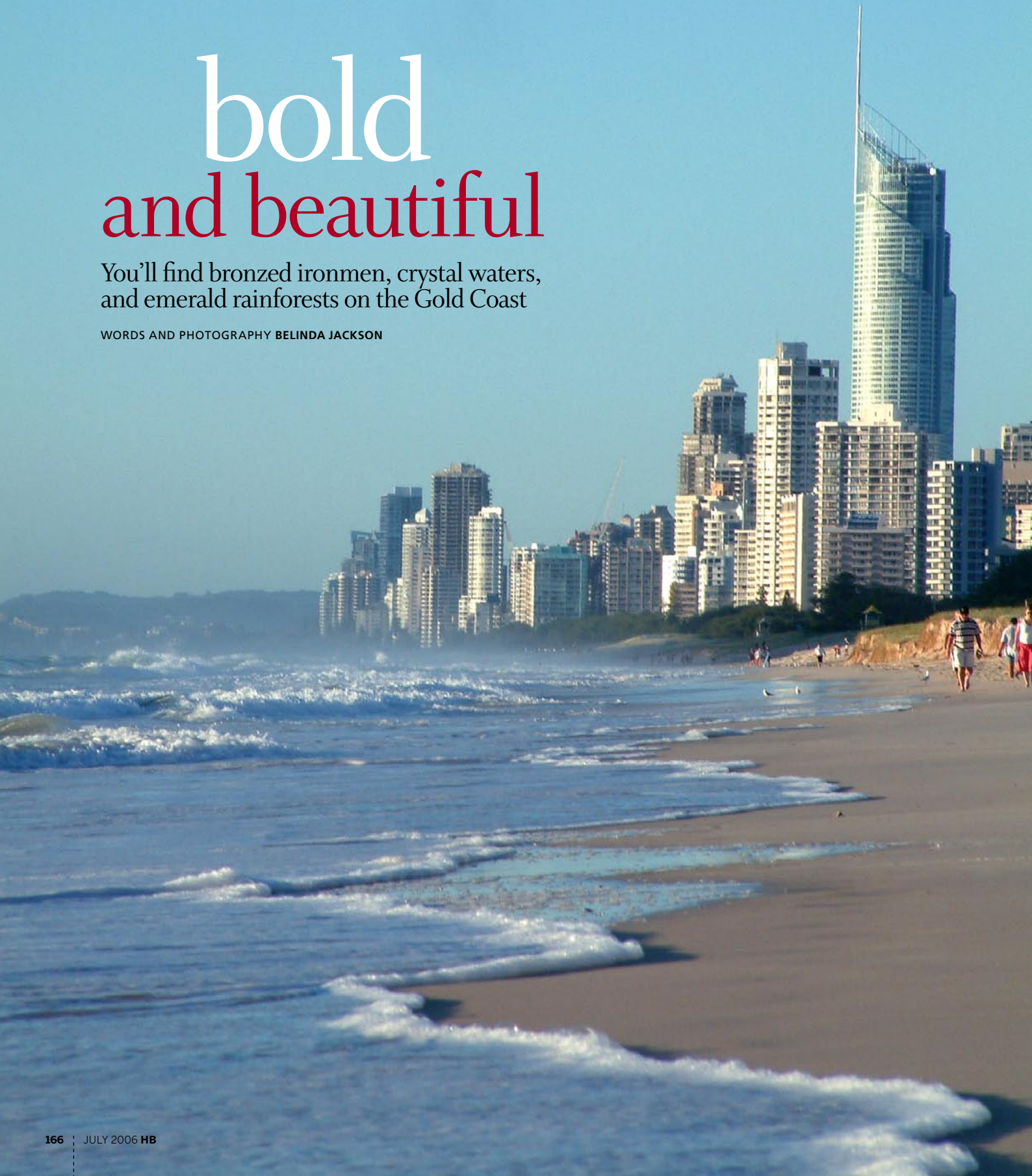


# bold and beautiful

You'll find bronzed ironmen, crystal waters,  
and emerald rainforests on the Gold Coast

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY **BELINDA JACKSON**



It's early morning on the beach and the Ironpeople pound the sand as they pass, legs pumping, breath heaving. It's like being in your very own Nutri-Grain ad. Everyone's so buff, it hurts. Superficial? Consumed with image? The Gold Coast's like that, and it hasn't apologised yet.

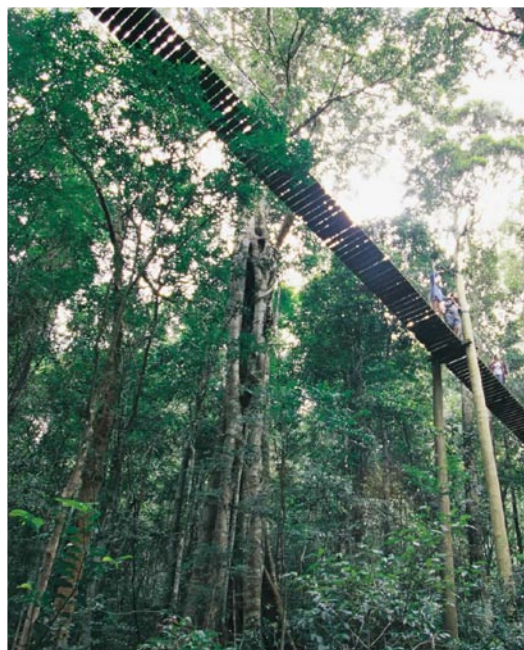
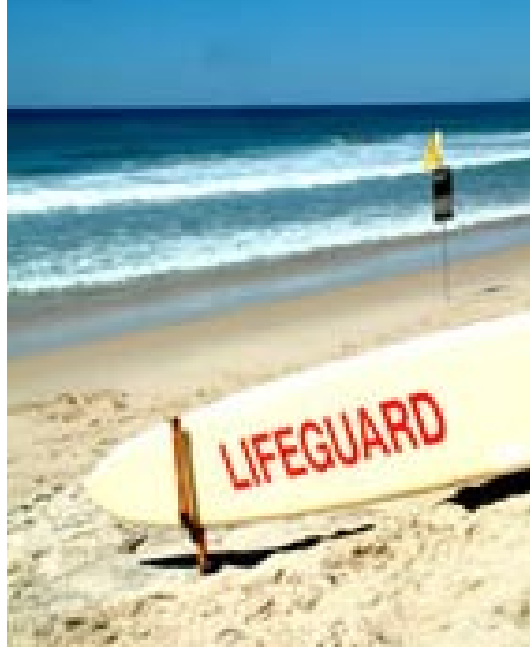
Flying into Coolangatta Airport brings back memories of that magical moment when, on family holidays, you first saw the sea. The smell of salt water and school holidays hangs heavy over the coast, which is thick, fecund and reeking of skipping out, knocking off, taking it easy.

The ocean's a big, beautiful, blue strip crested with white waves that surfs cling to all-year-round, no matter what the weather and especially in cyclones. When you look up 'beach' in the dictionary and there should be a picture of Main Beach, just north of Surfers Paradise, at midday.

Here, all the Aussie icons are out on display. Lifesavers and their red-and-yellow flags, sun-bleached boardriders, even, if you're lucky, a pod of dolphins or whales. No wonder the place is crawling with tourists, and not just British backpackers, boiled bright-red, or the obsessively sun-shy Japanese. We Aussies can't keep away, either.

The bikini made its debut here in 1949, and its never left. By day, the beaches are littered with them, by night, the streets glitter with the gold versions worn by the city's most famous, yet nameless, inhabitants – the Gold Coast meter maids – who were introduced by a canny mayor in the 1960s who used the bevy of babes to successfully promote the Gold Coast as a tourist destination. Then, in 1973, another icon, Billabong, launched its board shorts on the Surfers Paradise sandy strip, the ubiquitous logo now plastered to the wet backsides of a thousand little nippers.

For some, the Gold Coast, or GC, as it's recently been rebranded, is little more than the 60-odd kilometre stretch of beaches that run from just south of the NSW border to the flanks of South Stradbroke Island. >



**TOP AND FAR LEFT** Life's a beach: the Gold Coast's surf lifesavers are recognised internationally for their courage. **ABOVE** Where blue meets green: Burleigh Heads features beaches and a national park. **LEFT** Rainforest magic: Lamington National Park is listed as a World Heritage Area.

**TRAVEL FACTS:** For more information visit [www.verygc.com](http://www.verygc.com), (07) 5592 2699.

## inside info

### EXCHANGE RATE

Cappuccino, \$3.50, one-litre bottle of water, \$2.50.

**BEST BUY** Versace mug (right). Casually drop this baby on the desk at work for your morning coffee and a spot of serious statement-making, with its 24 carat gold-plated trim and trademark Medusa head. Medusa Red mug, \$130, Versace, (07) 5591 8080, [www.palazzooversace.com.au](http://www.palazzooversace.com.au).



**DON'T LEAVE WITHOUT...** doing a beach picnic, GC style. Grab a blanket, then pick up some fresh crusty bread, French butter and marinated vegies and meats from the well-stocked Fabulous Food deli and catering business, (07) 5592 1411, [www.fabulousfood.com.au](http://www.fabulousfood.com.au), located in the Evergreen Lifestyle Centre. Throw in a chilled bottle of the local semillon (we recommend Tambourine Estate or Witches Falls) and make for the beach.

## hot hotels

### BLOW THE BUDGET

**Palazzo Versace** Constantly rated one of Australia's finest, PV is deeply glamorous, yet also incredibly friendly. Check out the 750kg chandelier and the hand-pressed gold leafing on the ceiling in the lobby. Rooms are priced from \$425/double, including breakfast, up to \$3500 for the imperial suite, and packages from \$545. Call 1800 098 000, [www.palazzooversace.com.au](http://www.palazzooversace.com.au).

### MID-RANGE

**Peppers Salt Resort & Spa** Kingscliff is a beach town packed with little boutiques and cafes turning out a decent espresso. The resort rooms (below) are family friendly, while the beach house accommodation is just that bit more slick. Priced from \$180/double. Call 1300 729 802 or check online for last-minute deals on [www.peppers.com.au](http://www.peppers.com.au).

### BUDGET

#### Witches Falls Cottages

Hidden in the Hinterland, each of five quirky cottages is self-contained, with a fireplace, kitchen and a raised platform for the bed. Michiyo Duncan's Aus-Jap food is a dream. From \$160/double including breakfast. Call (07) 5545 4411 or visit [www.witchesfallscottages.com.au](http://www.witchesfallscottages.com.au).



North facing: beautiful Greenmount beach. **OPPOSITE PAGE** Ultimate extravagance: the Imperial Suite at the Palazzo Versace.

< But for the rest, the GC is a sunny promenade for the bronzed, the beautiful and the stinking rich – oh, and everyone else. Caravan parks squat beside condominiums, chippies beside chic cafes and sarong shops beside haute couture salons in one great roiling mass. It's a chameleon strip that pitches itself as having something for everyone.

### So what does it offer?

People who live on the Gold Coast are not like the rest of us. The locals do a good line in civic pride and, like farmers, they're obsessed with the weather.

"Where are you from?" a friendly specimen asks. Name anywhere below the border and you're asking for it – the look of pity, then the phrase that these people must surely have undertaken to memorise before they were allowed to live here: "Yeah, I go down south to visit the rellies but I can't stand the cold. I dunno how you live there."

They're also the bowerbirds of the nation – all that glitters is good. It's not called the Gold Coast for nothing. Day one, and you're in a daze, blinded by the bling and suffering whiplash as your friends keep muttering: "Biceps at two o'clock." By day three, all your chic black city clothes are rolled into little balls in the bottom of your suitcase and you've worked out you've got a décolletage. If, by day five, you can't order a dozen oysters and a glass of riesling for lunch without breaking sweat, you're just not trying hard enough.

It's the picture of suburban utopia, where everyone lives on a golf course or a marina, where the water's always 22°C and the sun shines 287 days a year. If that's not your cup of tea, the Gold Coast has another face: away from the mirrored high-rises on the shoreline are the cool-green rainforests, tucked into mountainous folds, and tiny villages that make up what's now known as the Hinterland.

One of the few villages on the map is Mount Tambourine, an area known for its burgeoning wine-making industry, rainforest spa retreats and, wedged in between, a strip



## Caravan parks squat beside condominiums, chippies beside chic cafes and sarong shops beside haute couture salons in one great roiling mass

of European-style shops whose wares of cuckoo clocks, robust pasties and hand-carved wooden bowls would make a minimalist weep. Still, kitsch beckons and, on weekends, hundreds answer the call, stopping in the town to finger folk art and devour Devonshire tea. Our advice? Leave the towns and head for the country roads.

Up here, the air is cooler and the rainforest is wild. Turn off the airconditioning and the radio, roll down your windows as you drive through and listen to the birdsong ringing through the forest. The Hinterland is riddled with twisted lanes that weave in and out of the hills, with views that stretch from Brisbane's suburbs in the north to Mount Warning in the south. On a late summer's afternoon, there's a hint of chill in the air, even though you can still see the sunny beaches below, just 35km away. Homey public loos are painted in murals of rosellas and snakes, rickety fruit stalls (desolate save a money tin) sell avocados, honey and rhubarb, which grows prolifically around the area, presenting a challenge for local chefs.

If you have the chance to sleep up in the hills, at night you'll hear geckos chatter and in the morning, frogs sing. The alarm clock is an unruly bunch of rosellas, with a follow-up call by a band of raucous kookaburras.

In between the mountains and the sea sit unnaturally shaped theme parks and coastline activities – the Tower of Terror, Tiger Island (the Bengal tiger rink), shopping malls and gyms, beauty salons and nightclubs.

You can throw yourself into the churning fray and lap up the manic beach-fuelled energy that never abates, or stay up here, on the ridge in the rainforest, where, instead of the beach sands, it's the silence that's golden. ■

## dining out

**BLOW THE BUDGET** **Absynthe** French chef Meyjtte Boughenout serves up a six-course degustation menu from \$95 that will have experimental eaters wriggling with excitement – his signature dish is the Golden Egg, a shell filled with egg mousse with savoury soy jelly and 22 carat gold leaf. (07) 5504 6466, [www.absynthe.com.au](http://www.absynthe.com.au).

**MID-RANGE** **Songbirds in the Forest** (below) Set on 51 acres of the rainforests of Mount Tambourine, birds call from the treetops as you try the new French-Australian menu from head chef Philip Edwards (formerly of Palazzo Versace). Weekend bookings are essential. Entrees from \$8, mains from \$28, (07) 5545 2563, [www.songbirds.com.au](http://www.songbirds.com.au).

**BUDGET** **The Surf Club, Northcliffe** Take the kids to the beach for a slap-up weekend brekky. The club is right on the sand, and the generous fodder will gear you up for a day in the surf. Psst, most of Australia's top Ironpeople are club members! The Northcliffe Big Breakfast will set you back \$9.90. Phone (07) 5539 8091, [www.northcliffesurfclub.com.au](http://www.northcliffesurfclub.com.au).



## city secrets

**BEST HOMEWARES STORE** **Casa Guardi** The owners scout all of Europe and Asia to bring in eclectic one-off furniture designs, from contemporary to antique. Marina Mirage shopping centre, Surfers Paradise. Call (07) 5591 6954.

**BEST MARKET EXPERIENCE** **Evergreen Lifestyle Centre** There's a great deli, restaurant, fashion and homewares stores and a garden centre and cafes amidst the foliage. Corner of Bundall and Ashmore Roads, Bundall. Call (07) 5531 7895 or visit [www.evergreengardencentre.com.au](http://www.evergreengardencentre.com.au).

**BEST CAFE STRIP** **Tedder Avenue** The place on Main Beach for an afternoon cocktail or coffee, packed with welcoming bars and cafes, a great bakery and Restaurant B, which foodies rate highly.

**BEST BUDGET SHOPPING** **Harbour Town** Said to be the best value, this massive discount outlet centre includes a David Jones warehouse and Mikasa, Villeroy & Boch and Sheridan outlets. Call (07) 5529 1734 or visit [www.harbourtown.com.au](http://www.harbourtown.com.au).

**BEST FISH & CHIPPER** **Oceans Sole Seafood** Skip over the border to Kingscliff and order up big at this cheerful chipper. The shop faces a sandy beach and a park with pine trees and picnic tables, so there are plenty of places for lunch, (02) 6674 5511.