



Sea Sea hotel aims for win win blend of old cool and new vogue

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Highlight: Designer George Gorrow is behind a new surf hotel at Crescent Head in NSW, which he desperately hopes isn't the next Byron Bay.

Body

If there was such a thing as a slightly scruffy utopia, Crescent Head would fit the bill. Just under five hours' drive from Sydney (depending on how the Newcastle bypass roadworks are proceeding that day), "Creso" is the quintessential NSW surf town that time forgot. A council-owned caravan park hogs prime real estate on its foreshore. Clusters of surfers lean back on the hoods of their 4WDs in the beach carpark checking the right-handers that peel off perfectly from the craggy headland. Children paddle in the turquoise tidal inlet Killick Creek below.

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Louie Douvis

It's an unvarnished beauty, made even more memorable by a golden buttery light on my visit and the fact the town hasn't attracted the fanfare and overdevelopment other NSW coastal meccas like Yamba and Byron have. And that suits multidisciplinary designer George Gorrow and his wife, Cisco Tschurtschenthaler, just fine.

On November 1, the couple will open the doors to their 25-room [boutique hotel Sea Sea](#), a collection of low-slung, brown-brick suites and villas that blends a laidback, time-warped spirit of '70s Australian surf culture with progressive cultural immersion.

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Louie Douvis

"There are so many elements to this thing," says Gorrow, granting Life & Leisure the first look at the 6000 square-metre motel he acquired in 2022. "It's going to be a proper surf-culture hotel. We'll have our own surf souvenir shop. An audio lounge. Our own CC TV in-house channel which is like an old version of MTV 'surf-style', so when you go to your room you can just flick it on. An event space that will hold seasonal photography-based exhibitions, live performances, movie nights. A space dedicated to listening to music. A games room. And a lounge, restaurant and bar that will be accessible to the public, with the food by Daniel Medcalf [ex Icebergs] using the freshest produce from the Macleay Valley food bowl and wines by Mike Bennie.

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"We'll also have a rental fleet of surfboards available, which is a collaboration with Byron's Wild Things Gallery, that guests can book for their stay."

Located a five-minute stroll from the surf, two blocks back from the beach, Sea Sea in its previous life was a tired three-star motel with a kidney-shaped pool and restaurant enticingly called Wombats.

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It was decided that the building's original bones be retained but privacy became a priority. "I really loved those old motels all up and down the east coast, where you parked your car and walked in," says Gorrow.

"But you'd shut the blinds straight away. Everyone walking past could see straight in. They were goldfish bowls. We've bricked those up, setting the windows higher, retaining the skylights to let light stream in and emphasised each suite's garden areas, packing the beds with long grasses and natives and protecting them from eyes with timber screens."

Fashion fans will remember 52-year-old Gorrow as the co-founder of the cutting-edge yet controversial [Australian denim label Ksubi](#) he launched in 1999 with Dan Single, Paul Wilson and Gareth Moody, and resigned from as creative director 12 years later. In 2014, he moved with wife, ceramicist and model Tschurtschenthaler, to Bali and in 2016, the couple channelled their energy into the hospitality arena with the launch of Canggu's The Slow hotel.

Architectural/interior design projects followed, including Byron Bay's Soma (its owner Gary Gorrow is the Vedic meditation guru and George's brother); Bali's Sandhouse Berawa villa and the restaurant Times Beach Warung; as well as hospitality venues like Santa Monica's Éléphante and Los Angeles' Belles Beach House.

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"To me this place feels like early Bali," says Gorrow, dipping a bare foot in Sea Sea's 20-metre green-tiled pool, which is surrounded by palm trees, wooden decks, U-shaped lounges and pergolas. "The low-lying villas, the big gardens: that doesn't exist in Bali any more because developers just want to pack everything in, make everything out of steel and build higher."

He surveys the scene. "Imagine this spot in winter. The beautiful energy of fire from the fire-pit, steam coming off the pool..."

Key design elements throughout the space are exposed brick walls coated in a satin gloss to darken them slightly, and original golden-pine timber wall panels stained a darker teak to match the new furniture - a mix of vintage items and custom pieces the couple designed and had manufactured in Bali.

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Wooden touches give the place a hunting-cabin feel. Retro-style speakers (a collaboration with furniture brand Torre) pull double-duty as bedside tables. Polygon-shaped light sconces, hand-carved by American artist Aleph Geddis, hang on walls and glow red at night ("It won't break your circadian rhythm if you wake to go to the bathroom," quips Gorrow.)

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Artworks fashioned from raw wood frames predominantly comprise photographs with a '70s Australian surf-culture vibe, captured by the likes of Kate Bellm, Peter Crawford and legendary surf snapper Alby Falzon, whose iconic black-and-white shot of surfers at Crescent Head has been printed onto a frame shaped to resemble a decorative Bavarian-style cutout.

"It's a nod to my German heritage," says **Cisco** proudly, the intent being to honour the charms of the old in a new and inventive way.

The couple fell for Crescent Head because of its strong identity, and say it's a slice of paradise that needs to be celebrated in an authentic way. But converting rundown retro motels along Australia's east coast into luxe hotels isn't exactly an original concept. (Exhibits A, B and C: Cabarita's Halcyon House, Gold Coast's Mysa Motel and Byron's The Sunseeker).

"The thing is, we're not trying to evoke Palm Springs, southern California or Italy here," assures Gorrow. "Sea Sea is uniquely Australian in design, aesthetic and intent. We're not targeting the wealthy jet set from Sydney or Brisbane. You don't have to be a guest to dine in our restaurant or drink at the bar. And we've deliberately designed the frontage so it's open to the street to make the town and community feel they're invited in."

Studios and suites are priced between \$460 and \$508 a night, two-bedroom suites from \$600, and a villa with a private pool \$1250 - not exorbitant compared with competitors whose rates start at \$800.

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"This pricing has to draw in like-minded people," says Gorrow. "If you push those people out and chase a more cashed-up guest, suddenly they don't like your food or your music." He shrugs unapologetically. "I don't care if you put that in the story!"

That aside, Sea Sea appears to be a canny business decision. South towards Point Plomer, out along the newly asphalted (previously the notorious potholed dirt) back road and past the breathtaking Racecourse Beach, there's not a soul in sight. For the moment.

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Here, plans are under way to link four of the Macleay Valley Coast's national parks with walking trails (the Five Headlands Coastal Experience), an 80-kilometre trek that could rival Tasmania and New Zealand's best hiking tracks and draw even more visitors to the region.

In state forest just south of Kempsey, the addition of five new mountain-bike trails means the region now attracts biking enthusiasts from all over the country. And just up the road, 40 minutes' drive away at South West Rocks, lies the Fish Rock Cave dive site, considered one of Australia's best.

Or you could just stay put at Sea Sea, order yourself a negroni and immerse yourself in Gorrow's showcase of surf-community creatives. "Cis says to me, 'George, really? Are you going to add that to it? You're biting off more than you can chew here. Maybe on the next hotel you need to do it differently?'

"But I don't know how to do it differently. It's exciting to add all these bits to it. If you took one away, you'd be missing that. I like that it feels full. I go bang! And then I mould things. It's constant removing ... adding ..."

"What does Sea Sea stand for?" he asks, grinning. "It's fun."

Graphic

Cisco Tschurtschenthaler and George Gorrow at Sea Sea Hotel, Crescent Head.

Sunrise at Crescent Head.

Surfers love the ride-hand break off Crescent Head.

Local surf shop and the owner's dad, Chad, doing some touchup paintwork after an electrical fire.

Longboard surfer Lyn, who was at Crescent Head for a surf competition on the weekend that Life & Leisure visited.

Helen Eames from Noosa going for a morning swim.

Crescent Head and the local attractions. Point Break Cafe.

Old malibu boards for the surf competition.

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