

CIVILISED RELAXATION

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Where can you find a world-class goat and chick pea stew? Where else but Noosa. DAVID DALE found this and other surprises.

NOT that I take holidays, of course, but if I had to define the ideal spot for a week's holiday, I'd begin by requiring it to have six adventurous restaurants (not seven, because you like to return to the best one on your last night). Then I'd say "one good bookshop, lots of bush within walking distance, a room with a view and room service, a clean beach, two cinemas, a baby-sitting service, reliable public transport, and five eccentric sights within a short bus or train ride".

It's a fantasy. But on that scale, Noosa scores eight out of 10. The best goat and chick pea stew I've ever eaten was just the first of many surprises. Then there was the experience of walking down Hastings Street after dinner to discover that the pavement cafes had lit candles on the tables, so that the whole block glowed with yellow light and buzzed with conversation, which blended with the gentle whoosh of the ocean and the breeze through the trees.

Instead of the mini Surfers Paradise I had been dreading; the Noosans have somehow managed to put together a combination of inner-city sophistication, resort comfort and peaceful nature.

I'd arrived grudgingly and grumpily, having explained to my wife that Travel is for the purpose of learning about other cultures, and there was nothing we could learn by sitting on the sand in Queensland for seven days. "This is not Travel," she said. "This is A Holiday, which is a different thing. You shouldn't need to take your notebook out at any stage."

She held the pessimistic view that having a 10-month-old baby meant that Travel was denied to us, so that we would have to substitute the word "relaxing" for the word "interesting" in describing places we might aspire to visit.

Noosa proved to be both, and I had my notebook out often, partly because we discovered an organisation called 'Nannies of Noosa', which is staffed by a couple of trained nurses, one of whom entertained the infant for hours at a time.

We also discovered the following:

* A national park, ten minutes walk from main street. You can plunge into winding trails through dense rainforest, regularly encountering fat goannas sunning themselves across the path, and emerge after a couple of hours at almost deserted rocky beaches.

* A magical mystery bus ride. Take the local bus at the end of Hastings Street, marked either Tewantin or Sunshine Beach (it's the same one, going round and round) and stay on it until the scenery becomes repetitious (about two hours). In the Sunshine Beach direction you can study the architectural extravaganzas built by all the Victorians now retiring to the Noosa area. In the other direction you'll pass national treasures such as Evonne Goolagong's home, The Big Shell, The Big Pelican and The House of Bottles (built, says a sign just inside, by George Clifford, who was the first human being to successfully put coloured sands in a bottle). At the Tewantin end you might catch a punt across to an island where they offer camel rides. The bus driver advised against this: "You wouldn't get me on them, dirty smelly things."

* For an even more exotic journey, take the bus labelled Eumundi, which ventures into the hills behind Noosa. You'll reach a quaint wooden village with a three-storey pub, its own brewery, and a terrific cafe called Eats At Eumundi, whose menu symbolises Australia in the 90s by encompassing green curry, gnocchi, spring rolls and steak and kidney pie with Guinness.

* Two brilliant restaurants, called Saltwater and La Plage, almost opposite each other on Hastings Street. Saltwater is upstairs on a patio, with elegant wooden chairs that could have come off an ocean liner and imaginative, spicy seafood that would make Saltwater an instant fad in Sydney. La Plage stretches onto the pavement and offers French colonial dishes of a kind you wish they'd serve in New Caledonia, including the aforementioned Moroccan stew of milk-fed kid with chick peas, okra, zucchini and capsicum, in a clay pot. In the unlikely event that you tire of repeated visits to these establishments, you could try the trendy Aqua Bar, which has multicoloured cocktails and describes its food as "lite moderne" (Caesar salad, tempura prawns, onion and walnut tart).

If you're the type who breakfasts on the beach before a vigorous day's swimming, Eduardo's offers banana pancakes with maple syrup or potato blinis with smoked salmon and poached egg. And if you're seeking good takeaway food to consume in your room, try the Thai place upstairs in the arcade off Hastings Street, or the pizza place near the bus stop. I apologise for not giving you their names - by that point I had stopped taking notes - but they are easy to find.

* A small but useful bookshop on Hastings Street, a bunch of lively coffee bars, a couple of clothing stores which sell 100 per cent-sunproof babies 'wetsuits, a shoe store at which I bought two pairs of shoes at much lower prices than I'd pay in Sydney, and a three-screen cinema a five-minute taxi ride away at Noosa Junction (where there's also a bigger bookshop).

And yes, our room, at a place called Seahaven, had a 180 degree view of the clean beach, plus a barbecue apparatus on the balcony, revolving ceiling-fans, a spa-bath, and room service provided by a neighbouring Italian restaurant.

But after all, it was only A Holiday. If they could just bring themselves to speak a foreign language, I could call it Travel, and feel much more comfortable about our next visit to Noosa. *