LOVED TO DEATH

Byron Bay: a place where homes sell in the multi-millions and the homeless live in makeshift camps. A place that sends a timely warning about what happens to community and the natural environment when wealth takes over.

BY *David Leser*

THERE IS no way to tell the story of a place as beautiful, fractious, mocked, stereotyped and beloved as Byron Bay, unless you admit, firstly, that everyone will have their own version.

You fell in love here, married here, gave birth here. You came to get well, or die here. Your life fell apart here. You wrote your book here, or spent years pretending to do so. You danced till dawn in the hills, learnt to surf on those perfectly formed point breaks. You kayaked with dolphins and sea turtles; you heard the migratory humpback whales singing their way up the coast, long after their parents and grandparents had been harpooned, their throats cut, then shipped to the slaughterhouse to be processed into margarine.

"You f...ing idiots," the protesters would rail even back in the early '60s. "Whales don't breathe through their throats."

You demonstrated here – on occasions without clothes on – against the ban on nude bathing, the destruction of rainforests, the fracking of the earth, McDonald's, Club Med, the war in Iraq, a consumption tax on tampons, vaccinations, 5G and now Netflix because, in the aftermath of all the destruction that had ravaged this once hard-boiled, working-class region, Byron had become a community of rebels, dreamers, misfits and back-to-nature paradigm busters who wanted to inhabit a more environmentally conscious and egalitarian world, and were prepared to take on multinationals and governments to protect that.

In the last 18 months we have heard a lot about staggering property price increases and soaring rents, about swelling numbers of homeless; about the influx of Hollywood stars who came to make movies in a COVID-19-free country; about all the so-called "influencers" that Netflix hopes to promote to its 200 million subscribers, but very little – beyond easy clichés – about what has made Byron so distinctive.

"This is paradise here, you guys," Hollywood star Matt Damon reportedly told two locals recently. "You don't know what you've got."

Except those who live – or are being forced to leave – this emerald patch of northern NSW know exactly what they've got: a unique, vibrant community inhabiting one of the most biodiverse places on earth, where in recent times, fires, plague, closed borders, celebrity fascination and a world awash with money have combined to create a crisis of economic disparity, social dislocation, demographic upheaval and seething community resentment.

The same forces are at work throughout Australia and across the globe, but in the Byron Shire, with a permanent population of around 35,000 – a little more than the combined population of Bondi and Carlton – we see it in exaggerated form: a collision between what wealth can buy and what a community can withstand in order to still flourish.

"I've never seen anything like it," says Michael Murray, a buyer's agent who has lived in the area for more than 35 years. "People think I must be creaming it. No, it's not pleasant. I'm getting pipped at auctions. I'm getting gazumped. There's people from Melbourne or Sydney just throwing 100, 200 grand more at something and not even viewing it. I've got lots of clients but I'm not making deals because I'm just in the queue like everybody else. I find the whole thing distasteful and tawdry."

Here we are on Lighthouse Road, heading around the hairpin into Wategos Beach where, last year, Rip Curl co-founder Brian Singer paid $22 million for a house laying claim to the most easterly room on the Australian mainland. It was the highest price ever paid for a home on the NSW North Coast, trumping the $18.85 million spent on a sprawling colonial house in 2019 by Adam Gilchrist, co-founder of the F45 gym franchise in which

Byron Bay's natural beauty has been a drawcard for decades – but a tsunami of outside money is changing its DNA.

Above, from left: Nada Loiterton has lived in her car for three years; single mum Charlie Tide has moved 23 times in four years; author Melissa Lucashenko says ordinary people are now "fringe dwellers".

Hollywood actor Mark Wahlberg has a minority stake. Gilchrist's home sits across the road from the iconic Raes on Wategos guest house, now owned by Australian Community Media boss Antony Catalano. (It's a lovely spot for dinner but possibly not worth the $3000 someone recently offered a couple for their table reservation. The offer was declined.)

On we go from Marine Parade into Brownell Drive, where Murray points out five houses currently being torn down and turned into mega mansions. Excavators and bulldozers gouge the earth directly under the Cape Byron lighthouse. "The billionaires are kicking out the millionaires," Murray says. "That's why I say Cape Byron is not only a light on the hill, it's a cool temple for money lenders to hang out in. And that's the quandary we've got. Can we still maintain the vibe and the New Age sentiment of being a place of difference and uniqueness with all this money coming into town?"

We drive back through Jonson Street in the centre of Byron, past the Great Northern pub and neighbouring 51-room hotel which sold last month for $80 million to two Melbourne-based businessmen, on to Cheeky Monkey's – the bar once famous for its cheap beers and wet T-shirt competitions, snapped up in May this year by Justin Hemmes' Merivale group for $13 million; past the Byron at Byron resort, bought two years ago for $45 million by Dubai-based Syrian billionaire Ghassan Aboud; now up into the soft, green hills where Murray regales *Good Weekend* with more eye-watering purchases, including one house in Bangalow, purchased for $2.5 million in 2016, then off-loaded last year – after $1 million was spent on it – for $11 million.

We return to Byron via arguably the most expensive industrial land in the country where, in 2017, a 4800-square-metre vacant block of land was bought for $3.85 million, sold two years later for $6.82 million and sold again, last month, for $9.4 million. "Never in my wildest dreams did I think coming to Byron was going to be about making money," says businessman James Dods, who arrived from Sydney 42 years ago. "I came to live a lifestyle. But there's no doubt a lot of people are here now to make money. I was coming home from a surf recently and I thought, 'I'm gonna count Teslas,' and there were eight. I was like, 'F...aroochy, where do I live?' I find it sad that a lot of people who followed their hearts here are being submerged."

THIS IS what submergence looks like. You're Merrilee Leonard, an 80-year-old grandmother and filmmaker who's lived in the area for more than 20 years and, short of a miracle, will soon be homeless. That's because the rental property she's been in for the past six years has been sold to a family relocating from the city. Often, she says, she curls up foetal on the couch and weeps, because every time she inspects another property there's as many as 70 other applicants for the same place, for prices that have risen by nearly 30 per cent in the past 12 months.

"You think it's never going to happen to you," she says. "You're never going to get old, you're never going to die. That just happens to other people. So being homeless, well that wasn't going to happen to me, either."

You're Charlie Tide, a 28-year-old single mother who has worked in international aid and as a jeweller and event-hire entrepreneur for the past decade. During these past four years, Tide has moved 23 times as relationship breakdown, domestic violence and escalating rental prices pitchforked her into emergency Airbnbs, house sitting, subletting, couch surfing, caravans and national parks.

She's scared stiff that if she is labelled "homeless", child protection services will take her daughter away; so when she manages to, she writes to inform her community of what's happening, but also as a way to self-soothe: "We've been lucky enough to land a house-sit from a cherished friend, and here we have running water in the kitchen for the first time in two years!" she explains on her blog. "That's nearly half my daughter's life without proper amenities. If it was just me, I'd be home-free. I'd take my pack and I'd roam these lands, continuing to write my way through life and working on the projects that most called me. But I have a child to feed, a child to bathe, a child to keep happy and healthy with her whole family."

Tide is one of more than 2000 women who has joined the local Women's Village Collective, set up by Sama Balson in August last year to help grapple with the worst housing crisis in NSW outside of Sydney. Women are living in their cars, often with their children, renovating buses and trucks to sleep in, moving into caravans, bedding down in bushland, or down by the Brunswick River in makeshift encampments; driving up and down the highway searching for safe places to rest for the night, sending plaintive email requests to potential good samaritans, applying for community housing, for which the waiting list is up to 10 years; moving out of the area in droves, forming queues at soup kitchens, or trying to exist like Cassie Sheppard did last year, in a van on the side of a mountain with her young daughter, Matilda.

"My experience of what it's like to live in the Byron Shire is that it's a nightmare," Sheppard says bitterly, five years after moving into the area. "It's absolute shit. I have zero dollars in my savings account because it has all been spent on moving everywhere."

Like many of the women in these dire circumstances, Sheppard is in full-time employment, in her case with the marketing team at local energy company Enova. In other words, she can afford to rent, she just can't find a place that's vacant, affordable or both. It's a story replicated across the shire, with many businesses unable to find staff because there's nowhere for them to live.

Around a camp fire recently, *Good Weekend* listened to the stories of four women – older women and single mothers – forced into a *Nomadland*-like existence where soaring rents, a market flooded with Airbnb properties and a virtual absence of affordable long-term housing has rendered them part of the fastest growing cohort of homeless people in Australia today.

Nada Loiterton, 68, has been living in her car for the past three years: most recently a Ford Territory decked out with a custom-made latex mattress, solar-powered fridge, small single-burner gas cooker, pots and pans and a 15-litre water bottle. Tonight she will sleep in the council car park in Mullumbimby so she can cook dinner under lights.

Charlie Tide will return with her daughter to temporary accommodation which she may have to leave at short notice. "As mothers," she says, speaking for many, "we are the often under-represented, invisible threads of society: packing the lunches, reading the stories, holding space in the tantrums, losing sleep. We are so often the underpaid and scarcely resourced. And then, after all those years of raising children and grandchildren, if we didn't 'make it' as a career-driven success story, then our odds for homelessness can stay pretty rife."

There are scores of men in this situation, too, many of them sleeping rough under balconies and stairs, on disused railway platforms, in community parks and gardens, out in remote bushland, or in the sand dunes behind Belongil Beach where one young man's 16-year-old partner recently gave birth. This young father was also born in these dunes to parents who were born in these dunes: which makes three generations of dune dwellers living virtually shoulder to shoulder with multimillion-dollar properties perched on a rapidly eroding shoreline. (The couple and their infant were recently placed in emergency housing.)

"It used to be just blackfellas and a few poor whites who were fringe dwellers in Australia," says Bundjalung author Melissa Lucashenko. "Now ordinary people are the fringe dwellers in what used to be thriving Australian communities."

> "A new industry will spring up, where you can import a few dreadlocked hippies for your barbecue."

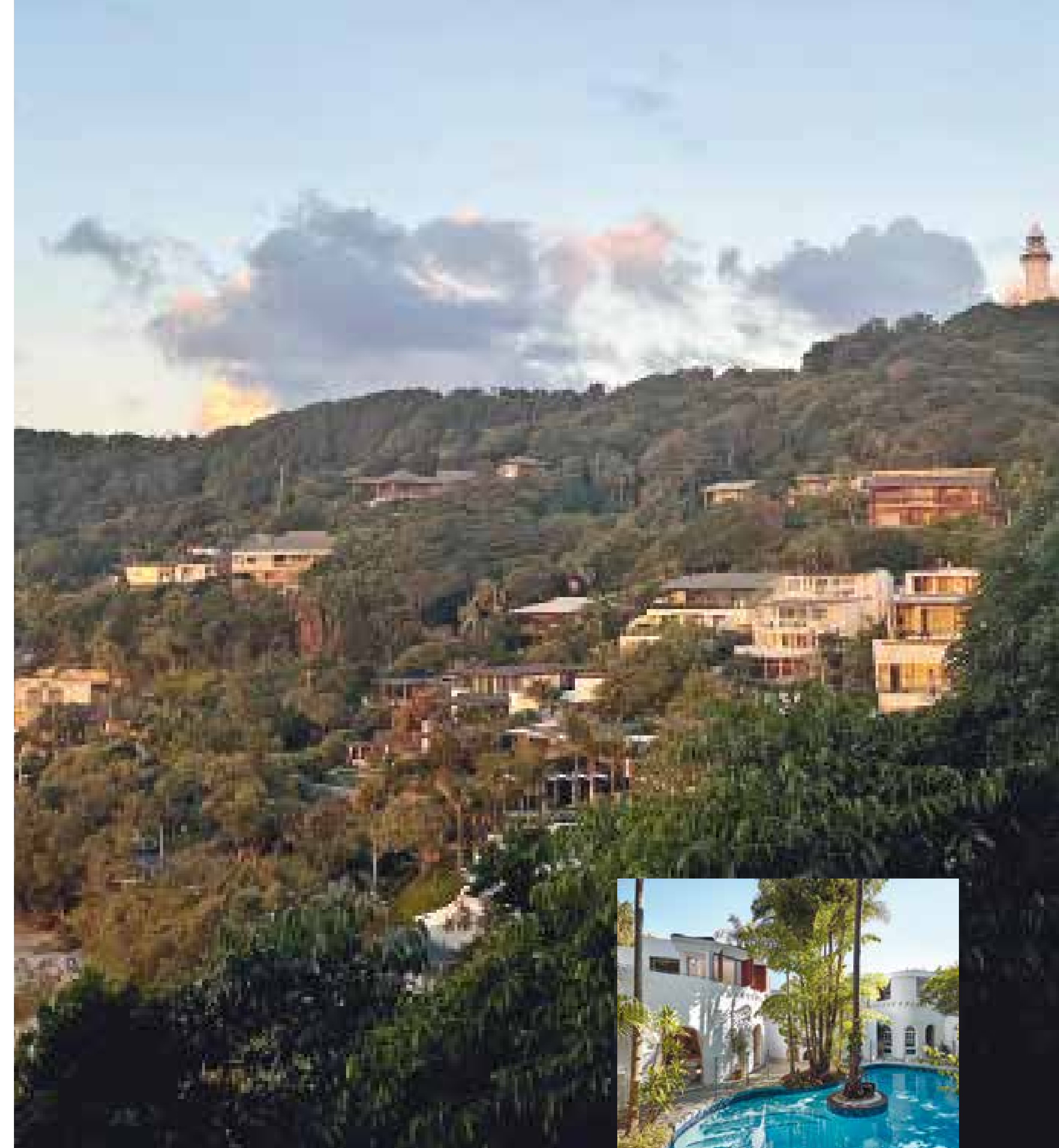
In a blistering opening-night address at the Sydney Writers' Festival in April, Lucashenko voiced what tens of thousands of people across Australia are experiencing as a result of the boom in property and rental prices and chronic shortage of long-term housing. "There's no room at the inn, folks," she said. "The inn has been negatively geared, and then listed on Airbnb. I don't think it's any secret that homelessness has hit country NSW like a freight train. If you wanna believe this is a classless society, try being a worker and renting a house in the [NSW] Northern Rivers. There's nurses living in tents, and families of five sleeping in cars."

Speaking to *Good Weekend* in a Mullumbimby pub, Lucashenko can barely disguise her fury – and heartache – at being a Bundjalung woman and not being able to afford to live on her traditional land. "When I went to Main Beach this morning, I felt physically ill," she says. "And that was because my 'brother', who lived in Byron for decades, is dead at 57 of hep C and in his place now there are parking meters where I need to pay to spend an hour on Bundjalung land.

"I've got a Miles Franklin Award [Australia's most prestigious literary prize] and a Walkley [award] and I still can't live where I did in the early 2000s. It's not just about me, it's about what's the bloke who grows up here and leaves school in grade 9 or 10 going to do? If he doesn't become a tradie, he's going to be alienated from his home and community, whether he's black, white or brindle.

"It's not sustainable. If people can't develop roots in a community and live there for at least several generations, who's going to look after the place? That's the basic question. Is the next influx of even richer bloody property investors going to look after the place? I don't think so."

OPENING PAGES: GETTY IMAGES. THESE PAGES: DAVID LESER; RENEE NOWYTARGER; GETTY IMAGES; HANNAH LESER



Mention to Lucashenko that there's a house at Wategos Beach which the owners have apparently left empty for the past 16 years, and she replies, "You see, if I was homeless and knew that I'd just break into the c... and live there until they kicked me out. It's insane. It's wrong. It's morally repugnant. I'd be busting down the bloody door and smashing in the windows and using the place."

Maybe we shouldn't mention the name of the street then, I suggest? "Maybe you should," she laughs scornfully. "And you can quote me on that. Draw a map."

What's going to happen, I ask, to the characters who made this shire so diverse and have been forced out of the area? "A new industry will spring up," she says, "a new gig industry where you can import a few dreadlocked hippies for your barbecue."

Clockwise, from above main: ultra-expensive properties overlooking Wategos Beach; luxury surroundings at Raes on Wategos guest house; the Beach Hotel sold in 2019 for $100 million; buyer's agent Michael Murray finds the housing mania "tawdry".

THE FIRST time I visited Byron Bay was in 1973, the same year thousands of people flocked to the NSW North Coast to attend the Aquarius Festival in Nimbin. Many of them saw what was here and never left. Alienated by the values of materialism, appalled by the wanton destruction of the rainforests, spurred on by the American protest movement of the 1960s, they moved into hamlets and towns like Rosebank, Federal, Eureka, Mullumbimby, Goonengerry, Billinudgel and Main Arm, and began Australia's first experiment in countercultural living.

In place of the cedar cutters, sand miners, graziers, whalers and, particularly, the abattoir workers who had made Byron stink of blood and guts, they started forming "intentional communities", growing their own food, performing their own home births, building rooms without walls and cabins constructed from rammed earth and recycled timber. They installed solar power, organised "Save the Rainforest" campaigns, set up farmers' markets, wildlife corridors and worm-farm waste systems. They put in all the back-to-nature simplicity trends that would one day inspire late-20th-century Greens politics in Australia before then entering mainstream thinking.

It was here, as a 17-year-old, that I first felt the stirrings of connection to nature: the soft, white curve of the shoreline, the moonlit points, the sea thick with sunlight, the tiptoeing bush turkeys and whip birds at dawn.

I recall one evening sitting on a balcony with friends at Wategos Beach, watching the sun slide into the Nightcap Range. Wategos then was mainly a banana plantation with a few fibro shacks. There were hang-gliders, brahminy kites and white-breasted sea eagles soaring and feinting above the lighthouse, four board riders taking it in turns for the last wave of the day, and dolphins leaping out of the sea like gambolling children. As night fell, the light could be seen all the way north to Brisbane and as far south as Yamba, swooping through bedrooms, guiding fishermen through snapper reefs, bathing and anchoring all those who felt drawn to the place where Australia first meets the sun.

"I'm going to live here one day," I told myself – and 28 years later, at the age of 45, I did just that. I came with my family for a 12-month sabbatical that turned into 12 years.

Until that point, I'd never really thought much about what a community was, let alone imagined I could be part of one. But then I saw it was the Telstra man taking his shoes off at the door. It was "George the Snakeman" driving around the Shire rescuing carpet and brown snakes from people's homes. It was the "Pink Ladies" working for kids in the Shire, pregnancy support groups, Day of the Dead ceremonies, full moon dances, local markets and street parades. It was ferals, buskers and fire twirlers; lawyers, real estate agents and footballers; yoga instructors, permaculturalists and builders. It was perfect strangers smiling at you, and it was the ride-on mower man saying between clamped teeth on a sunny day: "You know mate, the surf is the curse of the working man."

Not long before he died in 2005, I spoke to the then 83-year-old Eric Wright about his days in the old Norco butter factory where he'd begun working as a 14-year-old. During his 50 years with the company, he'd met and married the girl of his dreams, the lighthouse keeper's daughter, before going on to become the resident historian.

He loved Byron Bay, especially at the end of the day when he and his wife would walk up to the Cape for moonlit picnics and make love afterwards on the grassy slopes under the lighthouse. They were rarely alone. Other couples in the 1930s would also be drawn to the same rising ground, laying themselves out for love under the heavens.

"This was always a shagging place," he told me, his old sunburnt face creasing into a big, broad grin. "There was more sex here than you could poke a stick at."

There was also Paul Joseph, musician and anti-Vietnam War protester, who had helped organise the Aquarius Festival in 1973 before co-founding the first commune in the Northern Rivers. In the process, he and fellow organisers had sought the permission of traditional owners for the use of their land. "It was probably the first welcome to country for white people in the history of this place," he remarked before his death in 2015. (In 2001, Byron Bay became the site of the first national park in Australia created under an Indigenous Land Use Agreement between the Arakwal People and the NSW government.)

You could fill a book with Byron's characters, people like former Byron councillors Anudhi Wentworth and Rhonda Ellis, pioneers of the environment movement; stand up-comedian, writer, humour therapist and mother of five Mandy Nolan, possibly the funniest woman I've ever heard; as well as the notorious John Anderson, who once walked into council chambers dressed as Jesus Christ, a massive cross on his back and crown of thorns on his head to highlight how persecuted he felt by other councillors. He had arrived in Byron in the early 1980s, just as hundreds of

filmmakers, artists and writers were moving into the area, spurred on by the success of *Crocodile Dundee* and its creators, actor Paul Hogan and producer John Cornell, both of whom had settled in the region.

Anderson could see that for developers like Alan Bond and his cousin Eric, Byron was the next boom centre, so he decided to try and stop them, changing his name by deed poll to Fast Buck$ as a way of satirising Bond's methods and motives. He became the first person in the country to publicly challenge Bond's hero status. (Still one of the most divisive figures in the area, Fast Buck$ has been banned from council meetings and recently charged with breaching an apprehended violence order for alleged threatening behaviour towards Byron's deputy mayor, Sarah Ndiaye.)

Then there was Zenith Virago, much-loved celebrant and founder of the Natural Death Care Centre, whose pioneering work with the dying and bereaved had inspired her community with a more holistic approach to death. (She was recognised this year as Byron Shire Citizen of the Year.) There was also Howie Cooke, surfer, musician, writer, artist, one-time life drawing model and lifelong global anti-whaling campaigner who, for 45 years, had dedicated himself to protecting the oceans, taking on whaling fleets, running the gauntlet of warships, enduring death threats and physical attacks.

And in my own profession there was the brilliant and irreplaceable journalist and political historian Mungo MacCallum, still writing masterful, withering columns for Byron's independent newspaper, *The Echo*, almost up until his death late last year; as well as my friend and earliest journalistic mentor Craig McGregor, now in a local nursing home after suffering a stroke several years ago. Author of 23 books, cultural critic and walking encyclopedia on American R&B and jazz, McGregor first arrived in the 1960s with his wife Jane and their children after receiving an Australia Council grant to write his first novel. It was he who planted the first pandanus and casurinas on the beachfront at Wategos, and he who identified, not just that Byron Bay was the first urban cultural experiment in Australia outside the cities, but also that the genie was now out of the bottle.

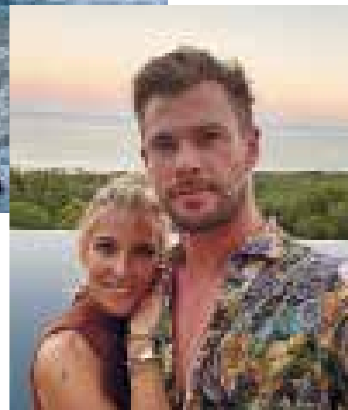
"I don't think you can put population caps on how far places will grow," he told me 20 years ago during an interview on community radio station Bay FM. "You can't just turn your back on all the hundreds of thousands of Australians who want to live and come to the coast just because we got here first. That is unforgivable."

What other shire of 35,000 people could claim to have a musician on every hill, live music seven nights a week in three venues – and that's just in Byron town itself – and could lure just about every big-name artist in the world because of an internationally renowned blues festival that had started in a disused piggery?

In the space of a few years I managed to see just about every dream act on my bucket list: James Brown, Jackson Browne, Bo Diddley, B.B. King, Taj Mahal, Joan Armatrading, Midnight Oil, Emmylou Harris, Lucinda Williams, Tony Joe White, The Blind Boys of Alabama, Paul Simon, Robert Plant, Bob Dylan… the list was endless, as were the stories that accompanied them. (On one of his visits, Bob Dylan spent most of his time riding a bicycle through the rainforest at the Byron at Byron resort, a cap pulled low over his head to preserve his anonymity.)

Then there was the Byron Writers' Festival – started 25 years ago next month by Chris Hanley, possibly the most erudite real estate agent in the country – where Australia's leading authors, publishers and readers have gathered under canvas to celebrate, and contest, a world of stories and ideas: Malcolm Fraser being grilled by Kerry O'Brien; Thea Astley reading one of her exquisite short stories only weeks before passing away; Paul Kelly unpacking the art of songwriting; Andrew Denton miming a song when he was actually meant to be singing it.

Too many to name here, but all this alongside the scores of writers, musicians, artists, filmmakers, fashion designers, wedding planners, organic farmers, alternative health therapists, hipster start-ups and entrepreneurs who had chosen to base themselves here, and, in the process, transform Byron into an employment hub for the entire region: Byron synthetic-chemical-free food, Byron eco-friendly botanical lipstick, Byron skin care products made from the cell juice of plants, Byron hemp and bamboo fashion, Byron jewellery, hats, shoes and denim; Byron tea, coffee, seeds and activated nuts, Byron zero-emission coconut soy candles, even a made in Byron "fake genuine Russian choir" known as Dustyesky. (With lawyer and independent mayoral candidate Mark Swivel as MC, they recently performed to a sell-out crowd at the Sydney Opera House.)



Influencers like Elyse Knowles (below) and actors Elsa Pataky and Chris Hemsworth (right) took Byron's name and stunning scenery (above) global.

As Richard Florida, the American urban studies theorist and bestselling author, once said: "Beneath the surface, unnoticed by many, an even deeper force [is] at work – the rise of creativity as a fundamental economic driver and the rise of a new social class, the Creative Class."

BENEATH THE surface there are also other forces at work in Byron Bay. Sexual and domestic violence are far more common than reported. Substance abuse, particularly cocaine, is rampant. People have vanished without trace, as was the case with Belgian backpacker Theo Hayez in 2019. There are numerous instances of women being raped and beaten, homes being trashed, bushland being despoiled, turf wars erupting in the surf, and all this while crippling housing insecurity causes an alarming escalation in mental-health issues.

"In my whole professional life of 40 years I have never seen so much distress and so many people looking for help," says Greg McHale, a local psychotherapist. Adds psychologist Jane Enter: "I have a six-month waiting list. There is an existential angst about people's survival at every level."

HANNAH LESER; @ELSAPATAKYCONFIDENTIAL/INSTAGRAM; @ELYSE.KNOWLES/INSTAGRAM

This intensifies the snarling discourse that often masquerades as political debate here, and helps explain why there is barely a soul in Byron who can't quote sections of the building code, or explain the way different zoning regulations should apply to alleviate the housing crisis. They can enlighten you until your head hurts about all the unapproved dwellings that don't meet compliance, and the subdivisions that should – or should never – have been approved. They can talk long into the night about the lack of transparency with development creep, the absence of any significant land releases, the growing fire risks in the hinterland, the proposed commercial expansions that will destroy ancient ecosystems, the roads that have already trampled wetlands, as well as everything you ever wanted to know – or not know – about waste management.

They can riff on the merits of a visitor bed tax, emergency housing, social housing, affordable housing, off-market housing and rent-to-own models, as well as the need for tiny homes, satellite hamlets, pavilion houses, community land trusts and why, more generally, the current models for rental accommodation are a national disgrace.

They can also tell you when paradise first started going to hell. It was in 1990 when John Cornell paid $9 million for the pub opposite the main beach and began ushering in a new era of tourism. (The Beach Hotel was sold two years ago for $100 million, a record price for a pub in Australia.) It was in 1995 when the new terminal was completed at nearby Ballina Airport, increasing arrivals from all over the country and making it possible for celebrities to land their private jets. It was in 1998 when the NSW Labor government amended the Environment, Planning and Assessment Act, effectively privatising development certifications and stripping local councils of their powers to self-determine.

It was in 2012 when the innovations of Airbnb began impacting disastrously on long-term rental supply and affordability, hollowing out streets and neighbourhoods. It was in 2015 when upgrades to the Pacific Highway were completed, bringing day trippers from Queensland and, in the process, creating traffic snarls to rival a big city's. It was in 2017 when Australian actor Chris Hemsworth began building his sprawling compound – replete with rooftop infinity pool – turning Byron into a new Hollywood, causing median house prices to further soar. The so-called "Hemsworth effect".

"That's absolute nonsense," says Oliver Dunne, whose groundbreaking term as mayor of Byron Shire in the late 1980s established building height ceilings, wetland protection and a prohibition on major land subdivisions. "The Reserve Bank affects the cost of money and has far more impact on housing supply and availability than the goings on of a film star."

As does the fact that after the country's borders closed in March last year. there was a rush to the regions, with cashed-up Australians imagining new lifestyles – and investment opportunities – in a COVID-devastated world. Byron was hardly alone, it was just – for many – the most attractive option.

SO THE perfect storm was already brewing when Netflix announced in April this year that it would be coming to town to make its first Australian reality TV series, *Byron Baes*, a "docu-soap" purporting to follow "hot Instagrammers living their best lives".

"This is our love letter to Byron Bay," the global streaming giant gushed, drawing stylistic parallels to the American franchise *The Real Housewives* and an equal and opposite scathing response from the community.

"Wow, a love letter that Byron doesn't actually want," Mandy Nolan, now a federal Greens candidate, tells *Good Weekend*. "In domestic violence terms that's called stalking. I don't want your love letter. You're creepy and abusive. Get out." Byron Shire Council told Netflix the same thing: relocate to a community that wants you. Local businesses – even those with a strong social media presence – boycotted Eureka Productions, the company chosen by Netflix to produce the series. Some members of the cast resigned, claiming to have been misled by the show's stated intentions.

"This is outsiders coming into a community and imposing their view of a community and taking that perception and putting it on a massive global platform," says local filmmaker Tess Hall, who launched an online petition that drew almost 10,000 signatures. "As a community, Byron is already fighting to keep its social fabric together … and this is going to cost the community massively by exacerbating issues that have been put into hyper-drive by COVID and the rapidly shifting demographics of the region. It is the death knell on the community. I don't think social services working on the frontline are going to be able to cope with the ramifications of a series like this going out bearing the name Byron in its title."

To make matters worse, the Arakwal Corporation, representing the traditional Bundjalung owners of the land, accused Netflix and Eureka Productions of failing to consult, either before the production was announced or prior to the filming of the first season. They also rejected the offer of a donation from Netflix. (The series is still going ahead, with Netflix claiming it has consulted with the local community and will continue to do so, particularly with the traditional owners.)

"How do you welcome something that's just so against our community values here and our cultural values?" asks Delta Kay, an Arakwal Bumberin Bundjalung woman and descendent of the three sisters who successfully lodged a native title claim over coastal land stretching from Byron Bay to Broken Head. "It doesn't sit well with our elders' vision of caring for country does it?"

Above: Netflix's plans hit opposition from locals wishing to protect Byron's social fabric, and from its traditional owners.

LONG BEFORE British seaman Captain James Cook sailed up the east coast of Australia in 1770 and named the jutting promontory Cape Byron, this was home to the Arakwal people of the Bundjalung nation. Byron Bay was Cavanbah, the "meeting place" where the neighbouring clans and people of the Bundjalung nation had been gathering for thousands of years. Julian Rocks, the twin granite outcrops off the Cape, was the resting place for the creator Nguthungulli. Mount Warning was Wollumbin or "cloud catcher", sacred men's mountain. (It was also the oldest link to the original supercontinent known as Gondwanaland.) All through the area were venerated places to birth, hunt, fish, dance, practise bush medicine, tell stories of the Dreaming and connect to nature. Everything grew here on the rich volcanic soil. The rainforests teemed with thousand-year-old cedar trees. The waters swarmed with fish. The skies were thick with birds and butterflies.

And then came the dispossession and massacres, along with the forced separation of children from their families. Wave after wave of white settler followed, from 19th-century tree feller to new-century tree-changer, and still the Arakwal people are trying to reclaim not just their past, their future, too.

"Guess how many houses the Byron Shire houses of my people, the native title holders of this area?" Delta Kay asks. "There's hundreds of Arakwal… We're the first people here and we've always struggled with housing. We're the ones who create all this protection along the beaches so that everyone can enjoy the beauty here. How many houses do you think we have here? Five."

And that, according to Melissa Lucashenko, is the result of a system built on brutality. "What one of our elders, Aunty Mary Graham, says is that the worst thing that happened [with European settlement] was not that they killed us, and not that they took the children, and not that they stole the land, but they brought this terrible idea that life is about survival… as opposed to the civilised way of living and actually seeing each other as fellow humans living co-operatively and sustainably.

"What non-Aboriginal people do is they import their sense of homelessness wherever they go [because] at the core of Australian culture is two things. There's a convict colony and the sense of not belonging. When the hippies arrived in the 1970s, a lot of them got along with Aboriginal people because their values were a little bit closer to Aboriginal values… but the good that the counterculture did – and could have continued to do – has been swept away by the tsunami of capitalism."

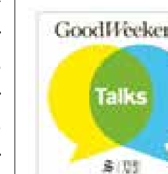
In 2004, Jan Barham became the first popularly elected Greens mayor in Australia, serving two terms before being elected to the NSW Legislative Council in 2011. During that time, together with her friend and colleague Ian Cohen, she grew accustomed to being named everything from "eco-terrorist" to, more recently, "Gangrene" and "Green Taliban".

"You should have heard what they used to call me in parliament," she says now. " 'Oh, here she goes again, going on about Byron.' 'Bunch of crazies,' they'd all yell, and tease me when I was talking up Byron. I used to say, 'Okay, then, you don't have to come because I think I saw you up there last holidays.' The ones who knocked us… this was their first place of choice."

And therein lies the problem. How do you protect the beauty and sustainability of a place that is so widely loved? How do you hold a generous, diverse community together when big money is forcing so many out? How do you advocate for the integrity of a region without unintentionally marketing it to the world? How do you not kill the goose that laid the golden egg?

Byron Bay is, arguably, Australia's advance warning signal for communities with limited resources facing an onslaught from every direction. There is no rule book for this. ■

PODCAST



Hear writer David Leser and his photographer daughter Hannah discuss their former home town of Byron Bay on *Good Weekend Talks*. Just scan the QR code here.