

FROM MAIN: *Wedged between Burleigh Heads and Main Beach, the once industrial hub of Miami boasts a kilometre-long stretch of golden sand. Snack on artistic dishes in The Exhibitionist Bar at HOTA (Home Of The Arts) in Surfers Paradise.*



PHOTOGRAPHY: TOURISM AND EVENTS QUEENSLAND (HOTA); ANNA BANDINI (MAIN IMAGE)

SOLID GOLD

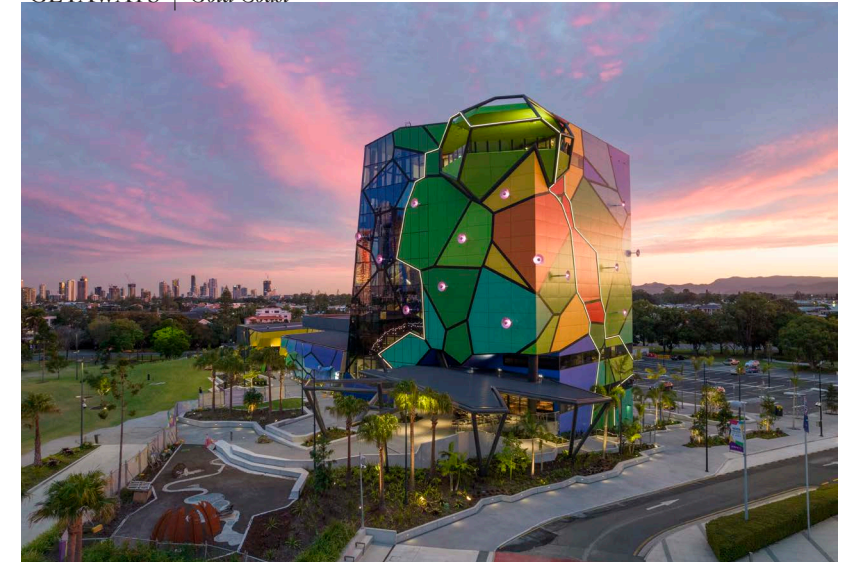
Amid a SEA of floating reefs, edible *ART* and lush rainforest *ESCAPES*, travellers to the Gold Coast today will *FIND* Queensland's *GLITTER* strip is all GROWN UP.

WORDS **ALEXIS BUXTON-COLLINS**

HOTA makes room for both high art and hedonism, mirroring a region whose reputation as an adult playground obscures a rich cultural scene full of artists as confident as any of the tanned bodies posing by the beach.



PHOTOGRAPHY: JOHN GOLLINGS
(ARTWORKS: WILLIAM ROBINSON'S
RAINFOREST, 1997 © WILLIAM
ROBINSON/PHILIP BACON GALLERIES)



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A visitor at HOTA admires William Robinson's *The Rainforest*, an ode to the Gold Coast hinterland's ancient landscape; Opened in 2021, eye-popping HOTA is a sprawling gallery displaying more than 4500 artworks.

A STIFF BREEZE RUFFLES MY HAIR as I cruise by ferry to one of Australia's most exciting new galleries, but the Derwent River is several thousand kilometres to the south. More than a decade after MONA upended travellers' perceptions of Hobart, another institution is hoping to do the same for the Gold Coast.

HOTA is unashamedly brash. A six-storey structure covered in geometric blocks of primary colour, it sits at the centre of a precinct with a rooftop bar called *The Exhibitionist*, an outdoor stage that just hosted a rave for 5000 people and a lake where visitors are encouraged to take a dip before perusing the artworks. An 'anything goes' vibe permeates the whole space, where 'don't run' seems to be the only rule that matters.

HOTA opened in 2021 and the name, short for Home of the Arts, is pronounced 'hotter'. So it's hardly surprising that it makes room for both high art and hedonism, mirroring a region whose reputation as an adult playground obscures a rich cultural scene full of artists as confident as any of the tanned bodies posing by the beach.

"There's always been art here," head of curatorial and programs Bradley Vincent tells me when I visit, "it just wasn't six stories high and colourful and screaming 'come here!'" When he was growing up in nearby Nerang, the Gold Coast Arts Centre had just 200 square metres of exhibition space. That building has since been converted into a cinema, while HOTA boasts 10 times the footprint. As Vincent notes wryly, "growth is this city's business."

Inside one of the galleries, nostalgic images of '50s motels ram his point home. Next door, supercar-themed ceramics →

Conscious traveller

Two-and-a-half kilometres out from the Gold Coast's famous beaches, nine kinetic sculptures rise from the sea floor and sway in the current like columns of giant kelp. The \$5 million Wonder Reef is part conservation project, part artwork and two years into its existence, the world's first buoyant reef has already been transformed into a vibrant hanging garden. Six species of transplanted corals shelter a thriving underwater community where divers can see colourful nudibranchs, menacing moray eels and an array of fish species.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: *Dust Temple* is a cafe that doubles as a creative hub; The tiny cabins dubbed qtQT at QT Gold Coast; Izakaya-style restaurant, *Yamagen*. OPPOSITE (from top): *Wonder Reef* comprises nine buoyant sculptures transplanted with coral; The famous *Surfers Paradise* skyline.



celebrate two very different sides of the Gold Coast, while William Robinson's *The Rainforest* is a masterpiece of light and shade spread across two panels that capture the dark menace and overwhelming fecundity of the hinterland's subtropical rainforest.

Vincent describes HOTA as a place "where art meets pop culture," a theme that reaches its peak in a temporary exhibition of pop art heavyweights. Some of the works even serve as inspiration for the 'culinary arts team' behind the rooftop bar and onsite restaurant *Palette*. The 'Manhattan Menu' degustation includes a parcel of sous vide lamb loin and crispy pulled shoulder hidden in a cloak of cavolo nero in homage to Warhol's camouflage self-portrait, while dessert is a 'chocolate and strawberry soup' in an instantly recognisable edible red and white chocolate 'can'.

Strolling back to the coast after dinner, the endless towers lining the beach seem almost interchangeable. But once I've located QT, I make my way up to a room with a difference. On the broad second-floor terrace, six black-and-white-striped cabins (dubbed qtQT) are bringing the tiny house revolution to the beach. Each one has a small deck with a hanging egg chair, table and blinds for privacy. Inside, a swipe-key entry and unfinished plywood walls set the tone for a mix of rustic and high-tech, while the bedside window frames a garden filled with giant palm fronds waving in the evening breeze.

I'm too full to contemplate the jars of complimentary nuts, cookies and bliss balls on offer, but the pot of tea that arrives with the turndown service hits just right as I peruse a menu of exclusive guest experiences that could fill an entire week. Should I spend the next day at a cocktail-making class or doing yoga on the terrace, I wonder? Learn to make sushi or get a surf lesson from a pro?

In the end, I opt for a whisky tasting at izakaya-style restaurant *Yamagen*. And as I'm savouring the satiny single malts and smoky

distiller's reserves drawn from the 100-odd Japanese whiskies behind the bar, I can't help but think about how different this feels from the late-night bar-hopping that dominated my first visit to this part of the world.

Though the Gold Coast runs for 70 kilometres from the outskirts of Brisbane to the NSW border, I never made it out of Surfers on that trip. This time, I'm determined to do better and Alex Baker from small group specialists *Kiff & Culture* is the perfect guide. "The GC gets a bit of a bad rap," he admits, "but it's not just high rises, a strip of sand and late-night clubs – we like to take people out of that Surfers/Broadbeach bubble."

With a light red ponytail and a laugh you can hear a block away, Baker looks like he'd be equally at home in those local beaches and bars, and as we drive south he helps me make sense of the diverse puzzle pieces that make up the Gold Coast. Suburbs that I've driven through plenty of times without stopping suddenly come alive, from grungy but welcoming *Palmy* (Palm Beach), unpretentious *Nobbys* (Nobby Beach) and up-and-coming *Miami*, where scores of colourful murals look out over former industrial sites.

In Currumbin, we stop to check out a low-rise enclave protected by a pocket of untouched rainforest before following Currumbin Creek to *Dust Temple*, a timber-filled former warehouse that serves as both cafe and creative hub. The pleasantly ramshackle →

feel wouldn't be out of place in Bali, but our next stop is pure Gold Coast.

Twenty-three hatted restaurants provide ample evidence that Gold Coast local cooks know what they're doing, but no venue gets more love than Rick Shores. And from our corner table, it's easy to see why. I can almost dip my hand in the ocean as I feast on tamarind-glazed karaage chicken, duck and lychee curry and the signature bug rolls.

"People literally come here from interstate for these," Alex tells me as I bite into a brioche bun filled with sweet Moreton Bay bug flesh and zingy sriracha mayonnaise. I believe it, and as I watch a surfer catching waves less than 50 metres away, I feel a pang of sympathy for the waiters tasked with ushering diners away from these views when their time is up.

A very different view greets us when we stop for a post-lunch drink in the former industrial hub of Miami. Granddad Jacks is one of a handful of craft distilleries and breweries in the area, and the interior of the former auto workshop is entirely kitted out with found furnishings from the 4220 postcode. Just as eclectic is the range of spirits that includes limited-edition releases such as pumpkin-spiced moonshine, trifle liqueur, yuzu mead and a fruity Christmas pavlova gin with "everything except the cream".

This revival is just one of many changes that have swept the region in recent decades. But further inland, the biggest attraction has remained largely unchanged for millions of years. This is the hinterland – "the green behind the gold" – where ancient Gondwana rainforests that once

covered much of the continent still proliferate. Even more heavily populated areas such as Mt Tamborine have plenty of lush pockets to get lost in.

At Verandah House Country Estate, several roomy suites are arrayed in an L-shape around a broad lawn and magnesium pool on the edge of the Scenic Rim. Owners Judy and Lawrence Pereira gutted the interiors and rebuilt virtually the entire property, filling the suites with custom-made Ralph Lauren furnishings, French oak furniture and artwork from their own collection. Even more impressive is the epic weekend breakfast spread that awaits when I visit.

"We say it's a continental breakfast but we go over the top," Judy admits as she piles my plate high with mushroom and Gruyère quiche, Danishes filled with giant blueberries and a twist of olive bread from local bakery Franquette.

Taking my plate to the edge of the escarpment, I sit beneath a stand of tallowwoods looking out over a 200-metre drop below. The panoramic views take in the entire Scenic Rim and beyond, from the jagged peak of Wollumbin (Mt Warning) across the NSW border to the forest of skyscrapers that line the coast.

Later in the day, I swap a picnic blanket for the cedar hot tub and watch the colours in the clouds slowly soften as the city far below is illuminated by twinkling lights that seem as distant as the stars overhead. "We book out for New Year's Eve way in advance," Judy tells me; "from up here you get a great view of the fireworks." Breathing in the clean mountain air, I reflect that it's just one more perspective on a region that offers a lot more than the old clichés of sun, sand and surf. **AV**

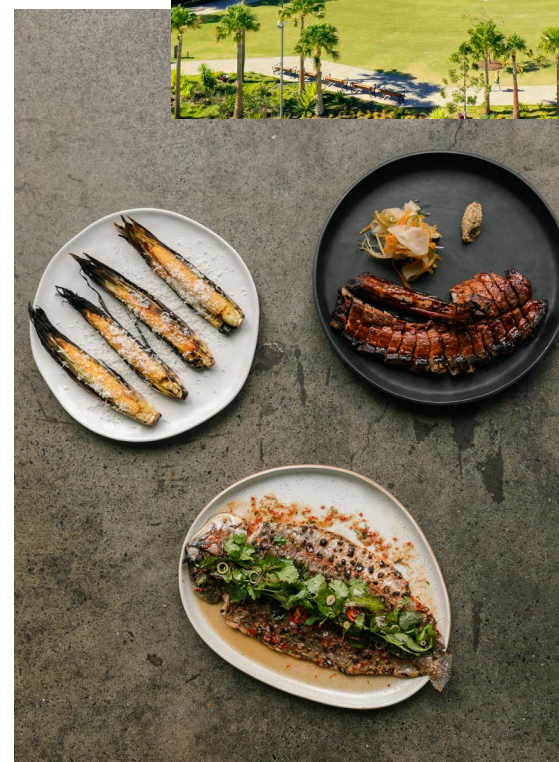


PHOTOGRAPHY: MATHILDE BOUBY (RICK SHORES DISHES); JOHN DOWNS (VERANDAH HOUSE COUNTRY ESTATE); TOURISM AND EVENTS QUEENSLAND (HOTA)



GETAWAYS | Gold Coast

As I watch a surfer catching waves less than 50 metres away, I feel sympathy for the waiters tasked with ushering diners away from these views when their time is up.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Iconic Burleigh diner; Rick Shores; Head for the hinterland to bed down at Verandah House Country Estate; Craft distillery Granddad Jacks; Seafood is the hero at Rick Shores; HOTA is the Gold Coast's premier cultural venue, surrounded by parklands in Surfers Paradise. OPPOSITE: Tranquil Currumbin Creek runs from the hinterland to the coast.

A traveller's checklist

Getting there

Gold Coast Airport has multiple direct flights daily from Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide, while Bonza serves a range of regional hubs. Brisbane Airport has more direct flights and is just over an hour from Surfers Paradise.

Staying there

Bunker down by the beach at **QT GOLD COAST**. Or venture to the hinterland with a stay at **VERANDAH HOUSE COUNTRY ESTATE**. qthotels.com/gold-coast; vhcountrystate.com.au

Playing there

If too much art is never enough, **ART ROLL** has you covered with an interactive map showing more than 100 murals dotted around the region. Some are gathered in dense clusters, and motorised scooters are a great way to see several precincts in a day. artroll.com.au

Accessibility

HOTA's exhibition spaces are all completely accessible and there are loan wheelchairs available. Visitors can also use assisted listening carrier devices and join Auslan-interpreted tours. Quiet Hour offers a calmer experience from 9–10am on the first Saturday of each month. Adults who identify with a disability can access the Sunroom, a safe space for art making, creative play and exploration,

and there are Changing Places bathrooms with an adult change facility, hoist and privacy screen.

The entire terrace at **qtQT** is wheelchair accessible, and Cabin 1 has a slightly larger footprint to ensure the bed and bathroom are both fully accessible.

Most Gold Coast beaches are part of a citywide accessibility program. There is permanent beach matting at **SOUTHPORT**, while other beaches have a range of all-terrain wheelchairs, floating water chairs and beach matting available, free of charge. goldcoast.qld.gov.au

GOLD COAST AIRPORT is one of Australia's most accessible. Features include ramps, tactile indicators, braille signage and a hearing loop for all flight-related information, while the website has written and visual social stories and a dedicated sensory map showing sensory-friendly facilities and the Low Sensory Space. goldcoastairport.com.au

