

# Knocking on heaven's door

Queensland offers the best of both worlds with its combination of cosmopolitan chic and natural beauty. By Serene Seow

My affinity with Australia had always been somewhat lacking. Save for a work trip to Sydney eons ago, Australia and I ran parallel. So when the opportunity came up for another visit – Brisbane and the Sunshine Coast, I was told – I jumped on it.

A spot of research was in order: Did you know that Queensland is five times the size of Japan and seven times the size of Great Britain? Or that Brisbane is voted the most liveable Australian city, and Sunshine Coast is where locals flock to on their off-days? With packed bags, I traipsed onboard Qantas for what was the start of my all Australian experience.

The Aussies, much like the Japanese, are extremely proud of what their kind has to offer. So it was little surprise that the flight

was a sneak preview to all things Aussie. In every seat was a retro-esque amenity kit by renowned interior designer Florence Broadhurst, and a change of Peter Morrissey pyjamas. Soon as I was nicely settled in, the friendly flight attendant whispered that a delicious pot pie made from a secret recipe by restaurateur Neil Perry was ready for supper (she even suggested that I wash it down with a glass of fragrant Barossa Valley red wine!).

You know you've arrived when the pilot booms over the in-flight system, "Welcome to Paradise!" From the window, I was greeted by amber-hued skies that parted shyly to reveal snippets of Brisbane's picture-perfect beauty. I couldn't have visited at a better time, according to my neighbour: "The winter is so mild you can leave your coats and parkas at home." Brisbane is Australia's only subtropical capital city, after all.

Whizzing past customs, I made a beeline for the Emporium, a swanky boutique hotel in Fortitude Valley. A Frangipani theme (the owner's favourite flower) runs through here, from the impressive lobby to the suite-like rooms to the hugely popular French-inspired bar that packs in the crowd every night. My room overlooks a precinct lined with popular eateries like Brisbane's iconic dessert hideout Freestyle Tout and Tartufo's hearty Italian fare in generous portions. Unpacked, I hiked up to the rooftop pool for some peace and quiet, better to get my city bearings and map out a to-do list, over an ice cold cocktail.

## THE GREAT WALKABOUT

Fortitude Valley is Australia's first dedicated entertainment district. Grungy pubs, iconic live music venues and award-winning super clubs play host to international DJs, indie



FLY IN COMFORT WITH QANTAS' ONE-OF-A-KIND BUSINESS CLASS

rockers and jazz bands. Cloudland hogs the buzz for its "mad maximalism" and up-in-the-clouds vibe. "The Valley", as the locals affectionately call it, comprises two parts, namely the Emporium and James Street, the latter known for its trendy line-up of shops and restaurants. Libertine Parfumerie, a cult fragrance boutique, stocks only the finest

potions. Tom Gunn's chic minimal collection of shoes is a hit with fashion editors. Cru Bar has a stunning wine list you must know.

Speaking of suburban precincts, a move towards inner city living in the last 10 years has resulted in hot spots hailed as chic belts. Other than the Valley, there's the funky West End, the family-oriented South Bank, the hip and happening New Farm, and the retro-skewed Paddington.

West End's most famous landmark is The Gunshop Café, as seen from mobs of tourists and locals that assemble here. No reservations are accepted so do get out early and wait in line. Though the menu changes daily depending on available ingredients, classics like the divine vanilla and vodka cured ocean trout, poached egg, spinach on sourdough and the visually stunning Swiss brown mushrooms, herbed ricotta, bella rossa truss tomatoes and olive on sourdough are sure-win choices. This once-rough neighbourhood has successfully transformed itself into a bohemian town. Exotic Greek and Thai restaurants are aplenty, interspersed with quirky bars. Also living in harmony here are funky book stores and independent grocers.

If you walk towards the Brisbane river, past Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre, is South Bank. It's home to the arts, so prepare to find Queensland Museum, Sciencentre, Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) and State Library on the same stretch. The newly opened GoMA being the largest gallery in the southern hemisphere, attracts curious crowds in droves with its continually changing art exhibitions and interactive

installations. On the right of the gallery is South Bank Parklands. The 17-hectare space unfolds against a dramatic city skyline. Streets Beach, Australia's only inner city beach, meanwhile, is where you'll catch family picnics and BBQs smoking up. Chic restaurants are within access along Little Stanley Street.

Walk across Victoria Bridge and head to the CBD. Queen Street Mall pedestrian precinct is ground zero for all the retail action. Country Road, Vein Shoes, Sports Girl, Hype, Cotton On and General Pants Co jostle with department stores Target, Myer and David Jones here. Stop for a cuppa at one of their pavement cafes before continuing on to the 24-hour Conrad Treasury Casino. A short walk away is King George Square, home to Roma Street Parkland, aka the world's largest subtropical gardens in a city. This breezy riverside precinct is an exceptional spot for alfresco dining, thanks to its breathtaking view of the Story Bridge. Jellyfish Restaurant stands out for unsurpassed culinary excellence. The tempura Moreton Bay bugs in chilli ginger glaze are a must. The fish menu is another palate-pleaser that revolves around personalisation; you pick the catch, then decide how you'd like it prepared and even get to choose the dressing.

One of the best kept secrets here in Brisbane is Paddington. A nostalgic enclave with colourful renovated Queenslander houses along tree-lined boulevards, it is where some of Brisbane's best dining experiences can be savoured, notably the quaint boutique cafes in Latrobe Terrace. The Lark serves killer cocktails while The Paddo offers barrels of stand-up comedy laughs. Oh, getting lost at Paddington Antique Centre inside a Heritage-listed theatre is part of the rural charm.

### GONE TO NOOSA

After conquering the urban jungle, a beach getaway will sound like music to everyone's ears. Chasing after the sunshine, I escaped to Noosa, the farthest end along the 60-mile Sunshine Coast. The Australian equivalent of the French Riviera, the strip starts from Caloundra to Mooloolaba to Sunshine Beach to Noosa, with each staking claim to its own following. The unadventurous stop at Caloundra while frequent travellers rough it out at Mooloolaba. Sunshine Beach and Noosa are almost strictly reserved for the trendy set.

Noosa has been getting rave reviews, thanks to a calendar of non-stop festivities, from Noosa Jazz Festival Best Dinner In



BRISBANE'S COSMOPOLITAN CITYSCAPE



## Market Analysis

### SOUTH BANK LIFESTYLE MARKET

**Where:** Stanley Street Plaza  
**What:** Original handcraft, exotic collectibles and organic produce  
**When:** Friday, 5 to 10pm; Saturday, 10am to 5pm, and Sunday, 9am to 5pm

### SOUTH BANK YOUNG DESIGNER MARKET

**Where:** Little Stanley Street  
**What:** Wares from under-the-radar designers  
**When:** First Sunday of the month, 10am to 4pm

### EAGLE STREET MARKET

**Where:** Waterfront Place 1 Eagle Street  
**What:** Original souvenirs, intricate glassware and handmade jewellery  
**When:** Sunday, 7am to 3pm

### THE VALLEY MARKETS

**Where:** Brunswick St Mall, China Town Mall and Fortitude Valley  
**What:** Creations by emerging fashion designers  
**When:** Saturday and Sunday, 8am to 4pm



THE GUNSHOP CAFÉ AT WEST END IS A MUST-GO



LIBERTINE PARFUMERIE AT JAMES STREET



BRISBANE'S MANLY HARBOUR



## Hinterland High

**MALENY**  
Rural life meets commerce here, so expect an interesting mix of the arts and cooperative ventures. The communal spirit comes alive at Sunday markets at the century-old Maleny Community Centre.

**Eat** - Reserve is housed in a charming colonial Queensland building. Famed for its French-inspired cuisine, it even comes with an extensive cellar of boutique and vintage wines. [www.reserverestaurant.com.au](http://www.reserverestaurant.com.au)

**See** - Colin James Fine Foods has everything under one roof. Its shelves are filled with award-winning premium ice cream, over 200 types of cheeses from Australian boutique cheese companies and fine wines from the Riversands St George vineyard. [www.colinjamesfinefoods.com.au](http://www.colinjamesfinefoods.com.au)

**Sleep** - Spicers Tamarind is a luxury hideaway perched atop Gardners Falls. It's an all-inclusive retreat (yes, alcohol included). Don't pass up on the chance to sample renowned chef Paul Blain's fusion fare of Thai- Australian bush. [www.spicersgroup.com.au](http://www.spicersgroup.com.au)

**Buy** - Yummy cheeses from Maleny Cheese are made from cow and water buffalo milk. The Cheese Stop café is a perfect pit-stop for refuelling. [www.malenychese.com.au](http://www.malenychese.com.au)

**MONTVILLE**  
A lovely hillside village with extraordinary laid-back charm, thanks to handmade souvenirs, chic cafes and fine art galleries. St Mary's Hall hosts Artists in the Green, a selection of local produce every second Saturday of the month.

**Eat** - The 250-acre cattle property of Flame Hill Vineyard and Restaurant overlooks Mt Coolum and Coral Sea. But the to-die-for view still ranks second to its quality local produce and wine. [www.flamehill.com.au](http://www.flamehill.com.au)

**See** - Lovers of handmade Chocolate Country will be left delirious by the extensive selection. [www.montvilleguide.com.au/chocolate](http://www.montvilleguide.com.au/chocolate)

**Sleep** - The award-winning Narrows Escape Rainforest Retreat consists of a cluster of luxury cottages perched beside Lake Baroon. [www.narrowescape.com.au](http://www.narrowescape.com.au)

**Buy** - Made from plants, herbs, fruits and vegetables, Montville organic skincare has won fans with its pampering formula. Receive a bag of mystery seeds with every purchase. [www.montvilleorganicskincare.com](http://www.montvilleorganicskincare.com)



LUNCH SPECIAL AT POETS CAFÉ, MONTVILLE

un-commercialised town of Maleny while tourists are inexplicably drawn to Montville's rustic old world charm.

At a glance, Maleny didn't impress. But I pounded the pavement anyway, just to figure out why so many cars were parked along the streets. Old school co-ops, dusty second-hand book stores and fair-trade clothing stores are all found here but most of the crowd is at Colin James Fine Foods, nibbling on premium gelati made from local Guernsey Maleny milk. The desserts have been bagging medals since 2002.

Montville, on the other hand, needs little persuasion to drop by. Picturesque to a fault, just sitting at Poets Café to take in the surrounding makes for a memorable outing. Nature-lovers flock here to enjoy the great outdoors. Slip off Western Ave at Montville for the Sunshine Coast Hinterland Great Walk, a World Heritage rainforest that spans 58 km of warm subtropical rainforest, scenic waterfalls and abundant wildlife. One of Queensland's six great walks, you can do a full-on three- to four-day trail with overnight camps, or opt for shorter day trips.

No trip to the Hinterland would be complete without a mandatory visit to the famed Eumundi market. One of Australia's largest markets, it houses 500 stalls every Saturday and upwards of 300 on Wednesdays. Operating on the motto of "make it, bake it, grow it or sew it", the handcrafted wares, fresh produce, original artwork, pre-loved furniture, handmade toys, clothing and handmade jewellery are inevitably unique. But shopping isn't the only recreation in this otherwise sleepy town.



EUMUNDI MARKET IS ARGUABLY THE BEST MARKET IN ALL OF AUSTRALIA

Eumundi's blast-from-the-past charm comes from its country ambience that is equal parts lively and laid-back. Its culinary scene provides solid evidence. Freshly made pies and cakes at Hodges Bake House sent us into a tizzy. And since the town looks as if time has stood still here, entering a historic pub like Joe's feels as if you're stepping into a John Wayne movie. "Gimme a XXXX Ale!" I hollered. Incidentally, XXXX is a brand of beer as well as a running joke that Brisbanites can't spell to save their lives. Be it high up on the Hinterland, down by the gentle waves of Noosa or cruising the bustling retail belt in Brisbane, Queensland charms endlessly. Needless to say, this is the start of a beautiful love affair Down Under.

SPECIAL THANKS TO TOURISM AUSTRALIA, TOURISM QUEENSLAND AND QANTAS

The World, Noosa Festival of Surfing, Noosa Triathlon Multi Sport Festival to the upcoming Noosa Longweekend. But the biggest draw is definitely the balmy subtropical climate that averages at 25°C, perfect for year-round swimming. The stunning backdrop of sun-kissed beaches, awesome swells and endless outdoor adventure come a close second.

Small as Noosa is, it packs in plenty. At the heart is Noosa Heads, where tourists hole up at seafront resorts straddled between Laguna Bay and Hastings Street. Alternatively, just off Hastings Street is The Outrigger where it's a tad quieter. Dine alfresco at Bistro C along Hastings for the best ocean views and fish and chips, then walk off the calories at the designer stores in Hastings. At the end of the street, turn left towards the national park or make a right for Noosa Junction where the cool surf shops and backpacking hostels congregate.

On the outskirts of Noosa Heads is Noosa Sound. Here, you'll find the millionaire's row of luxury waterfront homes. Chic but understated, it's the epitome of the good life. Plodding on, tracing the Noosa river, you'll arrive at Noosaville. Like Noosa Heads, this nook offers holiday accommodation and the river is peppered with water sports activities, although the vibe is less harried and people are more relaxed. Over coffee, I learnt from the barrister that here's where locals and repeat visitors hang out. And the best eats around here? Don't miss Thomas Corner, which insiders regard as the best restaurant in Sunshine Coast.

## NEXT STOP HINTERLAND

Tired of sun, sand and sea? Half an hour away is the great Sunshine Coast Hinterland, a mountainous region comprising a handful of townships that literally flow into each other. Because of its hilly landscape, mountain bike tours are a hit. Hurtle down a hill on free gear and feel the wind in the hair, but be warned that the climb uphill beats any Tour de France race. I chose the easy way up – on four wheels, of course. The steep uphill climb started with a scenic drive past the captivating Glass House Mountain. Shrouded in Aboriginal myth, these dramatic volcanic plugs are considered guardians of the majestic Blackall Range. Up close, the sinewy contours of Mount Tibrogargan could pass for a gigantic face of a gorilla while Mount Beerburum is shaped like a pyramid. Chugging along the winding single-file road, I soon found out that the local folk show a preference for the



THE BEST FISH & CHIPS CAN BE FOUND AT NOOSA'S BISTRO C



BE SEDUCED BY THE NATURAL CHARMS OF FRASER ISLAND



SURFING IS MANDATORY, WELL ALMOST, IN NOOSA



IT CAN ONLY BE THE SUNSHINE COAST

## Day Trippin'

Noosa is the gateway to Fraser Island, a World Heritage site and the world's largest sand atoll. Hop on a 4WD along the 75-mile coast and be bowled over by its lush rainforest, sweeping sands, sapphire blue lagoons and towering sand dunes. Hervey Bay has shored up accolades as the hot spot for whale watching. The best time to visit is in winter, from July to November, when the Humpback whales embark on their annual migration. Rest your head at the renowned Kingfisher Bay Resort if you're planning to stay the night. Next morning, dive or snorkel at north of Fraser Island, where the Southern Great Barrier Reef lies.

