



Longboard surfing is back – and **Murray Walding** knows where to find the best waves.

This summer it's 40 years since the demise of conventional longboard surfing. Shorter and lighter surfboards spelt the end of hanging ten, walking the plank and drop-knee turns. By the time the summer of '68 waned into autumn, surfing on the big hefty planks was almost dead.

Now a new generation of surfers is rediscovering the delights of longboarding and surf spots along Australia's east coast that, in the swing of the '60s, were must-go destinations.

If you have rediscovered longboarding, it's time you went on a surfari to check the best longboard waves between Melbourne and Noosa Heads.

First stop for me, just over the NSW-Victorian border, is Merimbula. In recent years

this sleepy town has slipped into the background as a top-line tourist destination but it has a mild climate, deserted beaches and a surf spot as good as anywhere in the country: the Merimbula Bar is a triangle of shallow sand that forms at the mouth of Merimbula Lake; it can create long, curling left-handers.

The surf at the Bar is famously fickle – there has to be a magical combination of swell and wind direction for it to be at its world-class best. But paddle a modern longboard onto a lengthy green wall here and you'll understand why it is so highly regarded.

The Pambula river mouth, at the southern end of the bay from Merimbula, can produce a wild spinning right-hander that peels like a

zipper across a sandbank. Unfortunately this break is even more fickle than Merimbula. Years of heavy rain are needed to flood the river and push the sandbar out into the bay. It has been at least a decade since there was quality surf here.

But don't let that put you off the area. There are several picture-perfect beaches between Pambula Surf Life Saving Club and Jiguma Beach, studded with rock outcrops that stand in shallow low-tide pools. They're perfectly placed to keep the whole family out of the sea breeze and the waves are usually family-friendly.

There's more quality surf up the road at Green Island, north of Ulladulla. This spot was the first big surf discovery south of Sydney

and was once considered the best left-hander in the country. The growth in short boards has taken the gloss off its reputation but the wave is still rewarding.

Nearby towns such as Manyana and Bendalong are in classic NSW surf settings, with lively sand-bottomed waves on beaches nestled between wooded headlands dotted with beach shacks. You won't find solitude but you'll be far enough away from the hustle and bustle to make surfing here on a longboard rewarding.

From Green Island to Sydney are miles of quality beaches and reefs but if you're specifically after waves to suit your longboard, keep driving north past Sydney where, an hour past Newcastle, you'll find Seal Rocks.



The coast here is backed by Myall Lakes National Park and the drive along the coast wanders beside mirror-surfaced lakes with a new vista around every corner.

The last section of road into Seal Rocks is rugged but once you arrive you'll realise why locals are in no hurry to have it sealed – it keeps the number of tourists to a minimum.

Number One Beach is just one of the stunning beaches in the national park and a favourite spot for those looking for a user-friendly wave. To the south of the tiny village is a turn-off to the spectacular Seal Rocks lighthouse and further down another dirt track lies Treachery Head and Yagen Beach. These are both beautiful and often deserted but not specifically good for longboards.

Remember, on these beaches you are a long way from help. When longboarding was at its peak, dive experts Ron and Val Taylor regarded the nearby waters as a great spot to shoot footage of large, hungry sharks.

Drive three hours north of Seal Rocks and you enter what surfers call the Land of the Long Right Points. The coastline is full of world-class waves and the first of the Long Right Points is just south of Slim Dusty's home town of Kempsey at the small town of Crescent Head. When surf was first discovered there in 1961 it was considered the equivalent of California's Malibu Beach, perhaps better. Its water was warmer and the waves broke further. But like Malibu, it was soon overrun with crowds of surfers.

A friendly camping ground lies immediately above the river stones that line the shore and help form the waves. The walk to the end of the point takes you along the fairways and greens of the picturesque local golf course.

South of Crescent Head, down a stony, corrugated road that will chew up your suspension and tyres is Point Plomer. Here you'll find Racecourse Beach, Delicate Nobby and a relaxing corner of sand at the mouth of Limeburners Creek

Nature Reserve. Camping is allowed between the banksias and eucalypts that line these beaches and for most of the day, any day, the beach will be all yours.

The next stop is Byron Bay.

When surfers first stumbled on this town, its main industry was whaling but the surfers didn't come looking for whales. They came looking for uncrowded waves and found them at the Pass, below the lighthouse on Cape Byron.

Waves at the Pass peel over a bottom of pure white sand and can be ridden as far as you'd like. Just over the headland is Wategos Beach,

a favoured spot for longboarding in the '60s. It's just as popular now as a sort of surfing millionaire's row but the real quality wave is still the Pass.

The warm water, the searing sunsets and the long rides that suit everyone from beginner to pro are the reasons why Byron is now so popular and the waves are always crowded.

But they're not as crowded as the Gold Coast, where you'll find glitz and glamour

along with surf at Burleigh Heads, Currumbin, Kirra Point, Greenmount Point, Rainbow Bay and Snapper Rocks.

Burleigh has good surf but it's mean. The rocks that line the break are slippery and savage and while the water is wondrously warm it hides a sweep that drags you northwards before you can paddle your first stroke. Unless you want your new longboard snapped in two you're better off trying Currumbin Alley, which features waves similar to Byron's Pass.

The southern end of the Gold Coast once had four top-quality surf spots including the legend-

ary Kirra Point, home to one of the world's fastest waves. But the waves at Kirra Point, Greenmount Point, Rainbow Bay and Snapper Rocks have disappeared, smothered by sand pumped along the coast to prevent erosion.

These four breaks are now all part of one wave surfers call the Superbank, the home of the longest wave in the country. When the sand is groomed by swells and currents, the Superbank can provide rides more than a kilometre long. However, the downside of such a long, thigh-straining ride is the waves are always frighteningly crowded.

If the crowds and clamour of tourism haven't put you off surfing, there's just one location left – a series of bays with surf so good it was once said to be like "having a cup of tea with God": Noosa Heads.

Noosa has five points set against a backdrop of palms and pandanus. It has sparkling aqua-blue waves that range from challenging to just plain fun and the town's tropical vibe makes it a fun destination, surf or no surf.

The bays at Noosa can lie flat for months but when a swell finally arrives, everyone from hippies in the hills to Danish backpackers swarm all over the waves.

The Noosa surf is at its best in autumn and if you're there next month, you'll be able to catch the action at the Noosa Festival of Surfing, where the best longboarders will test their skills in the silky waves of First Point Noosa.



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FAST FACTS

Longboard revival

Contemporary longboards are usually more than nine feet (2.75 metres) long but are lighter and more performance-oriented than pre-1967 surfboards. A new, custom-made longboard can cost more than \$1200 but there are plenty of entry-level longboards priced from about \$800.

Staying there

For more details on the places described in the story, see:
www.visitmerimbula.com.au;
www.takeabreak.com.au/Bendalong;
www.northcoast.stays.com.au;
www.byronbayaccom.net; and
www.accommodationgoldcoast.com.au.

Noosa Festival of Surfing

The country's largest surfing event is on March 2-9. It includes competition, an expo, movies, an auction of memorabilia, a line-up of vintage surf vehicles and a concert headlined by Apollo Bay rockers the Vasco Era. Byron Bay's Band of Frequencies also perform. Surf stars Kelly Slater, Tom Curren, Tom Carroll and Layne Beachley, as well as world champion Mick Fanning and world longboard champion Josh Constable, are scheduled to attend. See www.noosafestivalofsurfing.com.au.



New Surf Wales ... there is longboard surfing from Bondi (left) to the "surfing millionaire's row" of Wategos Beach. Photos: Photolibrary