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Sunshine Coast is a happy place with about 300 sunny days in a year

KALPANA SUNDER

# Crocodiles have fun in Aussie sun



Statues of television personality Steve Irwin and family outside the Australia Zoo in Sunshine Coast. Irwin died of a sting ray barb while filming a documentary.

**I**N THE background is Mount Coolool, the third largest monolith in Australia with an almost flat summit. The first Europeans in Coolool were shipwrecked sailors. Today, Coolool is home to the famous Kite festival.

It's a mini world out here, with shuttle buses and golf carts ferrying the guests (there are bicycles as well); an Italian-themed village square, a tennis court, nine swimming pools and a private beach with kangaroos for company! Our villa has a living room, with French doors opening to the golf course, and charming birdsong. We are at the Hyatt Coolool, on the Sunshine Coast of Queensland, Australia, set in sixty hectares of woodland: an oasis of lawns, ponds with water lilies and a golf course which is home to the Australian PGA championships.

Its name suggests that it's a happy place. There are miles of un-spoilt beaches, national parks and an average of 300 sunny days in a year. The Sunshine Coast is the laid back, bohemian counterpart of the brash, Gold Coast. It somehow seems to have successfully stayed away from skyscrapers, theme parks and the touristy attractions of the latter.

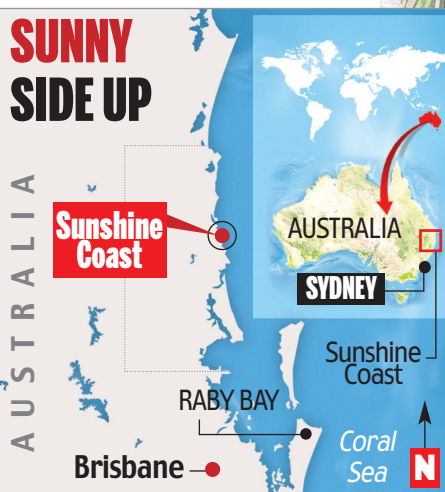
Noosa Heads, one of the main towns on the coast, has a chic European vibe. Once home to indigenous tribes, it was a sleepy village of anglers and beachcombers for many years. Today it has some of Queensland's wealthiest residents, and hosts backpackers too. We walk down Hastings Street, the swish main street, which we hear had a \$ 10 million face-lift. There are a slew of up-market boutiques, al fresco cafes, art galleries and shaded seating areas. I browse through shops selling bed linen and aromatic candles and a boutique called 'Cotton Diva' selling tunics and jewellery made in India.

The street ends in the Noosa National Park, with a rich flora and fauna.

Our drive to Beerwah is through an idyllic landscape, with acres of sugarcane fields. The main attraction here is the iconic Australia Zoo - made famous by crocodile hunter Steve Irwin. In the background are the craggy, blue hazed Glass House Mountains, a series of volcanic plugs, named by Captain James Cook in 1770, as they reminded him of glasshouses in his native land. The zoo was started as Beerwah Reptile Park in 1970, by Steve's parents, Bob and Lyn.

Since Irwin's death by a sting ray barb while filming a docu, the zoo is being managed by his wife Teri. Irwin's passion for wildlife is evident in his daughter's name, Bindi, an aboriginal word for

**An Australia Zoo staffer cradles a snake at the Crocoseum**



By Kalpana Sunder

a young girl. That was also the name of his favourite crocodile.

This is no ordinary zoo — we enjoy the many signs that combine humour with factoids and educate as much as entertain. The Crocoseum is the main venue of the Wildlife warrior's show — it seats over 5,000 people.

**T**he stars of the show are the crocodiles that glide out from their enclosures, in to the arena and are fed on land and in water. What is amazing about the zoo is the opportunity to get up-close with animals. 'Roo Heaven' is where we get to meet and hand feed grey and red kangaroos and wallabies and stroke their velvety fur. Our meet-and-greet time with wombats on a harness and leash and coal-black Tasmanian devils is the high point of our visit. We cuddle koalas, lie down beside dingoes and high-five with cockatoos.

We walk across the car park to the Wildlife hospital, for a behind-the-scenes look at the care of injured wildlife from across the state. The Australia Zoo funds the hospital which was a dream project of Steve's mother and is dedicated to her.

We drive back to Brisbane, through Mooloolaba, with its waterfront villas of the rich and famous, and pass the quirky Ettamogah Pun based on a cartoon character. The Sunshine Coast does have something for everyone.

— The author is a travel writer based in Chennai

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