

Beyond the City Limits

A Comprehensive Regional Tourism Analysis

DSpark

2023-10-03

Regional Tourism in Australia

Following a highly successful collaboration to examine the recovery of Australia's Central Business Districts (CBDs) post-pandemic, the Tourism & Transport Forum (TTF) Australia commissioned DSpark to turn its attention to regional Australia. Together, we attempted to **discover how regional tourism destinations are faring in 2023** to provide valuable insights for Australia's tourism, transport and aviation sectors.

Since COVID-19, many regional tourism operators have benefited from Australians' growing appetite for domestic travel. However, tourism providers continue to face a range of challenges, from increased cost pressures to finding staff amid the pervasive skills shortage.

We hope the findings serve as an important tool to inform industry and government responses to these challenges, by **identifying the most popular regional destinations for Australian travellers, the areas which have experienced the most growth since the pandemic, and the impact of age and residence on Australians' regional travel choices.**

What are the most popular tourist destinations in Australia?

Challenge

We needed to identify the **most popular regional destinations for domestic travel in Australia** in summer and autumn 2022–23 (i.e. 1 December 2022 to 31 May 2023). In addition to looking at total regional tourism, we analysed visitation by age group and state of residence. We also compare the total number of nights spent in each region to the same period pre-COVID (i.e. summer and autumn in 2018–19) to see how regional visitation has changed over time.

Findings

- The top 10 destinations for domestic travel in Australia are the **same for all age groups**.
- Residents typically **travel within their home state**.
- Regional tourism has **increased by 9% on average** since pre-pandemic levels.

The findings from this report can be used to inform and target regional development and tourism planning and infrastructure.

Analytical approach

To identify the top regional domestic tourism destinations, we analyse all 77 [tourism regions \(TRs\)](#), except for the non-regional TRs of “Canberra”, “Sydney”, “Brisbane”, “Adelaide”, “Hobart and the South”, “Melbourne”, “Melbourne East”, “Destination Perth” and “Darwin”. **We then identify the top 10 TRs by the total number of nights spent in the region.** By using total nights as a measure of visitation we can account for both the number of people who visit a region and the length of their stay.

Within each of the top 10 TRs, we then identify the top three [SA3s](#) (2016 boundaries) to reveal the most popular destination in the most popular regional tourism regions.

We do this for **all Australian residents aged 20 and over, on an [overnight trip](#)** (i.e. on a trip with at least one night away and a minimum of 40km away from the person’s place of usual residence). To understand preferences by age group, we then split the population into the following age cohorts according to their age at the time of travel:

- Younger Australians (20–29 years old)
- Middle-aged Australians (30–64 years old)
- Older Australians (65+ years old)

We then compared the results of the study period (1 December 2022 to 31 May 2023) to the pre-COVID baseline (1 December 2018 to 31 May 2019).

Key findings

1. The top 10 regional tourism destinations are **North Coast NSW (NSW), South Coast (NSW), Gold Coast (Qld), Hunter (NSW), Sunshine Coast (Qld), Australia's South West (WA), Peninsula (Vic), Great Ocean Road (Vic), Central NSW (NSW), and Central Coast (NSW)**. These regions occur in Australia's four most populous states and are close to major population centres, which supports the idea that most domestic overnight trips are intrastate. All regions are coastal, except for Central NSW.
2. People spend on **average three nights in each region**, with the average nights spent trending downwards over the top 10 regions.
3. All regions experience **more total nights compared to the baseline** period, with North Coast NSW and Gold Coast enjoying the most growth.
4. The top SA3s in each region are typically the home to the larger cities and towns, which makes sense given they have the most accommodation infrastructure. However, the number one SA3 is not necessarily the most populous centre in the region.

Australia's top regional destinations are mostly coastal



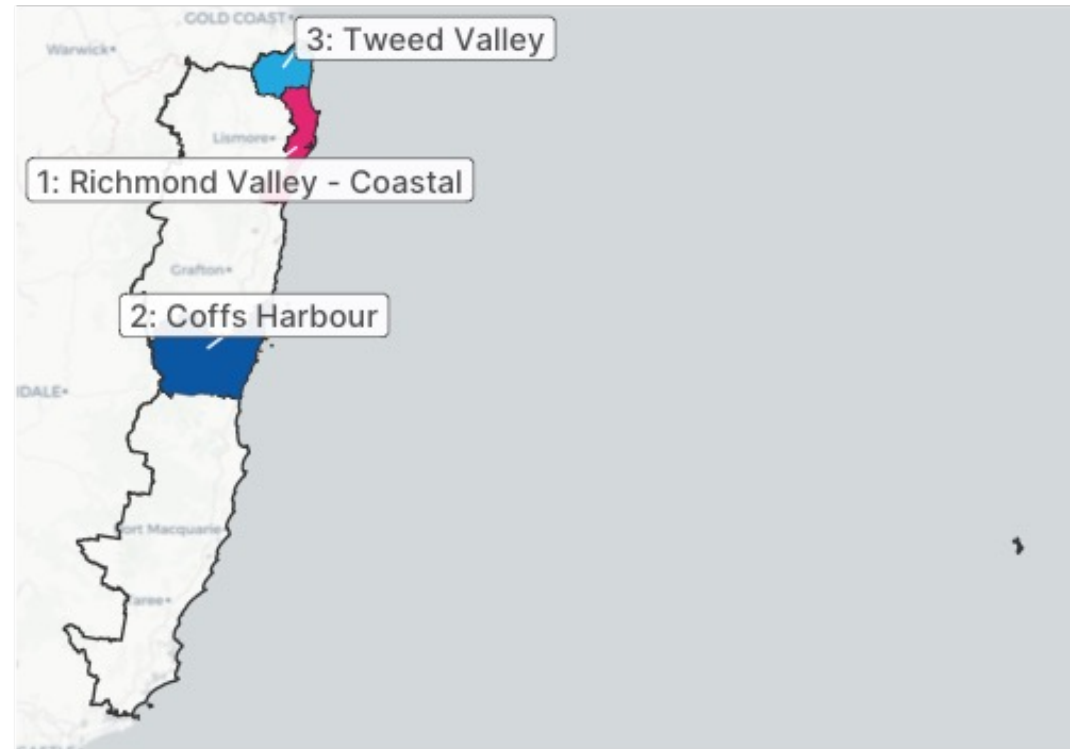
Tourism Region Rank 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Total nights are up compared to baseline

Rank	Tourism Region	Visitation change (total nights)	Average nights stayed in the region
1	North Coast NSW	4.2%	3.4
2	South Coast	4.2%	3.1
3	Gold Coast	14.3%	3.3
4	Hunter	7.5%	2.6
5	Sunshine Coast	14.0%	3.1
6	Australia's South West	15.9%	3.1
7	Peninsula	10.5%	2.6
8	Great Ocean Road	5.8%	2.7
9	Central NSW	9.4%	2.6
10	Central Coast	2.0%	2.5

North Coast NSW (NSW) - top destinations

Rank	SA3 name	Urban centres
1	Richmond Valley - Coastal	Ballina, Byron Bay, Alstonville, Lennox Head
2	Coffs Harbour	Coffs Harbour, Woolgoolga
3	Tweed Valley	Gold Coast - Tweed Heads (Tweed Heads Part), Murwillumbah, Pottsville



SA3 Rank 1 2 3

South Coast (NSW) - top destinations

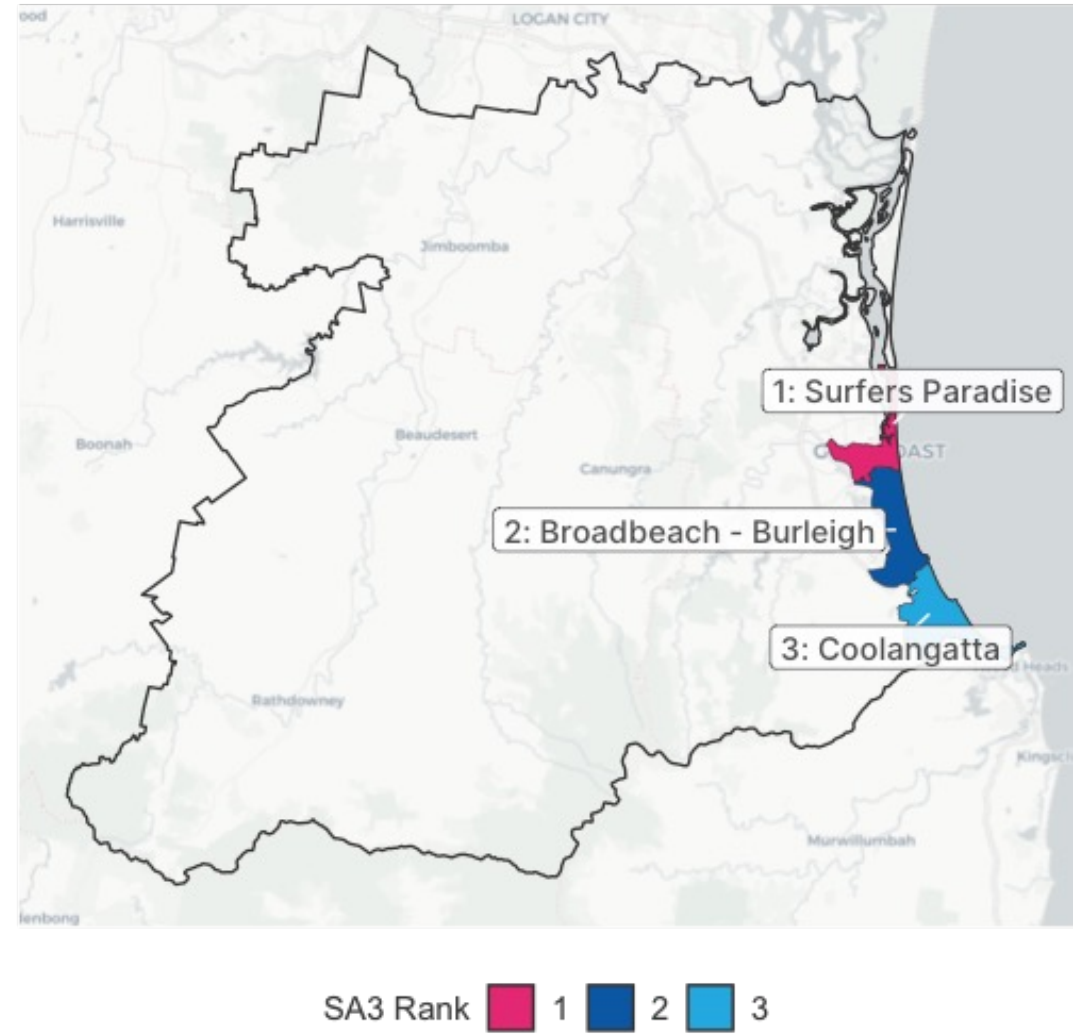
Rank	SA3 name	Urban centres
1	Shoalhaven	Nowra - Bomaderry, St Georges Basin - Sanctuary Point, Ulladulla
2	South Coast	Batemans Bay, Merimbula
3	Wollongong	Wollongong, Helensburgh



SA3 Rank ■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3

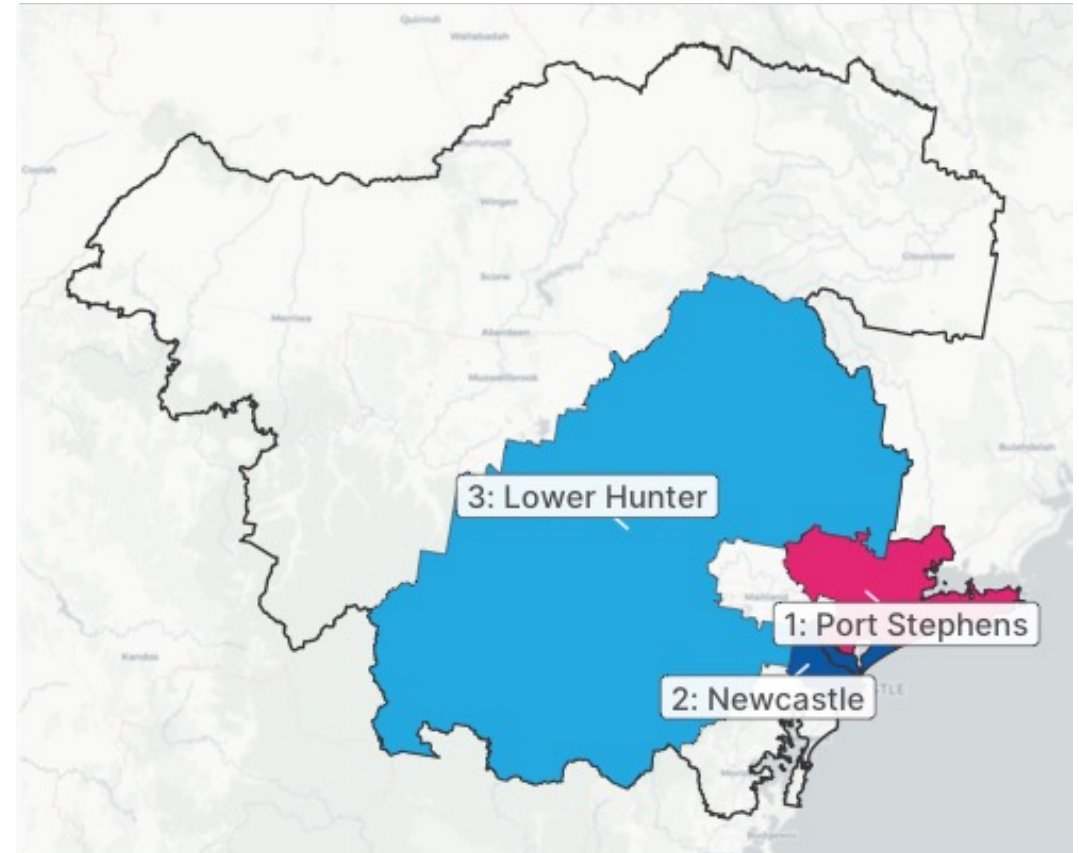
Gold Coast (Qld) - top destinations

Rank	SA3 name	Urban centres
1	Surfers Paradise	Gold Coast - Tweed Heads (Gold Coast Part)
2	Broadbeach - Burleigh	Gold Coast - Tweed Heads (Gold Coast Part)
3	Coolangatta	Gold Coast - Tweed Heads (Gold Coast Part)



Hunter (NSW) - top destinations

Rank	SA3 name	Urban centres
1	Port Stephens	Medowie, Nelson Bay, Raymond Terrace, Salamander Bay - Soldiers Point
2	Newcastle	Newcastle, Maitland (NSW)
3	Lower Hunter	Cessnock, Kurri Kurri, Singleton



SA3 Rank 1 2 3

Sunshine Coast (Qld) - top destinations

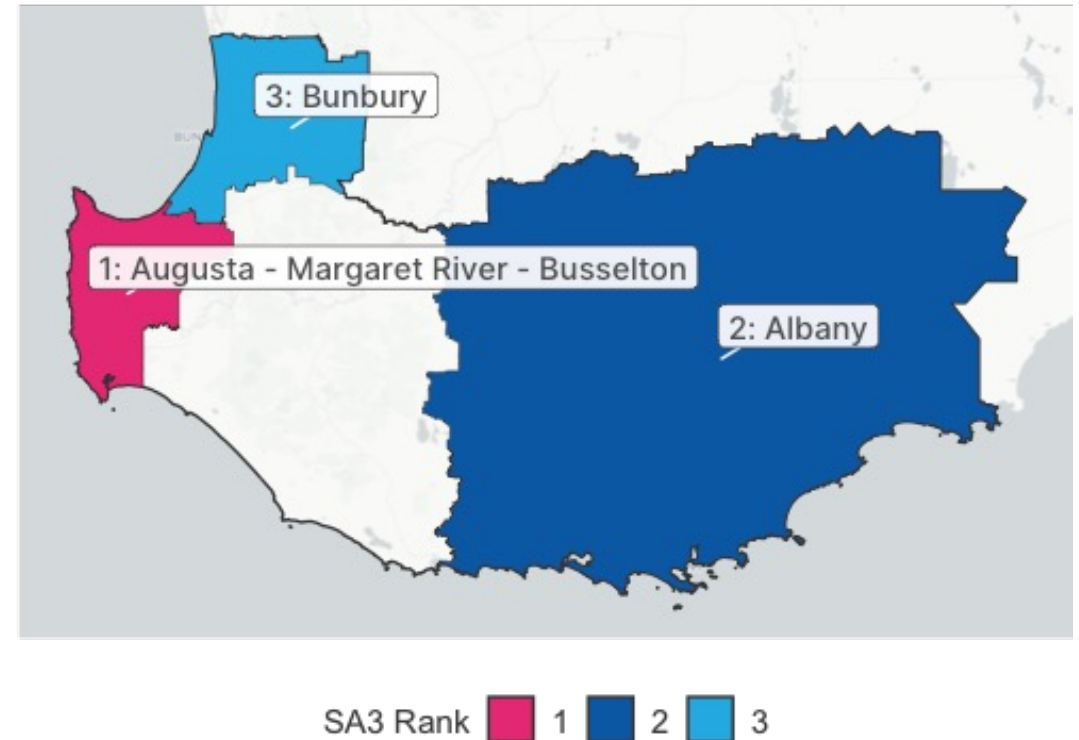
Rank	SA3 name	Urban centres
1	Maroochy	Sunshine Coast
2	Noosa	Sunshine Coast
3	Caloundra	Sunshine Coast



SA3 Rank ■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3

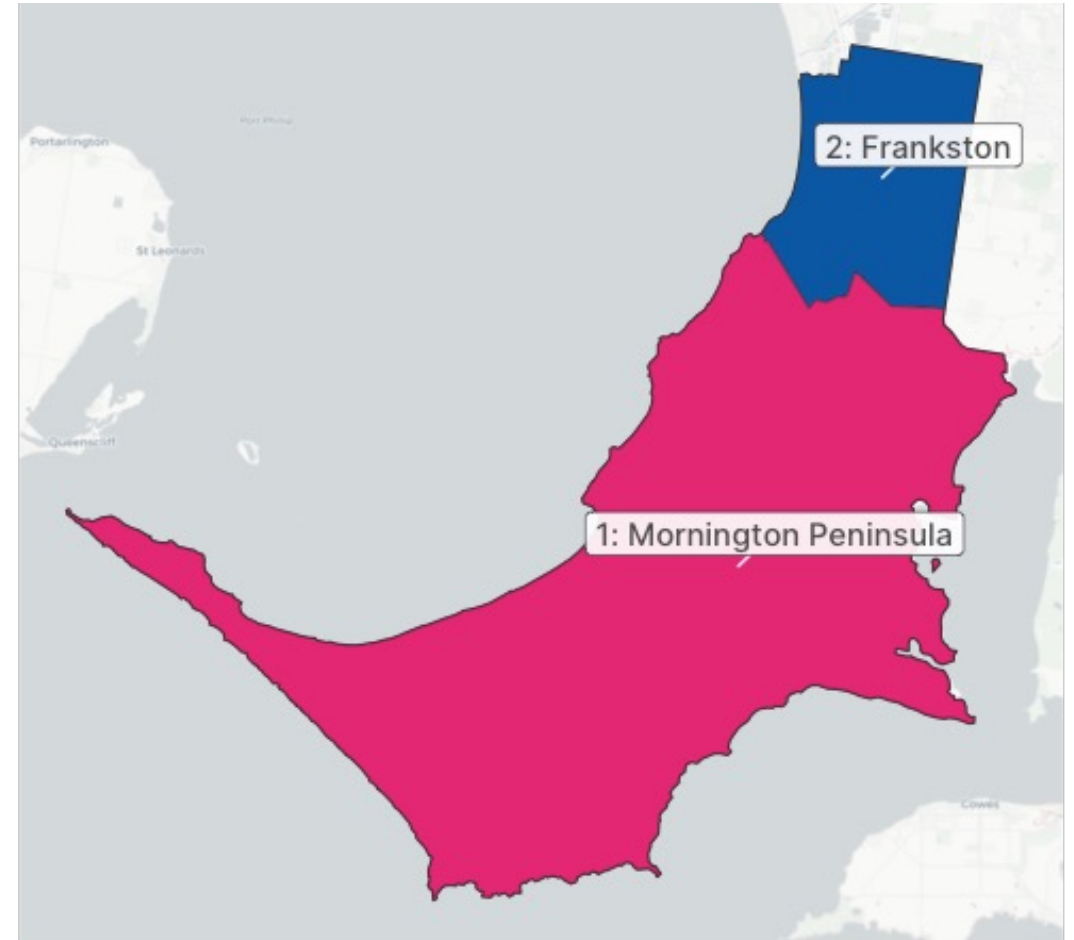
Australia's South West (WA) - top destinations

Rank	SA3 name	Urban centres
1	Augusta - Margaret River - Busselton	Busselton, Dunsborough, Margaret River
2	Albany	Albany
3	Bunbury	Bunbury, Collie



Peninsula (Vic) - top destinations

Rank	SA3 name	Urban centres
1	Mornington Peninsula	Melbourne
2	Frankston	Melbourne



SA3 Rank ■ 1 ■ 2

Great Ocean Road (Vic) - top destinations

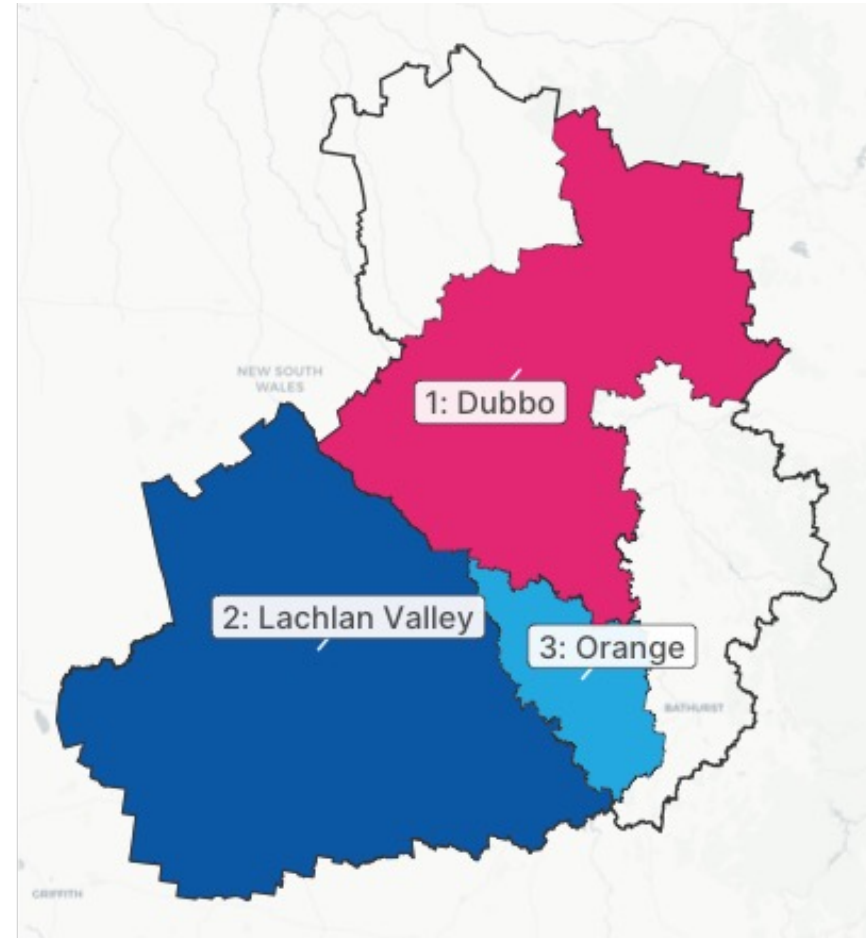
Rank	SA3 name	Urban centres
1	Surf Coast - Bellarine Peninsula	Geelong, Ocean Grove - Barwon Heads, Torquay - Jan Juc, Drysdale - Clifton Springs, Point Lonsdale - Queenscliff, Portarlington - St Leonards
2	Warrnambool	Warrnambool
3	Colac - Corangamite	Colac



SA3 Rank ■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3

Central NSW (NSW) - top destinations

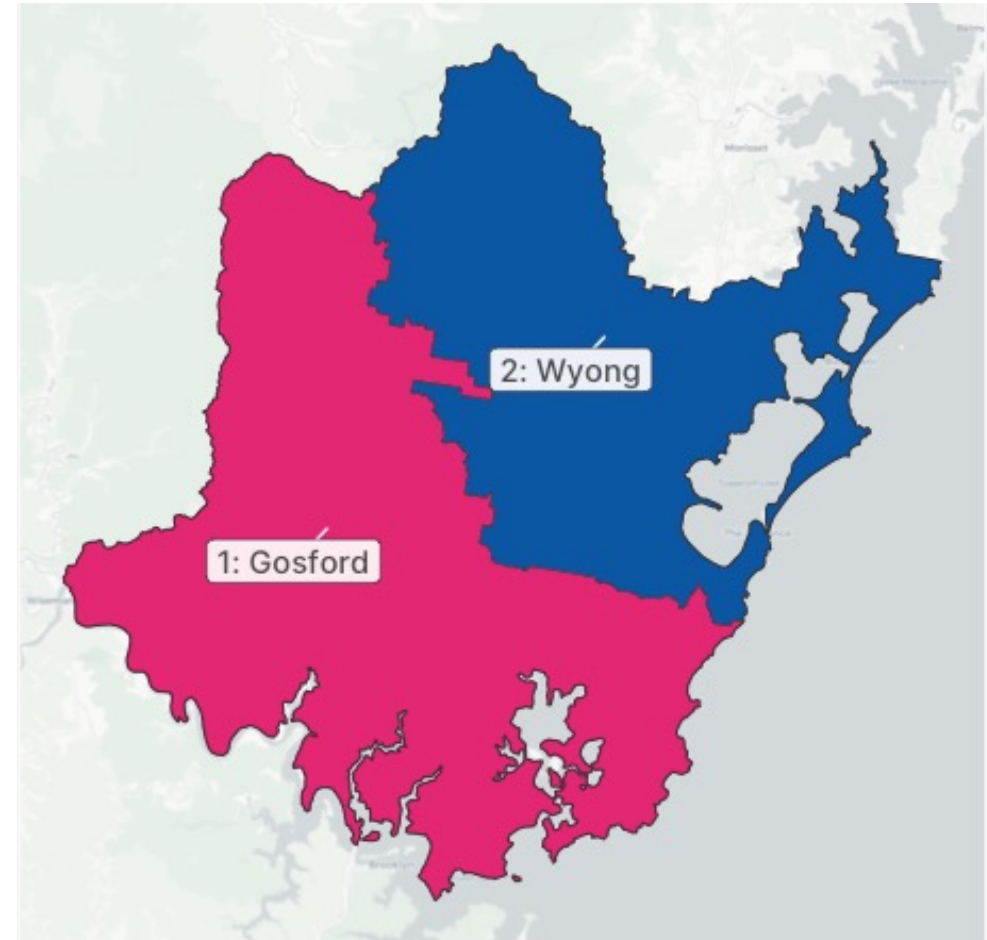
Rank	SA3 name	Urban centres
1	Dubbo	Dubbo
2	Lachlan Valley	Cowra, Forbes, Parkes
3	Orange	Orange



SA3 Rank ■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3

Central Coast (NSW) - top destinations

Rank	SA3 name	Urban centres
1	Gosford	Central Coast
2	Wyong	Central Coast, Summerland Point - Gwandalan



SA3 Rank ■ 1 ■ 2

Top regional destinations by age group

- The **top 10 regional destinations for each age group are the same**, however the rank order varies slightly. This suggests that the most popular destinations have broad appeal and cater to a wide range of interests.
- While most regions are enjoying greater visitation (total nights) than pre-COVID, **some areas have fewer younger and older visitors**. For example, total nights spent by Younger Australians in Great Ocean Road are at 89% of pre-COVID levels.
- **Older Australians spend the most time per region**, with about 3.5 nights per trip. This contrasts with Younger Australians who only stay about 2.5 nights.

Younger Australians ' (20–29yrs) top 10 tourism regions



Tourism Region Rank ■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5 ■ 6 ■ 7 ■ 8 ■ 9 ■ 10

Younger Australians' visitation

Rank	Tourism Region	Visitation change (total nights)	Average nights stayed in the region
1	North Coast NSW	-5.1%	3.1
2	Gold Coast	11.7%	2.9
3	South Coast	-3.9%	2.6
4	Hunter	0.2%	2.5
5	Sunshine Coast	4.6%	2.7
6	Australia's South West	8.1%	2.8
7	Central NSW	11.4%	2.6
8	Peninsula	-0.6%	2.2
9	Central Coast	-3.1%	2.3
10	Great Ocean Road	-11.4%	2.3

Middle-aged Australians ' (30–64yrs) top 10 tourism regions



Tourism Region Rank  1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Middle-aged Australians' visitation

Rank	Tourism Region	Visitation change (total nights)	Average nights stayed in the region
1	North Coast NSW	6.5%	3.3
2	South Coast	7.7%	3.1
3	Gold Coast	17.7%	3.3
4	Sunshine Coast	17.3%	3.1
5	Hunter	9.1%	2.5
6	Australia's South West	18.8%	3.1
7	Peninsula	15.9%	2.6
8	Great Ocean Road	8.4%	2.7
9	Central NSW	9.1%	2.5
10	Central Coast	6.1%	2.5

Older Australians ' (65+yrs) top 10 tourism regions



Older Australians' visitation

Rank	Tourism Region	Visitation change (total nights)	Average nights stayed in the region
1	North Coast NSW	6.3%	4.0
2	South Coast	1.0%	3.7
3	Gold Coast	4.9%	4.1
4	Sunshine Coast	12.3%	3.7
5	Hunter	11.5%	3.1
6	Peninsula	4.7%	3.0
7	Australia's South West	15.1%	3.7
8	Great Ocean Road	17.8%	3.1
9	Central NSW	8.1%	2.8
10	Central Coast	-4.9%	2.9

Most popular destinations for local residents

When it comes to regional tourism, **most Australians tend to travel within their home state or territory** (except for Canberrans, as the ACT Tourism Region is excluded from the analysis).

The following analysis looks at the top five regional destinations for the residents of each state and territory. While these destinations could be anywhere in Australia, we find that there is a strong preference for intrastate travel.

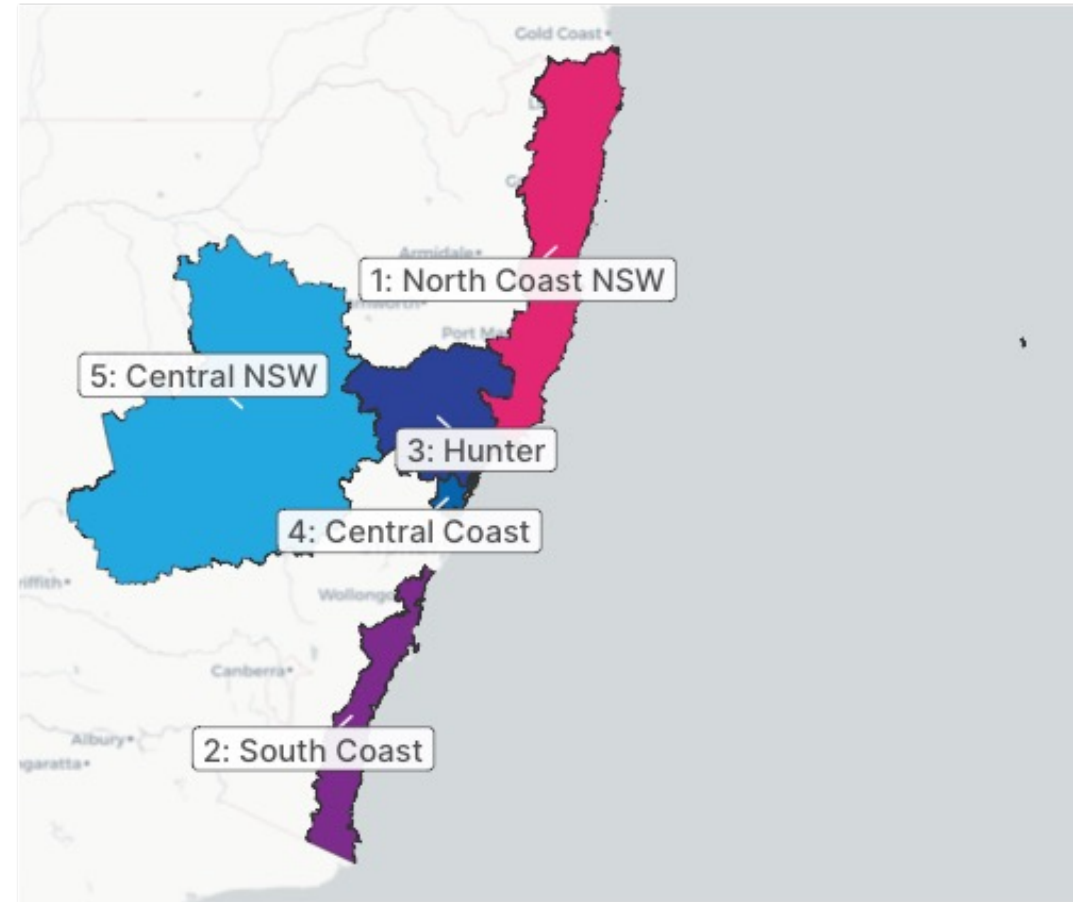
Gold Coast is the most popular interstate destination, with it appearing in the top five destinations of Western Australia, Tasmania, Northern Territory and Australian Capital Territory. The Gold Coast also has some of the longest average stays, at around 4.7 nights on average.

The majority of the popular tourism destinations are **experiencing more tourism nights compared to the baseline**. Tourism nights from Northern Territorian and Tasmanian residents have increased dramatically, in some cases up to 70%.

New South Wales resident visitation

Rank	Tourism Region	Visitation change (total nights)	Average nights stayed in the region
1	North Coast NSW	6.7%	3.5
2	South Coast	4.3%	2.9
3	Hunter	6.7%	2.5
4	Central Coast	2.1%	2.4
5	Central NSW	10.9%	2.5

The most popular regional destination for New South Wales residents across of Australia is North Coast NSW. On average New South Wales residents stay there for 3.5 nights, and visitation is up 7% since pre-COVID.



Tourism Region Rank ■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5

Victoria resident visitation

Rank	Tourism Region	Visitation change (total nights)	Average nights stayed in the region
1	Peninsula	11.0%	2.5
2	Great Ocean Road	6.3%	2.6
3	Geelong and the Bellarine	5.7%	2.3
4	Gippsland	2.5%	2.3
5	High Country	16.2%	2.6

The most popular regional destination for Victoria residents across of Australia is Peninsula. On average Victoria residents stay there for 2.5 nights, and visitation is up 11% since pre-COVID.



Tourism Region Rank ■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5

Queensland resident visitation

Rank	Tourism Region	Visitation change (total nights)	Average nights stayed in the region
1	Sunshine Coast	9.7%	2.7
2	Gold Coast	3.9%	2.4
3	North Coast NSW	-2.3%	2.9
4	Southern Queensland Country	10.7%	2.5
5	Tropical North Queensland	13.8%	3.1

The most popular regional destination for Queensland residents across of Australia is Sunshine Coast. On average Queensland residents stay there for 2.7 nights, and visitation is up 10% since pre-COVID.

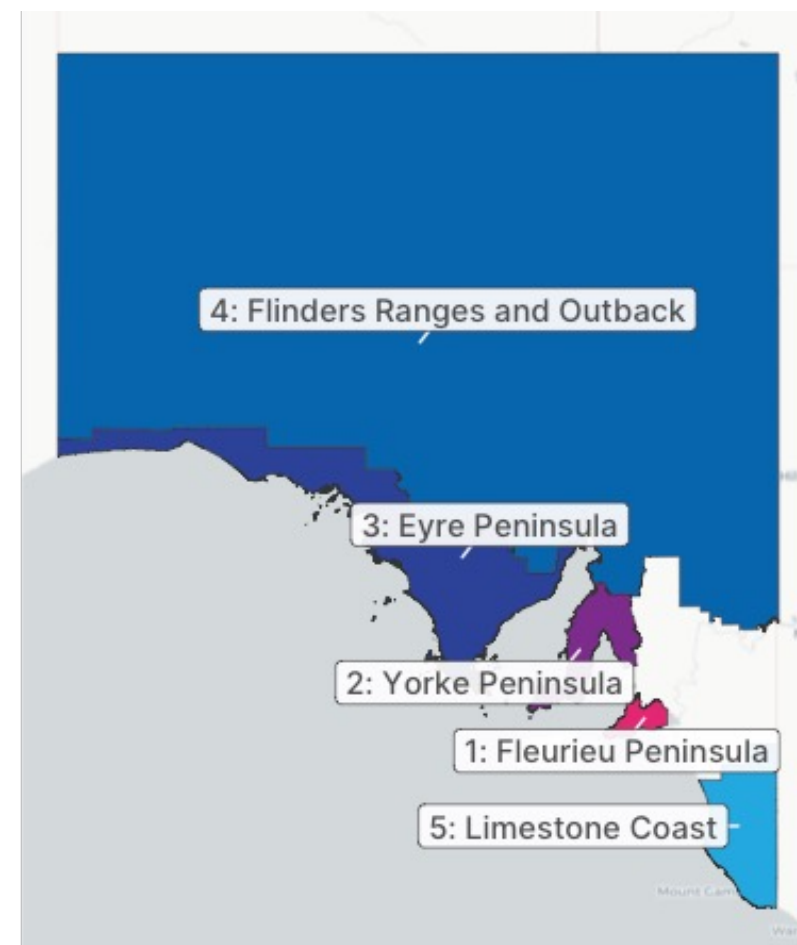


Tourism Region Rank ■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5

South Australia resident visitation

Rank	Tourism Region	Visitation change (total nights)	Average nights stayed in the region
1	Fleurieu Peninsula	13.8%	2.4
2	Yorke Peninsula	17.7%	2.8
3	Eyre Peninsula	20.5%	3.4
4	Flinders Ranges and Outback	23.0%	3.2
5	Limestone Coast	11.5%	2.6

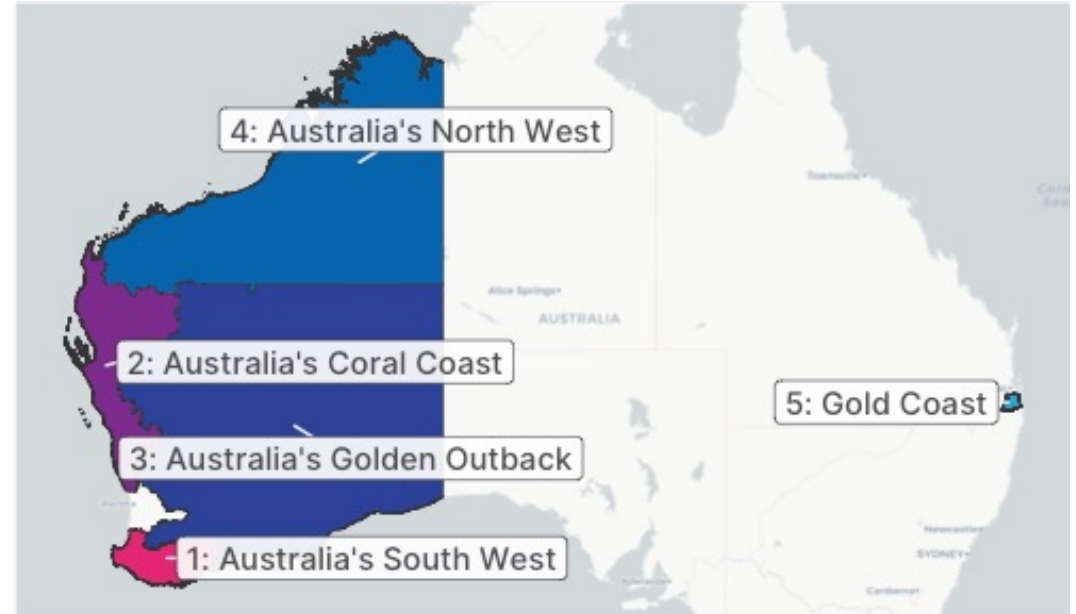
The most popular regional destination for South Australia residents across of Australia is Fleurieu Peninsula. On average South Australia residents stay there for 2.4 nights, and visitation is up 14% since pre-COVID.



Tourism Region Rank ■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5

Western Australia resident visitation

Rank	Tourism Region	Visitation change (total nights)	Average nights stayed in the region
1	Australia's South West	14.2%	3.0
2	Australia's Coral Coast	18.6%	3.3
3	Australia's Golden Outback	24.6%	3.4
4	Australia's North West	36.8%	4.6
5	Gold Coast	18.8%	5.1



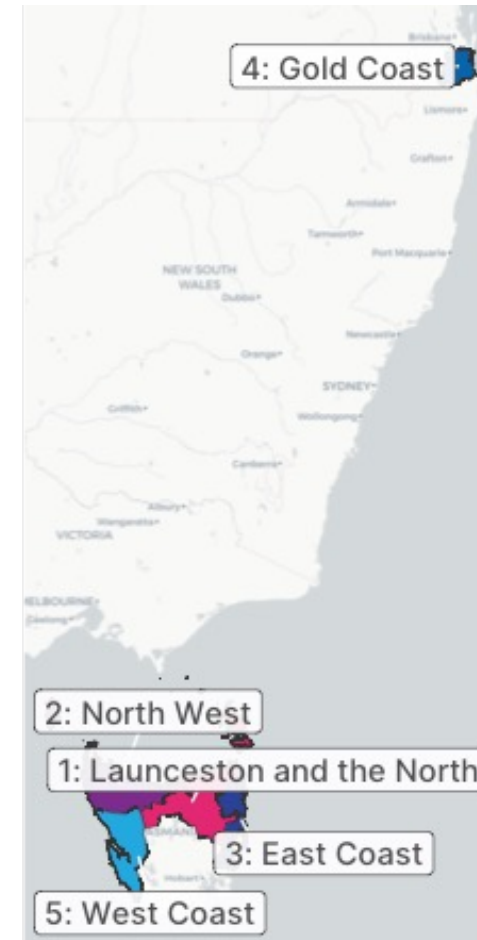
Tourism Region Rank ■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5

The most popular regional destination for Western Australia residents across of Australia is Australia's South West. On average Western Australia residents stay there for 3 nights, and visitation is up 14% since pre-COVID.

Tasmania resident visitation

Rank	Tourism Region	Visitation change (total nights)	Average nights stayed in the region
1	Launceston and the North	37.3%	2.2
2	North West	29.2%	2.4
3	East Coast	35.1%	2.7
4	Gold Coast	69.5%	5.8
5	West Coast	31.1%	2.7

The most popular regional destination for Tasmania residents across of Australia is Launceston and the North. On average Tasmania residents stay there for 2.2 nights, and visitation is up 37% since pre-COVID.

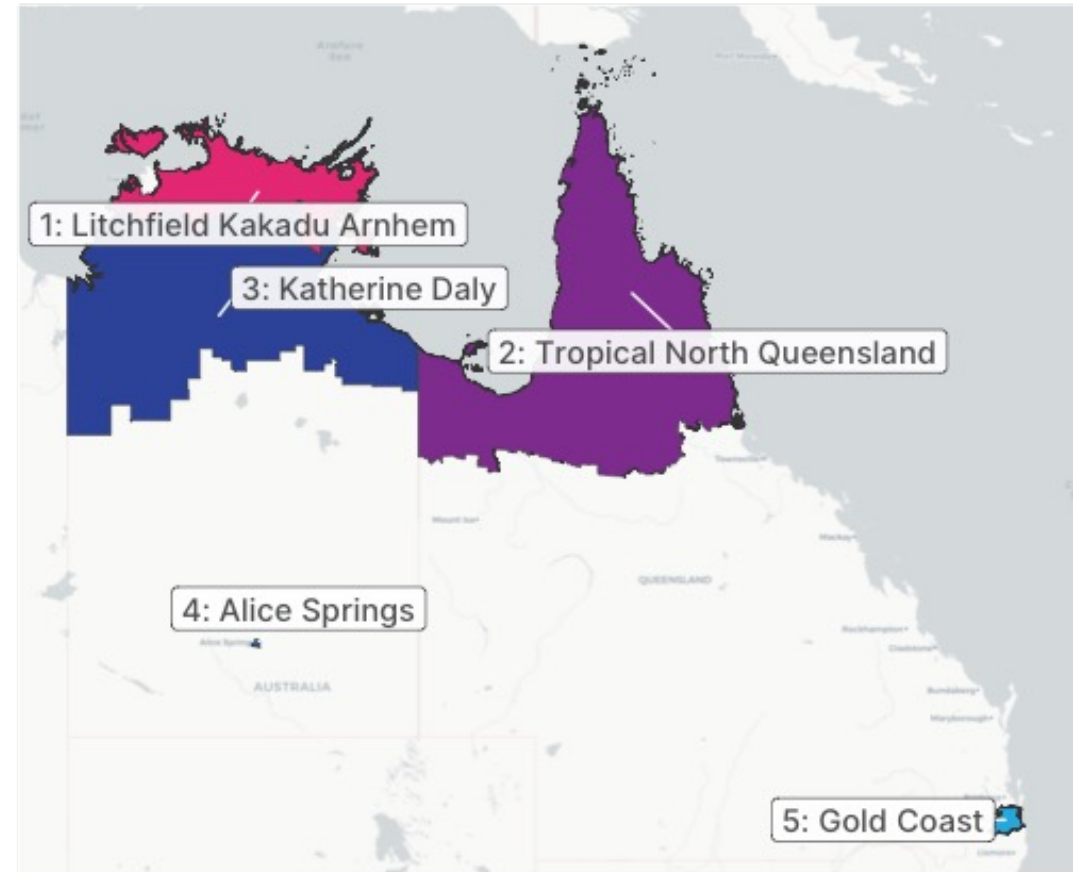


Tourism Region Rank ■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5

Northern Territory resident visitation

Rank	Tourism Region	Visitation change (total nights)	Average nights stayed in the region
1	Litchfield Kakadu Arnhem	70.6%	2.4
2	Tropical North Queensland	29.4%	6.3
3	Katherine Daly	19.0%	2.5
4	Alice Springs	6.1%	3.0
5	Gold Coast	-6.9%	5.0

The most popular regional destination for Northern Territory residents across of Australia is Litchfield Kakadu Arnhem. On average Northern Territory residents stay there for 2.4 nights, and visitation is up 71% since pre-COVID.

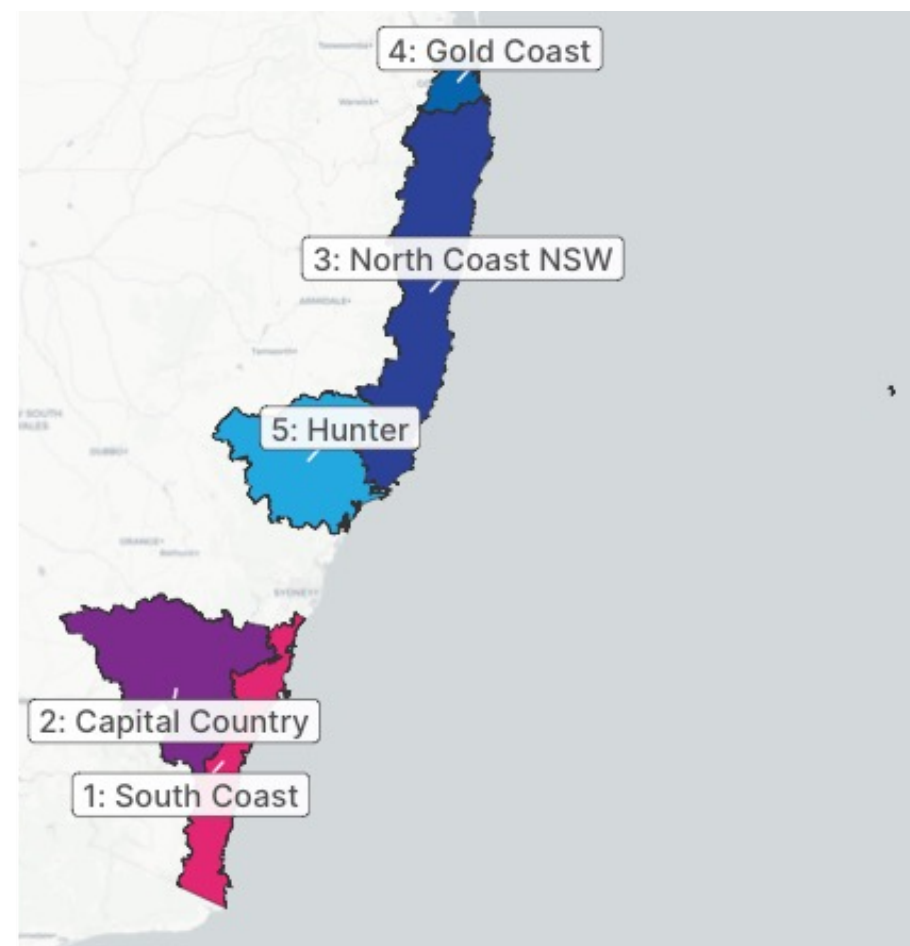


Tourism Region Rank ■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5

Australian Capital Territory resident visitation

Rank	Tourism Region	Visitation change (total nights)	Average nights stayed in the region
1	South Coast	3.7%	3.1
2	Capital Country	5.2%	2.0
3	North Coast NSW	8.0%	4.4
4	Gold Coast	40.2%	4.9
5	Hunter	12.5%	3.1

The most popular regional destination for Australian Capital Territory residents across of Australia is South Coast. On average Australian Capital Territory residents stay there for 3.1 nights, and visitation is up 4% since pre-COVID.



Tourism Region Rank ■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5

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