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HOME / TRAVEL

Making tracks in Bathurst

It's a case of trains, plains and automobiles in the city that was the colony's first inland European settlement.

By GRAHAM ERBACHER



Bishops Courts Estate in Bathurst.

From **Travel**

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The exquisitely crafted train pulls into Bathurst station, a smart building with gothic, Italianate and Tudor touches, on its journey from Tarana on the NSW Western Line, and the scene rekindles a thrill of childhood.

Before me in the new Bathurst Railway Museum is a scale model of this 40km stretch of track, complete with stations, cuttings and lattice bridge. One of the largest “miniature” railways on public display in Australia, it’s the size of a tennis court. The museum, which launched just before COVID, is in the Railway Institute where workers in an important rail town from the 1870s learnt their trades and socialised. Their stories are vividly told in the museum, none more proudly than that of Ben Chifley, the loco driver who became prime minister in 1945 and shaped postwar Australia. The Manchester-built Loco 5112 Chifley drove in the railway precinct and his modest home is nearby.



Young visitors to the Bathurst Rail Museum. Picture: Trent Cash

My short break in Bathurst, 200km northwest of Sydney, is all about trains and plains (of the Macquarie River, plentiful of produce) and automobiles (who could resist a spin around Mount Panorama?). And it is full of discovery.

The city and surrounds host more than 20 museums, but maybe that’s not surprising for the first inland European settlement, so ordered in 1815 by governor Lachlan Macquarie on what is recognised as Wiradjuri land. A walk around the city centre reveals its historical riches,

which include a grand courthouse with Renaissance dome, fine churches and gardens, a Boer War memorial and an 1878 public school, now the Australian Fossil and Mineral Museum that houses a T-rex skeleton. Look, too, for the Westpac Bank built in 1895 as the City Bank of Sydney on the site of the Carriers Arms, where Edward Hargraves heralded the discovery of gold in 1851. The rush was on.



Guestroom at Bishops Court Estate in Bathurst.

I am staying at Bishops Court Estate, a mansion built circa 1870 for the first Anglican bishop of Bathurst, Samuel Marsden, a grandson of the “flogging parson” of the same name who acted as both cleric and punishing magistrate in Parramatta. It is now a six-guestroom boutique hotel operated by interior designer and chef Christine Le Fevre. As a whiz who can cook, plate up, serve drinks and enthusiastically converse all at the same time, Christine is the hotel equivalent of theatre’s sing-dance-act “triple threat”. After a greeting in the dramatically draped reception room she takes me on a tour of the two-storey house set in private gardens and with a chapel where people now play rather than pray. In the recent past it has hosted cabarets and receptions, but during my stay I dine at a magically set long table with fellow guests who include a Sydney doctor and his family and an engaging academic.



Dinosaur display at the Australian Mineral and Fossil Museum, Bathurst. Picture: Destination NSW

Christine encourages guests to perch on stools in her kitchen, swap tales with dedicated staff and plan an itinerary for the days ahead. There is a distinct possibility she’ll take you herself to must-see spots. And, all in a day’s work, there may be a cooking class. At evening’s end everyone is invited to curl up around an open fire in the lounge for that last sleep-encouraging drop.

I am in Divinity Room on the upper floor and aspire to live up to its name; others carry the promise of Serenity and Harmony. My chamber with ensuite is supremely comfortable, decorated with European antiques, and it has French doors opening on to a terrace balcony, perfect for lazing with a view of the city and hills.

So let’s head out on a brisk morning to sample Bathurst’s best. First stop Keppel Street, fine-dining central with a spirit of boho in retailing. Favourites include Vine & Tap, on the corner

of William Street, for dishes seasonal and local (I surprise myself by loving a cauliflower steak), and The Hub.

I'm after highly prized lemon tarts from Legall Patisserie, but when I ponder the “jewel box” of the day's delicacies, including macarons and eclairs, it's a close call. Baking is a labour of love for French couple Philippe and Angele Legall, although next-generation Gwenael and Hannah are taking the reins.

At Bathurst Farmers Market in historic pavilions at the showground (fourth Saturday of the month, third in December), the regional produce is enticing, but it's turning blustery and stall holders acknowledge there'll be more yarning than commerce today.

It's a short drive to O'Connell — a staging post for coaches of Cobb & Co, which established headquarters in Bathurst in 1862 — where I'm bound for the vineyard and tasting room (by appointment) of Renzaglia Wines.

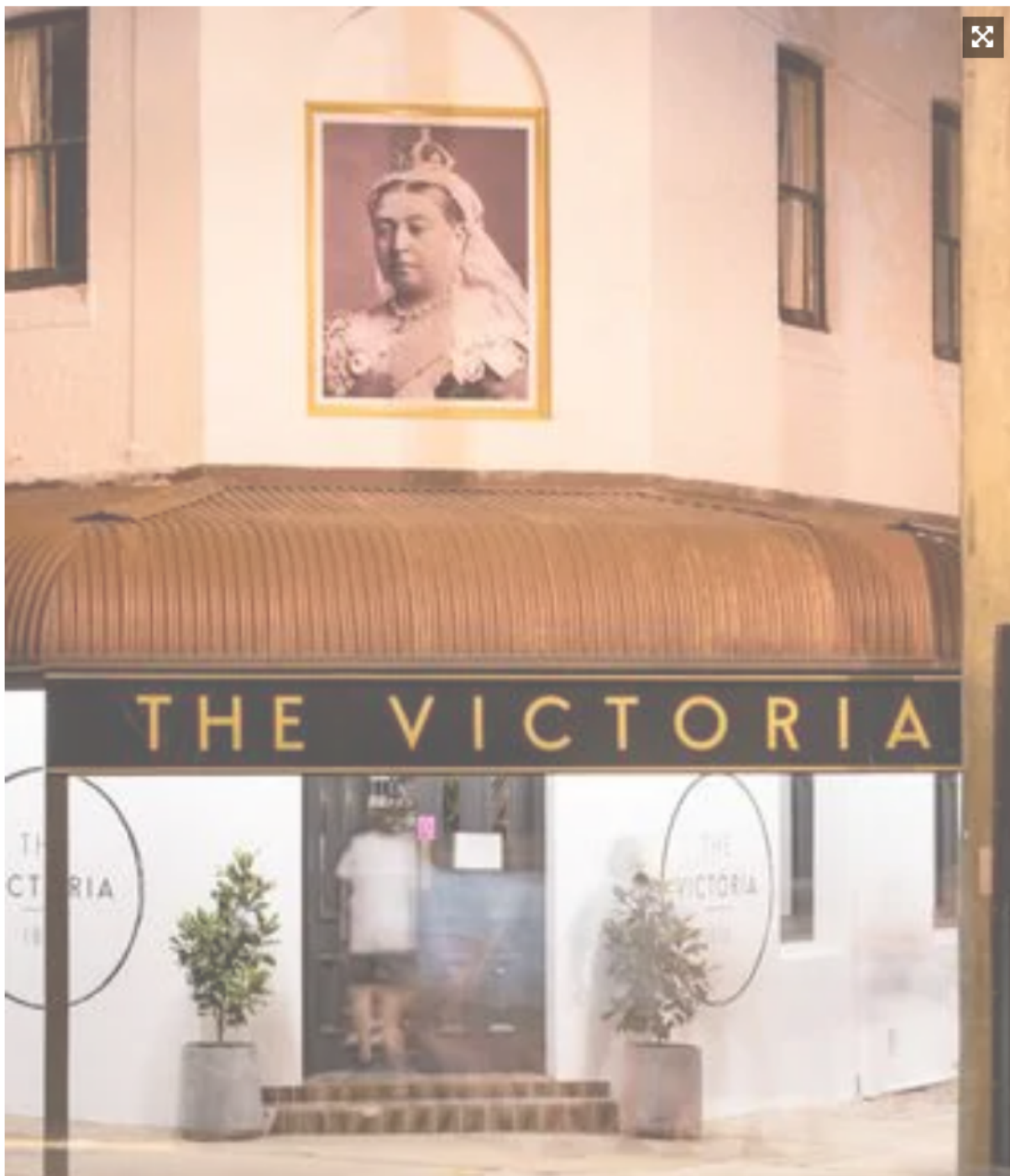


Renzaglia Wines near Bathurst.

Mark Renzaglia, originally from Illinois, and wife Sandy say Bathurst is “on the edge” for winemaking but that the granite-based soils give their reds and whites a special character. Their grapes also come from an estate on Mount Panorama, surrounded by the racetrack. Son Sam has joined the business, marketing their premium wines into classy Sydney

restaurants.

Not far away is Bathurst Grange Distillery, another family operation with plans for a fully fledged tasting room in a rustic shed to open in spring. It's set on a working sheep farm on the Fish River dating from 1823. In the hands of the Jones family since 1972, the heritage-listed homestead has accommodated the likes of Charles Darwin and Brett Whiteley. Sue and Toby are dedicated to sustainable farming and after a high-profile corporate life are "relaxing" into whisky and gin distilling. Son Nick is a dab hand behind the bar and makes a Blue Mountains gin (inspired by a view of the western slopes) and tonic with a fine kick, but I'm left in awe of his chilli chocolate negroni.





Bathurst's Victoria Hotel.

Next stop is at architect Tony McBurney's studios built in a repurposed dairy factory. On the top floor, in the Atelier D'Airy Creative, master tutor Tim Miller is conducting a life-drawing class. Tony sees the opportunity to offer short courses to visitors attracted to Bathurst by its creative past. In the 1940s artists including Russell Drysdale and Margaret Olley were drawn to the gold towns of Hill End, 75km away, and Sofala. The Bathurst Regional Art Gallery (BRAG for short, and why not?) has an excellent collection of paintings, drawings, prints, textiles and ceramics that director Sarah Gurich and staff have been meticulously reappraising during a COVID shutdown. Open again, the gallery has resumed a busy program of in-house and touring exhibitions, specialising in the work of local artists.



Mount Panorama during last year's Bathurst 1000 race. Picture: Getty Images

No visit would be complete without a circuit of Mount Panorama. I start at the National Motor Racing Museum at Murray's Corner, where curator Brad Owen is proud this place is not only for petrolheads. Its changing display of cars and bikes captures the story of motor racing since the 1920s. The polished vehicles dazzle; Brad's favourite is a 1968 Holden HK

Monaro GTS 327, which is pure art.

It's an exhilarating drive around the track, even if the speed limit is 60km/h. A driver behind is raring for more. I pull over for a pit stop.

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Rooms at Bishops Court Estate from \$460 a night (two-night minimum at weekends).

bishopscourtestate.com.au

Alfred on Keppel from \$250 a night (two-night minimum at weekends).

alfredonkeppel.com.au

visitcentralnsw.com.au

bathurstregion.com.au

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Tremain's Mill in Bathurst

Tremain's Mill, once home of Invincible flour, is a magnificent industrial relic on Bathurst's Keppel Street, now a buzzy precinct hosting a popular coffee shop, Doppio's, and soon visitor accommodation. Its planned heart is the Australian Milling Museum, which executive officer Jess Jennings believes will be one of a kind. Jess, also a local councillor and (it turns out in conversation) a grandson of 20th-century artist Weaver Hawkins, says it will map the history of milling from Indigenous peoples through to the hundreds of mills built in the 19th and 20th centuries. Right opposite, Alfred on Keppel offers luxury accommodation in a private three-bedroom terrace, fully equipped and with sunny courtyard.

Graham Erbacher was a guest of Bishops Court Estate, Alfred on Keppel, Central NSW Tourism and Bathurst Regional Council.

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