

TRAVEL

AUSTRALIA



CECE SCOTT PHOTO

The sparkling waters of Australia's Byron Bay are full of special surprises, from thrill-ride waves to a resident pod of dolphins.

Going for a thrill ride in Byron Bay

Whether it's the waves or the wildlife, kayaking on Oz's east coast sure to dazzle

CECE SCOTT
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

BYRON BAY, AUSTRALIA—"Do you have to be a conservationist to get this thing stopped all the way up?" I ask the long-legged woman sitting at a makeshift table next to a stack of yellow and red sea kayaks.

"Well, I reckon your suit's on backwards," she answers, making me melt with embarrassment as my companions turn away with smirks on their faces.

The pungent full-body wet suit, stuck to my skin like a postage stamp, was still damp from a previous outing, but my early-morning enthusiasm was whetted by a conversation I'd had with our guide Andy, of Australia's Cape Byron Kayaks.

"We are fortunate to have a 'resident' (dolphin) pod that seems to like the area," Andy says. "I reckon it is because there is always a safe haven for them no matter what way

the weather is coming from and the never-ending food supply."

Our group half-carried, half-dragged the heavy fibreglass kayaks through a tight corridor of skinny trees down to the ocean.

Andy bellows over the roar of incoming waves, telling us the correct paddle positions, safety precautions and what our paddle path would be for the day.

Of course, in a random group of tourists, some with hours of experience and others complete neophytes, there's always someone who swaggers out the question everyone else is secretly wondering.

"Are there any sharks in these parts?" a burly guy asks.

"Oi, I was hoping someone would ask," Andy quips. Then he launches into one of the many colourful tales he spins throughout the four-hour jaunt.

"A man and woman were on their honeymoon and decided to go for a

dive out past the Julian Rocks," he says, with a smile. "They enjoyed the 10-minute ride out and a half-hour dive when she noticed she was running out of air, so they quickly surfaced about 10 metres from the boat.

"They were approached by a very large shark 20 foot or more in length, would have weighed about three tons. The shark swam off and the couple decided to do a safety stop, then went back down believing the Great White had swum away!

"They were hanging like a couple of anchovies on a fishing line when the shark came back and lunged for the wife. The husband pushed her out of the way and it grabbed him and swallowed him whole, scuba tank and all."

A low murmur went through the group and the breeze felt a few degrees cooler as we snapped on our helmets and life jackets, pushed out

boats off the beach and headed east, towards the most easterly point in Australia, the gloriously wild and rugged rim of Byron Bay.

The area is edged by milk-chocolate-coloured sand running along the sprawling coast: Belongil Beach, Main, Clarkes, Talkow, Watagos, Little Watagos Beach.

I've kayaked off Vancouver Island, Newfoundland, Cuba, Costa Rica and the Florida Everglades and each time the adventure was an energy super-charger.

But there's a personality and life to the waters here that I've never seen before. The sparkle of the rolling waves, like points on a diamond, is almost blinding.

We paddle hard for two hours before drifting into shore for a welcome respite of caramel and chocolate Tim-Tams (finger long, sugar-fuelled energy cookies) and drinks.

We didn't see dolphins on the first day, but Andy takes us out again early the next morning before we head back to Brisbane.

That's when the action begins.



CAPE BYRON KAYAKS PHOTO

JUST THE FACTS

• Cape Byron Kayaks, Cape Byron, Australia. All safety gear supplied, including lifejackets, helmets and wetsuits. Free pick-up from your accommodation. See www.capebyronkayaks.com

Andy picks me to be his paddle partner, and the ocean swells thundering in are twice the size of the day before.

We rock and roll and dip between wave valleys for close to an hour before Andy spots a dolphin pod. Fins slice through the water, their bodies graceful projectiles, as we alternate between awed silence and excited whoops.

I'm pumped and ready to roll when Andy asks, "Would you like to ride the waves, mate?"

"Sure," I reply.

"When I tell you, paddle as hard as you can, don't stop," he says. "When I say 'Oi,' lean back and hold on," Andy yells.

A second later, a towering wave is upon us. Riding the crest of its arching curl, I paddle like mad, not realizing my end of the kayak is right out of the water.

"Lean back, lean back," is all I hear as the wave picks us up and throws us forward.

"More dolphins or more waves?" Andy laughs, as we fly towards shore. With a mouthful of salt water, I give Andy the nod.

"Again," I say. The dolphins will just have to wait.

Cece Scott is a Toronto-based freelance writer.