

# cyclones, dirt roads and neon signs

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By Blair McNamara

In the 1960's most of Queensland was still a wild frontier of bush, beaches and dirt roads. With the coming of mass car ownership most people could now access the areas beyond their towns. Brisbane at the time was like a big Nambour with a regional culture of nothing open on Sundays and cricket games in the street. Post-war families settled the hot sweaty hills behind Moreton Bay that were developed and named after notable British generals or aristocrats. As the suburbs merged, Chermside became Australia's first 'Drive-In' supermarket. The freedom of the automobile made weekend travel to the surf beaches of the north or south coasts (as they were known) increasingly popular. In the 1950's the North Coast consisted of a number of beachside resorts (like the Boolarong), with only two major towns, Caloundra and Nambour. Fibro surf life saving clubs were to be found at the major beaches and caravan and camping grounds provided the main form of holiday accommodation. By the mid sixties, motels and holiday apartments had sprung up and canal estates started. The South Coast was already in a domino effect as the beachside strip embraced new hotels, the bikini, nite clubs and scandalous playboys - all in the scintillating glow of 'Claude Neon' lights. The previously mined sands of Broadbeach to Mermaid Beach blazed into eyes as the cars travelled south to Tweed Heads to see the dolphins at Jack Evans'. Along the highway strip the telegraph poles were punctuated here and there by signage of celebrated American-style chintz. During the seventies most people had still never been to the far North Coast. Coolum Beach was rumoured to have big surf. With improvements to the Bruce Highway and the opening of the Maroochy Airport, the coastal villages of the coast came within easy reach of daytrippers from Brisbane and holidaymakers from the southern states. So popular did the localities become that many started to lose their individuality, as Mooloolaba merged into Alexandra Headlands and Maroochydore to the north and Kawana to the south. Coolum had avoided the bricks and mortar holiday makeover longer than other beaches, partly because of topography and has managed to retain a sense of its own identity to this day. The Noosa Heads topography attracted a different mindset of people - Victorians, the gardeners of Australia. As they travelled in their cars along the eastern seaboard for their annual holidays many saw Noosa as the leafy and sheltered alternative. Here Laguna Bay seemed to be protected, almost ethereally, from the 'one-big-esplanade' mentality that was and still is a generic quality of South-East Queensland coastal development. By the 1970's most of the headlands of Noosa to Sunshine Beach were declared National Park which halted the government/developer quantum of laying 'the highway' along the edge of the entire coast. This was an invaluable and hard-fought precedent for Queensland. Coolum's environmental relationship with Noosa influenced later governments to secure significant lands along Lake Weyba to Mount Coolum as inclusive sections of the Noosa National Park. Today the preserved flora surrounding Coolum is scientifically acknowledged as one of the last significant sites remaining on the Sunshine Coast. In one square meter of open heath "Wallum" lie a variety of plant species that outnumber any other observed area in Australia or the world.

Throughout the 1970's a series of annual cyclones flooded these ancient lands as storm surges breached some sections of the sand dunes and waves broke on the top walls of Coolum's main beach. The break line can still be seen along the second and third dune up the beach. The Gold Coast beaches as well as beachfront roads and properties were washed away which in turn created the highly controversial activity of stabilizing beaches with solid rock wall 'groynes'. The reality of Mother Nature also forced the local councils and government to reconsider any further sand dune developments. Today the Maroochy River is the only river on the open east coast of Australia that is free of a groyne. By the 1980's Coolum Beach went as strange as the pop music of the Sex Pistols. The Surf Air beergarden stopped bringing up 'the' bands as drink-driving made getting there and back illegal. The proprietor, Stan Elson was found dead in his other hotel swimming pool at Burleigh Heads. By 1983, a fourteen-story highrise had somehow ended up on the main beach of Coolum. Like a Star Wars space ship it had menacingly morphed from out of the ground. Below, on the opposite corner, Somers' Family Fare Store looked about as comfortable as a child at the dentist as a thousand truckloads of cement ascended into the sky. By then most of the hippies had moved on in their unregistered cars as their pregnant girlfriends were no longer able to post in their dole forms. In the 1990's, the famous Coolum Cinema was removed to be replaced with a Macca's and traffic lights were installed. Right now, in the 2000's the ghostly and lovingly pathetic sound of old Mr. English's banjo can still be heard late at night outside The Jaffle Inn 'down-the-front' and his homemade toys are available as collector's items, on E-bay. It is claimed that one of the toys was recently purchased as an accessory for the fitout of a 'Q-1' penthouse apartment on Surfers Paradise. Sources say that the interior designer "got it for a song" and that it was an exquisite signature piece for the 'Naïve' theme of the apartment's styling.