

IN FULL BLOOM

With its dramatic location, outstanding architecture and glorious parks and gardens, Toowoomba is an unexpectedly elegant destination. **Tracey Hordern** took a drive to Queensland's largest inland city.

Photography Isamu Sawa



Fertile ground: Every garden you visit in Toowoomba is picture perfect.

If you arrive in Toowoomba from the east, after an easy ninety minute drive from Brisbane, you'll be instantly taken in by the dramatic setting and your ears will ring as you make the steep climb up the mountain to the plateau.

Signposted from the Warrego Highway, on the city's eastern side, Picnic Point Lookout is on the edge of the escarpment and is set amid gorgeous gardens with an amazing outlook over the Lockyer Valley. You'll also find the fabulous, and aptly named, Picnic Point Restaurant here. This is where my travelling buddy Justine and I enjoyed a great lunch, with a large side of sensational views.

Set on Toowoomba's most valuable real estate, the restaurant has recently been given a major makeover. Operating as a smart café with a spectacular outlook by day, the restaurant transforms into a romantic fine-dining venue by night – either way it's well worth the visit and perfectly sets the tone for this surprising city.

From the lookout's great height of between 600 and 1,000 metres above sea level, you can literally see that much about Toowoomba differs from the rest of the state of Queensland. To start with, the entire region along the plateau has four distinct seasons. This, of course, determines the foliage, and is why Toowoomba is commonly known as the 'Garden City'.

Despite being in Queensland, much of this fascinating inland city can appear to look, feel and smell like the Blue Mountains, or even the Southern Highlands, located in the more temperate state of New South Wales.

COUNTRY MANNERS

A drive around town quickly confirms the widespread reputation Toowoomba has for its beautiful gardens, the result of both the climate and good planning.

Each September the parks, public gardens and tree-lined streets here have an annual show-off known as the Carnival of Flowers – we decide it's most definitely worth a return visit later in the year to see Toowoomba in bloom. As well as 1,000 hectares of parkland, including the natural bushland of Redwood and Jubilee parks, the city features the centrally located Queens Park and stunning Botanical Gardens.

After briefly taking in the beautiful gardens, we head to one of Toowoomba's most popular tourist attractions, the Cobb & Co Museum. This atmospheric museum traces the history of horse-drawn transportation in Australia and houses more than 30 vehicles, from old timber wagons, spring

wagons and bullock drays through to the Cobb & Co coaches and the elegant landau, used by the Duke of Edinburgh when he visited the colony in 1876.

The Cobb & Co museum is also a great place for children, who are encouraged to join in the Little Cobblers kid's program. Taking a quick trip back to childhood, Justine and I gave the educational and fun puppets and interactive games such a workout that a traditional afternoon tea was required for our recovery!

It was soon time to check in to our accommodation – the grand Vacy Hall. Arguably Toowoomba's most beautiful house, this charming mansion was built in 1899 as a

wedding present for the daughter of a wealthy squatter and it perfectly represents the elegant atmosphere enjoyed by those living comfortably over 100 years ago. Set in beautiful gardens (as everywhere here seems to be), the large and well-appointed rooms are resplendent with architectural details and furnishings, characterised by pressed-metal ceilings, bay windows and ornate fireplaces. It's a sumptuous slice of country heaven.

For a complete change of scenery we headed to the thoroughly modern Spotted Cow for dinner. Nicole, our gorgeous hostess and chef, was like so many people we crossed paths with in Toowoomba – friendly and well-humoured.

The Spotted Cow is essentially a restaurant that happens to be attached to a pub, not the more usual other way around, so the food is restaurant standard. We had heard that the 'Cow' famously specialises in mussels and steak, so that's what we opted for. My mussels were cooked in basil, garlic and stock, and were honestly the best I've ever had. Justine deemed her steak "sensational". Needless to say we loved the place.

STREET STYLE

Happy and sated we returned to our sumptuous accommodation. In the cooler weather – as it was during our late-May visit – the sound and light of a real fire crackling away proved a delightful way to drift off to sleep. The next morning, on the sunny verandah, a breakfast of perfectly cooked fresh mushrooms on Turkish bread was the ideal start to the day.

The morning was dedicated to getting a feel for the city's vibe. As well as being easy to navigate, as it's essentially designed as a grid, in no time

we discovered that Toowoomba is decidedly hip. It's overall look is attractive, the streets are clean, wide and tree-lined, the architecture is obviously valued, the art gallery is renowned, the occupants well dressed and the shopping is nothing short of impressive.

In fact, apart from the gardens, the architecture is one of the aspects this city is most proud of, and it's easy to see why – there is no shortage of striking timber Queenslanders and there's also a large number of elegant and historic commercial buildings and stately public buildings.

The art deco Empire Theatre is a wonderful example – it's in lovingly restored condition and is currently leading a full and busy life, appreciated by visitors and locals alike. There is a full calendar of locally produced theatre and musical events, as well as big touring shows keen to display their talents in this lovely venue.

Op-shopping is another popular local activity. This city is home to more than its fair share of charity and second-hand shops and antique galleries, and you'll soon find that all things vintage seem to be an integral part of the cool vibe here. Australiana can be found in abundance, and if you like the thrill of the hunt, you should definitely put Toowoomba on your list of places to visit.

As the largest inland city in Queensland, Toowoomba is the 'big smoke' to the vast interior of Queensland and has been attracting the good country folk from the state's remote locations for generations. More recently, this intriguing destination has drawn visitors from other cities and states – and for very good reason!

INSIDER INFORMATION

Toowoomba is situated in south-east Queensland, on the crest of the Great Dividing Range, and is 132 kilometres west of Brisbane. With four distinct seasons and 150 parks, it's a beautiful place to visit any time of year. Annual events include Easterfest and the Australian Carnival of Flowers, held in September.

DO & SEE

- **Cobb & Co Museum**
27 Lindsay Street, Toowoomba
Ph: (07) 4639 1971
Web: www.cobbandco.qm.qld.gov.au
- **Empire Theatre**
54-56 Neil Street, Toowoomba
Ph: 1300 655 299
Web: www.empiretheatre.com.au

EAT & DRINK

- **Mason Wines**
27850 New England Highway Ballandean
Ph: (07) 4684 1341
Web: www.masonwines.com.au
- **Picnic Point Restaurant**
164 Tourist Road, Toowoomba
Ph: (07) 4631 5100
Web: www.picnic-point.com.au
- **Rudds Pub**
45 Tooth Street, Nobby
Ph: (07) 4696 3211
- **The Spotted Cow Hotel**
296 Ruthven Street, Toowoomba
Ph: (07) 4639 3264
Web: www.spottedcow.com.au

WHERE TO STAY

- **Vacy Hall**
135 Russell Street, Toowoomba
Ph: (07) 4639 2055
Web: www.vacyhall.com.au

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- **Queensland National Parks & Wildlife Service**
Web: www.epa.qld.gov.au/parks_and_forests/
- **Toowoomba & Golden West Regional Tourist Association**
Ph: (07) 4632 1988
Web: www.toowoombaholidays.info



Clockwise, from top left: The Spotted Cow; fine fare at Picnic Point Restaurant; in the mist; the Empire Theatre; on a clear day; a Cobb & Co coach; Vacy Hall's owner Graham Higgins; stately Vacy Hall.

TAKE A DAY TRIP

If you head south from Toowoomba along the New England Highway, there are several notable places to visit. The historic Rudds Pub, in Nobby, is a cruisey 45 minutes from Toowoomba and serves inexpensive and good pub fare. The tourist driven pub is famed for its *Dad and Dave* connection as the creator/writer of the sitcom was a local. Drive another hour south and you will reach Granite Belt wine country. It comes as a surprise to most people that the Sunshine State has a burgeoning wine industry – there are over 50 wineries in the Granite region alone – and due to the high altitude and rich volcanic soil, a number of grape varieties flourish here. We visited Mason Wines, in Ballandean, which produces premium wines at affordable prices, has a great cellar door/café and features a stunning vineyard property – Mason House – which accommodates holidaymakers.