



Finding wellness in Shoalhaven

We explore the stunning Shoalhaven, located on the New South Wales South coast, just two hours from Sydney and Canberra. There, we rest, rejuvenate and soak up the many wellness activities the region has to offer.

Words KATE HOLLAND

I have finally arrived. I take a deep breath in and look around. The waves at Mollymook beach are gently breaking against the rocks, the sun is shimmering on the water and I spot an eagle soaring through the pink sky. I take another deep breath in and this time, I arrive in my mind. I reflect on the planning it took to make this two-day wellness stay in Shoalhaven happen. My toddler is with his doting grandparents, my work schedule is clear and my phone is turned off. I have officially clocked off all duties. It's time to soak up everything this self-curated getaway has to offer in one of Australia's most untouched wellness regions.

Finding focus

First up, I head to Life Centre Holistic Health in Bewong for a two and a half hour breathwork, ice bath, sauna, pool and float session. Co-owner Kirk Tindall greets me with a warmth that reminds me of an old friend. He reveals the heart of his business, which he shares with his brother, is a mutual goal to help clients reach their highest levels of health and happiness. Nestled among the native Australian gum trees, the centre offers a range of services aimed at promoting wellness and transformation. Tindall kicks off the session with some guided breathwork and I eagerly allow my mind to follow. As I relax, I watch the many to-do lists I was still holding onto dissolve. The mental load I carry as a busy working mum starts to feel lighter, less important, less necessary right now in this very moment. After the breathwork, I head to the infrared sauna and continue rinsing out my day, week, year. I spend 30 minutes

getting a good sweat on before jumping into the magnesium pool to cool down. Then, under the expert guidance of Tindall, I lower myself into my first ice bath. After 30 seconds I want to get out. Surprisingly, a warmth starts to set in. My glutes begin burning, which Tindall explains is the cold water targeting inflammation.

At four minutes, I hit my edge. I leap out and into the barrel sauna to warm up my core temperature. I feel electric, my mind is sharp and my body feels alive.

I keep my focus on deep breathing and I'm reminded of my son's labour. I get full body shakes at three minutes. Tindall asks me to welcome them, explaining that the shakes mean my immune system response is kicking into gear. He guides me through a breathing technique that refocuses my mind. I feel calm and determined. My pain threshold and mental endurance sit much higher now that I've given birth — I can handle this. At four minutes, I hit my edge. I leap out and into the barrel sauna to warm up my core temperature. I feel electric, my mind is sharp and my body feels alive.

After the barrel sauna, it's time to float. Tindall explains that there are 550 kilograms of magnesium- and sulphate-rich Epsom salts in the float tank and hands me some goggles. As I float freely and experience zero gravity, I enjoy the meditative music

and let my mind wander. For the first time in a while, I properly — and productively — think. I don't just put out fires, check nappies and write grocery lists. I actually think. I conjure up all kinds of plans for the future, for my health, for my wealth and my happiness — and for that of my family. After 40 minutes, I step out of the "think" tank and join Tindall in the sun. I observe a sense of spaciousness within and I leave with a new-found love for cold-water therapy.

Checking into laidback luxury

Rows and rows of gorgeous white Taiwan lilies growing roadside lead me back to Mollymook. First, I spot the neon pink sign and pull into Motel Molly's carpark and look up. Three pastel-painted motels line the beach and I can't help but smile. They're beautiful, cheeky and fun. The sorbet colours sit pretty among the coastline and give a retro feel to this recently refurbished motel in the heart of Mollymook.

I check into my room and instantly fall in love with the Moroccan-inspired decor, handcrafted ceramics and local artwork. Because I'm staying in the blue hotel, various shades of blue are complemented by bright mosaic tiling and pastel finishes. And the bath, oh the bath! It's tucked away, sunken and looks very inviting. I jump onto the king bed and let myself sink deeply into the cloud-like mattress. I plan to rest for just a few minutes, but an hour later I wake up to the sun setting through my window.

It's time to check out the sunset and enjoy a glass of wine. I head down to Motel Molly's pool and spa and recline on a day bed with a novel. I contemplate taking one of the surfboards out or riding a bike around





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town. Instead, I take a deep breath in and relax. I haven't had free time like this since my son arrived — I'm going to soak up every single moment the beautiful Shoalhaven has to offer. I listen to the soft rumble of waves in the near distance and begin to feel why Shoalhaven is a top wellness destination.

Slow food done right

The Shoalhaven region is certainly spoilt for choice when it comes to good-quality, wholesome and fresh food. My first taste of this was at Milton Hotel, a historic building that has been meticulously restored to offer a warm and inviting atmosphere. The restaurant has recently won a hat in the *Sydney Morning Herald* Good Food Awards 2023 and, after my first bite of the delicious wood-oven prawns, I can certainly taste why. I also enjoy the market fish, a beautifully cooked snapper, and the barbecue eggplant with cashew mayo and miso caramel. Their wine and cocktail list is just as impressive, along with the local live music at night.

My taste buds are delighted again at Milk HAUS, a quaint garden-to-plate eatery on the outskirts of Milton. Located in a 19th century converted cheese factory, the space also contains a workshop area, on-site ceramicist, four-bedroom accommodation and abundant

The best time to visit

This is your reminder to stop putting everyone else first. Escape the city and reconnect with yourself in Shoalhaven, a true wellness destination. With mid-week and off-peak options available (April to October), the area is perfect for solo visits, couples and families. Not only will you experience a new-found spaciousness in your mind, you'll avoid the busy holiday crowds and long lines.

Join a curated retreat or do it your way

When it comes to holidays, you fall into one of three camps. Some people like an action-packed holiday filled with surfing, hiking and exploring. Some people like to simply relax and book a retreat that takes care of every decision. And there're some people who like a little bit of both, like me. After spending two days in the stunning Shoalhaven, I see that it has something for everyone. You can design your own retreat by building an itinerary with the many wonderful offerings found at shoalhaven.com/wellness.



kitchen garden. I order a perfect poached egg on fresh sourdough with local ham, served with garlic-infused greens and a tomato medley, both picked fresh from the garden this morning. After breakfast, I chat with the founders Kitty and Nat, whose passion and vision for Milk HAUS is infectious. Nat takes me for a tour around the garden and it further affirms why my breakfast greens tasted so good! She shares that their kitchen garden is planned, planted and nurtured for each seasonal menu and that the restaurant is self-sufficient when it comes to fresh produce, something the team should all be extremely proud about.

For dinner that night, I'm excited to be dining at Small Town Food + Wine as I've heard great things. My brother Matt and his fiancée Lauren join me and it's nice to have the company after a few solo dining experiences, although they were much appreciated. Perusing the neighbourhood bistro's new menu, my mouth begins to water at all the Mediterranean influences. But first, wine. We order a bottle of red from their weekly wine list, which the waiter explains features three new wines each week that are interesting, rare and exciting. Then, onto the food. We can't go past Clyde River rock oysters and Small Town's famous (and rightly so) lobster roll, so we enjoy those first. For mains, we try the barbecue octopus, grilled king prawns and a few delicious sides, all of which leave our tastebuds fizzing with delight. The team at Small Town Food + Wine sure know what they're doing with honest and appealing food. All night the conversation flows, we laugh, we wine and we dine. I leave experiencing first-hand the love and care that goes into creating memorable and magical food experiences in the region.

Surfing with dolphins

On Friday morning, I meet Thabu from Mollymook Beach Surf School. He gives me a wetsuit and an eight-foot foam surfboard and we paddle out at Mollymook beach. Being from Byron Bay, I've surfed a lot but not much since becoming a mum. I'm nervous at first but then I surprise myself — surfing really is like riding a bike. My skills are still there and,

with the helpful guidance and occasional push, I have the time of my life. My knowledgeable instructor teaches me how to effectively turn on the wave, reminds me to take my time with the pop up and to stay lower on my board. We laugh, spot dolphins, talk about life and swap parenting stories. For 90 minutes, my mind is focused on nothing else but the present moment. Parenting, I realise, is a lot like surfing. Most of the time you're paddling out, copping sets on the head and scrambling around trying not to drown. But then an incredible set of waves comes through and you stand, you glide and you ride that golden wave into the sunset. Then and there, you realise that those few seconds of surfing make the hours of paddling all worth it.

Pampering by the sea

Bannisters Spa by the Sea has been on my bucket list for far too long. As I walk through the gate, I soon see why this revered day spa is one of Australia's best. Stunning ocean views meet an infinity pool that's private and enticing. My jaw drops. This is luxury wellness at its best. I head towards the spa and am warmly greeted by my therapist, Carolina. Herbal tea in hand, she leads me to a huge spa suite overlooking the ocean and I get ready for my deep tissue massage. My therapist has hands of magic as she gently releases knots from my shoulders and neck. With each inhale, I feel my muscles give in to her touch and with each exhale the tension and tightness leave my body. It's one of the best massages I've ever had. Afterwards, I lie in stillness listening to the birds, feeling the sea breeze on my skin, not wanting to let the world rush back in. When I return to the room, I smile. I'm still on my wellness retreat in paradise — there are no dishes or washing or mouths to feed. I linger a little longer, moving slowly and consciously back to the spa reception. I purchase the same beautiful massage oil and body butter so I can recreate a feeling of relaxation and rejuvenation at home ... well, at least I hope I can. If anything, the sensory experience should bring me back to this profound moment of peacefulness. 🌿

For more information visit shoalhaven.com.

