



travel feature

DISCOVER THE TWEED ... WHERE GOOD THINGS COME IN SMALL PACKAGES!

Lush rainforests. Miles of deserted beaches. Quiet rivers rambling through emerald green pastureland and waving canefields. Sophisticated resorts and quaint country villages ... sometimes the best things in life really do come in small packages.

Cosied up next to Queensland's glitzy Gold Coast, the Tweed region takes up just a tiny corner of northern NSW but, within this compact triangle, you'll find an incredibly diverse range of experiences.

Geographically speaking, the region is actually defined by the bowl or 'caldera' of an ancient shield volcano – the world's second oldest, in fact, and the largest in the southern hemisphere.

The northern boundary follows the NSW/Queensland border from the mouth of the Tweed River up to the rainforest-shrouded escarpments of Springbrook and Lamington National Parks. Sweeping around the Border Ranges, Nightcap and Mt Jerusalem National Parks, the final arc of the semi-circle flattens out into sugarcane plantations and farmland coasting down to the Pacific Ocean just south of Pottsville.

Smack bang in the middle of this Garden of Eden is Mt Warning, the central plug of the old volcano rising 1157m to catch the very first rays of sunlight that wash over the east coast each day.

Tailor a Tweed holiday to suit

Blessed by abundant rainfall and sub-tropical temperatures, the Tweed Valley has been a productive farming region since the earliest days of settlement.

But it is undoubtedly those 35kms of clean, uncrowded ocean beaches that have made it one of Australia's favourite holiday destinations.

For generations of Aussie families, the sleepy seaside villages of Fingal, Cabarita, Hastings Point and Pottsville are virtually a second home. Each year they make the pilgrimage to their favourite beachfront caravan park, motel or holiday house to spend long lazy days stretched out on the beach or fishing off the rocks.

In the afternoons, they'll take a drive out into the countryside or picnic by a river or head to a nearby golf course. At night, they'll gather with fellow holidaymakers around the barbeque or maybe wander down to the local fish shop to see what the trawlers delivered that morning.

In recent years, however, the Tweed has developed a new personality. It started with the cosmopolitan cafes and restaurants that set their colourful market umbrellas and awnings up along Kingscliff's beachfront esplanade to create a sophisticated, sun-drenched 'Eat Street'.

The next phase saw expansive residential estates opening up just a few kilometres down the road, catering to the sea change boom.

The beauty of this new Tweed persona is that the quieter villages with their budget-priced accommodation and laid-back lifestyle still offer the traditional holiday options, while international standard resorts like Peppers Salt Resort and Spa, Mantra on Salt Beach, Santai Resort and Casuarina Beach Resort provide the opportunity to indulge in a little pampering and a whole lot of luxury.

Touring the valley

Tempting as it is to focus your holiday activities on the surf, sun and sand of the Tweed Coast, there is much to explore in the valley that stretches away to the mountains.

The inland township of Murwillumbah is a good starting point. Here the historic shop facades house local art galleries, antique emporiums, gift shops and cafes serving hearty country fare.

On a picturesque hill overlooking the town, the Tweed River Regional Art Gallery should also go on your Murwillumbah 'must do' list. It houses an exceptional permanent collection of portraits from the Doug Moran National Portrait Prize and has a regularly changing program of exhibitions, lectures and workshops.

If art is your thing, you should also call into some of the local art co-operatives nearby, such as the Curious Art Gallery at Chinderah where the on-going series of exhibitions could feature anything from a traditional landscape to surreal digital media; and AAARTEC (Australian Allied Artisans Resource Talent Environment Management Cooperative) which specialises in high quality woodwork.

Heading west from Murwillumbah, you have the choice of taking Tourist Drive 32 which hugs the banks of the Tweed River out to Mt Warning, Uki and Clarrie Hall Dam; or Tourist Drive 36, following the northern branch – the Rous River – up into the hills to Crystal Creek, Chillingham and Tyalgum.

The Mt Warning option gives you the opportunity to take the challenge of the 4km climb to the summit of the north east coast's highest peak to soak up the incredible 360° views. If that sounds all too energetic, you can explore the rainforest and wildlife around the base on a gentle 200m track that is suitable for all ages and fitness levels.

Just a few kilometres further on, Uki is a great place to stop for lunch. The old Butter Factory has been converted into artisans' stores and there are a couple of lovely cafes to try. Alternatively, stock up on fresh fruit from the farmers' stalls lining the road and set up a picnic by the river.

Keen anglers will want to make sure they've got their tackle onboard. You can virtually pull up anywhere along the river and get your line wet or try fly-fishing for Australian bass out at Clarrie Hall Dam.

Local fishing clubs stock the dam with fingerlings each year so there's a better than even chance that you'll get lucky, but they do advocate a catch-and-release policy and strict bag limits apply.

Returning to the coast, you can take the alternative road from Uki to Stokers Siding, a village renowned for its pottery, and onto Mooball where the locals have taken their namesake to the nth degree by painting cow patches on pretty much anything that doesn't move – the café, the garage, even the telegraph poles!

Staying on the side roads through the picturesque Crabbes Creek community brings you back to the beach at Wooyung.

The Rous River option from Murwillumbah takes you out to Crystal Creek where you can call into Crystal Creek Miniatures and be captivated by the pint-sized cows, horses and donkeys that are bred here.

A little further along the road, you'll come to Chillingham. Sample local fruit, vegies and coffee at Banana Cabana and buy some gifts for the family at the little soap factory across the road or the Old Butcher Shop Gallery which showcases some really lovely local pottery.

There's another gorgeous gift shop, café and nursery at Tyalgum, a tiny hamlet famous worldwide for the amazing acoustics of its town hall. Each September, Australia's finest musicians gather here for the Tyalgum Classical Music Festival.

Drive back to Murwillumbah via Eungella where the Hare Krishna community opens their doors to visitors every Sunday. For a gold coin donation, you can join them for the afternoon banquet and take a tour of this unique complex.

Another excellent day trip circles around the back of Tweed Heads and Coolangatta, and up into the hills of Carool.

This little pocket is home to the Tweed's award-winning Zeta's Coffee which you can sample at many of the region's cafes and restaurants. You can also try the local vino at Ilnam Estate Winery. On Sunday afternoons, the café here hosts a brilliant jam session where the musical talent is only surpassed by the spectacular views.

Driving down to the historic river town of Tumbulgum, you can enjoy a relaxing afternoon ale at the old pub overlooking the wide waterway then head for Condong and Clothiers Creek Road to see one of Australia's big success stories at the Madura Tea plantation.

Market magic

As opposed to the international exporting capacity of the Madura Tea, there are lots of producers in the valley who operate on a smaller, more exclusive scale.

The best way to discover their gourmet delights is to visit one of the country or farmers' markets that are held in various locations throughout the region each weekend.

Local labels to look out for include the Iron Pot Food Company which produces Macadamia Pesto, Dukkah, Chai Tea, honey from the hive, Honey Nut and Seed Slice, and Gingerbread Biscuits; The Right Food Group, producing organic jams and pickles; Fisherman's Bounty for smoked trout and other seafood specialties; and Rodina for smoked salmon, turkey and chicken.

Be as active as you like

As you tour the region, it won't take long to realise that golfing is a popular pastime in these here parts so make sure you pack the clubs if you're keen. Championship fairways at Tweed Heads, Murwillumbah and Terranora offer plenty of challenges in an absolutely spectacular setting or you can have a hit-and-giggle at easier courses near Fingal, Chinderah and Kingscliff.

Between the rivers, dams, estuaries and ocean, fishing is another big drawcard for the Tweed. You can try your hand at everything from the aforementioned fly-fishing to deep sea fishing charters; and even the most inexperienced angler will get a kick out of dropping the crab-pots and hauling in a feast of blue swimmers or Queensland muddies on one of the catch-a-crab river cruises that operate from Tweed Harbour.

But wait ... there's still more! How about hiring a bike and riding along the beachfront cycleway; or taking a 4WD safari through the rainforest; or planning a serious bushwalk in one of the five World Heritage-listed National Parks; or heading out on a whale watching cruise between June and November; or catching an international show at Twin Towns Services Club ... the list goes on and on.

There is also plenty of variety when it comes to accommodation – from beachfront caravan parks, motels, holiday units and swish resorts along the coast through to friendly country B&Bs and unique retreats hidden in the rainforests.

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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MORE INFORMATION:

Karen Ransome
Verve

Ph: 07-5538 7379
Mob: 0431 958 726
Email: kransome@technet2000.com.au