



REPORT

COFFS COAST & COUNTRY CAPER

MONDAY 11 – FRIDAY 15 MARCH 2024



DAY ONE: Full coach with driver Malcolm and a beautiful day, departing Penhurst prior to 7.30 am. Using the wonderful NorthConnex, it was a routine trip to our morning tea spot at Mooney Mooney on the Hawkesbury River. There's a large carparking area here, but it's a popular boat ramp so space for the coach was limited. Further along the highway, our next venue, Hunter Region Botanic Gardens at Heatherbrae, phoned Elizabeth to say their water had accidentally been



turned off which meant that their toilets were unavailable! So, a further comfort stop was required at Hungry Jacks before our 11 am arrival at the gardens. An hour to wander there – with the waterfall and waterlilies stealing the show. We found the mozzies really bothersome and were pleased to escape to the gazebo-style area where a light lunch was provided. By this time, the water was back on. A further comfort/coffee stop at the service centre on the outskirts of Port Macquarie before heading through heavy traffic to our accommodation for the four nights at the **Opal Cove Resort** on the northern side of Coffs Harbour at Korora (across the road, part of

the 14 km Coffs Harbour Bypass was under construction). Being an older building (1989), the hotel's foyer area and guest rooms (most with balconies) were particularly spacious, with the added bonus of friendly staff and delicious pre-ordered dinners every evening in their ground floor Horizons Restaurant. After a fine, hot day, it rained quite heavily.

DAY TWO: Weather fine and a full buffet breakfast in the resort before heading to – you guessed it – Australia's first Big Thing, the iconic 13-metre long **Big Banana** designed by engineer Alan Chapman and built by Alan Harvey, opening on 22 December 1964. A tour here first, strolling through the lower half of the banana plantation (Cavendish & Lady Fingers grown) followed by an informative presentation in the packing shed plus memorabilia and interactive displays. Plenty of time to buy a coffee or souvenir afterwards.



Hot and humid during the time at the next venue – the **Coffs Coast Wildlife Sanctuary** - but it was well worth it! According to their website: Formerly known as Dolphin Marine Conservation Park, the sanctuary was established in 1970 as a rescue and rehabilitation centre for sick and injured marine animals and is where they continue to rescue, rehabilitate and release hundreds of sea turtles every year. It's the only place in Australia where you can experience marine mammals up so close including Little Blue Penguins, Bottle-nosed Dolphins, endangered Australian Sea Lions, Freshwater Turtles and local Reef Fish. We watched the antics of little blue penguins, then the seals. A little later, a couple of us were extremely fortunate to see the little penguins



scoffing a feed of pilchards whilst the dolphins put on a show for everybody else in the marine lagoon. Fish feeding was next, turtles and stingrays etc on display. Love this amazing picture of one inquisitive stingray taken by Chris Warner. We cooled off somewhat during our light lunch in the building housing their fossil collection. Great place and highly recommended.

Back into town to the newly-opened (Sept 2023) **Yarrila Arts and Museum** for a talk by and a wander with guide Fiona, and also view the beautiful children's library attached. Yarrila is a Gumbaynggirr word meaning to brighten or illuminate. Apart from their regular displays, a number of touring exhibitions are hosted here during the year and *Sea Monsters – Prehistoric Ocean Predators* was on and looked great, although we didn't actually enter this section.

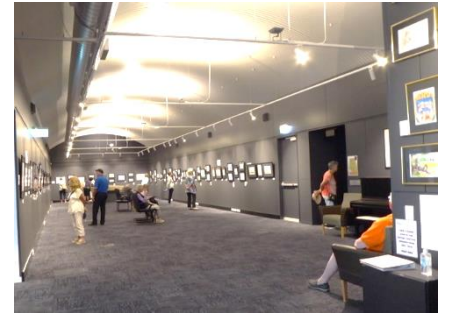


At 3 pm, it took a few minutes to reach the **Coffs Harbour Marina**, as it wasn't possible to access the **Historic Jetty** which had been our main focus. However, there were views of it from the marina with its cafés and restaurants (the ice-creams were popular), and we were free to wander the robust northern breakwall to Muttonbird Island - quite the contrast with breaking waves on one side and fishing boats/other craft tranquilly moored on the other. Eventually and despite the ice-creams, the heat got the better of us and it was back to the resort's Happy Hour and a welcome cool drink, lovely dinner and Elizabeth had organised a games night of "horse-racing" afterwards.

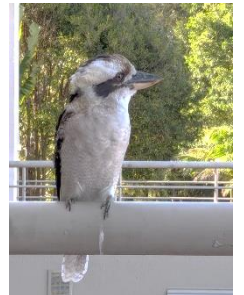
DAY THREE: A fine day and a very quick drive just around the corner to the family-run **Carobana Confectionery** for a talk by daughter, Wendy, accompanied by freshly-made coffee for all. Carob trees cannot be grown in the Coffs area as they need a dry climate, so the carob is imported from interstate where there are thriving plantations in SA, WA, VIC and QLD. From the Carobana info: *The pods are harvested when brown, broken open and seeds removed (which are used for other purposes). The empty pods are then washed and their roasting determines the final colour – light, medium or dark. Being milled, like wheat, makes it a very fine brown powder which is naturally sweet. This powder can be used the same as cocoa and less sugar is needed.* There is no caffeine which can be a bonus for many people. We found their carob confectionery super tasty and enjoyed watching the Rocky Road and Peanut Brittle being made by Wendy's father and brother. There was a shop adjoining which offered an extensive range to purchase. A quick dash back to the hotel to leave our carob treats in the coolness of our rooms.



Driving through CH's light industrial area we drove up City Hill Drive and parked outside the **National Cartoon Gallery @ The Bunker**, Australia's only cartoon gallery. We were greeted by Susie and Steve and, after a brief talk, we were left to wander the beautifully renovated two-level WWII bunker and chuckle at the hundreds of wall-mounted cartoons. We plied Steve with questions and enjoyed the ambience of the bunker originally built (in 1943) to house vital communication equipment and personnel to be kept safe from attack during the war. *Near the airfield, it was then used by the Civil Aviation Authority until 1980, but gradually fell into disrepair. Rotarian, John Champion, saved the building by proposing that it be redeveloped into a permanent home for an ever-growing cartoon collection, and the gallery now hosts changing exhibitions, cartooning workshops and other special events including the annual Rotary Cartoon Awards.* A tasty quiche lunch was held in their very pleasant café on the second level. A unique place to visit and definitely worth seeing. (Sadly, shortly after we left, Susie and Steve closed their doors until at least the end of June, hoping for further funding.)

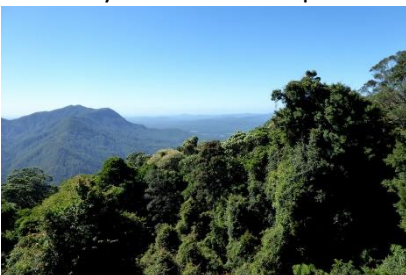


Off to Woolgoolga, 25 minutes north, for a talk and generous tastings at the modern **Critters Distillery** located in the town's light industrial area. What a treat this was – everyone loved it – with owner Chris (originally with a civil engineering/science degree) giving the talk with his offsider, Kamil, pouring generous samples of their award-winning Vodka and Gin into beautifully polished glasses. Later, there was also a taste of their fabulous Limoncello and Coffee Liquor. Everything here is made from scratch and sustainably sourced, including the alcohol. We were able to purchase products on-site and we left there feeling quite jolly



accompanied by very warm tummies! Poor Malcolm had to miss out though. At our resort, there was plenty of time for a swim/spa or relaxing on the expansive terrace with drinks before dinner – a lone kookaburra keeping a “eagle” eye on us, making sure we didn't over-imbibe.

DAY FOUR: Another fine day and departure at 8.30 am. Heading south, it took half an hour to get through town! The currently being constructed bi-pass is sorely needed! Near Urunga, we turned onto Waterfall Way Scenic Drive for a pretty trip of 40 km to Dorrigo. Very winding with roadwork delays, but generally a good road which finishes in Armidale, a total distance of 185 km. A couple of waterfalls along the way which were difficult to photograph as we were obviously not able to stop. Passed through the quaint town of Bellingen known for its cedar timber and dairy, but, due to its scenic area and location on the Bellinger River, these days is diversifying with health retreats, b & b's etc. More fertile pastoral land housing dairy cattle (Holstein/Friesian) and Brahman (that don't seem all that common these days), before turning right into **Dorrigo National Park and the Rainforest Centre**.



On arrival, there was a brief talk and there were several choices to keep us occupied for the next hour or two -

adjacent to the centre was the 70m Skywalk boasting extensive mountain and rainforest views, a couple of the shorter bushwalks, purchasing souvenirs from their fabulous shop or grabbing a coffee in their relaxed Canopy Café - great spot! Cool and breezy here, but not unpleasant and a relief from the humidity of the coast.



Two hours followed in pretty tree-lined **Sawtell**, a much sleepier town than Coffs, but still a lively spot offering great cafes (lunch at own expense today), pub/club, boutique shopping and the beach. We enjoyed the couple of hours free-time here.



Our last destination of the day was **Sealy Lookout**, about a ¼ hour drive from Sawtell. A narrow road and one close call with an oncoming vehicle driving too fast. Once up there, though, we had the area mostly to ourselves and took the short uncrowded walk on the 22 metre Forest Sky Pier to admire the magnificent views over Coffs Harbour and up and down the coastline. There are walking tracks through the rainforest, but there wasn't the time to venture on any of these. Decent toilets are also provided and a tiny café, but it was closed. The pier apparently attracts 100,000 visitors a year! Our group photo was taken here, then it was back to the resort to pack our bags and enjoy a drink before dinner.



DAY FIVE: A long day's drive ahead so an early breakfast and 7.15 am departure to Port Macquarie for a brief stop. Then the rain started, but fortunately it wouldn't affect the day. Another comfort stop in Bulahdelah before several minutes' drive, ending with a dirt road, to Bulahdelah Clydesdales on an 85-acre property, after the owners relocated from



just 14 acres on the Central Coast. Fortunately, the showers ceased allowing our hosts, Pat & Irene, to talk about their gorgeous two Clydesdales Jack and Dusty and more aloof stablemate Murphy the white donkey. Pat spent some time demonstrating the horses' capabilities, but it was a comfortable seated experience for us in their rusty old lean-to. Afterwards, we were encouraged to treat the animals with the supplied carrots – not that we needed much encouragement! Beautiful countryside here and this visit had been a great way to round off a fabulous trip.



On to Bulahdelah Bowlo where the lunch was great, but lacking hospitality. We left there at 3 pm, with a further comfort stop at Wyong. Due to rebuilding of the entire service centre, the two choices were the juice shop toilets or what looked like luxurious portaloos. One of our female members opted for the portaloos, but opened the door on a workman using the facility – she's not sure who got the biggest shock!

On our final leg, Elizabeth gave the answers to her quiz and drew the raffle's three prizes (proceeds \$140 to the RFDS) and Susan P, Richard S and Jenny S were the winners. The Lucky Seat prizes were given to Marilyn R and Chris P. The total number of km was 1392 and the Cleverest Person on the Coach guessing 1400 was Marina C. Running an hour late due to heavy traffic particularly around Maitland plus further heavy showers, we arrived in Peshurst at 7 pm.

A most enjoyable few days and a huge thank you must go to Elizabeth for organising the trip, to the staff at the Opal Cove Resort, and to Malcolm (McDermott Chartours) whose patience and skilful driving topped off the relaxing few days.



Thank you to Chris Warner, Jenny Scally and Elizabeth Northcott for their welcome photos. Some are included here but lots more are on our website.