



COAST WITH THE MOST
Clockwise from below: Canoe outings with Saltwater Eco Tours explore the quiet upstream channels of the Mooloolah River; The Boat Mooloolaba; evening cruises on the same vessel are accompanied by expertly crafted cocktails.

MOOLOOLABA ON THE MOVE

On Queensland's Sunshine Coast, a new era is dawning for an oft-overlooked Australian beach town.

QUEENSLAND Despite its postcard beauty and idyllic weather, Mooloolaba has long lacked a certain polish; travelers in search of luxury on the Sunshine Coast have gravitated instead to Noosa Heads, some 40 kilometers to the north. Now, with the May opening of the **Avani Mooloolaba Beach Hotel** (*avanihotels.com*; from *US\$225 a night*), a fresh breeze is blowing through this laid-back seaside enclave.

With 180 rooms across 12 floors — some facing the Pacific Ocean, others the volcanic plugs of the Glass House Mountains — the Avani is the first luxury hotel built in the region in nearly four decades. It also marks the brand's Australian debut.

To say locals are excited is an understatement. “You’ll be able to get a coffee after 2 p.m.!” one resident tells me, referring to the hotel’s lobby bar. The pièce de résistance, however, is Sully’s Rooftop, a casual-chic perch with ocean views and a modern Australian menu. Executive chef Marky Godbeer makes full use of the local seafood, much of it sourced straight from the trawlers that dock along the narrow peninsula known as the Spit, which separates the Mooloolah River from the ocean.



COURTESY OF SALTWATER ECO TOURS; COURTESY OF THE BOAT MOOLOOLABA (2)



It is here that Kristine and Todd Young have opened **Fish House Steak & Grill** (*fishhousedining.com.au*), an up-market surf-and-turf spot. The Spit has long been a hub for families tucking into generous servings of shelled prawns and fish and chips. At Fish House, however, the menu leans into Asian flavors and premium local ingredients, with dishes like quick-smoked yellowfin sashimi and tempura prawns with fermented chili. “This is a world-class dining experience,” says Kristine, noting that until recently, diners would have had to go to Noosa or Brisbane for something comparable. “I really feel that in the next five to 10 years, Mooloolaba will be the hot spot.”

It helps, too, that in March Jetstar launched thrice-weekly flights between Singapore and Sunshine Coast Airport — a 15-minute drive from Mooloolaba — via Bali, opening the destination to both Asian and European travelers.

Everyone is preparing for an influx. The promenade is being upgraded with dedicated walking and cycling trails, as well as new parks and lookout points. At the popular **Dune by Pavilion** (*dunebypavilion.com.au*), which sits above the promenade, owner Shane Hepburn has spent the better part of two years transforming his rooftop into a beach bar with Mediterranean small plates and sweeping views.

On the river side of the Spit, **The**

SHORE ENOUGH
Clockwise from above: The dining room at Dune by Pavilion; poached Mooloolaba king prawn with wasabi, yuzu, pickled eschalot, and prawn bisque at Fish House Steak & Grill; views from Mooloolaba’s coastal boardwalk.



Wharf Mooloolaba (*wharfmoooloolaba.com.au*) brings together numerous activities and attractions, among them an oceanarium where visitors can walk through a clear acrylic tunnel as sharks and rays swim overhead. **Sunreef** (*sunreef.com.au*) offers even closer encounters with marine animals, running snorkeling tours to see resident hawksbill turtles and dives at a nearby gray nurse shark aggregation. In winter, swimmers can also enter the water with migrating humpback whales.

Derived from the local Kabi Kabi language, the name Mooloolaba means “place of the snapper fish.” **Saltwater Eco Tours** (*saltwaterecotours.com.au*), an Indigenous-owned operation founded by Torres Strait Islander Simon Thornalley, works with Kabi Kabi traditional

owners to offer water-based cultural experiences, including bushtucker cruises aboard a 120-year-old Huon pine ketch. More recently, it has introduced canoe tours along the quieter reaches of the Mooloolah River, led by guides who interpret the surrounding ecosystems.

Another addition to the waterways is **The Boat Mooloolaba** (*the-boat.com.au*). On weekends, the two-story vessel carries revelers along the river and canals for Sunday Socials, with fast-flowing cocktails and a DJ playing house and party tunes. Just as social, if more restrained, is **Tank Bathhouse** (*tankspa.com.au*), where communal magnesium pools are paired with an excellent restaurant and bar. It’s more day club than serene escape, but it suits Mooloolaba’s new mood to a tee. —**Carrie Hutchinson**