

Down by the river

Worthy of more than just a day trip, the Hawkesbury region is rich in history and rural bliss

WORDS & PHOTOS BRIAR JENSEN

'THE RIVER'S JUST the beginning' says the Hawkesbury River region's tourism slogan. The waterway wiggles erratically like a freshly exposed garden worm, twisting back on itself so many times that early European explorers thought it more than one river. The Dharug people called it Deerubbin, meaning 'wide, deep water', but Governor Arthur Phillip renamed it in 1789 after his encounter on a search for fertile farming land to feed the colony. Despite now being in the path of rampant urban sprawl, the Hawkesbury proudly retains its rural roots and close-knit communities, making it a 'nourishing' holiday destination within an hour of central Sydney.

With a week to explore, I begin heading north to Wisemans Ferry, joining the convict-constructed Great North Road at Baulkham Hills. Now called Old Northern Road, it passes through Castle Hill and Dural. I take a coffee break at Glenorie

Bakery Café, reminiscent of a country farmhouse kitchen with the aroma of freshly baked bread. From here the road climbs into sandstone country and the city feels a world away. Pulling up at Hawkins Lookout, it's apparent why Governor Phillip saw the Hawkesbury as "so noble a river". It glistens benignly two hundred metres below, belying its power, while eucalypt-clad hills corral verdant river flats on its far bank.

Wisemans Ferry, on a hairpin bend in the Hawkesbury, is named after emancipated convict, Solomon Wiseman, who inspired Kate Grenville (his great-great-great-granddaughter) to write the novel, *The Secret River*. On the route of the Great North Road, Wiseman ferried passengers and stock across the river in 1827, making it Australia's oldest continuously operating ferry service. His sandstone house, Cobham Hall, the upstairs section of which is now a museum, forms part of the Wisemans Inn Hotel.

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Along with the historic pub, the village boasts the Ferry Artists Gallery (a community run art gallery), a book exchange, a smart Grocer Café, The Retreat at Wisemans (where I spend the night), and Busby's Café Restaurant, which offers views to the chiselled sandstone cliffs of Dharug National Park across the river.

Eager to experience the secretive creeks Kate Grenville depicted, I hire a kayak from Able Houseboats and head upstream to Webbs Creek, against the tide, so I can get an easy ride back. It's hard going and I drift swiftly backwards whenever I stop paddling to take a photo. As the creek narrows, the bush

closes in and crows caw mournfully, giving me a sense of the isolation pioneering settlers must have felt.

In the morning I take the car ferry across the Hawkesbury to Settlers Road and the Convict Trail at Devines Hill. Closed to traffic, this arduous section of the Great North Road is now a World Heritage Site in Dharug National Park. Interpretive signage explains the cutting-edge engineering feats of the time that gave curved stone walls and buttresses, all hewn from the surrounding sandstone by leg-chained convicts. Thanks to the fantastic Convict Road app, I walk the 1.8km track in the digital company of these convicts, as well as a present-day ranger and cute wildlife, bringing history alive for both adults and kids.

The drive along Settlers Road continues the journey back in time. The unsealed road follows the Macdonald River through bucolic farmland and the Forgotten Valley into the hamlet of St

Main image: Getty Images



Albans. The sandstone Settlers Arms Inn, built in 1836 to serve cattle drovers, still attracts a crowd at weekends with live music under the trees and in the company of peacocks and chooks. Licensee, Ian Burns-Woods, took over the pub 30 years ago. Mid-week it's the domain of a few locals, who Ian greets by name as he shows me historical photos on the walls.

History runs deep here, with several families being direct descendants of the first settlers. Everyone is fiercely proud of their 'Common', which they recently saved from a government land grab. Established in 1824, it provided farmers communal grazing for stock in compensation for the small size of their land grants. It makes a picturesque drive - pelicans float on waterholes and cattle meander freely, until a fierce afternoon thunderstorm sends me scuttling to my accommodation.

The convict-built St Albans Historic Courthouse is now a self-contained B&B perched on the side of a hill. A young tree-changing family has given it a new lease of life with a swimming pool, goats in the paddock and swish bathrooms that were once its jail cells. Sitting on the front veranda, wine in hand, I have a vista straight down the narrow river valley below, where a flock of cockatoos explodes raucously out of the trees.

After breakfast, I follow Upper Macdonald Road deeper into the valley, past organic pecan farms to Bandusia Country Retreat. Owner Penny Pyett also runs the Permaculture Sydney Institute, so rather than laze by the pool, I take up her offer of a property tour, learning about wicking pots, food forests and mandala beds, before enjoying a communal meal fresh from the garden.

I return to Wisemans Ferry the next morning via St Albans Road, past shimmying poplar plantations once destined to be matchsticks. I cross the Hawkesbury again, this time on the Webbs Creek Ferry, then take narrow River Road past water ski parks and Black Diamond Wakeboarding School. On my third ferry crossing at Sackville, I marvel at how it operates 24/7 and it's free. Lunch is at atmospheric Tractor 828 in Sackville, in what was once a service station, before continuing to Ebenezer.

The sandstone Settlers Arms Inn, built in 1836 to serve cattle drovers, still attracts a crowd at weekends



MEET A CHEETAH

Mentioning wild cats out here invokes tales of an elusive black panther rumoured to stalk the area. However, there are African wild cats - caracals, servals and cheetahs - at the Wild Cat Conservation Centre in Wilberforce. With fewer than 7000 cheetahs left in the wild, captive insurance populations are critical and Ben Britton heads Sydney's only cheetah breeding program, which supports his work in Botswana. Book a private tour for unprecedented, but respectful, interaction with a cat on an enrichment walk or a cheetah meet-and-greet, while learning about their conservation. Having a cheetah purr beside you is an unforgettable experience. wildcatcentre.org.au



(L-R): Tizzana Winery looks like it belongs more in Tuscany; the Sackville free ferry only ever stops for periodic maintenance; Hangman's Cave on the Convict Trail at Devines Hill; Solomon Wiseman's statue standing proudly at Wisemans Ferry; one of the spectacular Proteaceae on display at Blue Mountains Botanic Garden.



History buffs will appreciate Ebenezer Church. Built in 1809, it's Australia's oldest remaining church and volunteers operate a small tearoom from the adjacent schoolhouse. The Australiana Pioneer Village is at nearby Wilberforce and open on Sundays, making it a fun family experience with picnic facilities amongst historic buildings and Clydesdale horses. I loop back to Tizzana Winery and, over a tasting in the cellar, owner Peter Auld tells me the fascinating history of the Italian medical doctor, Thomas Fiaschi. He established the vineyard here in 1889 and this explains why the place resembles a Tuscan villa. There are two guest rooms and mine has a stunning view over vines to a lagoon backstopped by bushland.

The following day I head to Windsor, the largest of the five 'Macquarie towns' that include Wilberforce, Richmond, Pitt Town and Castlereagh. Governor Lachlan Macquarie established them on higher ground in 1810 in order to mitigate the loss of food stores from floods. A plaque outside Windsor's Macquarie Arms Hotel describes the highest flood ever recorded as a whopping 19 metres in 1867.

The river is calm, albeit muddy from construction of a new bridge at Windsor, during a cruise aboard the Hawkesbury paddlewheeler *Turrumburra*. The fish don't seem to mind,

This is orchard country where you can pick your own fruit in season or purchase direct from growers

jumping beside us as we glide by weed-choked banks and contrasting manicured and terraced gardens.

There are photos of the floods amongst the pastoral history at the excellent Hawkesbury Regional Museum. It also tells the hilarious 1985 story of the 'flabbit', an elusive rabbit with wings, which was eventually revealed as the local councillor's taxidermy hoax to attract tourists to the Hawkesbury.

While there's lots more to visit in Windsor, such as the Hawkesbury Regional Gallery, I push on along Hawkesbury Valley Way, past the RAAF base at Richmond to Bells Line of Road. This is orchard country where you can pick your own fruit in season or purchase direct from growers like Bilpin Fruit Bowl and The Pines Orchard, along with homemade relishes and local honey. Hillbilly Cider and Bilpin Cider both utilise local apples and have rustic tasting sheds with orchard views.

In the mountains on the western edge of the Hawkesbury, Berambing is home to Wollemi Wilderness Cabins. An eclectic mix of bespoke 'love cabins', I score whimsical Dream Cabin, with wall-to-wall wilderness views that I soak up from the terrace. After a sunset wine while listening to whip birds, I join Jochen Spencer on a magical glow worm tour. Deep in a rainforest valley, hanging beneath rock ledges, the tiny worms create a mesmerising wall of fairy lights, which on closer inspection resemble miniature chandeliers of gossamer threads.

Brunch next morning is a garden-on-a-plate while seated atop the world - or so it feels on the lofty balcony of The Potager in the Blue Mountains Botanic Garden. I spend so long wandering through the Proteaceae gardens that returning down Bells Line of Road means there's no time to detour through Kurrajong village with its galleries and bric-a-brac stores.

My last stop is Billabong Retreat in Maraylya, a treetop yoga and wellness centre overlooking a lily-covered billabong, where I'm lulled to sleep by croaking frogs and wake to the warble of birds. During a meditation session I'm encouraged to clear my thoughts and still my mind, but all I can think about is how much more there is still to explore in the Hawkesbury. ☑

MORE INFORMATION

Glenorie Bakery Café glenoriebakery.com.au
Wisemans Inn Hotel wisemansinnhotel.com.au
Busby's Café Restaurant busbycaferestaurant.com.au
Retreat at Wisemans wisemans.com.au
Able Hawkesbury Houseboats hawkesburyhouseboats.com.au
Convict Trail convicttrail.com.au
Settlers Arms Inn settlersarms.com.au
St Albans Historic Courthouse stalbanscourthouse.com.au
Bandusia Country Retreat bandusia.com.au
Australiana Pioneer Village theapv.org.au
Tizzana Winery winery.tizzana.com.au
Hawkesbury Paddlewheeler paddlewheeler.com.au
Wollemi Wilderness Cabins lovecabins.com.au
Blue Mountains Glow Worm Tours glowwormtours.sydney
The Potager potagermounttomah.com.au
Billabong Retreat billabongretreat.com.au