



Paradise lost: The destinations that tourism ruined

11:00pm, Dec 10

NIGEL BOWEN

Chasing after cashed-up travellers is a risky business, writes Nigel Bowen. As seen in Airlie Beach, the easy tourist dollar might destroy the golden goose.



Middle-of-the-road tourists are killing the world's tourist destinations, says... Photo: Shutterstock

For as long as anyone can remember, Airlie Beach ("the gateway to the Whitsundays") has been a backpacker town, the kind of place full of hostels and raucous pubs packed with twentysomething Scandinavians getting drunk on \$10 jugs of beer. But no more. Airlie Beach has looked at towns such as Byron Bay and thought, 'We'll have some of that, thanks'.

And by 'some of that' they mean the patronage of middle-class, middle-aged, middle-of-the-road tourists of the kind who spend up big during the day and stay out of trouble at night. (As opposed to the rather more familiar type of visitor who lives on two-minute-noodles and is prone to engaging in noisy sexual congress in local parks after pub closing time.)

With barely disguised distaste for all those who made the town what it is

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Airlie Beach has long been known as a backpacker town.

today the local tourism authority, Whitsundays Marketing and Development, is frantically trying to rebrand Airlie as 'the new Byron Bay' (expect to see a rash of articles on that theme in the months to come).

The town has had a \$20 million revamp and, according to the CEO of

Whitsundays Marketing and Development, is keen to drive a stake through the heart of the backpacker town reputation and "move it to the next level".

A tourist town wanting to attract cashed-up, fiftysomething German dentists rather than tightfisted British teenagers on a gap year is one of those strategies that seems to make perfect economic sense but ultimately doesn't. Just as every takeaway shop can't simply exponentially increase its profits by relaunching as a five-star restaurant, every coastal holiday destination with an eye on the main chance can't just rebrand itself as the new Byron Bay.



Airlie Beach is changing rapidly.

“ One of those strategies that seems to make perfect economic sense but ultimately doesn't. ”

The problem facing the good burghers of Airlie Beach is that there's already an *old* Byron Bay for upmarket tourists to go to, not to mention the likes of **Qualia** and **Hayman Island** a short ferry or plane trip away. Frankly, it's going to take rather more than zhushing up the main drag and the opening of a few cafes charging \$8 for a soy latte to attract your discerning, high-net-worth individual to Airlie Beach.

What's far more likely to happen is Airlie Beach's traditional customers – not only foreign backpackers but also low to middle income Australians wanting an affordable beach holiday – will get the message they are no longer welcome and head elsewhere (to some neighbouring seaside village destined to become known as "the new Airlie Beach") while the much lusted-after big spenders fail to materialise in anything like the numbers projected.

End result? The people of Airlie Beach will find themselves stranded in the not particularly lucrative no-mans-land between 'backpacker town' and 'five-star resort' while yet another vibrant, if somewhat raffish, holiday destination will have been ruined by an ill-conceived cash grab.

Other holiday destinations being ruined by gentrification

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Berlin.

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