

Short breaks Toowoomba

Step back in time and enjoy a more genteel pace of life

Stroll through art galleries, antique shops and beautiful parks in this historic town, writes Alison Cotes

IT WAS built as a wedding present for the daughter of a wealthy grazier in 1873, destroyed by fire 25 years later and rebuilt the following year in the form we find it today. Listed by the National Trust of Australia as a place of national historical significance, Vacy Hall has a long and impressive history (see the website for links), where you too can live like the squattocracy for as little as \$98 a night. You don't even have to empty your own chamber pot. The last time I stayed there I ended up in the French Suite (\$175 a night midweek), which I now consider my private property - and it does me very nicely, thank you, if I'm in the mood for playing the lady.

A bay window with upholstered seats; an open fireplace, although the rooms are now airconditioned as well; cedar furniture, polished floors, a leather grandfather chair as well as a period sofa; a small ensuite bathroom and a private tiled veranda with its own glorious Toowoomba garden - if you want anything more than that, you're very hard to please.

No maids in starched aprons bringing hot water in Royal Doulton basins, and certainly no butler with your newspaper on a silver salver, but you can have your breakfast delivered by trolley to your room if you don't want to join the other guests on the sunny communal veranda. It's so easy to develop a taste for high living in accommodation like this, and Toowoomba is just the town to indulge yourself even more without spending a heap of money.

There are some fine antique shops along Margaret St, but there are also bargains to be had of second-handeries and oddities than fine furniture, but a delight to explore. But even they, alas, did not stock old hassocks from refurbished churches,

which I'm seeking to give to friends for Christmas to use as footstools under the computer.

Still, our quest took us to some lovely places - the Darling Downs Antique and Art Centre at 121 West St is especially fine, even if they hadn't heard of hassocks, although they had a enviable Victorian walnut conversation chair which is on the list for our next trip - and we spent a full day exploring the places listed on the Antiques Trail brochure from Vacy Hall or the Visitor Information Centre in James St, where all the volunteers are long-term residents and can tell you about, or remind you of, things worth doing, such as a visit to the glorious Art Deco Empire Theatre in Neil St, where you can see the Queensland Ballet's Swan Lake on July 9 or, going from the sublime to the gor-blimey, Monty Python's Spamalot in October. There are also guided backstage tours for groups - see details below.

Even classier is the Art Gallery in Ruthven St (have lunch at Oxygen Cafe first), which houses a hidden secret on the first floor, the Bolton Reading Room and the Lionel Lindsay Library, all wood panelled like a gentlemen's club. There are exquisite things here as well as Lindsay's drawings and engravings - works by his younger and more notorious brother Norman, and other significant Australian painters, including Frederick McCubbin, Arthur Streeton, Tom Roberts and Rupert Bunny. A worthy collection indeed, and another way to have an aristocratic experience in Toowoomba without spending a fortune. And although the trees are no longer in their autumn beauty, winter has its own delights, and a walk or carriage ride (would I lie to you? Ask at the Visitor Information Centre) through Queens Park and the fallen oak and willow leaves.

Vacy Hall Guesthouse Toowoomba

The fallen leaves were still there when we visited a couple of weeks ago. It's a nostalgic experience for those of us who were brought up in places where there are four seasons instead of two. But you can have all this as well as floral displays if you wait until late September for the Carnival. Just be sure to book your suite at Vacy Hall now.

Wish you were here

Getting there:

Toowoomba is 120km (about 75 minutes) west of Brisbane along the Warrego Highway. Bus services include the Airport Flyer from Brisbane Airport to the door (www.theairportflyer.com.au, \$67 one way); Toowoomba Transit Coaches (www.ttcoaches.com.au, from \$9.95 one way); and Greyhound Coaches (www.greyhound.com.au, from \$15 one way).

Staying there

Vacy Hall Historic Guesthouse, 135 Russell St, Toowoomba, ph 4639 2055, website www.vacyhall.com.au, email bookings@vacyhall.com.au. Rates (room only): one night from \$98 midweek in a standard room to \$225 in a luxury suite at weekends. Continental breakfast \$15, full cooked breakfast \$25, served

either in-room, on your veranda or in dining room. For other rates and honeymoon packages, check the website.

Doing there:

Antique shopping, art galleries, Japanese gardens at the university, Queens Park, Picnic Point, wineries, Cobb & Co Museum. Eat at The Spotted Cow (pub with Queensland's most extensive range of beers), Oxygen Cafe (superior organic food), Veraison and Gips (fine dining).

The Visitor Information Centre in James St has information about other things to do, including guided or self-guided walks through the historical precincts. There is also a two-hour bus tour of historical Toowoomba, departing from the Neil St bus interchange at 10am daily - \$35 a person. Pick-ups from local motels by arrangement, ph 4687 5555. Lionel Lindsay Art .

Gallery and Library, 531 Ruthven St; reading room open 11 am-3pm Tue, Wed and Thu, and also 1 pm-4pm Sun; gallery is open every day except Mon.

Empire Theatre, 54-56 Neil St, ph 1 300 655 299, website www.empiretheatre.com.au

