Toronto, Noosa is a bit too far away to be my happy place. But now I know that I'm looking for something just like it.

## IF YOU GO

Daily, non-stop Air Canada flights from Vancouver have a flight time of about 14 hours to Brisbane. Noosa Heads is a two-hour drive north.

Renovations to the Sofitel Noosa Pacific Resort on chic Hastings Street are taking it higher up the five-star ladder. The adjacent Noosa Beach House restaurant, now helmed by chef Bret Cameron, is a total Sunshine Coast food experience. [sofitel-noosapacificresort.com.au](https://sofitel-noosapacificresort.com.au)

**Creative Tours** showcases exactly what tourists want to do in the Noosa region, such as farm-to-fork food tours, a land-sea-air tour, a gourmet food trail and an after-dark distillery tour. [creativetours.com.au](https://creativetours.com.au)

Right on the beach, **Sails Restaurant** Noosa is the town's classic dining experience, with a nice view of Laguna Bay and one of Australia's biggest wine cellars. [sailsnoosa.com.au](https://sailsnoosa.com.au)

**Drop by for happy hour** at Noosa Heads Distillery for a whisky, gin or vodka tasting adventure on the patio. This is one of the Sunshine Coast's first craft distilleries. [noosaheadsdistillery.com](https://noosaheadsdistillery.com)

The town of Eumundi southwest of Noosa Heads makes a great day trip. It's noted for the Eumundi Markets, an outdoor shopfest that supports local artisans, growers, makers and bakers. Overnight visitors can check into the HOLA boutique hotel. [eumundimarkets.com.au](https://eumundimarkets.com.au), [hola-eumundi.com.au](https://hola-eumundi.com.au)

Special to The Globe and Mail

The writer was a guest of Tourism Australia. It did not review or approve the story before publication.