



# THE BEAR ESSENTIALS



**OK, they're not really bears but they're adorable and our koala capital is full of them, writes David Fitzsimons**

**W**hen you mix koalas and food, most people would think gum leaves — but in Port Macquarie they are thinking tourists.

The mid-north coast beach town is the koala capital of Australia and has an emerging food focus based on fresh local produce, a major food festival and new restaurants.

Port has the world's only koala hospital, which attracts visitors from around the world. And the town now has a trail of 50 larger-than-life koala sculptures painted by leading artists.

## HIT THE TRAIL

There's the Dame Edna koala, Cadel the cyclist koala, Con the convict koala, Celtic koala, Crusader koala, Garage Girl and more.

Organisers say the trail could expand to 75 koalas and may continue beyond the current proposed end-date of December 2015.

Project director Margret Meagher says the koalas as public art highlight environmental concerns for

the animals, while also engaging people.

Many people have been trying to see all 50 and record the experience on social media, she says.

"When you create something like this, you don't know where it is going to go but people have picked it up and run with it.

"Everybody feels very comfortable with public art. They like to engage with the sculpture. Everybody likes to climb all over it."

Meagher says sponsors paid \$12,500 for each sculpture and, unlike this year's Taronga Zoo rhino trail, which ran from Sydney to Dubbo for a few months before the sculptures were auctioned off, these are staying put.

"I didn't want something that would be put in-situ for a short time."

When project organisers spoke to experts from the Koala Hospital, they discovered that NSW koalas look different to their counterparts from interstate.

"They taught us that koalas

in different places look different in different areas," she says. "Our koala is an authentic representation of the Port Macquarie koala."

Meagher says the fibreglass sculptures were built in Sydney, then painted by a range of local, Sydney and interstate artists.

"A lot of them felt grief when they had to give up their koalas. One artist spent 900 hours on their koala. They got really engaged with it in a way I haven't seen before."

That reaction reflects the deep affection people everywhere have for koalas.

"They are the most well-recognised animal associated with Australia,"

Meagher says.

"The koala is very child-like in its appearance. When you look at a koala, it is a human face."

The koala sculptures are dotted around Port Macquarie and in the nearby towns of Blackmans Point, Bonny Hills, Laurieton, Bago, Comboyne and Wauchope.

And they are spreading far



and wide, too, with one at a children's hospital in Texas and others to follow in Melbourne and London.

Meagher says koalas, along

with pandas, feature high up on international animal popularity lists.

"The Koala Hospital is the number-one reason international tourists come to Port Macquarie," she says.

It's feeding time at 3pm every day at the hospital and the public are invited to take a guided tour to learn about the furry marsupials and their battles for survival.

Volunteers rescue up to 300 koalas from the bush and city streets every year.

A host of volunteer carers work with vets to rehabilitate injured and sick animals.

Volunteers head out to the bush around 4.30am every day to harvest eucalyptus leaves to feed the koalas.

## SO MUCH MORE

But Port Macquarie is about more than koalas — its

major festival, Tastings On Hastings, celebrates the burgeoning local food production industry with stalls offering delicacies such as smoked sun-dried tomatoes, olives, jams, chilli sauces, nuts, oils, artisan breads, beer and wine.

Every year the festival has a celebrity chef and this year it was SBS TV show host Peter Kuruvita.

Local produce is also a feature at some of Port's leading restaurants, including Grape & Petal, which offers an unusual menu of South American-influenced tapas.

Like many coastal towns in NSW, Port Macquarie has a large ageing population — in fact it was once known as "God's waiting room" — but there has been a shift toward

young families in recent years.

You have only look over Town Beach early each morning to see fit and healthy people out jogging, boot-camping, rowing, cycling and

surfing before filling local coffee shops, including the popular Milkbar, part of the Observatory Hotel resort-accommodation complex.

The 4.5 star hotel is 100 per cent carbon neutral and last month won a major gong at

the World Boutique Hotel Awards — being voted the Best Sustainable Hotel in Australasia.

Port Macquarie boasts a seafront cycle path and one of the best coastal walks in the state — extending 9km

from the centre of town to Tacking Point lighthouse, the third oldest lighthouse in the state, dominating the headland with sensational views down Lighthouse Beach and to the secluded Little Bay.

## THE RIGHT TRACK

The route to Tacking Point crosses several beaches and descends steps and paths down to the sands before rising again.

There's plenty of history along the way, too, including

the hill from where ships were once signalled, and the site of the area's first flour mill.

Look out for eagles floating on the winds eyeing prey, and skinks and lizards shuffling through the undergrowth.

The beaches are diverse — from the popular and lifesaver-protected Flynn's, which has a cafe, to the expanses of Shelly, to the dog-friendly Nobby's and the rocky Miners, which also doubles as an unofficial nudist beach.

On the way, take a 600m detour up the hill to the Sea Acres National Park visitor centre. A stroll along a 1.3km boardwalk takes you up to 7m high into the heart of the rainforest.

The Rainforest Cafe is a great spot for lunch. While there, pop downstairs to check out the eco-display on the local Aboriginal Birpai people, too.

The writer travelled courtesy of Greater Port Macquarie Tourism

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**Cheyne Flanagan and patients at the Koala Hospital (top left); evening at a Port Macquarie beach (above); celebrity chef Peter Kuruvita at the Tastings on Hastings festival.**









## All the facts

### GETTING THERE

- Port Macquarie is a 4.5 hour (393km) drive from Sydney. Qantas Link and Virgin fly daily. NSW Trainlink XPT service to Wauchope with connecting bus to Port Macquarie.

### DOING THERE

- **Koala Hospital & Study Centre**, Roto House, Macquarie Nature Reserve, Lord St, Port Macquarie; Feed, Walk And Talk Tour

3pm daily, free, koalahospital.org.au

- **Tastings On Hastings Festival**, Town Green, Horton and Clarence Sts, Port Macquarie; October 2015, date to be confirmed, adult \$2, child free, tastingsonhastings.com.au
- **Hello Koalas Sculpture Trail**, various venues, Port Macquarie region; until December 2015, free, bigkoala.com.au
- **Sea Acres Rainforest Centre**, Pacific Dr, Port



Macquarie; daily 9am-4.30pm, boardwalk adult \$8, conc \$7, child \$4, family \$16, 6582 3355, nationalparks.nsw.gov.au

### DOING THERE

- **Grape & Petal**, 72 Clarence St, Port Macquarie; 6584 6880,
- **Rainforest Cafe**, Sea Acres Rainforest Centre, Port

Macquarie; daily 9am-4pm, 6582 4444, rainforestcafe.com.au

### STAYING THERE

- **The Observatory**, 40 Williams St, Port Macquarie; 6586 8000 or 1300 888 305, theobservatory.net.au Has bike hire, Endota Spa massage and Milkbar cafe.

### MORE INFO

- portmacquarieinfo.com.au
- visitnsw.com.au

## High five

### Exciting summer experiences in the Hastings region

#### 1. OYSTERS IN THE VINES.

Head to Cassegrain winery on January 25 for tastings of oysters and wine and markets. [cassegrainwines.com.au](http://cassegrainwines.com.au)

#### 2. JAZZ CRUISE.

Hit the Hastings River in style on February 1 for an afternoon of jazz with a bar on board. [portventure.com.au](http://portventure.com.au)

#### 3. NEW WALKING TRACK.

Spend an hour strolling the 2km Googik Heritage Track through the Lake Innes Nature Reserve. [nationalparks.nsw.gov.au](http://nationalparks.nsw.gov.au)

#### 4. SECRET TREE.

Old Bottle Butt (below) is the largest red bloodwood tree in the southern hemisphere standing 52m high and 16m wide. There's a new walking track and viewing platform. [forestcorporation.com.au](http://forestcorporation.com.au)

#### 5. CRAFT BEER.

The Little Brewing Company has increased its tasting room space for summer and has a few new brews to try. [thelittlebrewingcompany.com.au](http://thelittlebrewingcompany.com.au)

