

Free Fall

Finding Home in Moruya's Sky

Written by Preeshita Shah

The plane doors lurched open as a gush of cold wind ran across my cheeks. My heart hammered against my ribs as adrenaline flooded my system. I glanced at my instructor, Bindi, before looking out of the plane and down at my altimeter: 15,000 feet, it read. I edged closer to the door of the plane. One knee down, one knee out.



*Check in, check out, horizon. Out. In.
JUMP.*

Time suspended as I arched through the air. The wind's roar silenced my ever-moving thoughts. In that moment between earth and sky, I glimpsed what drew people from across the globe to this unassuming coastal town, just four hours south of Sydney. More than just a place to fall from planes, Moruya has become a sanctuary where ordinary people transform into skydivers. On the South Coast of New South Wales, the small, sleepy town of Moruya, known for its black swans and farm stalls, might seem an unlikely epicentre for one of the world's most exhilarating sports. But here, nestled between stunning coastline and the winding Moruya River, exists what many consider the ultimate training ground for aspiring skydivers, holding near-mythical status. Unlike drop zones that prioritise tandem jumps for tourists, Moruya has crafted an entirely different atmosphere — one built around nurturing students through their Accelerated Free Fall (AFF) courses. The program consists of nine progressive stages that take

students from jumping with two instructors holding onto them to completely solo freefalls with complex manoeuvres in the air. Each successful stage brings them one step closer to the coveted A-license, the international passport to jumping anywhere in the world. "Reddit confirmed over and over again that Moruya was the best place for student learners because they're actually geared towards students," says Gibson Luu, a 30-something recent graduate of the AFF program. The drop zone's structure is designed to immerse students, rather than simply achieve rushed certifications. Courses run over a full week, with small cohorts of four to five students who progress together through stages of theory, practice and freefall. This hands-on approach operates in stark contrast to the 'get them in, get them out' method of sites that cater primarily to tourists. Bindi Watson, an instructor with around 1,700 jumps under her belt, says this is part of what makes Moruya so special. "Our courses run over a week, so students really get time to build a

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connection with their instructors. They meet other skydivers, see what sticking with the sport can lead to, and become part of the community.” This intensive format creates an environment where learning becomes a shared journey, Gibson says. “Going through the course with the same four or five people really helps. You watch people grow in the sport,” he explains. “When you land, you’re 20 metres away from each other, and as you’re picking up the parachute, the first thing you hear is, ‘How was that?’ And you’re yelling back, ‘Oh yeah, that was fucking sick!’ You all understand how ridiculous this hobby is.” Unlike many drop zones that operate as daytime attractions, Moruya offers on-site accommodation that transforms the experience from a brief adventure into total immersion. “The accommodation felt like boarding school,” Gibson laughs, “but it’s the whole vibe — you’re just constantly living the hobby.” The site becomes a microcosm of the broader skydiving community, giving newcomers exposure to the sport’s culture, values and pathways. “Meeting people who have 2,000 jumps, but also meeting your classmate who flew all the way from India and had never done a jump before — that wide range of experience really paints a picture of what skydiving is about,” says Gibson. Han Lee, a 25-year-old who travelled from Singapore for his AFF course, was struck by this aspect. “I’ve played many sports, but I haven’t been in a community that’s so warm and welcoming for beginners. Everyone is just so humble,” he says. In the field, the atmosphere strikes a delicate balance between playfulness and safety. Gibson recalls, “You’re allowed to goof off in class and say stupid things, but the moment the parachute goes on and the jumpsuit is zipped up, it’s all business.”





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The mix of fun and firm guidance creates a space where students can relax while still taking training seriously. Instructors know when to be stern, but they also understand that skydiving doesn't come instinctively to most people. There's understanding, not judgement — and that balance makes all the difference. Bindi embodies this philosophy, maintaining a healthy respect for the sport's risks while focusing on building confidence rather than fear. “Learning to fly isn't something that comes naturally, and you only get about 50 seconds to nail it each time,” she explains. “We've all had off days, and every experienced jumper started at jump one. It's all part of the process.” Not every student's journey follows a perfect arc. After breaking her tailbone during a landing, 22-year-old Nicola returned from Sydney to finish her training after a year, driven by the same reasons she started — to challenge herself, step out of her comfort zone and push her limits. For Nicola, the personalised attention she received through smaller class sizes became vital. “When I went back after my injury, the smaller groups gave me the chance to spend more one-on-one time with the instructors, going over the jumps and practising,” she explains. “The support and camaraderie at Moruya definitely played a big part in helping me enjoy the journey and keep going.” Even when things don't go as planned — which in skydiving, they often don't — preparation and support make all the difference. Gibson experienced a line twist on his first solo jump, a potentially dangerous situation where twisted parachute lines can affect proper canopy deployment. “It was like being in a really slow car accident where you can see it coming, and in your head you're just like, ‘This is why I should have gone to church!’” he laughs. The realities of the sport aren't hidden from students, with instructors candidly discussing friends lost to skydiving. “The circles are small,” Gibson says. “They all know someone who maybe pushed the extremes a little too hard and unfortunately lost their lives.”

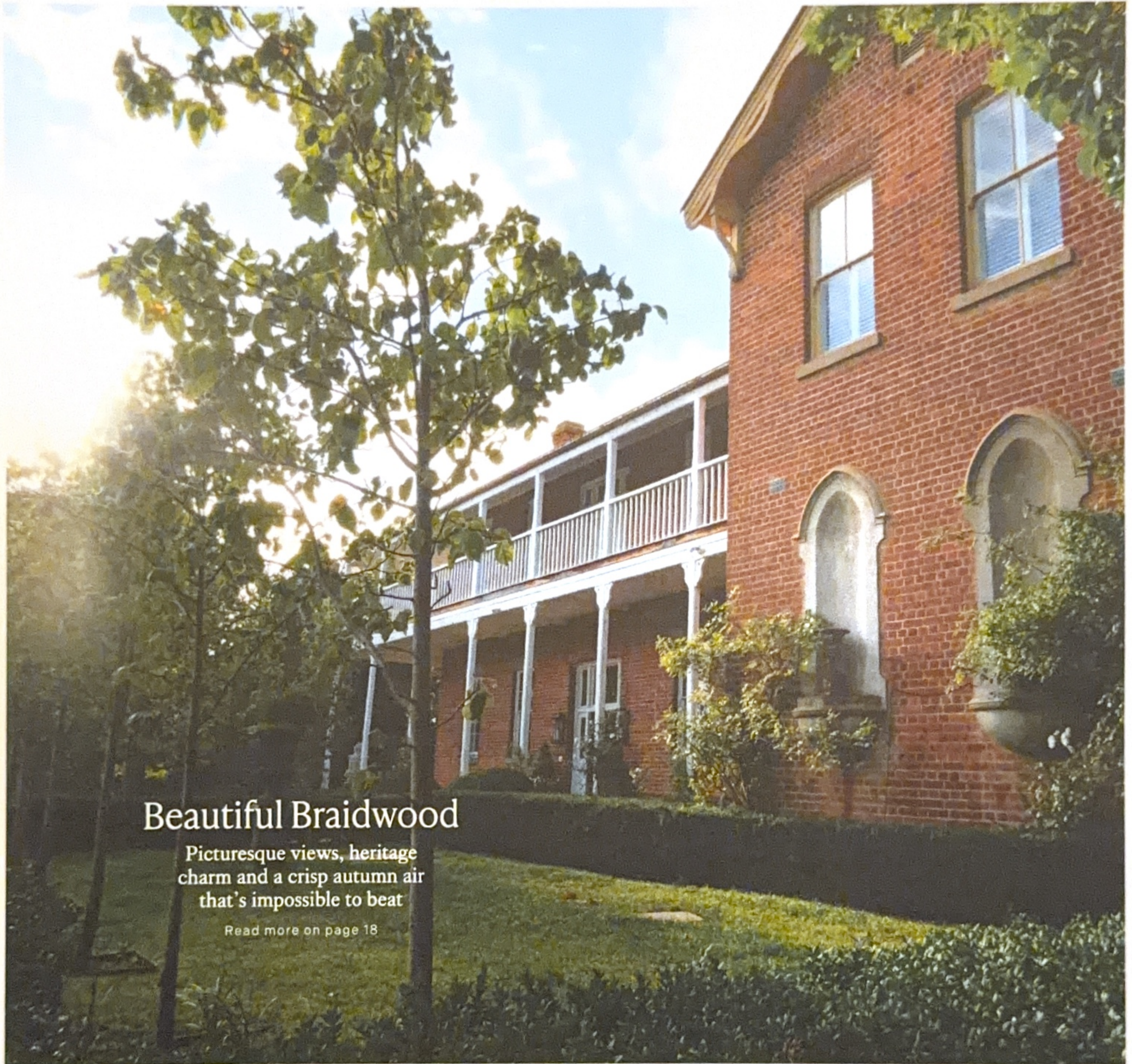


What makes Moruya truly unique goes beyond the drop zone. The relationship between the coastal community and its skydiving-obsessed visitors has evolved into an unusually supportive environment for students. “You can feel that the whole town understands there’s a bunch of freaks jumping off planes nearby,” Gibson laughs, “and I don’t think they’re ever surprised if they have to go watch someone land in the trees next to them.” With the beach and coastline on one side and the meandering Moruya River cutting through lush fields on the other, students experience scenery that rivals any drop zone in the world. Perhaps the most telling testament to Moruya’s special quality comes from those who continue returning long after earning their licences. Gibson recalls meeting a father-son duo from Dubbo who insisted, despite closer options, that Moruya felt like home. “At the time I thought, ‘Okay, you must be strangely sentimental,’ but now that I’ve got my licence and jumped in other places, I fully understand. Moruya does feel like home.” Bindi shares a similar sentiment. “It wasn’t just about getting people in the air. It was personal, welcoming, and had a strong focus on learning and safety. There was

this guiding, supportive vibe that made it easy to trust the process — and at the same time, it was ridiculously fun.” Years after landing in Moruya and making it home, she sees this pattern repeating with her own students — including her very first. “He still jumps at the drop zone today, and I get to see him regularly. It’s moments like that that remind me why I love instructing, being part of someone’s journey.” As the plane circles back toward the drop zone, I watch the next group of students prepare for their jumps. Their faces mirror the same mix of excitement and apprehension I felt throughout my course. Below, the Moruya River glitters in the afternoon sun, winding between green hills toward the Pacific Ocean. “It’s hard to put into words what skydiving brings to your life,” Bindi reflects as we watch the students’ canopies blossom against the blue sky, “but for me, it completely changed what I believed I was capable of.” She smiles as the students make their approaches to landing. “Moruya is a place for everyone, whether you’re a beginner or an experienced flyer breaking world records. The camaraderie here is strong, the banter is next level, and it’s the kind of place where some people show up and just never leave.”



South
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Well-Mannered ^{PG. 116}

A local artist's rebellious take on who the modern, 'well-mannered' woman is

Freedom Flight ^{PG. 108}

Learning the importance of perseverance and community in Moruya's sky