

# NSW



## > TRAVEL TIPS

- **Getting there** Virgin Blue flies daily from Sydney to Port Macquarie and fares start at \$69 one way. Flights take 35 minutes. Phone 13 67 89. See [www.virginblue.com.au](http://www.virginblue.com.au).
- **Staying there** Virgin Blue and the Mercure Centro Port Macquarie offer special packages, through Blue Holidays, that include return flights plus three nights' accommodation from \$440 per person twin share ex-Sydney. Phone 13 15 16. Phone 1300 656565 or see [www.accorhotels.com.au](http://www.accorhotels.com.au).
- **More information** Let's Go Travel offers transport in and around the Port. Day tours from \$65. Phone 0407 667 524, or see [www.letsgotravel.com.au](http://www.letsgotravel.com.au). Also see [www.portmacquarieinfo.com.au](http://www.portmacquarieinfo.com.au) or phone 1300 303 155.



Worthy port of call ... (clockwise from top left) a view of Town Beach from Goal Point; a standard room at the Mercure Hotel Centro; Cassegrain Winery.

# Bloom town

**Winsor Dobbin** discovers that Port Macquarie is much more than just a stop on the way to Byron Bay.

From 1821 to 1832, Port Macquarie was a place of punishment, a convict penal settlement that was home to the worst of the worst "at constant hard labour".

Today the region that was once a place of fear and loathing is one of the fastest-growing holiday destinations in Australia.

Just over four hours' drive north of Sydney, Port Macquarie has been enjoying boom times recently, the region attracting more than 600,000 visitors last year. The usually sunny beaches are the main draw, for surfing, swimming or even camel riding, but there's a lot to do in and around town, as well as in the sleepy hinterland.

Virgin Blue recently launched daily flights from Sydney that take about 35 minutes, the first jets to fly into Port Macquarie's revamped airport.

With the recent opening of the 72-room Mercure Hotel Centro Port Macquarie – the first new-build hotel in the town for more than a decade – the town now offers premium accommodation.

Newcomers such as the Mercure and the All Seasons Ki-Ea furnished apartments are welcome additions to a town where rooms have been in older-style motels.

While the Mid North Coast has traditionally been something of a gastronomic desert, Port Macquarie has an increasingly cosmopolitan selection of restaurants and bars, and several

gourmet food producers. The North Coast Wine Trail comprises eight wineries, six in and around Port Macquarie, and Sherwood Estate just south of nearby Kempsey.

Regional pioneer Cassegrain is the flagship winery, using both local fruit and grapes from throughout the state.

The on-site Ca Marche restaurant serves serious food (think house-made ravioli of rabbit served in a forest mushroom and rabbit consomme) matched with serious wines (the Cassegrain Fromenteau chardonnay) in a casual atmosphere.

The Cassegrain cellar door, overlooking the vines and superb rose gardens, offers tastings and sales and also features a wide range of local produce – from nuts to olive oils – making it an ideal one-stop shop.

Restaurant Splash, overlooking the town green, is probably the current dining standout as the winner of several recent awards, young chef Stefan Hostettler producing exciting modern Australian cuisine.

Highlights here include chilli salt and Sichuan pepper squid with ponzu dipping sauce, and macadamia-crust lamb rump on roasted butternut pumpkin tartlets, with juniper berry jus. Outstanding. An excellent wine list features names such as Kilikanoon, Meerea Park and Majella, along with local offerings.

Other dining possibilities include Synergy, within the Mercure Hotel, which has a wide

range of choices for both starters and mains. The desserts here are sublime, and it is open for lunch, afternoon teas and dinners daily.

Bliss serves dishes with a South-East Asian influence (think nasi goreng ayam or a truly delicious crispy pork red curry), and offers a \$20 lunch menu that features a range of choices and a glass of wine or beer.

Locals are also enthusiastic about Fusion 7, the Stunned Mullet, overlooking Town Beach, and the Whalebone Wharf for seafood. Rainforest Cafe and Macquarie Seafoods' fish and chips also garner praise. New Spanish restaurant Mi Casa looks promising.

Local producers worth visiting include Ricardoes Tomatoes, where you can pick your own strawberries, buy a range of tomatoes and products made from both, as well as enjoying devonshire tea with home-made strawberry jam at the Cafe Red.

"City kids don't even know what a strawberry plant looks like, so they love the chance to pick their own fruit," says co-owner Anthony Sarkis, who says Ricardoes is a "see, touch and taste experience".

Innes Lake Winery, close to town, has a welcoming cellar door and is home to the very popular Little Fish Cafe. Guests can sip and slurp indoors, or on the terrace of grass, and canine visitors are welcome outside.

Other popular wineries include Longpoint Vineyard in Lake Cathie, which also produces an outstanding ginger beer and Bago Vineyards, home to a refreshing sparkling chambourcin and regular venue for jazz concerts.

The newly opened Little Brewing Company, which makes a pilsner, pale ale and witbier under the Wicked Elf label, opens for brewery tours on Saturdays.

The best of the region's food and wine is showcased at the Tastings at the Hastings Festival over the October long weekend.

There is a range of cruise possibilities. We enjoyed a two-hour morning tea cruise on the Port Macquarie canal system and Hastings River on board the comfortable Port Venture, which is moored at Clarence Street Wharf and offers a variety of cruise options.

We missed out on spotting dolphins but most cruises do locate them. The hinterland and rainforests can be explored by four-wheel-drive or quad bike, or from the air. Port Macquarie's seaplane scenic flights, which depart from the Hastings River in the heart of downtown, offer the chance to view the region from a range of perspectives. Twenty-minute flights start from \$90.

Wauchope, home of the ever-popular Timbertown and with a growing cafe culture, Comboyne, Kendall and Lorne are all attractive hinterland hamlets and the best local produce can be found on the fourth Saturday of each month at the Wauchope Showground. Look out for Lorne Valley macadamias, Vickers fudge and local cheeses from the Hastings Valley co-op.

Other leisure possibilities include trail riding through the Bellrowan Valley or cooking classes at the Company Farm, which grows the produce used by many leading Sydney restaurants, including Rockpool (fish) and Sailors Thai.

History buffs will enjoy visiting the 14-room Port Macquarie Historical Museum, one of the several museums in town, the convict-built St Thomas Church and the old graveyards on Horton Street.

The Alma Doepel, a square-rigged sailing ship built in 1903, is now open as a maritime museum.

Walkers can take the coastal track from downtown to the Tacking Point Lighthouse, built in 1879 and one of the oldest in the country, or the six-kilometre convict heritage walking trail. Other trails take in Ellenborough Falls, or you might enjoy the boardwalk at the Sea Acres Rainforest Centre.

Animal lovers should not miss visiting the world's only Koala Hospital, run by volunteers, which treats sick and injured koalas and is open to visitors all day. Feeding times at 8pm and 3pm are the best times to get a close-up look.

Port Macquarie is a glorious part of the world that even with growing tourism numbers remains largely unspoilt.

*The writer was a guest of Accor Hotels, Virgin Blue and Port Macquarie Tourism.*