

CALL OF THE SOUTH



The far south coast of NSW has been an undiscovered gem, but that may be about to change

SAMANTHA HUTCHINSON

Talking to *The Weekend Australian* over a latte, the Sydney eastern suburbs PR agent was unequivocal. "Byron Bay's over. Everyone is heading south." She was being literal. Fed up with the hordes overrunning Byron Bay throughout high summer and beyond, the smart set is choosing the NSW far south coast and the climes of Narooma, Tilba Tilba and Bermagui for their summer sojourn. And increasingly they're heading there in winter too.

Justin Hemmes is a homeowner, while Sydney architect Nick Tobias has been holidaying there for years. More are coming, with agents in the area noting a steady uplift in the number of prestige homes selling and the number coming on to the market.

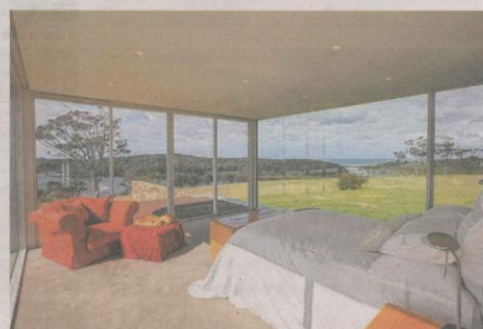
"A lot of people choose to buy homes down there because they want to get a bit off the road, and they want a private getaway," Whale Coast real estate agent David Nolan says. The Sydney-based agent holidays near Narooma every year, not because that's where his work is but because he is one of the thousands to profess the region is "the most beautiful place on earth".

"Narooma literally means 'blue water' and you look at the advertising materials and people think the colour has been retouched, when it hasn't at all," he says.

"It's just pristine and the type of place that still feels like a proper beach town. You can walk around with your shoes off and no one will think twice, there's a sense that there aren't many places left like it."

A quieter cousin to NSW's Byron Bay and Victoria's Mornington Peninsula, the NSW far south coast is about 4½ hours from Sydney and eight hours from Melbourne. It is best known for its windswept beaches, punctuated by dramatic rock formations, and sleepy towns still anchored by old-fashioned general stores and 1960s-style recreation and golf clubs.

Nolan chose the area for its laid-back vibe, the endless beaches to choose from and a long activities list



that keeps the family occupied. Newcomers to the area may be attracted by the region's produce, including some of Australia's best oysters, shellfish and seafood, he says, while others are likely to give the area a second look because of its improved transport links to Sydney and Melbourne.

Moruya and Merimbula airports are within 40 minutes' drive of Narooma, and each offers daily and sometimes twice-daily flights to Sydney and Melbourne.

The growing flight frequency is one factor Nolan believes has driven the growing interest in the area. A gradual uplift in million-dollar sales also is catching the attention of well-heeled city-based buyers.

Sydney hotelier Hemmes set a benchmark in the area late last year when he paid a reported \$6.7 million for the Glasshouse Rocks estate on the beachfront at Narooma.

In nearby Tilba Tilba, Tobias garnered praise and turned the attention of the design crowd to the tiny hamlet with the much-lauded renovation of a 60s-style home into a sleek multi-generational beach retreat for his family. It sits on a rolling hill sloping down to a windswept beach.

While some cite improved accessibility as a drawcard, others have pointed to a growing events calendar that is attracting more and more visitors.

Aside from mainstays including Narooma's Great Southern Blues Festival, a packed line-up of horse riding, racing and polocrosse events, and quaint traditions including the Oyster Festival, new arrivals such as the Four Winds Festival of classical and world music can see visitor numbers spike to more than 15,000 for a single event, while Tilba's Easter Festival attracts more than 10,000 visitors each year.

"Something is happening all year round and I suppose that's the difference," Nolan says. "It's no longer seen purely as a summer destination."

Property prices in the region have stayed relatively

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DAVID NOLAN

Silvermere Farm, above, a rolling estate and working sheep and cattle farm, is expected to fetch more than \$4.75 million. On 124ha, the waterfront property features a striking architect-designed home, guest accommodation and a manager's residence, surrounded by paddocks.

flat during the past two years, according to Core Logic RP Data, with this year's median sale price sitting at \$385,000 compared with averages of \$378,000 and \$374,000 during the past two years. Turnover also has tracked sideways, with 35 homes selling last year, down from 36 in 2014 and a long-term high of 42 in 2013.

Yet agents have been buoyed by a flurry of prestige sales. A waterfront parcel on the Old Highway fetched \$1.7m just before Christmas, selling to the Costin family. Spanning almost 2ha, the estate included a five-bedroom home set among mature gardens sloping gently down to the water and a jetty.

In April the Peachey family paid \$1.025m for a 2ha estate beside the Old Highway near Narooma. The lavish four-bedroom home at the centre of the property includes high ceilings and views across rolling hills to Montague Island. Outside are formal gardens and a sprawling resort-style pool and barbecue area.

A string of properties now on the market will add to the multi-million-dollar sale list.

Nolan is marketing Silvermere Farm, a rolling estate and working sheep and cattle farm with expectations of fetching more than \$4.75m.

Set on 124ha about 10 minutes from Narooma and Tilba Tilba, the waterfront property features a striking architect-designed home, guest accommodation and a manager's residence, surrounded by paddocks running Angus cows and calves and Dorper ewes and lambs.

Nowra-based architect Colin Irwin at 1 Architecture designed the home in a series of wave-inspired pods, with views from every room out to the estuary and the open ocean.

Other prestige homes on the market include a Cape Cod-influenced four-bedroom home on the waterfront at 3B Hillcrest Lane, Narooma, with a wraparound veranda looking to the Wagonga Inlet, cathedral ceilings and a modern, gourmet kitchen with stainless steel and European fittings.