

**T**he Queen's Baton Relay is launched by the monarch herself at Buckingham Palace tomorrow. The royal message will pass through 70 nations and territories before being read out, 388 days later, at the opening ceremony for the XXI Commonwealth Games, to be held in Queensland, Australia.

But why wait more than a year to join in the fun? The Gold Coast, an hour's drive south of Brisbane, is hosting most of the events, and many of the venues are already in place and can be enjoyed either free or for the price of a protein shake or two. Grabbing my Speedos and a bucket of sunblock, I set out to test a few before the medal-hunters roll up next April.

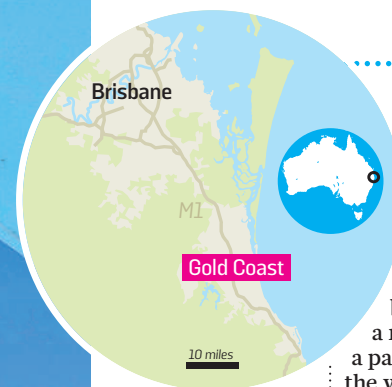
The Gold Coast is a city as well as a stretch of coast. Both are sports mad. Blessed with magnificent beaches and 300 days of sunshine a year, here it seems everyone can be an athlete — even a lazy Pom like me. “The Gold Coast makes you want to get outside and train,” says Ryan Fisher, a 25-year-old triathlete who lives in the city's Burleigh Heads suburb. Ryan was 24th at the Rio Olympics and has every chance of being in the Australia squad next year.

When I visit Southport Broadwater Parklands, a swathe of landscaped grounds and open water where the triathlon will be staged, it's easy to understand why so many Aussie sports stars like Ryan choose to live and train here. And how does he relax after his punishing swimming, cycling and running sessions? “Oh, I go surfing,” Ryan says. On his doorstep are some of the most famous breaks in the world.

My first test comes up the road at the Gold Coast Aquatic Centre, where the swimming and diving events will be held. The best view over this huge outdoor complex is from its 10-metre diving platform — well, until I look down and decide this probably isn't the day I attempt a Tom Daley-style armstand back triple somersault. Instead, I go for a swim in its glistening new 10-lane pool. Next year, seating for 10,000 spectators will be added, but for now anyone can take a dip for £3.50 ([goldcoast.qld.gov.au](http://goldcoast.qld.gov.au)).

Swimming 50 metres, I quickly realise, is a fair old slog and makes me appreciate the achievements of athletes such as Brenden Hall, an Australian paraswimmer who lost his right leg aged 6 and set a world 400m freestyle record at the London 2012 Paralympics. Next year, Brenden, 23, could be going up and down this very pool eight times in little more than four minutes. One of the strengths of the Commonwealth Games is that parasports are integrated into the daily programme rather than added on afterwards, as at the Olympics.

The cycling road races will start and finish on the Currumbin beachfront. A good place for Lycra-lovers to get in the mood is Piccolo Espresso, a cool cafe on Hythe Street, in the suburb of Miami, a few miles north. It's owned by the local sprint hero Robbie



beaches, as well as beginners' classes where you're invited to “come down and get sandy”.

The place to head, though, is Coolangatta, where a temporary stadium will be built. This southern suburb has a relaxed vibe and a surf club with a panoramic restaurant overlooking the white sand (mains from £15; [coolangattasurfclub.com](http://coolangattasurfclub.com)).

Playing volleyball here is exhilarating, but hard work in the heat, and I'm grateful for the soft landing given my frequent pratfalls. Thankfully there are not many watching — unlike at the games,

**With magnificent beaches and 300 days of sunshine a year, here it seems everyone can be an athlete — even a lazy Pom like me**

**Piking early** A diver gets in some practice at the Gold Coast Aquatic Centre. Below, Nigel's not getting anything past the Olympian Natalie Cook; and the lawn bowls ace Lynsey Clarke

which will attract an estimated global audience of 1.5bn. Among those who lobbied for the sport's inclusion in 2018 was Queenslander Natalie Cook, a five-time Olympian. She lists the many skills I'll need to master before stardom beckons — there's the “pokey”, where you hit the ball with bent forefingers, and the art of “woodpeckering” (sledging, essentially).

Less energetic is lawn bowls. The games venue for this is the recently upgraded Broadbeach Bowls Club, where anyone can enjoy a two-hour “barefoot bowls” session on the four championship greens (£4.30; [broadbeachbowls.com.au](http://broadbeachbowls.com.au)). The sport has had a radical mood change, and here you'll find pounding rock music and a lively bar with gaming tables.

What's the secret of winning? “Power, aim and concentration,” says Lynsey Clarke, captain of the Jackaroots, the Australian national team, and a resident of nearby Helensvale. It's a privilege to play on a pocket of emerald grass that's been bowling along since 1951, but I do worry about my ball straying into a neighbouring “rink”. What happens in that eventuality? “You buy a lot of drinks,” Lynsey says. Her steely look tells me she's not joking.

The verdict? Those Aussies may be competitive, but they're immensely sociable, too, and the games have found an ideal host in the Gold Coast. And here's a tip: if you fancy hanging out with them, get yourself along to Southport Yacht Club on Thursdays, when its genial members hold a free Twilight Sailing race open to all ([southportyachtclub.com.au](http://southportyachtclub.com.au)).

Which is how I find myself on board a 47ft yacht called Pole Dancer with 12 strangers, grinding and trimming inexpertly in a three-hour race. It's superb fun, even though we come last. For once, winning doesn't matter. The sports superstars can go for gold, but a cold beer back in the bar with my newfound friends feels just as good.

● Nigel Tisdall was a guest of Tourism and Events Queensland. The Gold Coast 2018 Commonwealth Games run April 4–15 ([gc2018.com](http://gc2018.com)). For more about the region, see [visitgoldcoast.com](http://visitgoldcoast.com) and [queensland.com](http://queensland.com). Cathay Pacific flies to Brisbane via Hong Kong; from £670 ([cathaypacific.com](http://cathaypacific.com)). Or try Singapore Airlines ([singaporeair.com](http://singaporeair.com))

# Gold rush

Anyone can compete at the venues for next year's Commonwealth Games — and there's no better way to bond with sports-mad Aussies, says **Nigel Tisdall**



McEwen, who won three green jerseys in the Tour de France. The day I catch him here, he's downing a beetroot smoothie and sitting beside a £10,000 bike.

Robbie's a TV commentator now, and suggests that I take a spin along the cyclepaths that border much of the Gold Coast's 35 miles of beaches. I hire a bike from Somebody Cycle Hire, in Surfers Paradise, the coast's entertainment hub, and follow a breezy route north to the woods and dunes of the Federation Walk Coastal Reserve (£12 for two hours; [somebodycyclehire.com.au](http://somebodycyclehire.com.au)). This culminates in a long jetty at Nerang Head with splendid views back to the coast's massed skyscrapers.

Just about everyone I pass seems to be tanned, toned and active, while the seafront has exercise stations, showers and beach volleyball courts. The sport will feature in the games for the first time next year, and there are public nets on all the main