

Solitary Islands Coastal Walk preview

13-17 August 2023

Situated in the vicinity of Coffs Harbour, northern NSW, the Solitary Islands Marine Park was established in January 1998. It covers an area of approximately 710 km², from the mean high water to three nautical miles offshore, including estuaries to their tidal limit. The marine park stretches for a length of 75km along the coast and takes its name from a suite of nine barren, rocky islands just offshore, of which five are included within the park. The islands were named by Captain Cook as he sailed past them on 15 May 1770.

Stretching over 60km within the marine park, the Solitary Islands Coastal Walk connects Red Rock in the north of Coffs Harbour with the coastal village of Sawtell to the south. (We clocked up 65km). The walk traverses a series of gorgeous sandy beaches, separated by rocky headlands and minor amounts of coastal rain forest. Kim and Trevor Rosen were keen to preview the walk as a potential BBI walk, and invited eight friends (from both BBI and the Melbourne Walking Club) along for the ride (so to speak).

Ten of us in all assembled in Coffs Harbour on Saturday, 12 August 2023, having driven from Melbourne via various devious routes. Kim had arranged for us to stay at the Big 4 Holiday Park and each couple had their own commodious and comfortable cabins (a step up from the normal caravan park cabins). The accommodation proved to be ideal and on three evenings we used the well-appointed camp kitchen and immaculate barbecues for a shared evening meal.

Kim's walk planning was, as always, immaculate. The key driver for when and how far we walked each day was the tide. The 60km route was divided up into five days, so none of the day walks were especially onerous. About two thirds of the walking was on the beach, and, in order to be certain of hard sand to walk on, Kim planned each walk around the day's low tide. This was especially relevant for the third day, when we had to cross a stream flowing across the beach.

Because of the linear nature of the walk, car shuttles were needed each day. On most days, five cars would set out together, then three would be dropped off at the finish point and two cars would proceed to the start. Then, the next day we returned to where we had stopped the night before. With all the driving, we came to know a short stretch of the Pacific Highway very well but were still very thankful for Google Maps to get us to the right beach and home again!

Day 1: Red Rock to Mullaway Beach – 14.5km

A warm (25°) and sunny day saw us in fine form for a group photo at Red Rock. This headland is reputedly the sight of a massacre of Gumbayngirr indigenous people in the 19th century. A memorial has been erected at the base of the headland to commemorate this. The massacre reputedly began at Blackadders Creek when mounted police entered the aboriginal camp. They started shooting and then pursued the survivors to the Red Rock River where they continued shooting. Some people were then driven off the headland. The headland was named Red Rock because the river went red from the blood of the indigenous people.

We descended the steps to Red Rock beach and headed off along a beautiful wide beach with spectacular views for a 6.5km walk to Corindi, where we stopped for coffee. (Kim's excellent planning not only took into account the tides but also ensured that a suitable venue was to hand each day for morning coffee!). There was no need to remove shoes when crossing Arrawarra Creek and then we headed up and over Arrawarra Headland and onto a series of bays before we finished our walk at Mullaway Beach with a late picnic lunch.

Day 2: Mullaway Beach to Sandy Beach – 12km

The Day 2 weather was a bit cooler but still mostly sunny as we set off along a series of beaches towards Woolgoolga ("Woopi" to the locals) for coffee. Then up onto the bare Woolgoolga

Headland, where the path took on a distinctly suburban characteristic with its concrete pavers. Steep wooden steps led us down to the Woolgoolga Back Beach from where we had terrific views out to sea towards South Solitary Island and its lighthouse.

We had lunch on the beach and then completed our walk to Sandy Beach.

Day 3: Sandy Beach to Sapphire Beach – 13km

This was the most tide dependent day, when we needed to cross the Moonee Creek at the lowest possible tide level. As each day passed, low tide occurred later in the day, so we had a leisurely start to Day 3.

The weather turned cool and windy on us, although the sun did increase through the day. We had a short walk to coffee at Emerald Beach before traversing a series of beautiful sandy bays, separated by rocky headlands. Just as on other days, we were virtually the only people on the beaches.

Some of the paths around the headlands went through quite dense scrub but then we came out onto Look At Me Now Headland, with great views north, south and out to sea. It also has a large population of kangaroos (roos with a view!).

Markers here record the service of the South Solitary Island lighthouse keeper and the long distance relationship between him and the Signal Hill station operator's daughter, who carried on nightly conversations in morse and semaphore. And occasionally, the lighthouse keeper would row 6km ashore for a picnic lunch on the beach with his fiancée before rowing back to work!

After traversing Look At Me Now Headland, we headed back to the beach for a long and windy walk along the hard sand Moonee Beach. We waded across Moonee Creek uneventfully before stopping for lunch. Then, we crossed one more headland and walked around one more bay to Sapphire Beach.

Day 4: Sapphire Beach to Park Beach – 11.5km

In the morning we visited Muttonbird Island, reached via the Coffs Harbour breakwater. The island is devoid of trees and has a boardwalk across its full length so as not to disturb the wedge-tailed shearwaters and their burrows. We encountered a keen team of volunteers weeding the island and met the ranger who was most informative about the shearwaters, which were just beginning to return from their annual Philippines sojourn.

We started walking in cool and windy weather, crossing a series of smaller sandy bays than we had encountered previously, each separated by a rocky headland. We also did more inland walking than previously, even along a few roads, with numerous sharp inclines and descents.

The weather warmed up a bit after lunch, as we walked the wide Park Beach back to the Big 4 Holiday Park, which like so many caravan parks is situated on prime beach frontage real estate.

Day 5: Park Beach to Bonville Headland, Sawtell – 14km

Another late start for Day 5. We had coffee in Coffs Harbour before setting off at midday along Park Beach, past the harbour and onto the historic jetty. We were promised that we would see turtles and rays but the water was too murky and choppy in the wind.

We found a spot out of the wind on Jetty Beach for lunch, before heading off along gorgeous Boambee Beach, 5km in length with hard sand providing exceptionally good walking and with the wind behind us for a change.

At the end of Boambee Beach, we crossed the creek on a combined rail and pedestrian bridge, which led us onto the path around Boambee Headland. The path took us back to our final beach and a 2km walk to Bonville Headland and the end of a terrific walking adventure.

Congratulations to Kim and Trevor for their fantastic planning and organisation.