

SPORT COFFS COAST

Something in the air

Coffs Harbour is shedding its sleepy image and remaking itself as an adventure tourism destination, writes **Dan Hall**.

Coffs Harbour has long been synonymous with the Big Banana tourist stop just metres from the Pacific Highway, but an injection of rally cars is set to shake the foundations of the region and its tired family holiday spots.

The Coffs Coast, about 540 kilometres north of Sydney, will parachute onto the world stage on September 9 when it welcomes about 20,000 World Rally Championship fans.

Coffs Coast tourism and marketing manager Glenn Caldwell admits the area has tried to be all things to all people for too long. The region has suffered from a lack of targeted tourism investment since the 1980s, when a group of family holiday resorts and entertainment hotspots – such as the Big Banana – reinvented

themselves to catch commuters halfway between Sydney and Brisbane.

Caldwell is hoping the World Rally event and a new focus on adventure activities will help Coffs become a genuine holiday alternative to New Zealand's Queenstown.

The best way to kick off an adrenalin-fuelled weekend on the Coffs Coast is a visit to Skydive Coffs Harbour. As the side of your aircraft opens at 4000 metres it's too late to consider turning back. With a dead keen instructor strapped on your back and a clear path to the exit, the heart thumps and palms sweat.

According to instructor Tom, two Korean schoolgirls were the only thrill-seekers to have opted out this late in the experience – news that makes it very difficult to back out of the jump.

So it's time to leap into the big blue abyss.

The intense rush of adrenalin temporarily stuns the senses as you somersault out of and underneath the aircraft. As you stabilise in free fall, you become all too aware that the ground is approaching at terminal velocity – about 200km/h.



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The chest-thumping free fall towards the beautiful coastline is exhilarating. The full beauty of the Coffs Coast and hinterland is laid out in the distance and with one yank of the ripcord, the parachute deploys, giving divers time to take in the view.

If skydiving's not your thing, there are fishing tours, beach-to-bush buggy rides and world-class golf courses such as Bonville Golf

Resort to play – so long as the fickle Coffs weather holds out.

Then again, Coffs gets even more wild when it's wet. Whitewater rafting on the Nymboida River, 60 kilometres from Coffs Harbour, is best when water flows are high, as they have been over the past six months.

Bellingen is just 30 minutes' drive from Coffs. Gary Eagles from Running Wild Adventure Tours

has created a downhill bike ride tour that has to be seen to be believed. Eagles drives you for 40 minutes up a nearby mountain pass to an elevation of 900 metres. From there, riders cycle at breakneck speed down a waterfall-lined mountain to just 20 metres above sea level.

There is a variety of rides for all abilities, including Waterfall Way to the historic town of Dorrigo.

For something more subdued, Bellingen Canoe Adventures runs an extraordinary full-moon champagne tour on the Bellinger River.

The Bellingen and Nambucca Heads area is a good launchpad to the region's adventure activities and will also host a number of the World Rally Championship stages.

For those who need to refuel, dining options include the hatted No 2 Oak Street restaurant near the centre of Bellingen, or the Jaaning Tree Restaurant in the coastal town of Nambucca Heads.

Accommodation in Coffs is plentiful and ranges from coastal resorts (near the departure points of the many fishing charters that venture from Coffs Harbour into the Pacific Ocean), such as the BreakFree Aanuka Beach Resort, to budget roadside motels.

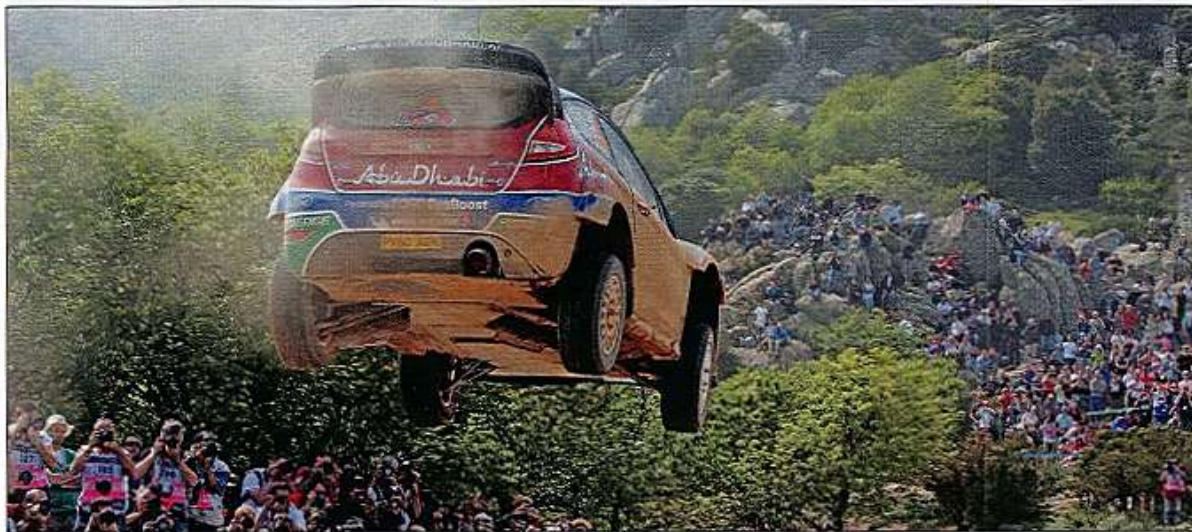
But for an unforgettable rest stop check in at the luxury CasaBelle bed and breakfast set amid six hectares of landscaped gardens in the Bellinger Valley.

The friendly service, serene setting and hearty breakfast is a winner for adventure junkies.

After exploring the Coffs Coast it's clear the city and its surrounds are becoming more sophisticated about their approach to fun in the sun.

Travellers who previously journeyed past Coffs can rethink a stop; it's no longer about tacky tea-towels and sluggish theme-park rides for the kids.

The skydive and other adrenalin-fuelled activities show the region is keen to split from its banana-centric image. And the World Rally Championships may be just the ticket.



The World Rally epitomises the new adventure image and, top, a skydiver's view of Coffs Harbour. Photos courtesy WRC, Skydive Coffs Harbour

The writer travelled as a guest of Destination NSW.