



“Hey, is it this way?” shouts a voice up ahead. It’s a glorious Saturday afternoon in Byron Bay, so bright it’s burnt in my memory. But instead of the obligatory lighthouse walk or swim at Wategos, I’m in the middle of a forest looking for a pub.

“It’s really different to the last time I was here,” says our puzzled guide, Nat, as she searches for a way. Dense bush has enveloped the sandy trail and the entangled tapestry of greying melaleuca trees and low shrubs seem to be closing in on us.

“Over there, isn’t it?” another guide calls back. The snap, crackle and pop of the bush underfoot tells me Nat has recovered the route. “This is a tricky bit,” she says. “Keep close to the horse in front and keep steering.” I give Bobbi a firm nudge. There’s cold beer waiting, after all.

If this were a year ago, I would have been one of many crowding into Byron’s top pub on this diamond day to ring in the weekend in a way that felt inherently normal. But since the pandemic, our drinking culture has changed dramatically.

In my own state of NSW, where rules on capacity and mingling are still coming and going, the pub crawl has largely been retired, albeit temporarily.

But silver linings appear where you least expect them. In the age of social distancing, there’s only one way to crawl (or trot, rather) to the pub: on horseback.

Byron Bay coastal ranch Zephyr Horses offers rides that set off into the wilderness every Saturday, weaving through forest and to the nearby Sun Bistro for the proverbial schooner and schnitzty.

“You can’t really do this in many places, so we’re really lucky,” says Kate Noller, co-founder of Zephyr Horses, which is set back off Belongil Beach on the outskirts of town.

“We sit outside in the beer garden near the grass and the horses are tied up right there. So you can still see what they’re doing while they have their hay and wait for us. It’s just such a good way to be able to break up your ride,” says Kate.

Horseback pub tours are not new to Zephyr’s repertoire, but the novelty has come into its own during COVID.

My horse, a chestnut mare, comes with exemplary references. “Bobbi is really sweet. She’ll look after you,” says Nat, a veterinary

A HORSE WALKS INTO A BAR...

MANY AUSSIES HAVE A TENDENCY OF GALLOPING TO THE PUB, OR SADDLE UP FOR REAL TO HEAD FOR A DRINK

JENNY HEWETT



nurse who guides on the side.

Naturally, I’ve arrived with a bit of a posse, as one typically does when hitting the pub. Together, our group of eight, which includes three of my pals, two other guests, plus two guides, has varying levels of horse-riding experience, including a first-timer.

Beer and horse-riding – what could possibly go wrong?

“We only have one beer, so there’s no drink riding,” explains Kate. “If you guys want

to kick on and keep drinking, you can stay there and we’ll take the horses back,” she smiles, adjusting my saddle.

After a quick briefing, we’re making our way slowly through the forest to the soft whistle of birds and rustling leaves. But sweet Bobbi is already breaking the rules.

“If you guys can get back from the pub ride without them eating a fern, I’ll give you all a \$100 bonus,” Kate calls after us, having made one request to steer them on when they stop

WHERE TO KICK ON

Stone & Wood

The Byron Bay-born craft brewery takes walk-ins for tastings and lunch. stoneandwood.com.au

Azure Bar & Grill

Sip on bush-tucker inspired cocktails at this chic venue located at beachfront Elements of Byron Bay. elementsofbyron.com.au

Balcony Bar

Take the Byron Bay Solar Train back into town for the Drag and Dine show held here every Sunday night. balcony.com.au

to indulge in the foliage. Next thing I know, Bobbi is muzzle deep in a particularly luscious-looking fern, and I helplessly watch it disappear into her mouth like a giant writhing insect.

Bobbi’s wayward appetite is both a constant battle and source of entertainment, but she’s otherwise easy to handle. As we pad on sand with forest on either side, I tense as she’s startled by a wallaby bounding through the scrub. But her and I soon settle into each other and begin to feed off the energy of this paradise.

“Lean back,” Nat yells as we manoeuvre the horses through a waist-deep puddle and prepare for the “bush bash” to the pub.

I’m walking beside Bobbi now, leading her into the carpark of the Sun Bistro as pub-goers look on at our procession with what can only be described as FOMO.

We’ve only just arrived, but Bobbi has already broken the seal. She wastes no time in relieving herself in the middle of the street, an unfortunate occurrence for my friend behind, but not unusual given the setting.

Helmets unbuckled, we head straight for the bar and grab a table outside, with Bobbi, Rocco, Bunyip, Val and the rest of the crew visible in the distance.

The cold Stone & Wood craft brew and salt and pepper calamari and sweet potato fries go down a treat. We’re happy, not drunk, when we leave the pub and mount our horses. And one horse joke richer.

The writer travelled as a guest of Tourism Australia.