

# Hunter Valley



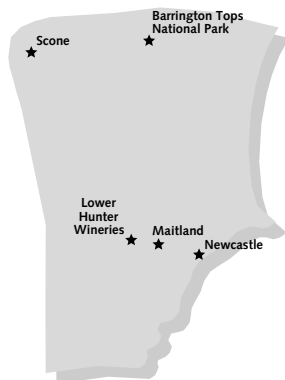
The vastness of the Hunter is readily recognised during a flight from Sydney, perhaps in a Dash 8. But the ample expanse is only really realised when you find yourself in the middle of the Wollemi or Yengo National Parks, or perhaps Barrington Tops. And the beauty is admired during a road trip on any given Sunday as you travel from Newcastle up to Scone. Forested mountains envelope rolling hills and sweeping valleys. And it's green, particularly if you have arrived after rain.

But poor weather is at the back of one's mind when holidaying in New South Wales' (NSW) second-largest city, Newcastle. Tanned bodies and surfer dudes populate the golden sands of Bar Beach, uninterested in the dozens of waiting coal loaders that adorn the horizon. Once home to the worst behaved convicts from the colony, the old steel city breathes a little easier these days by effortlessly embracing a barefoot surf culture, although telltale signs of the convict past are still scattered throughout the city and the Hunter in towns like Maitland, Morpeth, Wollombi and Stroud.

Money talks and farmed paddocks have slowly given way to the mining industry, which, in turn, now rivals the wineries. But today the farming is not just about grapes, with wineries sharing the focus and tempting foodies with selections of local produce such as olives, oranges, organic honey, macadamia nuts and even alpaca. And although the mining and energy industries still linger, you don't have to visit the Hunter vineyards on a busy weekend to realise the future here is in tourism.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Cruise the **Lower Hunter Wineries** on the back of a trike (p151)
- Catch a wave at **Nobbys Beach** (p142) in Newcastle
- Survive The Steps, at night, in **Barrington Tops National Park** (p156)
- Back a winner at the **Scone Races** (p155)
- Greet ghouls at **Maitland Gaol** on a psychic tour (p147)
- Chill out on the grass at **Jazz in the Vines** (p151) in the Lower Hunter Wineries region
- Swim laps at **Merewether Ocean Baths** (p142) in Newcastle
- Learn viticulture speak at the **Hunter Valley Wine School** (p149)



## NEWCASTLE

☎ 02 / pop 483,300

'You gotta love this city', The Whitlams' front man croons. And everyone does. Most afternoons you'll see countless Novocastrians staring out over the beach, beyond the breaks and the coal ships, to the horizon, soaking up the coastal way of life.

Spotted by Lieutenant John Shortland in 1797 while pursuing escaped convicts, Newcastle was settled in 1801 as a colony for the worst behaved convicts. This past combined with a surfing lifestyle has helped shape a laid-back culture, making it one of the few cities in the developed world where you can grocery-shop barefoot and no one bats an eyelid.

Visit popular local beaches and bath in ocean baths or explore the endless dunes at Stockton. Dine at world-class restaurants both scattered and concentrated throughout the city. Whatever you do, don't just pass through, but stay and make sure it's for more than one day.

## History

Founded by Lieutenant Charles Menzies in 1801, he brought with him just 34 rebellious prisoners. By 1814 Newcastle was the colony's major prison with more than 1000 inmates. They were the worst of a bad bunch – only those who re-offended were shipped to Newcastle, banished to hard labour, burning lime, logging, and mining coal by hand.

Newcastle rivalled Sydney as an industrial centre from the late 1800s right through to World War II, when BHP played a significant role in producing war materials. As a result the steel city was the target of a Japanese submarine that fired shells at it in 1942. Fort Scratchley, of course, retaliated.

Newcastle's recent history has caused a massive shift away from misbehaving convicts and coal. The renewal has been rampant, spreading like wildfire since the 1989 earthquake and the closure of the BHP steelworks. It's home to the second-largest port in Australia and although the horizon may be dotted with coal ships, the air is now clean.

## Orientation

Central Newcastle sits on the end of a peninsula that separates the Hunter River from the sea and tapers down to a long convict-built spit heading east to Nobbys Head. The main street is Hunter St and it runs down the length of the peninsula parallel to King St.

## Information

There are ATMs and all your needs can be met in the Hunter St Mall, however most locals head to Charlestown Square (in Charlestown) for luxury items.

**John Hunter Hospital** (☎ 4921 3000; Lookout Rd, New Lambton)

**Juicy Beans Café** (☎ 4929 4988; 365 Hunter St; per 30 min \$2; ☎ 6.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 3pm Sat) Has two terminals for internet access.

**Newcastle Region Library** (☎ 4974 5300; Laman St) Internet costs \$3 for 30 minutes if you are checking email.

**Police Station** (☎ 4929 0999; cnr Church & Watt Sts)

**Post Office** (☎ 13 13 14; 1 Market St)

**Visitors Centre** (☎ 4974 2999; www.visitnewcastle.com.au; 361 Hunter St)

## Sights

There are many vantage points across the city, but your first stop should be **Queens Wharf Tower** (Queens Wharf; admission free; ☎ 8am-dusk). It is 40.3m high, has 180 steps and is otherwise referred to by locals as the 'Giant Penis'.

Take to the city on foot and follow the **Bathers Way**, a 5km coastal walk stretching from the lighthouse at Nobbys Head to Glenrock Reserve. Or negotiate the **Newcastle East Heritage Walk**, a 3km walk that includes Fort Scratchley. Maps for both walks are available from the visitors centre.

Climb the tower at **Christ Church Cathedral** or stop by the **Convict Lumberyard**, the oldest surviving example of a convict industrial workplace.

## BEACHES

Newcastle has six patrolled beaches within 5km of the city centre and each can be visited along the Bathers Way. From **Nobbys Lighthouse** head to the Art Deco elegance of **Nobbys Beach Surf Pavilion** and then follow the coast around to **Newcastle Ocean Baths** and **Newcastle Beach**, home of 'Surfest'. Both these beaches are fairly protected and therefore popular with young families. Hike up the headland and along the perimeter of King Edward Park where you can descend the steps to the **Bogey Hole**. Opened to the public in 1863, it was cut into the rock platform by convicts. One of the more favoured surfing breaks is at **Bar Beach** (which has loads of parking) but **Dixon Park Beach** and Merewether are equally popular. The largest ocean baths in the southern hemisphere are at the southernmost tip of **Merewether Beach**.

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Queens Wharf Tower				

Hone your surfing skills:

**Newcastle Surf School** (☎ 0405 500 469; lessons \$30) Choose between Nobbys or the more private Cave's Beach.

**Redhead Mobile Surf School** (☎ 4944 9585; lessons \$45, wetsuit & board hire for 2hr \$25) A bit more personal with smaller groups.

**Surfist Surf School** (☎ 0410 840 155; www.surfist-surfschool.com; lessons \$25) Held at Nobbys Beach; buy four lessons and get one free.

## MUSEUMS & GALLERIES

The **Newcastle Region Art Gallery** (☎ 4974 5100; 1 Laman St; admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) is a dynamic space featuring travelling shows. It has school holiday workshops and a free kids' programme here on weekends at 11am, where your tiny tots (ages three to 15) can create their own masterpiece.

**Fort Scratchley Maritime & Military Museum** (☎ 4929 3066; Nobbys Rd; closed for refurbishment at time of research) overlooks the Pacific Ocean and was originally built as a deterrent to the Russians. You can wander the tunnels underneath, which are said to run all the way to King Edward Park.

## Activities

The lush grounds of the **Wetlands Centre Australia** (☎ 4951 6466; www.wetlands.org.au; Sandgate Rd, Sandgate; adult/child \$5/3; ☎ 9am-5pm) were born out of a desperate bid to stop the highway storming through the guts of this former rubbish tip. The wetlands' humble beginnings in 1986 are now hidden by 45 hectares of rehabilitated wetlands and more than 250 wildlife species. Mosquitoes are aplenty so best keep walking/canoeing (canoe hire \$8). The centre is a short walk from Sandgate train station.

Set in a bushland reserve, **Blackbutt Reserve** (☎ 4904 3344; www.newcastle.nsw.gov.au; Carley Ave, Kotara; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm) is a great venue for a picnic lunch, plus there are many walking tracks.

**Pacific Dreams** (☎ 4926 3355; 7 Darby St; day hire \$50) hires out secondhand boards that are fibreglass – and hurt when they hit you in the white wash. However, the pain is a small sacrifice for looking cool.

**Fishers@Honeysuckle** (☎ 4926 2722; Honeysuckle Dr; bike hire 1hr/2hr/day \$15/20/35) hires bikes and buggies and is also a booking agent for several cruise companies in the area that specialise in drifting around the harbour, sauntering over to Stockton or floating as far afield as Morpeth.

Had enough? Feel like jumping from Strzelecki...? Paragliding with **Air Sports New-**

**castle** (☎ 0412 607 815; www.air-sports.com.au; tandem flight \$165) is perhaps the answer.

## Tours

**Best Tours** (☎ 4950 4518; per person incl lunch \$75) Tours the Lower Hunter vineyards.

**Hades Day Tours** (☎ 4981 0100; per person incl lunch \$69) Goes to the vineyards also, but is a wee bit cheaper.

**Heliservices** (☎ 4962 5188; scenic flights from \$69) Stuff the bus, take a chopper instead.

**Hunter River Cruises** (☎ 4958 7766; Queens Wharf; from \$37) Sails around the harbour or inland to Morpeth.

**Newcastle's Famous Tram** (☎ 4977 2270; Newcastle train station, Hunter St; adult/child \$12/6; ☎ 11am & 1pm) Take a 45-minute tour of the city's beaches and historic sites while receiving a running commentary and a little local gossip, delivered with typical Novocastrian zest. The best-spent 12 bucks in Newcastle. Vineyard tours are also available on weekends.

## Festivals & Events

This town knows how to party and the list of festivals is endless, so ask the visitors centre about its events calendar, which includes: **Mattara – Festival of Newcastle** (www.mattarafestival.org.au) This combines the Maritime Festival and Darby Street Fair to make the largest festival on offer throughout the year.

**Rainbow Festival** (www.rainbowvisions.org.au) An October festival celebrating Hunter gays and lesbians.

**Surfest** (☎ 4929 5833) The longest-running professional surfing competition in Australia, held at Newcastle Beach every March (and sometimes at Merewether).

**This Is Not Art Festival** (☎ 4927 0470) Young writers, artists and music-makers celebrate.

## Sleeping

**Terraces for Tourists** (☎ 4929 4575; www.terracesfortourists.com.au) rents, as the name suggests, terraces for tourists. Or find longer term rentals at www.newcastle-real-estate.com.

## BUDGET

**Backpackers by the Beach** (☎ 1800 008 972, 4926 3472; www.backpackersbythebeach.com.au; 34-36 Hunter St; dm/d \$25/55; ☎) This one is just down the road from the YHA and is an alternative for those who despise YHAs (although Newcastle's one isn't nearly as institutionalised as some), or if the YHA is booked out.

**Newcastle Beach YHA** (☎ 4925 3544; www.yha.com.au; 30 Pacific St; dm/s/d \$26/43/64; ☎) Residing in the old 'Gentleman's Club' building, it's lucky they're a dying breed and the space is now better utilised by backpackers. There is

a barbecue at the Brewery on Thursday night and a free dinner and plenty of craic at MJ Finnegan's Irish Pub (www.irishpub.com.au; 21-23 Darby St) Sunday to Tuesday nights.

## MIDRANGE

There are a string of motels along the Pacific Hwy at Belmont, which are great for exploring Lake Macquarie but not so much Newcastle proper.

**Travelodge** (☎ 1300 886 886, 4926 3777; www.travelodge.com.au; cnr King & Steel Sts; r from \$100; ☎) Unexceptional rooms on offer here. No surprises or delights, but it's the cheapest room (with a bathroom) in town.

**Riverview Gardens** (☎ 4928 3048; www.riverviewgardens.com.au; 98 Fullerton St, Stockton; s/d incl breakfast \$130/150) Spend lazy afternoons watching coal ships pass by the front door. It's a magical position giving some industrial insight into the harbour.

**Ashiana** (☎ 4929 4979; www.ashiana.com.au; 8 Helen St, Merewether; r incl breakfast \$165; ☎) Set back off the main road to the beach; soak up summer days in your swimmers and nights at the Beaches Hotel.

## TOP END

**Harbour View Manor** (☎ 4927 1448; www.harbourviewmanor.com; 110 Church St; r incl breakfast \$175-300; ☎) Fantastic views over the harbour at the top of town. The perfect stay in a quiet old street while still being amongst it. Closed on Sunday.

## Eating

There are three strips of eating places in Newcastle: **Beaumont St**, **Darby St** and the **Honeysuckle Boardwalk**. The first two are well established and will cater to every taste bud's whim. The third is a reasonably recent addition and features funky glass-fronted restaurants. Check out the website www.eatlocal.com.au for restaurant listings.

## BUDGET

**Scotties** (☎ 4926 3780; 36 Scott St; mains \$9-15; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) A relaxed beach shack serving fish and chips and gourmet burgers with BYO.

**Estabar** (☎ 4927 1222; cnr Ocean St & Shortland Esp; light meals \$10) Enjoy espresso and gelati practically on the beach. The Spanish-style hot chocolate is popular with those who cringe at the scent of coffee.

## MIDRANGE

**Sticky Rice Thai** (☎ 4927 0200; 19 Scott St; mains \$11-19; ☎) lunch & dinner) Beach-style Thai; this is not quite what you find in Koh Samui but it's close enough.

**Bogie Hole Café** (☎ 4929 1790; cnr Hunter & Pacific Sts; mains \$18-24; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Located at the top of Hunter St, it's just a hop, skip and jump to Newcastle Beach. The menu includes light summery meals like chicken and honeydew melon salad, to heavier options such as braised lamb shanks.

**Blue Water Pizza** (☎ 4929 5686; Queens Wharf; mains \$18-24; ☎) lunch & dinner) Just up from Scratchleys, this restaurant is a Newcastle institution.

## TOP END

**Scratchleys** (☎ 4929 1111; 200 Wharf Rd; mains \$14-52; ☎) lunch & dinner) It's fishy fresh and it's local, and if king prawns aren't big enough, they have jumbo prawns here. There are non-seafood options also.

**Silo** (☎ 4926 2828; Honeysuckle Dr; mains \$27-38; ☎) breakfast Sat & Sun, lunch & dinner daily) Laughter refracts from the red and white walls and rickshaws off the glass chandeliers. Silo specialises in local produce and sports a tremendous selection of beers, cocktails, liqueurs and spirits. A DJ spins up a storm Friday and Saturday nights (from 9.30pm) and lazy Sunday afternoons.

**Jonah's on the Beach** (☎ 4929 5181; cnr Shortland Esp & Zaara St; mains \$28-39; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) A concoction of contemporary Australian cuisine by the beach. Go for lobster and king prawn fettuccini for dinner or champagne-battered fish with lime aioli for lunch.

## Drinking & Entertainment

There has always been a lively music scene in the city. **Newcastle Music Week** (☎ 0425 236 156) and **Music and Moonlight Concert** (☎ 4914 5975) both celebrate this side of local culture. For a rundown on coming events check out www.tin.org.au/gigguide/livemusic or pick up a copy of *Drum Media*.

**Beaches Hotel** (☎ 4963 1574; www.thebeachhotel.com.au; cnr Frederick & Ridge Sts, Merewether) There is only one place to be on a Sunday afternoon and that is at this beachside pub.

**Queens Wharf Brewery** (☎ 4929 6333; www.qwb.com.au; 150 Wharf Rd) Newcastle has always been good at utilising its views, and this place and Beaches Hotel are the best two examples.

**Cambridge Hotel** (☎ 4962 2459; 789 Hunter St) Block out the spewy scent saturating the carpet; by



midnight you won't even notice. Renowned for secret gigs where big acts will rock up to do an unadvertised show.

**Vass O'Gowrie Hotel** (☎ 4962 1248; 14 Railway St, Wickham) Built in 1877, this is the oldest pub in Newcastle and has been the heart of the local music scene for the past 15 years. See local original acts here most nights.

**Greater Union Cinemas** (☎ 4926 2233; www.greaterunion.com.au; 183 King St) For a more subdued evening, head to the movies.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

The airport is 40 minutes from Newcastle Station by bus. It runs irregularly, therefore most people make their way to town by taxi or hire car. **Aeroplan** (☎ 4928 9600), **Jetstar** (☎ 13 15 38), **QantasLink** (☎ 13 13 13) and **Virgin Blue** (☎ 13 67 89) all operate here.

### BUS

All local and long-distance buses leave from Newcastle Station. **Greyhound** (☎ 13 14 99) goes north as far as Byron Bay (adult/child \$84/69), west to Tamworth (adult/child \$66/54) and south to Sydney (adult/child \$39/32).

Other options for travelling up the coast include **Premier Motor Service** (☎ 13 34 10) which travels through to Brisbane daily. Purchase a pass that allows you to jump on, jump off on the way (Backpacker Pass \$109). Or take a trip up the coast with **Port Stephens Coaches** (☎ 4982 2940). It has multiple daily services that go as far north as Fingal Bay (adult/child \$11/6). **Busways** (☎ 4983 1560) runs to Forster (adult/child \$31/16) and Sydney daily.

For more westerly movements, **Rover Coaches** (☎ 4990 1699) has return services from Cessnock to Newcastle (adult/child \$13/7) and **Sid Fogg's** (☎ 4928 1088) runs across to Dubbo, stopping at all major towns (adult/child \$65/53).

### CAR

**Budget** (☎ 13 27 27) and **Thrifty** (☎ 4965 1535) usually have the best-value small cars. However, **Avis** (☎ 4965 1612), **Europcar** (☎ 4965 0162) and **Hertz** (☎ 13 30 39) also have cars at the airport. Otherwise, head to **Cheep Heep** (☎ 4961 3144; 141 Maitland Rd, Islington) and hire a cheap heap from as little as \$33 a day.

### TRAIN

All **CountryLink** trains stop at Broadmeadow, just west of town, and run up and down the coast to

Coffs Harbour (adult/child \$75/40). Change at Casino or Grafton for Byron Bay (adult/child \$105/55). Trains also head to Tamworth (adult/child \$50/25) and leave directly from Newcastle Station for Sydney (adult/child \$30/15).

There are plenty of **CityRail** trains heading to Sydney and northwest to Maitland, Dungong and Scone, daily.

## Getting Around

All travel on the blue and white buses around the city centre is free.

**Newcastle Buses & Ferries** (☎ 13 15 00), offering a 23-hour service (adult/child \$8/4 including bus and ferry), covers Newcastle and the eastern side of Lake Macquarie. Jump on the Stockton Ferry at Queens Wharf (adult/child one way \$2/1).

If you have flown in, **Port Stephens Coaches** (☎ 4982 2940) runs to and from the airport almost hourly with reduced trips on the weekend (\$6, 35 minutes). Otherwise call a **cab** (☎ 4979 3000).

## AROUND NEWCASTLE

Each grain of sand at **Stockton Beach** is constantly shifting, making it the largest moving dune mass in the southern hemisphere. It is the final resting place of the **Sygnia**, a Norwegian bulk carrier that ran aground in 1974. And its sands are shipped over to Hawaii to cushion the fat alohas at Waikiki Beach. The main access to the dunes is via **Lavis Lane** off Nelson Bay Rd, but stop in at the **Metro** (☎ 4965 0401) on the roundabout to grab a vehicle permit (weekend pass \$10).

Hoon across the dunes with **Sand Safaris** (☎ 4965 0215; www.sandsafaris.com.au; Lavis Lane, Williamstown) Two-hour trips cost \$119/129 midweek/weekends. Or contact **Moonshadow 4WD Tours** (☎ 4984 4760; www.moonshadow4wd.com.au) for a more civilised approach (adult/child \$20/15).

**Stockton Beach Tourist Park** (☎ 4928 1393; touristpark@stocktonbeach.com; Pitt St; sites \$20-31, cabins \$44-78, with bathroom \$75-111; **P** **♿**) is very popular with the regional crowd and books out a year in advance for Christmas and Easter. You can hire linen (\$12).

## MAITLAND

☎ 02 / pop 58,000

Molly Morgan stole some yarn and was therefore transported from England to the colony in Sydney. Married three times and transported twice, this vibrant character is part responsible for the birth and building of

Maitland. A cunning convict, she arrived with her 'ticket of leave' and a cedar-forested land grant on the banks of the Hunter River. The bullock track that dissected her property became High St, and the forested plains around her the township of Maitland.

## Orientation & Information

The main street, High St, is partly closed off and Heritage Mall is where most of your shopping needs will be met.

**Library** (☎ 4933 6952; 480 High St)

**Police Station** (☎ 4934 0200; 3 Caroline Place)

**Post Office** (☎ 13 13 18; 379-383 High St)

**Visitors centre** (☎ 4931 2833; www.maitlandhuntervalley.com.au; cnr New England Hwy & High St) Look for the old steam train along the highway.

## Sights & Activities

The city's 19th-century wealth is reflected in the elaborate Georgian and Victorian buildings, so head to the visitors centre and grab information regarding heritage walks in town.

**Maitland Gaol** (☎ 4936 6482; John St; admission adult/child \$10/7, tours adult/child \$12/9) This is the second most haunted place in the country and the spooks rule the roost here. Ex-inmate tours give you insight into all the jailhouse goss and the psychic tours are even more informative.

**Walka Water Works Complex** (☎ 4932 0522; Sempill St; admission per car \$3; powered/unpowered sites \$15/11; **☎** 7am-dusk) Follow the signs from the roundabout at Maitland train station. Don't forget to pack lunch and the kids.

## Festivals & Events

**Steamfest** (www.steamfest.com.au) celebrates Maitland's steamy past and attracts 70,000 enthusiasts each April to ride trains throughout the Hunter.

## Sleeping

**LJ Hooker** (☎ 4933 5511) can hook you up with a rental property if you decide to linger longer.

**Belmore Hotel** (☎ 4933 6351; www.thebelmore.com.au; 476 High St; s/d \$45/55 Mon-Thu, \$65/75 Fri-Sun; **P** **♿**). Respectable pub rooms and a friendly bar downstairs for a few cheeky ones.

**Molly Morgan Motor Inn** (☎ 4933 5422; New England Hwy; s/d \$85/95, \$10 more Sat; **P** **♿**) One of the better motels in Maitland, all rooms are spacious and there is a good à la carte restaurant.

**Monte Pio Motor Inn** (☎ 4932 5288; New England Hwy, Rutherford; r \$115; **P** **♿** **♿**) West of town, it

is set in a historic building on acreage, with resort-standard facilities.

## Eating

**Maneeya** (☎ 4933 1717; 473 High St; mains \$15-20; **☎** lunch Wed, dinner Thu & Fri) Centrally located on the main street, get a typical Thai feed here before heading out for the night.

**Café Blende Lorn** (☎ 4934 8224; 27 Belmore Rd, Lorn; mains \$19-25; **☎** breakfast weekends, lunch Tue-Sun & dinner Wed-Sat) A quiet, comfortable little restaurant just over the river. There is a mixture of meals including pizza, pasta and meat-free steaks.

**Old George & Dragon Restaurant** (☎ 4933 7272; 48 Melbourne St, East Maitland; 2/3 courses per person from \$57/70; **☎** dinner Wed-Sat) In a restored pub dating from the 1830s; owner and chef Ian Morphy's Anglo-French food attracts critical acclaim.

## Drinking & Entertainment

An epidemic spreads through town on Friday nights. It involves one-hit wonders, distasteful ballads and alcohol-dependent egos. Karaoke performances can be witnessed at both **Shenanigans** (☎ 4933 6566; 458 High St) and across the road at the **Belmore Hotel** (☎ 4933 6351; www.thebelmore.com.au; 476 High St).

**Clubhouse Hotel** (☎ 4933 5265; 41 Elgin St) serves dinner, but you should come back later as the crowds don't start pouring in until the wee small hours when the Belmore closes.

## Getting There & Away

**Rover Coaches** (☎ 4990 1699) has an hourly bus service to Cessnock on weekdays, with reduced services on Saturday. But **CountryLink** (☎ 13 22 32) travels slightly further afield, heading north to Scone (adult/child \$20/10) and Tamworth (adult/child \$45/25) daily, up the coast to Coffs Harbour (adult/child \$72/36), and south to Sydney (adult/child \$21/18).

**CityRail** has plenty of trains going into Newcastle and west to Scone, stopping at all major towns.

## MORPETH

☎ 02

Morpeth Cemetery looks over a sweeping green valley to the town, which hugs the Hunter River. In that cemetery are some of the oldest bones in NSW, as this was once the major port for passengers and products arriving in the Hunter. Sandstone buildings line the main street, where you can shop for

expensive ladies' fashions, secondhand books and antiques.

**Morpeth Sourdough** (☎ 4934 4148; 148 Swan St; ☎ 9am-5pm Wed-Sun) is housed in the original Arnott's Biscuits building; the grandson of the big-bickies business originator, Stephen Arnott, now handmakes bread.

For old-fashioned brews visit **Morpeth Ginger Beer Factory** (☎ 4933 1407; 5 Green St; ☎ 10am-5pm Thu-Sun). There's also a range of gourmet foods upstairs.

Held in September, the **Morpeth Jazz Festival** ([www.morpethjazz.com.au](http://www.morpethjazz.com.au)) features food, jazz and fine wine.

John Bradley scenes of Morpeth adorn the walls in the elegantly decorated **Bronte Guesthouse** (☎ 4934 6080; [www.bronteguesthouse.com.au](http://www.bronteguesthouse.com.au); 147 Swan St; r incl breakfast \$140 Mon-Thu, \$200 Fri-Sun).

**Kokepelli's** (☎ 4933 0337; 2/119 Swan St; mains \$22-28; ☎ breakfast & lunch daily, dinner Fri & Sat) does basic Aussie meals with a twist. Try kangaroo loin with blueberries and red wine.

**Blue Ribbon** (☎ 13 15 00) runs a bus from Maitland weekdays but, alas, they will leave you stranded on weekends. Not to worry; it is only six minutes in a cab and will cost about 10 bucks.

## AROUND MORPETH

The historic trail only begins in Morpeth, so cross the rickety bridge and continue north. One of the more pleasant drives in the valley, the road winds through broad green paddocks and hilly cattle country. **Largs** and **Woodville** are cute and quaint, but continue on to **Patterson** and stop for lunch at Yabbies Bistro at the **Paterson Tavern** (☎ 4938 5196; 25 Prince St; ☎ lunch & dinner Wed-Sat).

## CESSNOCK

☎ 02 / pop 18,100

Clichéd it is, but Cessnock really is the gateway to the Hunter Valley vineyards. It has quickly built its identity on this, forgetting a coal mining past and focusing on more pressing viticultural issues. By basing yourself here you may be able to cut costs as there are slightly cheaper alternatives to sleeping in amongst the vines. However, there is no guarantee, as this town expertly rides the wave of the wine boom.

## Orientation & Information

Vincent St is the main street and runs perpendicular off Wollombi Rd. Several **ATMs** can be found along here.

**Grocery stores** (Cessnock Market Place, just off Wollombi Rd)

**Library** (☎ 4993 4399; 65-67 Vincent St) For internet access.

**Post Office** (Cessnock Market Place)

## Sleeping

Like grape country itself, Cessnock accommodation prices fluctuate on weekends, the definition of which can sometimes be vague. Also watch out for wounded bulls on long weekends and 'event' weekends. If you are looking to stay longer term, contact **Sylvestre First National Real Estate** (☎ 4991 2577).

**Hunter Valley YHA** (☎ 4991 3278; [www.yha.com.au](http://www.yha.com.au); 100 Wine Country Dr; dm \$29-32, s/d \$64/77, with bathroom \$79/97; ☎ ☎) Wine tasting, pushbike riding, wine tasting, horse riding, wine tasting, flying lessons...best stick with the wine tasting.

**Wentworth Hotel** (☎ 4990 1364; 36 Vincent St; s/d incl breakfast \$50/70 Mon-Thu, \$75/95 Fri-Sun) For a good-value basic room you cannot go past The Werty. Particularly good news if you view accommodation costs in terms of cases of wine.

**Cessnock Motel** (☎ 4990 2699; 13 Allandale Rd; s/d \$80/85 Sun-Thu, \$90/95 Fri, \$120/130 Sat; ☎) The word swanky comes to mind. Think dark colours and minimalist furnishings.

**Potters Hotel & Brewery** (☎ 4991 7922; [www.pottersbrewery.com.au](http://www.pottersbrewery.com.au); Wine Country Dr; r \$99-149 Sun-Fri, \$220 Sat, spa villa \$200-300; ☎ ☎) Stumble home from the brewery without getting lost. Shout yourself a spa package and you may never leave the grounds. Brewery tours (\$6) leave at noon, 2pm and 4pm.

**Valley Vineyard Tourist Park** (☎ 4990 2573; Mt View Rd; sites \$30; cabins midweek \$65-85, weekends \$85-110; ☎ ☎) Set a little off the frantic Mt View Rd, this green park is a cheapish alternative if you possess a tent or caravan (linen hire \$15).

## Eating

**Oak Brasserie** (☎ 4990 2366; 221 Vincent St; mains \$12-24; ☎ lunch & dinner) Inside the Royal Oak you'll be served huge and exquisitely presented meals like pork loin on sweet potato with pear salsa.

**Old Brickhouse Brasserie** (☎ 4991 7922; Wine Country Dr; mains \$14-27; ☎ lunch & dinner) Salads, pizzas, steaks and a whole section of the menu dedicated to 'Beer 'n' Food', ie brewer's lunch, beer 'n' fish basket, Hunter lager and lamb barbecue, and beer and steak pizza.

## Getting There & Away

**Keans** (☎ 6545 1945) has buses every day except Saturdays that run up the New England Hwy to Scone (adult/child \$30/15) or down to Sydney.

## LOWER HUNTER WINERIES

People have been drinking wine for more than 5000 wonderful years. It is the oldest known agricultural product in the world. And Australia is the fourth biggest exporter in the world, sending 2.5 million bottles every day to 100 different countries. But don't worry, there is plenty left for Aussies. It's in our blood.

Wine came out with the First Fleet in 1788. It was one of our icons, Gregory Blaxland (of Lawson and Wentworth fame), who experimented with vines back in the 1820s. He had a little luck but it was not until James Busby put pen to paper and told the masses how to grow grapes that Australian viticulture truly began. Fiercely promoted by the government as a means of getting the convicts off harder spirits, there was hope the colony would become 'a healthy, sober, jolly, wine-drinking population'.

But nothing of a significant scale happened until 1828 when a free settler by the name of George Wyndham headed to the Hunter, land grant in hand. He cleared some land and planted the seed and Wyndham Estate was born. So too was Australian shiraz, semillion, chardonnay...

So here you are where it all started. With more than 140 wineries before you it can be a little overwhelming. The rigid few will grab a copy of the *Hunter Valley Wine Country*

*Visitor Guide*. The rest will get to know the biggies and then go looking for the boutiques. 'Explore. Dream. Discover'.

## Information

**Hunter Valley Wine Country Tourism Centre** (☎ 02-4990 0900; [www.winecountry.com.au](http://www.winecountry.com.au); Wine Country Dr) Will book accommodation as well.

**Red Zebra Childcare Agency** (☎ 0419 411 636) The holy grail.

Grape picking starts in late January and continues through to late March. Contact the **Hunter Valley Vineyard Association** (☎ 02-4991 4533) for further info; otherwise it is a matter of contacting the vineyards individually in November and December.

## Sights & Activities

**Hunter Valley Gardens** (☎ 02-4998 4000; [www.hvg.com.au](http://www.hvg.com.au); Broke Rd; adult/child \$20/10) This is the most child-friendly destination in the vineyards. Young families can dine relatively cheaply here at several cafés and visit the Hunter Valley Chocolate Factory (where they have chilli chocolate samples for unsuspecting choco-holic traditionalists).

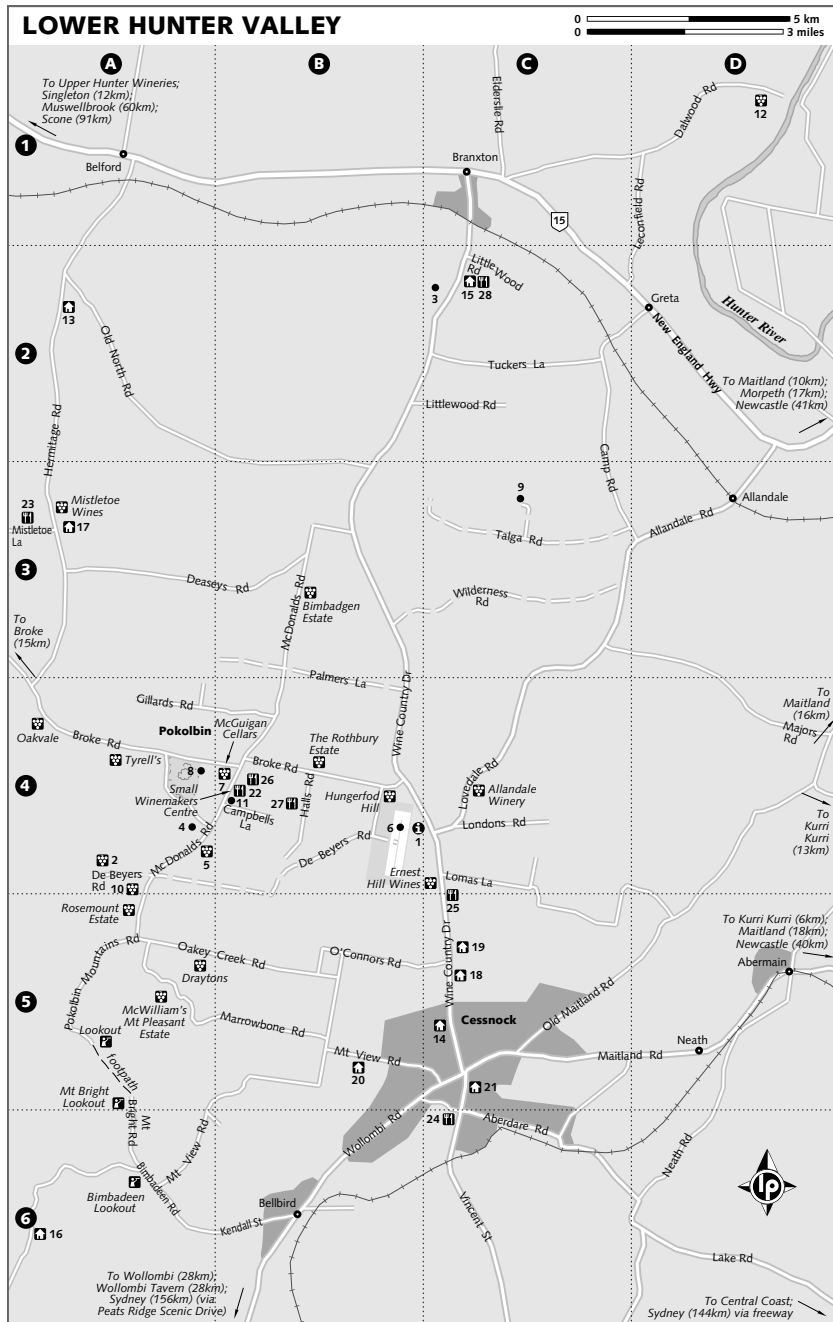
## GOLF

**Cypress Lakes Golf & Country Club** (☎ 02-4993 1800; [www.cypresslakes.com.au](http://www.cypresslakes.com.au); cnr McDonalds & Thompsons Rds, Pokolbin; green fees \$84-98). Green fees include a motorised golf cart and disapproval of wannabe Happy Gilmores.

**Aqua Golf & Putt Putt** (☎ 02-4998 7896; Hunter Valley Gardens Village; putt putt adult/child \$6/5, aqua golf

## TOP FIVE ACTIVITIES

- Get up in the air for sunrise with **Balloon Aloft** (☎ 1800 028 568, 02-4938 1955; [www.balloonaloft.com](http://www.balloonaloft.com); 1443 Wine Country Dr; flights \$295). Too much hot air? Take a joy flight with **Hunter Valley Aviation** (☎ 02-4991 6500; [www.huntervalleyaviation.com](http://www.huntervalleyaviation.com); Main Rd, Cessnock Airport; 20min flight \$60).
- Work up a canter at **Hunter Valley Horse Riding & Adventures** (☎ 02-4930 7111; 288 Talga Rd, Rothbury; per person \$50). If you're not very horsey and prefer creatures of the night, go on a **4WD Night Wildlife Safari** (adult/child \$30/15) instead.
- For a romantic clip-clop along the valley try **Pokolbin Horse Coaches** (☎ 02-4998 7305; McDonalds Rd; half-/full-day tours \$45/69).
- Hire a tandem from **Hunter Valley Cycles** (☎ 02-4998 6633; Hunter Valley Gardens; per day \$50) and let your better half do all the work while you drink the precious cargo.
- Become an instant wine connoisseur at **Hunter Valley Wine School** (☎ 02-4998 7777; Hermitage Rd, Hunter Resort; \$25) and get some tips on the best buys in the valley. Or tie up your apron and take on the oven at the **Hunter Valley Cooking School** (\$120).



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 Audrey Wilkinson Vineyard.....2 A4  
 Balloon Aloft.....3 C2  
 Cypress Lakes Golf & Country Club.....4 A4  
 Hunter Olive Centre.....5 A4  
 Hunter Valley Aviation (Cessnock Airport).....6 B4  
 Hunter Valley Cheese Co.....7 B4  
 Hunter Valley Cycles.....(see 8)  
 Hunter Valley Gardens.....8 A4  
 Hunter Valley Horse Riding Adventures.....9 C3  
 Hunter Valley Wine & Cooking School.....(see 17)  
 Lindemans Vines.....10 A4  
 Pokolbin Horse Coaches.....11 B4  
 Wyndham Estate.....12 D1

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 Hunter Country Lodge.....15 C2  
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 Hunter Valley Resort.....17 A3  
 Hunter Valley YHA.....18 C5  
 Potters Hotel & Brewery.....19 C5  
 Valley Vineyard Tourist Park.....20 B5  
 Wentworth Hotel.....21 C5

**EATING**   
 Australian Regional Food Store & Café.....22 B4  
 Harrigan's.....(see 8)  
 Mill.....23 A3  
 Oak Brasserie.....24 C6  
 Old Brickhouse Brasserie.....25 C5  
 Pokolbin Village.....26 B4  
 Robert's Restaurant.....27 B4  
 Shakey Tables.....28 C2

**Tours**  
 There are countless vineyard tours, so stop by the visitors centre for more info.  
**Hunter Vineyard Tours** (☎ 02-4991 1659; www.huntervineyardtours.com.au; day tours \$50, with lunch \$75)  
**Tumbleweed Trike Tours** (☎ 02-4938 1245; 1st hr \$150, thereafter \$50; 🗓 weekends only) You won't be able to get the smile off your face, and that's before you have even started tasting.

**Festivals & Events**  
 See www.winecountry.com.au/events for a full listing.  
**Jazz in the Vines** (www.jazzinthevines.com.au) Food, wine and jazz all in the one place at the end of October.  
**Lovedale Long Lunch** (www.lovedalelonglunch.com.au) A progressive lunch held at the end of May.  
**Opera in the Vineyards** (www.wyndhamestate.com) Plenty of throat lubrication needed for this one.

**Sleeping**  
 On the weekend you will find it hard to get a bed in the valley (especially for one night), so booking is essential. For budget or midrange accommodation it's best to base yourself at Cessnock (p148).  
**Hunter Country Lodge** (☎ 02-4938 1744; Wine Country Dr; s/d incl breakfast \$100/140 Mon-Thu, \$145/200 Fri-Sun; 🗓 🗓) Whitewashed walls, fresh air and a seat out on the veranda in the morning sun. Simplistic rooms next door to Shakey Tables restaurant.

**Billabong Moon** (☎ 02-65747290; www.billabongmoon.com.au; 393 Hermitage Rd; cottages \$200-220 midweek, \$530-540 weekends for 2 nights; 🗓 🗓) Self-contained cottages with original artworks, spa and four-poster bed. The bush setting is juxtaposed by a somewhat Roman feel.  
**Hunter Valley Country Cabins** (☎ 02-49908989; www.huntervalleycabins.com.au; 1329 Mt View Rd; d incl breakfast \$259 Sun-Thu, weekends for up to 4 adults \$559; 🗓) Secluded wooden cabins with a seductive slow-combustion fire in winter. It offers vineyard tours and transfers to and from local restaurants.

**Hunter Valley Resort** (☎ 02-49987777; www.huntervalley.com.au; Hermitage Rd; \$198-290 Sun-Fri, \$230-325 Sat; 🗓 🗓) The resort is beginning to show its age but is a handy place to stay if you want to get really familiar with the beverages at Blue Tongue Brewery.

**Eating**  
**Australian Regional Food Store & Café** (☎ 02-4998 6800; McDonalds Rd; mains \$14-20; 🗓 breakfast & lunch)

\$7). Bad handicap? Let your frustrations out at Aqua Golf, where you don't have to go looking for the ball.

**WINERIES**  
**Wyndham Estate** (☎ 02-4938 3444; 700 Dalwood Rd, Dalwood; 🗓 10am-4.30pm) Where it all began back in 1828, this winery is the birthplace of Australian shiraz. The 'Shiraz Experience' tasting plate is essential to your full understanding of the drop. Tours through the winery leave at 11am.

**Lindemans Wines** (☎ 02-4998 7684; McDonalds Rd; 🗓 10am-5pm) The naturally grand Lindemans with its amphitheatre of grapes is a cherished member of many families, even though Linde is kept in a cask on the bottom shelf of the fridge.

**Audrey Wilkinson Vineyard** (☎ 02-4998 7411; De Beyers Rd; 🗓 9am-5pm) The single most beautiful vineyard in the valley is home to the first grapes planted in Pokolbin. Marvel at the expansive view while enjoying a drop of red, even if the wine was designed by a teetotaler.



After sampling the wines inside the Small Winemakers Centre, follow your nose to the regional produce section.

**Harrigan's** (☎ 02-4998 4000; Broke Rd; mains \$16-35; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Featuring beers from Ireland and beyond, soak up the craic while tasting five at a time on weekends (\$9 per person). Light meals include Guinness pie, but unfortunately most meals are uninspiring so go only for the beer when you're all winned out.

**Mill** (☎ 02-4998 7266; Mistletoe Lane; mains \$31-33; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Glass-fronted with sweeping views of the valley, Mill has a tapas menu for early afternoon.

**Shakey Tables** (☎ 02-4938 1744; Wine Country Dr; mains \$36; ☺ lunch Sun, dinner daily) Two A3 pages comprise the wine lists alone! Multi-award winning, funky and stylish, promoting atypical eating in the vineyards: pork belly and black truffle potato mash; roasted pigeon perhaps?

**Robert's Restaurant** (☎ 02-4998 7330; Halls Rd; mains \$37-40; ☺ lunch & dinner) Try the tasty twice-roasted duckling with bok choy, pear and marmalade. But duck also if you are tall when entering the doorway of the restored 130-year-old settler's cottage.

No time for fine dining? Head to Pokolbin village for some slightly cheaper options or go gourmet with the excellent regional produce:

**Hunter Olive Centre** (☎ 02-4998 7524; Pokolbin Estate Vineyard, McDonalds Rd; ☺ 10am-5pm) The olives are roasted, they're marinated, and they are virgin. There are bush tucker sauces, vinaigrettes, tapenades, chutneys, condiments, conserves and wine jellies and jams (and it's all local).

**Hunter Valley Cheese Co.** (☎ 02-4998 7744; McGuigan Complex, McDonalds Rd; ☺ 9am-5.30pm) Cheese as well as gourmet produce such as organic pickled walnuts, and the alcoholic's favourite... whisky marmalade. Grab a pre-packaged Ploughman's Platter (\$30) before heading to the Hunter Valley Gardens for respite. Cheese talk and tasting at 11am daily (\$6).

## Getting There & Away

**Rover Coaches** (☎ 1800 801 012) runs a coach from Sydney daily (adult/child \$40/30) with drop-offs in Cessnock and throughout the Lower Hunter Valley vineyards. It also has multiple daily services to Maitland (adult/child \$9/4) and Newcastle (adult/child \$12/6). Buses leave from in front of the visitors centre (p149).

## WOLLOMBI

☎ 02 / pop 355

The Wollombi Brook meanders through a narrow valley, passing the Wollombi Tavern at the foot of town. There's 175 years of European history preserved here, thanks to the demise of the **Great North Road** (see also p116): back in 1832 the government decided to open up the Hunter to free settlers and sent convicts restricted by leg-irons to build a road. Using retaining walls, stone abutments and pillars, the Great North Road was completed in 1836, opening an artery from Sydney to the north and placing Wollombi firmly on the map.

The old courthouse, now **Endeavour Museum** (☎ 4998 3375; Wollombi Rd; adult/child \$2/1; ☺ 11am-2pm, to 3pm Mon & Fri, to 4pm Sat & Sun) houses a collection of local items dating back to the late 1800s.

Aborigines roamed these parts for 13,000 years prior to European settlement. This is remembered annually at **Wollombi Corroboree** (www.wollombi.org). Taking place in September, it is a celebration between local town folk and the original inhabitants of the area.

**Gray's Inn Guesthouse** and the **Water Hen Restaurant** (☎ 4998 3475; Maitland Rd; mains \$25-32; ☺ breakfast & lunch Sat-Sun, dinner Wed-Sun) have a refined menu that reads like a taste bud's dream – pork medallions, veal cutlets, herb spatchcock, seafood paella and spiced vegetable stack.

An old wine bar was originally built at the current **Wollombi Tavern** (☎ 4998 3261; Great North Road; mains \$16-20; ☺ lunch daily, dinner Fri & Sat) site. It burnt down in 1959 when the publican accidentally filled a kerosene fridge with petrol.

## WOLLEMI & YENGO NATIONAL PARKS

These two parks are inundated with Aboriginal paintings, with the 270-million-year-old outcrops being the perfect canvas for their art. Rock paintings often centre on Baiame, a prominent Dreamtime spirit in the area. The creator of all things, when he had finished his work he left this world from the top of Yengo Mountain, in Yengo National Park.

Furthermore, the infertile soils, dry climate and rugged terrain have kept the farmers away. So the parks have survived, forming the largest wilderness area in the state.

Sandstone ridges, gorges and escarpments mean the parks are popular for adventure sports such as rock climbing, canyoning, abseiling, and liloing. 'Tag-along' tours by 4WD are available through the **NPWS** 'Discovery' programme (see www.nationalparks.nsw

## CHANGING TIMES FOR THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

The first people to arrive in the Hunter Valley, via Great North Road, were war veterans then Irish, Scottish and English free settlers. Wollombi became a strategic hub of the region, but along with Wollombi's boom came the bushrangers. The Great North Road was their ultimate playground. Edward 'Jew Boy' Davis then 'Yellow Billy' ravaged the area between 1865 and 1866.

When the Wyndham Estate was established in 1828 it signified the beginning of something huge. Then coal was discovered near Cessnock so the mining industry began its migration from Newcastle to the Upper Hunter in 1887.

However, the Great North Road's importance declined as the wheat industry declined; the onset of the disease rust made farmers realise you can't grow wheat by the coast. The last straw was when *Sophia Jane* steamed in direct from Sydney to the port town of Morpeth, via the Hunter River. The Great North Road was left to fall into disrepair.

It is best preserved from Wiseman's Ferry north to Manning. However, you can still cycle or walk along its entire length (see www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au). Look out for Australia's oldest bridge and convict graffiti.

.gov.au). Two of the more popular tracks are **Womerah Range Track** and **Finchley Track** in Yengo National Park near Wollombi.

There are glow-worm tunnels near Newness (near Lithgow), and **Dunns Swamp** (near Rylstone) is a canoeing canal and has **camping** (adult/child \$3/2). Facilities can also be found at **Little Capertree** (near Newness Hotel), **Sheepskin Hut** and **Wheeny Creek**.

As well as being endowed with the very rare Wollemi Pine, the place unfortunately has some areas riddled with weeds, particularly **Colo River**, which is lined with willow trees. **Friends of Colo** (☎ 02-4588 5247) has annual rafting trips into the area focused on eradicating the willow. You can also contact Bulga **NPWS** (☎ 02-6574 5555) for further information.

## UPPER HUNTER WINERIES

If you have already toured the Lower Hunter vineyards...so what, the wine tastes different here. That is because it is hotter and the upper reaches of the valley don't receive coastal rains. They see just a trickle of customers midweek, so if you don't like crowds, get on your horse.

They specialise in cabernet sauvignon and shiraz; forget merlot but do dabble in the verdelho and chardonnay. **Cruikshank Collatoota Estate** (☎ 02-6547 8149; Wybong Rd, Wybong; ☺ 9am-5pm) is unique in that it is family run and absolutely everything takes place on the property, from grape pressing through to marketing. A favourite is the Velvet Cabernet.

**Yarraman Cellar Door** (☎ 02-6547 8118; Yarraman Rd, Wybong; ☺ 10am-5pm) has a broad selection

of wines including some less familiar varietals (yes that's wine speak) such as chambourcin. There is a barbecue and an outdoor area, so collect your carnivorous snacks from Robert's Meats in Denman before heading out. Another favourite is the 2004 Gewurztraminer.

**Sandy Hollow Caravan Park & Country Cottages** (☎ 02-6547 4575; www.users.hunterlink.net.au/~mbbph; Golden Hwy; sites \$16-22; d cottages \$78-160, cabins \$68-88; ☺) is the perfect low-cost base for the vineyards, and if you have a bike, even better, as numerous rides depart from the caravan park.

## DENMAN

☎ 02 / pop 1600

The sprouting wineries around its perimeter have done little to change the 182-year-old town. A historic main street is lined with numerous cafés serving Devonshire tea, clothing and craft stores, and gift shops that make you sneeze.

The main street is Ogilvie; there's an **ATM** halfway up the street and the **CTC** (☎ 6547 2799; 28 Ogilvie St) has tourist information and internet access.

There are plenty of B&Bs but the **Royal Hotel** (☎ 6547 2226; www.denmanroyal.com; Ogilvie St; s/d \$25/35) is cheap and managed to survive the 1955 flood. Apparently the water came part way up the bar, and rumour has it the patrons, undeterred, kept drinking their beers. The hotel restaurant (mains \$14 to \$28) is open for lunch and dinner.

The little things are important at the **Denman Motor Inn** (☎ 6547 2462; denmanmotorinn@bigpond.com; 8 Crinoline St; standard s/d \$80/90, deluxe r \$95; ☺ ☺) ... face washers, insect spray, hairdryer.

The very green **Denman Van Village** (☎ 6547 2590; www.denmanvillage.com.au; 10 Macauley St; unpowered/powerd sites \$15/20, cabins \$40-85; ♿) is at the quiet end of an already quiet town.

**Sid Fogg's** (☎ 4928 1088) buses run between Dubbo and Newcastle (adult/child \$65/53).

## SCONE

☎ 02 / pop 4560

It is the sport of kings, and although Kerry Packer was not quite royalty, Australia's recently departed richest man (his inheritance was worth five billion), did have property in Scone. This is thoroughbred country, nestled between the vines and the mines, and the culture in town is squarely focused on Mr Ed.

## Orientation & Information

The New England Hwy becomes Kelly St, the main shopping street. The **visitors centre** (☎ 6545 1526, www.upperhuntertourism.com.au; Susan St) is on the north side of town.

**Neighbourhood Resource Centre** (☎ 6545 2562; 214 Kelly St) Has internet access.

**NPWS** (☎ 6540 2300; 137 Kelly St)

**Post Office** (cnr Kelly & Liverpool Sts)

## Sights & Activities

The visitors centre has information about the heritage buildings in town. Kelly St is rife with historic façades but so too are Liverpool, Guernsey and Kingdon Sts.

**Upper Hunter Tours** (☎ 0417 439 776; www.upperhuntertours.com.au) can arrange visits to some of the area's horse studs. Tours generally go on demand and cost \$95 per couple per stud.

Coal seams at **Burning Mountain** have been smouldering for 6000 years. They fooled the first Europeans who were certain it was an active volcano. A 3km return track leads up to the smoking vents. The turn-off from the New England Hwy to Burning Mountain is about 20km north of Scone.

## Festivals & Events

Held in the second week of May, the **Scone and Upper Hunter Horse Festival** (www.sconehorsefestival.com) celebrates all things equine. The highlight for lonely lads and ladies is the B&S Ball.

## Sleeping & Eating

There are many accommodation options in town and an abundance of B&Bs, so drop into the visitors centre for a complete listing.

**Airline House Motor Inn** (☎ 6545 1488; www.airlinehouse.com.au; 229 New England Hwy; r \$82-99, ste from \$140; ♿) Built in 1895 this old building was once the town doctor's residence. Stay in the hotel rooms or in a studio-type apartment.

**Belltrees** (☎ 6546 1123; www.belltrees.com; Gundy Rd; cottages incl breakfast \$218-380) First established in 1831 the wealthy estate once had 64 houses, including a store, post office, church and school. The cottages are suitably quaint and very agreeable.

**Scone Caravan Park** (☎ 6545 2024; 50 Kelly St; unpowered/powerd sites \$17/18, onsite van \$37, cabins \$50-60; ♿) This caravan park is a leafy, quieter alternative to the only other one in town. Linen hire is \$10.

**Crowded House Café** (☎ 6545 2414; 95 Kelly St; meals \$7-14; ☺ breakfast & lunch Mon-Sat) An attempt at cool has failed miserably thanks to a centrally hung horse portrait. Luckily they put together a great gourmet sandwich.

**Quince Restaurant** (☎ 6545 2286; 109 Susan St; mains \$22-32; ☺ lunch Thu-Sun, dinner Thu-Sat) You can find this century-old wooden cottage next door to the visitors centre. The menu ranges from salads to lamb rump and there's some added pizzazz to what was once just a steak sandwich.

## Getting There & Around

**Greyhound** (☎ 13 14 99) buses has daily services to Sydney (adult/child \$72/60), Newcastle (adult/child \$50/41) and Tamworth (adult/child \$44/36). And **Keans** (☎ 6545 1945) heads down to Sydney (adult/child \$48/24) or out to Tamworth.

**CountryLink** has daily train services south to Sydney (adult/child \$55/35) and north to Tamworth (adult/child \$36/15). The railway station is located on Guernsey St behind the visitors centre, and you can also get **CityRail** trains east through the valley.

## GOULBURN RIVER NATIONAL PARK

Goulburn River National Park takes its name from the river, where you will spot wallabies and wallaroos dining on the grassy banks in amongst the river oaks. Keep an eye out for Aboriginal rock paintings on the Narrabeen sandstone outcrops, a favourite canvas used by Aborigines who travelled along here. And head to **Mount Dangar** for sweeping views over the Hunter Valley.

Go by 4WD along **Big River Trail** or canoe down the river (but you may get lodged on a

rock if there hasn't been heavy rain). The park is 35km southwest of Merriwa, and access is from the road running south to Wollar and Bylong; all roads in the park are dry-weather roads only.

There are several (free) camping options; try **White Box Camp**, or **Spring Gully** and **Big River Camp** right on the river. Mudgee **NPWS** (☎ 6372 7199) has more information.

## THE BUCKETTS WAY

This old road is an engaging alternative to the Pacific Hwy as a route north of Newcastle, branching off the highway about 15km north of Raymond Terrace and rejoining it just south of Taree. The scenery is very English Cotswolds – well, just as charming if slightly less historic.

## Stroud

☎ 02 / pop 670

Rich in convict history, the town was established in 1826 by the Australian Agricultural Company. The town's newsagent and **visitors centre** (☎ 4994 5117; 54 Cowper St) has tourist information.

Several convict-built buildings are still standing, such as the old school **Quambi**, the **Anglican church** and the **courthouse**.

Stroud in Australia, the USA, England and Canada all participate in a **brick-throwing competition** held in union in July.

The **Central Hotel** (☎ 4994 5197; The Bucketts Way; r \$30-60) may be able to help you with some tourist information, but if they don't know they may also make it up. And **Stroud Monastery** (☎ 4969 0000; stroud@samaritans.org.au; r \$28) has cheap rooms in a beautiful bushland setting. Or pay a little more for the clover-carpeted gardens at **Orchard Cottage** (☎ 0414 725 482; www.orchardcottage.bigpondhosting.com; 3 Broadway St; s/d \$150/185).

**CountryLink** (☎ 13 22 32) buses go to Gloucester (adult/child \$9/5) and connect through

to Newcastle. Otherwise head to Raymond Terrace (adult/child \$9/5) to get to the North Coast.

## Gloucester

☎ 02 / pop 2500

A churchy town at the base of the goddess of all mountain ranges, Barrington Tops, Gloucester is a peaceful place where farmers still do business at the end of the bar in the local pub. With the last timber mill shutting recently, it's surprising that there appears to be a type of tourism resistance in certain sectors of town. Thankfully most recognise the beauty in their back yard and are comfortable sharing it with the rest of the world.

## INFORMATION

**Gloucester Online** (☎ 6558 1784; 34 King St) Has internet access.

**NPWS office** (☎ 6538 5300; 59 Church St)

**Post Office** (☎ 6558 1819; 9 Queen St)

**Visitors centre** (☎ 6558 1408; www.gloucester.org.au; 27 Denison St) Just off the main street.

## SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

**Camp Cobark Trail Rides** (☎ 6558 5524; 2457 Scone Rd; 2hr ride per person \$45) operates horse rides that take in stream crossings and unmatched panoramic views. But if you really want to live things up a bit contact **Skydive Adventure Club** (☎ 1300 135 867; www.tandemskydiving.com.au; Gloucester Aerodrome, Jack's Rd; tandem jumps from \$280). Jump at 14,000 feet, pull the cord at 3000 feet, and spend the next five minutes enjoying the view.

## SLEEPING & EATING

Stock up on groceries at the local IGA on the roundabout before heading bush. But if you aren't a bush hippy and camping gives you the creeps stay at **Gloucester Country Lodge Motel** (☎ 6558 1812; The Bucketts Way; s/d \$74/88 Sun-Thu,

## RACE 6 MELVILLE HILL CHARDONNAY OVER 1600 METRES

A tribute to *The Jetsons*, the stadium centre is dedicated to betting. Excited voices echo out from its interior, 'C'arn Nordic Princess...'. Veins protrude from her neck and her nostrils flare but the old chum is pipped at the post by Mr Humerus. Tickets fly through the air before littering the ground. But on the hill the sun blazes and grass weaves between your toes...not even losing a couple of bucks can dampen the spirit. If you prize the odd punt or perhaps are a lover of horses, champagne or rather short men, then you are up for a fantastic day at the Scone Races.

Head out on Liverpool St, then right on Satur Rd and right at the TAFE. See www.racingnsw.com.au for upcoming events throughout the region.



\$79/95 Fri & Sat). It's the better option on the outskirts of town. Or stay at **Gloucester Holiday Park** (☎ 6558 1720; Denison St; unpowered/powerd sites \$9/20; cabins \$41-65; 🚰) if you are towing a van.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

**CountryLink** (☎ 13 22 32) trains travel south to Broadmeadow (adult/child \$20/10) and Sydney (adult/child \$50/25) and north to Byron Bay (adult/child \$90/45).

### BARRINGTON TOPS NATIONAL PARK

On top of the world – well, the Hunter – this is NSW's outdoor adventure capital: bushwalking, mountain biking, horse riding, canoeing, fishing and 4WDing. The **Barrington Trail** is particularly popular for 4WDing but it is closed during winter, which is AOK as it often snows and can get pretty chilly.

**Barrington Outdoor Adventure Centre** (☎ 02-6558 2093; www.boac.com.au; 126 Thunderbolts Way; 1-/2-day tours \$125/335) specialises in mountain biking adventures with limited uphill legs. But if you would rather wrestle the rapids, **Canoe Barrington** (☎ 02-6558 4316; www.canoebarrington

.com.au; 744 Barrington East Rd; 2hr hire \$40) hires canoes and kayaks.

Camping is possible throughout the park. The most popular grounds are at **Gloucester River** (\$8) but there's free camping at **Devils Hole**, **Little Murray** and **Junction Pools**, although you need a 4WD to get there. The park can be accessed from Scone, Dungog and Gloucester. For more information contact Gloucester **NPWS** (☎ 6538 5300).

#### Camping

**Barrington Wilderness Retreat** (The Steps; ☎ 02-6558 3048; www.australianoutdooradventures.com; 535 Manchester Rd, Barrington; sites \$10, dm/s/d \$28/32/70) The property fronts 600m of rapids, known in kayaking and canoeing circles as 'The Steps'. But a day spent rafting here is for soaks – this is the only place in the country where you can raft by moonlight.

**Riverwood Downs** (☎ 1800809772, 02-49947112; www.riverwooddowns.com.au; sites \$10, dm \$19, cabins \$90-120) The ultimate retreat, it has come a long way in the past 10 years, so if you have been before, it's time to go again.