



travel feature

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK IN THE TWEED VALLEY

With the rainforest forming a lush green tunnel over the winding road and colourful native birds flittering around the leaf litter lining the verges, we could have been anywhere in the world: The Amazon jungle, the rainforests of Borneo, an obscure Central American mountain range.

In fact, we were taking the road less traveled through the Tweed Valley; our present location barely 15 minutes from the busy Pacific Motorway.

The super-smooth dual carriageway from Byron Bay now provides a fast and easy drive to the Queensland border through some admittedly spectacular countryside, but have you ever stopped to wonder what you're missing along the way?

The Tweed region in northern NSW is networked with country roads and mountain byways that will take you into the heart of World Heritage-listed rainforests, via tiny rural villages and to unique attractions, eventually depositing you across the border via the back door, so to speak.

If you've already left the east coast highway at Grafton in favour of the Summerland Way to Casino and Lismore, you can stay off the beaten tourist track by driving through the rainforest-shrouded Border Ranges and into the back of the Tweed Valley.

Watch for the signs to Nimbin then skirt around Nightcap National Park to Lillian Rock which serves as the gateway to the world's second oldest shield volcano.

The detour up into Border Ranges National Park provides some spectacular views across the volcanic crater to the central plug of Mt Warning. The well-maintained 64km Tweed Range Scenic Drive follows the upper rim of the caldera, with picnic spots, lookouts, waterfalls and easy bushwalks providing plenty of excuses to stop along the way.

Back on the main Tweed Valley Way, the babbling Tweed River keeps you company as you stock up the groceries with farm-fresh fruit and veggies tumbling from rustic roadside stalls dotted here and there along the road to Uki.

This gorgeous little hamlet has lots of local art and craft outlets housed in the old butter factory, where you can also stop for lunch by the river.

If you're looking for somewhere really different to stay, try Castle on the Hill – a fair dinkum castle built by hand from mud-bricks and stones in the style of the 14th century Italian Renaissance. Artists Robert Todorai, Robert Pope and Irene Brown built and own the property, and conduct regular art works for those so inclined.

Alternatively, you can take the road to Mt Warning and stay in your choice of unique rainforest spa cabins themed around a Mongolian yurt, a Javanese joglo and a hillside cave at Wollumbin Palms Retreat.

The side road to Mt Warning, not far out of Uki, is an absolute must as it brings you to the base of the Tweed's most famous landmark and the first place to feel the sun's rays each morning on Australia's east coast. The 4km hike to the summit is not for the feint-hearted (allow at least four hours) but the rewards are well worth it: a journey through superb examples of World Heritage sub-tropical and temperate rainforest capped off with the most incredible 360 degree views. There's also a much easier short walk through the rainforest at the base which puts you in the midst of the wilderness and wildlife without the effort.

Whether you trek to the summit or take the easier option, Mavis' Kitchen and Cabins offers the perfect excuse to stop and soak up the serenity as you dine on organic fare, sitting out on the verandah of this gracious old Queenslander looking up at the mountain.

Next stop, Murwillumbah, is a major business hub in the valley but you'd never know it from strolling along the historic village-like streets. There are some wonderful art galleries, cafes and restaurants (the locals rave about the pub fare) and you mustn't miss the Tweed River Regional Art Gallery, home to one of Australia's most famous portrait collections.

Still keeping away from that highway, you can skirt around the other side of Mt Warning following the Oxley River to Tyalgum, another quaint rural village.

When it comes to odd facts, you'll be proud to add this one to your collection: Tyalgum is famous for the acoustics in its local hall; so much so that Australia's best classical musicians and a selection of international artists come to perform here each year at the Tyalgum Classical Music Festival (September). The village is also home to Flutterbies Café and their famous Flutterbie Cake, as well as a truly indulgent Soulfire chocolate menu which is only available on Sundays.

Chillingham is another charmer with local produce and bush tucker for sale at the Banana Cabana, hand-made soaps at the Soap Factory and arts, crafts and antiques on display in the old butchery next door.

Also in this general vicinity you'll find the Parrot Garden Café with its aviary of exotic birds and Crystal Creek Miniatures, an animal farm specializing in miniature breeds of cows, horses, donkeys and more. In addition to being a fully fledged breeding operation, the owners have set up a range of activities for visitors including a small train that goes around to all the animals, and a café.

There's some brilliant accommodation tucked away in this corner of the valley, including Hillcrest - a five-star rated B&B; and Crystal Creek Rainforest Retreat where seven self-contained luxury cabins are hidden amidst the trees.

When you're finally ready to drag yourself away from this little patch of paradise, it's just a short drive through rolling green farmland and rainforest-shrouded mountains to Numinbah Valley and Nerang on the Gold Coast.

Tweed Tourism can provide details on what's available and make all your reservations, as well as sending you a free copy of their Tweed Coolangatta Visitor Guide. Phone tollfree on 1800 674 414 or go to www.tweedtourism.com.au.

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