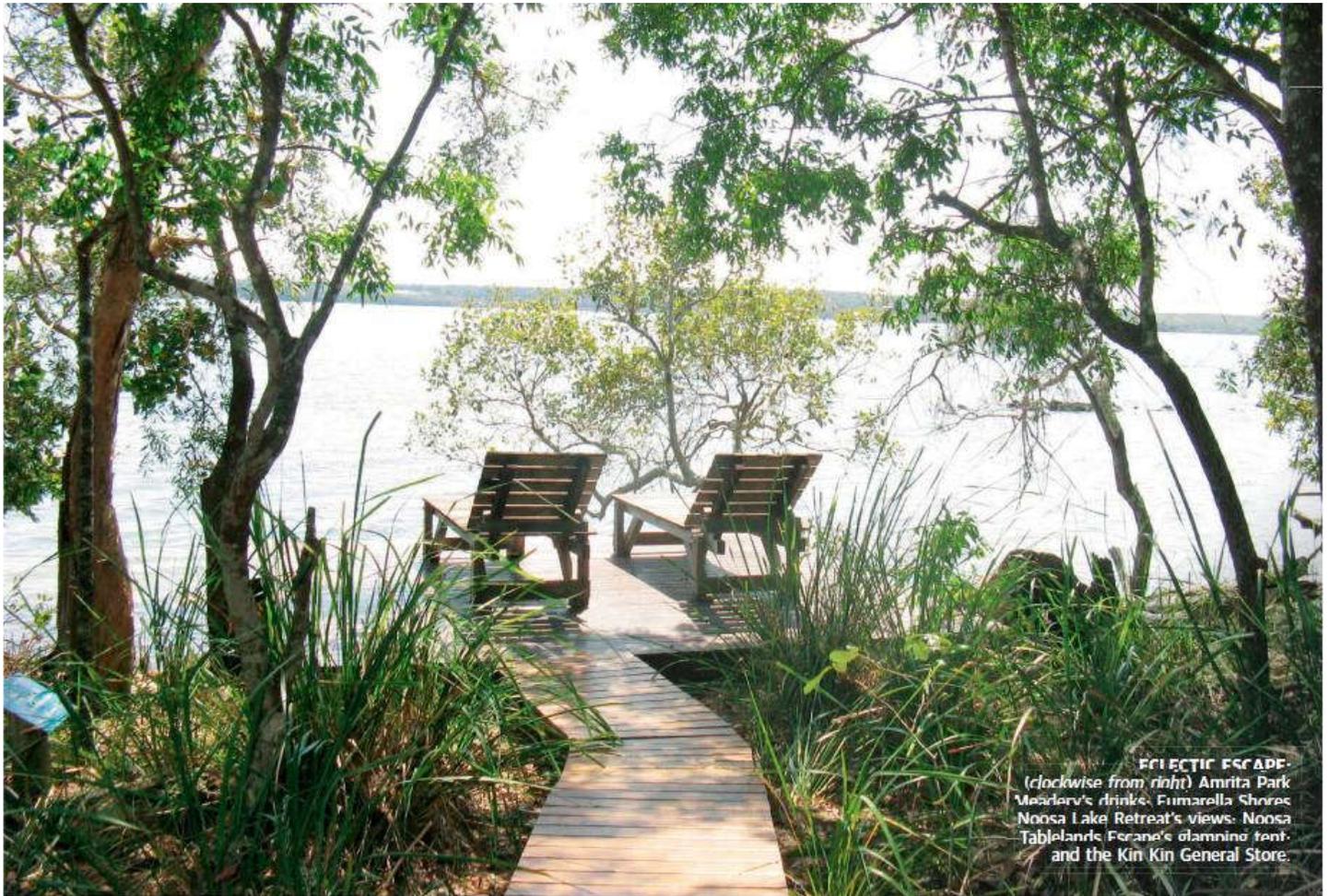


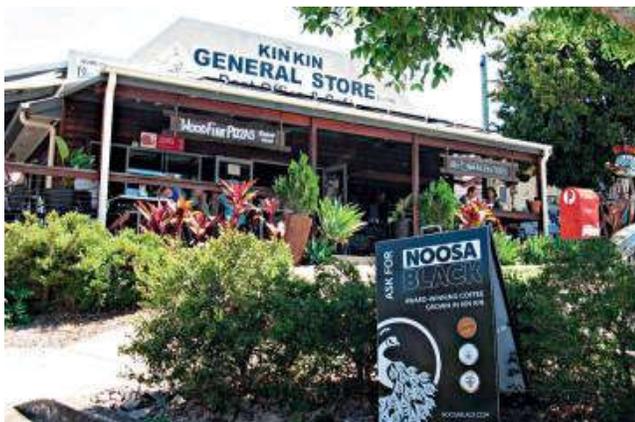
Waking to birdsong

MARCUS KUCZYNSKI



ECLECTIC ESCAPE:

(clockwise from right) Amrita Park Meadery's drinks; Eumarella Shores Noosa Lake Retreat's views; Noosa Tablelands Escape's glamping tent; and the Kin Kin General Store.



Hinterland glamping and lakeside cottages ... there's more to the Noosa region than the beach



Beach or bush? The question lingered uneasily as the warm glow of a sunshine-filled day by the shimmering sea beckoned.

It seemed almost a shame to eschew the rolling surf and golden sands of Noosa Heads and to head for the hills which stretch their verdant fingers as a series of ridges behind the holiday mecca.

But not too far from the madding crowd and high-end boutiques of Hastings St, there's a more tranquil side to this popular paradise and I was determined to discover what lies beyond the tourist shores.

Our "camp" for the night was calling us to experience the "wild" side of Noosa.

My childhood memories of camping involve matching up tent poles and ropes and unrolling a cumbersome canvas to provide a canopy to sleep under, and then cooking a lumpy stew in a tin pot over an open fire.

You can scrub all those labour-intensive chores at Noosa Tablelands Escape, a luxury glamping experience exclusively for couples, where the only common thread with my childhood past is the canvas tent.

Situated at the end of a winding bush track 300m above the charming hinterland village of Cooran and only half an hour from Noosa Heads, the final stretch to reach our pavilion in the clouds is down a rocky track accessible only by our hosts' all-terrain vehicle or a four-wheel-drive.

First impressions count, and they certainly don't disappoint as my wife and I reach the clearing where our eco tent clings to a rocky spur with a priceless front-row seat to an incredible valley vista beyond. But the surprises don't end there. Enter the spacious, high-pitched tent where a kingsize bed with fluffy pillows, comfy robes and slippers opens on to a private deck, allowing you to wake up to the amazing view without leaving your bed.

Next to the marquee is an ensuite bathroom and kitchenette, as well as a fourburner gas barbecue to cook your evening meal. Planning to travel light? No worries. Hosts Wayne and Tracie can provide a selfcook barbecue dinner pack for a little extra if you pre-order. A continental breakfast pack is complimentary.

As the afternoon passes, the changing colours and shadows dance across the series of peaks on the horizon and birds soar effortlessly with the breezes. Just enough time to go for a bushwalk before dinner. Noosa Tablelands Escape is almost completely surrounded by Woondum National Park and is on the extensive Noosa Trail Network which winds through the hinterland and caters for hiking, mountain-bike riding and horse riding.

After dinner, the night-life starts. Perfect for bringing out a torch and seeking echidnas, wallabies, fruit bats and other wildlife. This is as close you can get to nature without compromising on homely comforts.

The next morning, we wake at sunrise to a heavenly view of wisps of mist cloaking the valley below. It's a fresh day to explore some of the hinterland's villages.

Nearby Cooran is a quirky collection of arts and craft shops, perched on the main northern rail line. We drop in to Vintage Junction, an organic coffee shop nestled among vintage and eclectic collectables, upcycled furniture and other decorative knick-knacks. It was a little early in the day, but if you time your visit right, just up the street you can sit down to a craft beer at the rustic-style Bonsai Brewhouse.

If you want to imbibe in something a little more unusual, on the road to Kin Kin you can't go past the Amrita Park Meadery.

Mead maker Andy comes from a family with a long history of beekeeping and mead brewing and picked up some valuable tips from his 98-year-old grandfather before he passed away recently.

Along with partner Nicola, a qualified chef, the couple are reviving the ancient craft of making this honey-based alcoholic beverage, while adding a unique local flavour with fresh fruit and spices grown in the Noosa hinterland.

Drop in on a Saturday and you can taste test some of their ever-changing blends, including one infused with the exotic jaboticaba berry, passionfruit or, my favourite, citrus and spice.

Nicola says Amrita Park is Queensland's first meadery and adds the liquid ambrosia is starting to take off in Australia.

There are two good options to stop for lunch up the road in Kin Kin: at the historic Country Life Hotel, or the Kin Kin General Store and post office, which also incorporates the Black Ant Gourmet cafe.

The Black Ant has built up a well-earned reputation as a catering business and eatery using local ingredients that have been farmed and sourced ethically. The friendly welcome and generous menu always seems to attract a hungry crowd.

Our second night's stay is another world away at Eumarella Shores Noosa Lake Retreat, perched on Lake Weyba.

Nestled in a gazetted nature refuge surrounded by native wallum vegetation, this family owned environmentally conscious getaway is just 15 minutes from Noosaville and features a cluster of rustic cottages and lakehouses, many with water views.

Our home for the night is Tree Tops cottage, boasting a huge veranda overlooking the gently lapping waters of the lake through a leafy canopy, and with its own private jetty.

Established originally as an artists' and writers' retreat, Eumarella Shores retains its peaceful setting and is a haven for many bird species, sugar gliders, bandicoots and kangaroos.

Several bush trails meander through the 40ha property and beyond, or you can take one of the retreat's canoes out on the shallow waters.

Alternatively, you can relax in the cottage's ensuite bathtub with a window view of the lake.

The lure of dining out takes us to Noosaville and the Thomas Corner Eatery, boasting an enviable location on the corner of Gympie Tce and Thomas St with views of the Noosa River.

The atmosphere here is modern and casual, with the option of dining indoors or relaxing on the breezy deck.

Chef David Rayner has been here for almost a decade and says his philosophy is to keep the food local and simple without compromising on quality.

As part of keeping the food always fresh, David changes the menu every month to showcase the region's seasonal produce.

He had just taken delivery of a truckload of local figs the night we visited, so a special treat for starters was a serve of separated figs with feta and broadbeans in a fig balsamic reduction. It whetted our tastebuds for more.

I was more than satisfied with my main course choice of Coral Coast barramundi, with broccolini, chilli, ginger and miso dressing, while my wife proclaimed the spiced Kingaroy pork chops, with rhubarb and pickled turnip salad and an apple and ginger puree a winner.

Our selection for dessert was the lemon and pine nut slice with clotted-cream ice cream and raspberries, a delightfully cool and tangy conclusion to our cascade of flavours.

Leaving the bright lights of Noosaville, we return with our bellies full to the lakeside tranquillity of Eumarella Shores. Confirming we are on the right track, as we follow the trail to our cottage we are greeted by a paddock full of grazing kangaroos in our car's headlights.

The end to just another day in the land of contrasts that is Noosa Shire.

The writer was a guest of the operators

BOOK IT NOW

NOOSA TABLELANDS ESCAPE

560 Tablelands Rd, Cooran From \$225 per night Ph 0407 177 964

noosatablelandsecape.com

EUMARELLA SHORES NOOSA LAKE RETREAT

251 Eumarella Rd, Lake Weyba From \$310 per night (2 nights min) Ph 5449 1738

eumarellashores.com.au

Drive: noosacountrydrive.com.au **More info:** visitnoosa.com.au