



Poplars, a maze and restful waterways at Mayfield Garden, beautifully restored Bishops Court. PHOTOS: WOLTER PEETERS

European splendour

Central NSW offers a distinctly Continental sensibility, writes Catherine Marshall.

First-time visitors to the golden plains of central NSW might imagine they've wandered into a sun-drenched version of a northern hemisphere idyll. Botanical treasures native to gentler climes imbue the region with a singularly European sensibility: in the Provençal blue spruce and English box hedge planted in a maze in Mayfield Garden near Oberon; in the dafodils and delphiniums that dapple parks and pavements with their sweet scent and colour in spring; in the English elms lined up as tall and handsome as the Queen's Regiment along Bentinck Street in Bathurst.

That distant continent of Europe – more out of reach than ever during this time of COVID-19 – is manifested in the region's architecture and culture, too. There are the delicate lemon tarts baked daily by the French-immigrant Legall family at Legall Patisserie Cafe in Bathurst (arrive early as they sell out quickly), and the house-made gnocchi with Italian pork sausage at Vine & Tap, conjured from co-owner Trish Marino's memories of her Italian mother's kitchen. The city's skyline is ornamented with Victorian gables and Gothic revival church spires, Renaissance domes and Scottish baronial majesty.

At the original Anglican bishop's quarters – a Victorian mansion transformed into a boutique hotel by a woman with French heritage – a soupçon of artistry hails from climes even further flung. When British Columbia-based Sid Dickens heard about the array of his Gothic Memory Blocks Christine Le Fevre had on display at Bishops Court Estate, he personally selected a handful of cast tiles to add to her collection.

"His PA sent me an email to say, 'Sid's reaching out to say hello to you in Australia, and to say he's so delighted with the way

you've curated his blocks, he's curating a private collection... which he's seeking you.' And they arrived last week!" she says.

"They posted on their Instagram [account] about this little boutique hotel in Bathurst, Australia, [saying] 'You need to go there if you're a Sid Dickens lover!'"

Such illustrious foreign connections seem to be a leitmotif for the hotelier, who moved to Bathurst 20 years ago from Sydney, where she had worked as a designer of luxury hotel interiors. Indeed, the current Earl Bathurst – whose ancestor this settlement was named for in 1815 – has been a guest at Bishops Court Estate with his wife on several visits. And the couple has reciprocated Le Fevre's hospitality at the earl's seat, Bathurst Estate in Cincencester.

"We've created a sister-city relationship with Cincencester, and they've become lovely friends," she says.

Underpinning this imported culture is the primal expanse of Wiradjuri land chosen by the first European settler to plant crops for the expanding colony in the 19th century.

"They came over the mountains with Aboriginal trackers to try and find alluvial river flats," says Le Fevre. "And once they'd cut their way through and over the mountains and could see that the land opened up and there were open plains without trees and there was a mighty river, [they knew] that would be the place."

This Aboriginal legacy is commemorated at the Bathurst Regional Art Gallery, where exhibitions tackle themes such as connection to place and the multiculturalism that characterises the region today. The gallery has received a grant to appoint a First Nations curator to develop a body of work commemorating the bicentenary of the Bathurst War in 2024.



"[After settlement] the two cultures collided, and there were a series of incidents that then went to reprisals and led to the declaration of martial law," says the gallery's director, Sarah Gurich. "Because we're coming up to a significant moment, a 200-year commemoration, there's a lot of discussion in the community, there are a lot of people who are getting really interested in that particular piece of Australian history. I've been working strategically since 2014 to start to make connections and start that conversation in the gallery and the wider community."

Where conflicts once arose, swamp pools now willow; wildflowers stipple the once-bloodied frontier in springtime. And on the road from Bathurst to Oberon, a former sheep farm has been daubed with colour from roseate camellias, gentian irises and plumed wisterias dropping their petals in a blizzard of mauve and soft pink.

This is Mayfield Garden, Australia's largest privately owned cool-climate garden, laboriously planned and planted over several decades by the Hawkins family.

"About a month ago these cones were bright purple; now they're blue," says Mayfield Garden horticulturalist, Alicia Clarke, peering up into a feathery spruce.

From this elevated boundary, with its swamp cypresses and spruces and charming bluestone family chapel, the land falls away in elegant blocks of decked-out green. Poplars line the far boundary, and beyond it lies a carpet of rejuvenated pasture. The garden is an artwork in progress, a dreamy patchwork of arbours, coppices, ornaments and orchards stitched together with lacquered bridges, winding pathways and a stream.

This horticultural curiosity has flourished since it opened to its first visitors in 2008, expanding far beyond its original boundaries. Visitors can meander through a birch forest underlain with hellebores, and cross a boardwalk above a lake filled Monet-like with water lilies. French lavender vivifies the greenery in summer, and maple leaves burnish it as the season turns again. When winter arrives with its mist and occasional snowfall, the landscape's hemispheric transformation comes full circle.

But there are reminders that this garden is rooted in Australian soil. Native species frame the exhibit, their unkempt branches providing a robust foil to the sculptural formality of the garden. And the wildlife, of course, is determinedly native. A temporary sign on the cobblestone walkway close to the grotto, where visitors can walk behind a lavish cascade of water, reads "CAUTION," "a snake has been seen in this area."

It is a metaphor, perhaps, for the true nature of this hinterland. Its plains have been tamed with gentled specimens, its skylines embellished with European splendour. But its bedrock is unyielding, immutable, primordially Australian. **BR**

The writer was a guest of Bishops Court Estate, Mayfield Garden, Bathurst Regional Council and Central NSW Joint Organisation.



Need to know

Getting there Bathurst is a three-hour drive from Sydney. Mayfield Garden is 35 minutes by car from Bathurst, or a picturesque, three-hour drive from Sydney via the Blue Mountains and Oberon.

Staying there A two-night midweek package at Bishops Court Estate costs \$920 per couple and includes breakfast, afternoon tea and evening drinks and nibbles. Mayfield Garden offers pop-up accommodation during its Autumn Festival, from April 2 to 25.

Visiting there Entry to Mayfield Garden costs \$22 an adult and includes access to 16 hectares. During the garden's Autumn Festival, visitors can explore the property's entire 65 hectares, including the Hawkins family's private garden and maze; tickets are \$35. See mayfieldgarden.com.au. Bathurst's Winter Festival runs from June 26 to July 11 and will feature illuminations, themed activities and the Queen's Birthday High Tea at Abercrombie House. See bathurstregion.com.au and visitcentralnsw.com.au

TIME OUT

Campbell Macpherson founder of Change & Strategy International



How did you get into yoga and how long have you been practising it? My wife, Jane Macpherson, is a simply brilliant yoga teacher and yoga therapist. She coaxed me along to one of her classes 15 years ago. I found muscles I did not know existed and had the best night's sleep of my life.

What kind of yoga do you do? Part Iyengar, part Vinyasa, part whatever I feel like at the time. I don't do hot yoga and my 'Instagram yoga' days are well behind me. Yoga isn't just for the young and bendy. It's for everyone.

Do you go to a class or do it at home? And how often do you practise? Two or three times a week at home – alone or with Jane in person or via one of her online classes. And three times a year at Jane's retreats in India and Europe.

Have you made these trips during COVID-19? No, Jane's last retreat was in Kerala in January last year. The retreats in Bali and Europe had to be cancelled. The next one will be in Bath, England, in June, hopefully.

How has the pandemic affected your yoga practise and plans? It has restricted it to sessions at home and on Zoom. Yoga via Zoom is good, but not the same. However, you can turn your camera off, which has its advantages.

Do you feel different now compared with when you started? Undoubtedly. It's hard to describe, but yoga makes you feel like a better version of you – physically and mentally.

Why yoga? It makes me calmer, more content and better able to do my job. It was invaluable during our two weeks of hotel quarantine. Being confined to an airless hotel room for a fortnight creates all sorts of anxieties. Yoga helped us calm our anxiety about the absence of fresh air and everything that was out of our control.

What is your favourite pose? Garudhasana (eagle pose). It opens up the area between my shoulders that sets like cement from sitting at my desk.

What is your least favourite pose? Baddha Konasana. My knees stick up like spikes on a pineapple bush.

Are there poses you just can't manage? Oh, yes. My attempts at crow pose can be very messy. A fellow class member said it was "more like roadkill".

What about the spiritual aspects of yoga? The yogic techniques of simply observing our emotions and detaching from our negative thoughts are incredibly powerful for accepting and embracing change. My delegates love them.

Tell us about your most memorable yoga experience. It was in a wall-less yoga shala in Kerala in a tropical rainstorm. The sun had just set and the pre-monsoon deluge thundered down onto the tin roof was so loud that none of us could hear Jane speak. So, we all set our mats in a circle around her and followed her every movement for an hour of silent yoga. It was magical.

Where is the oddest place you've done yoga? On a stand-up paddle board while on an engagement in Abu Dhabi. I completely lost it during a very wobbly side-plank and toppled into the yogi next to me, which set off a domino effect and

captivated the entire class. I was asked to leave.

What tips can you offer to become a better yogi? Listen to your body – listen to understand, not to reply; observe without judgment – be kind to yourself, and to others.

Injuries and other frustrations? I have a recurring issue with plantar fasciitis, which yoga helps as long as I work with it, not against it.

Is there anything about yoga you don't like? There is nothing not to like about yoga. Once I realised that it has nothing to do with what I look like, and that it is all about what I can do rather than what I can't do, then it became life-affirming – life-changing, even.

Who would you most like to do yoga with? Barack Obama, Robert Downey jr, Woody Harnelson, Matthew McConaughey and Jon Bon Jovi – yogis one and all. Not only for the yoga – just imagine the conversation in the pub afterwards.

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