Great Expectations

The Great Lakes, home to one of the most dazzling stretches of coast you will ever see.

Story and photography by MIRIAM BLAKER

Fancy a unique and wild adventure combining ocean swimming, driving through rugged forests and mountain biking through pristine National Parks? Too strenuous? Then how about slowing it down a tad and sampling a small part of it as we did... an invigorating walk to a lighthouse, swimming in crystal clear waters, marvelling at open air cathedrals and indulging in fresh oysters.

We were on our homeward journey to Melbourne, having travelled with our camper trailer to Rainbow Beach in Queensland and had decided the Mid North Coast region of NSW would be a great place to camp for a couple of days. The Great Lakes district is one of the last untouched coastal wildernesses in Australia and we were looking forward to exploring all of its wonders.

In a place defined by its pristine waterways, and a world away from the hustle of city life, the Great Lakes area is where the magnificent eastern dividing range forms a backdrop to a dazzling stretch of the Australian coast. Just the name conjures up images of spectacular views and waterways but would the place live up to its name?

First impression was good. There are numerous tiny hamlets, idyllic camping spots and holiday parks along this stretch of coast, however travelling in peak times, and without a booking meant powered sites were limited. On the flip side it gave us the freedom to stop where we wanted so we set our sights on the Forster/ Tuncurry area.

On entering the scenic twin towns we found the vibe relaxed, the lakes dazzling and a tranquil air of seaside bliss. However, we still had to find somewhere to pitch the camper. With night falling and many places booked out, we were happy to finally secure a site at Forster Lakeside Holiday Park.

As the name implies the park has prime position right on the lake and, even though
our site wasn’t waterfront, we were only 150 metres from the water’s edge and our site was grassy, flat and spacious. We were also close to the well-equipped camp kitchen and the resort style pool and games area, perfect for keeping the kids entertained, though I had plans to keep us out most of the next day.

Next morning, after an early hearty barbecue breakfast (best to keep the troops fuelled up) our first destination was Seal Rocks, about 45 kilometres from Forster and boasting one of the most beautiful beaches in the area. Whether you’re a surfer, swimmer, bushwalker or looking for a great place to dive or just after some peace and seclusion this has to be seaside heaven. Seal Rocks has a distinctly isolated feel about it. If we hadn’t already pitched our camper trailer in Forster, the camping ground opposite the pristine beach would have been ideal.

The sleepy seaside village is famous for its peaceful resistance to commercial development and there are still signs as you enter the town that read “Save Seal Rocks – the last frontier”. Apparently this sign has been continuously repainted over the past 30 years such is the fervour of the locals to protect their unspoilt and isolated beach haven from developers.

Keen to walk on the white beach which beckoned us we were soon enjoying the feel of the squeaky white sand between our toes. Every now and then we’d stop to watch surfers, to wade into the water near the rocky outcrops that give the place its name or make small talk with the occasional walker, like a local bloke walking his Blue Heeler.

Back in the car and further along we parked and walked through the gate leading to Sugarloaf lighthouse, the most eastern point of the great lakes. It’s a few hundred metres to the lighthouse and
lookout and the track is fairly easy going. As you near the top make sure you stop at the spectacular blowhole where the ocean surges through a tunnel carved at the base of a rock wall.

We trekked on and eventually reached the lookout over Lighthouse Beach and Sugarloaf Bay, marvelling at the views along the way and stopping to capture the beauty. The place is a photographer’s dream.

The impressive looking lighthouse was built in 1865 and there are many signs around the lighthouse grounds detailing the history of the era. Although it’s not possible to enter the lighthouse, an access path leads up a short flight of stairs just outside the lighthouse door. It was here we spotted a pod of dolphins frolicking in the waters below. In whale season the vantage point of the lighthouse is an ideal spot to watch for whales as they migrate north from mid-May to the end of July and then back from mid-September to late November, many with calves in tow.

A knee bending walk lead us back down to the car park and before long we were back at Seal Rocks village enjoying an ice cream outside the general store. The village doesn’t comprise of much: there are two camping areas, a caravan park and the general store but the sense of remoteness and its stretch of pristine beach is incredibly appealing. It’s undeveloped and easy to understand why the locals want to keep it that way.

The Great Lakes area is fringed by stunning national parks and forests with many amazing spots hidden within. Coming back from Seal Rocks we passed through sections of the Booti Booti National Park and the Wallingat National Park, our map showing Sugarcreek Road which led to the Whoota Whoota lookout in the Wallingat National Park.

The roadside sign said 15km to the lookout which the brochures describe as “...where eagles soar. Nothing captures the great lakes like this mountain, beneath your feet is lake Wallis with all the river systems and the view out to sea is stunning”.

On entering the National Park a Road Closed sign was dropped on the side of the road and we debated whether or not to enter, given the recent bushfires. However, having seen a log truck driving through earlier we figured the road was open. We’d driven about 12km along Sugarcreek Road and were almost there when we rounded a corner and the terrain suddenly changed, exposing burnt trunks and canopy and smouldering evidence of a recent bushfire. Aware of how close we were to the lookout but conscious of the possible threat of falling branches we reluctantly turned back, disappointed but knowing we had to play it safe.

The kids were hungry by this stage so we detoured to nearby Smiths Lake for lunch. Smiths Lake is the smaller of the Great Lakes but just as stunning and a great place for a swim or picnic lunch. The wonderfully named Frothy Coffee Boathouse overlooks the lake but we were content with our pies and pastries bought from the local bakery and our prime view seat by the lake.

There are a few hidden gems worth seeking out in the area, one is the state’s tallest trees found on Stoney Creek Road in the Myall Lakes National Park. The Grands is a magnificent Flooded Gum, which soars skyward and, at 84 metres high is reputedly NSW’s tallest tree. Another hidden gem is the Green Cathedral at Tiona, set on the shores of Lake Wallis, an outdoor consecrated church we eventually located on our way back to Forster. The open air cathedral is a special place where you can worship, meditate or just sit for a while and appreciate nature at its most pristine. We marvelled at the green and lush rainforest canopy, more beautiful than any church windows, sat on pews carved from smooth tree trunks and waded into the clear waters of Lake Wallis with scores of tiny fish darting around at our feet. It is a truly magical place. Even if you don’t consider yourself spiritual
Getting there:
Forster is the centre of the Great Lakes area and is reached by travelling along the Pacific Highway. It is approximately 12 hours driving time from Melbourne and 3.5 hours north of Sydney. From the south drive through the town of Bulahdelah and 3km north turn right onto the Lakes Way and follow the signs to Forster. Coming south from Brisbane take the Pacific Highway National Route No. 1, continue past the Taree and Old Bar exits turning left onto Tuncurry Road (Tourist Drive 6 following the signs to Forster.

Where to camp:
There are several camping and caravan parks in the area including Forster Beach Caravan Park, Lakes Holiday Island, Wallamba River Holiday Park and Smugglers Cove Holiday Village as well as many basic camping grounds in nearby National Parks such as Wallingat National Park. We stayed at Lakeside Resort Forster 13 Tea-tree Road, Forster Tel: (02) 6555 5511 www.lakesideresortforster.com.au

A good option if camping near Seal Rocks is the Seal Rocks Holiday Park Kinka Road, Seal Rocks Tel: (02) 4997 6164 or Camp Tarecherry, located behind beautiful Tarecherry Beach, Seal Rocks 166 Thomas Road, Seal Rocks (02) 4997 6138 www.tarecherrycamp.com.au

When to go:
The Great Lakes region is beautiful to visit all year round with various festivals, markets and events held during the year. On Saturday 7th November 2015 the Lakeside Festival will be held at John Wright Park, Tuncurry. Visit lakesidefestival.com.au for more information. For information on all events during the year visit www.greatlakes.org.au/events

Further information:
Visit www.greatlakes.org.au for information on camping, National Parks and what to do in the area. Moonshadow Cruises, Nelson Bay, For information on dolphin, whale and other cruises to Broughton Island and the Great Lakes area contact 02 4984 9388 or visit www.moonshadow.com.au