

Northwest



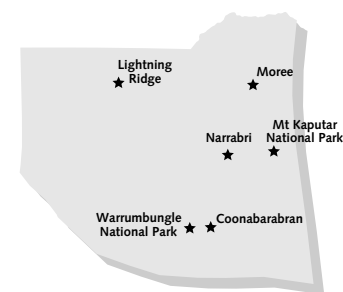
A big sky umbrellas the mega cash crops below. Kilometres of cotton and a sprinkling of canola, cow peas, field peas and other fruits of the soil dominate today's northwestern New South Wales landscape. About 17 million years ago the Warrumbungle volcano erupted, the remnants of which characterise the Coonabarabran horizon.

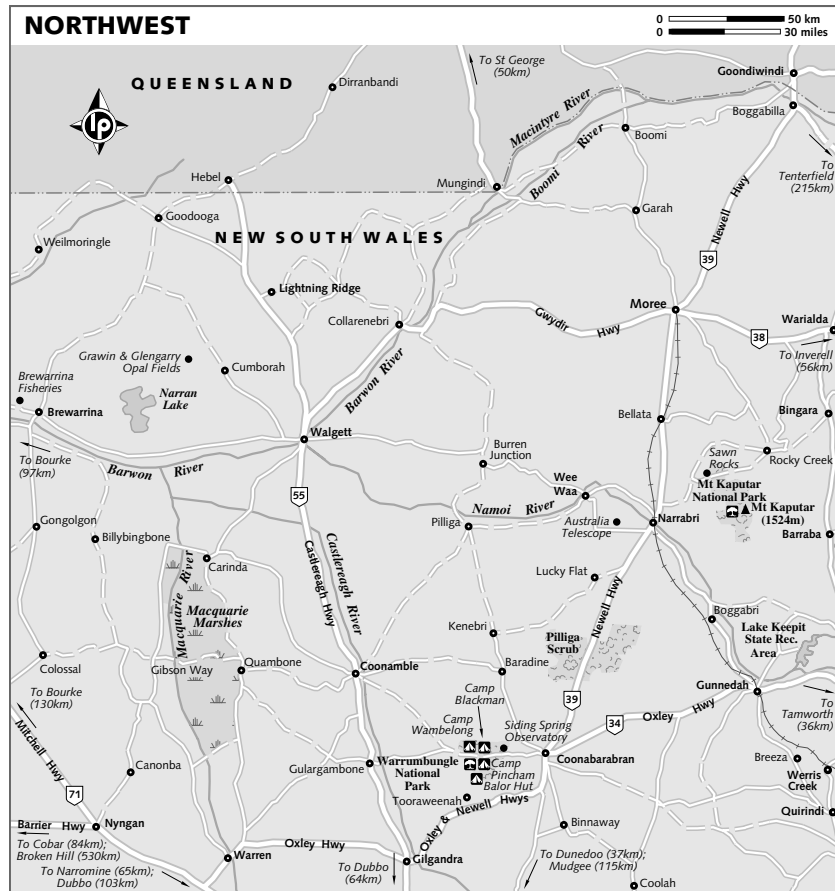
When the Australian plate drifted north away from Antarctica, the earth became warm and the ice caps melted. If you were heading to Lightning Ridge back then you'd pack your togs, as it was covered by an inland sea (with perfect chemistry for opal formation). Mountains formed, the artesian basin boiled, and rivers flowed – the Namoi, the Macquarie, the Castlereagh, the Barwon – each depositing the rich alluvial soils over vast flood plains that now bare the colossal cotton crops of the northwest.

A labour of love, the soils are worked and the crops raised, only too often to be destroyed by drought or flattened by flood. As the weather dictates the lives of those who work the land, it also inadvertently shapes a culture of hardened and hard-working farmers, who are down-to-earth with a certain admiration and respect for mother nature. The northwest is populated by locals who openly appreciate the wilderness in their backyards, with the Warrumbungle's a perfect example of a community utilising and loving their landscape. Linger a little longer at Lightning Ridge and you'll also recognise this respect in the eyes of the opal miners.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Noodle for opals and meet the locals at **Grawin and Glengarry Opal Fields** (p256) near Lightning Ridge
- Get an eyeful of geologic monstrosities such as the Breadknife in the **Warrumbungle National Park** (p252)
- Star gaze at the **Skywatch Observatory** (p251) in Coonabarabran
- Contemplate the universe at **Australia Telescope Compact Array** (p253) just out of Narrabri
- Relax in **spa baths** (p255) in Moree and let your troubles float away
- See the sunset from **Siding Spring Observatory** (p251), west of Coonabarabran
- Camp in style on **Mt Kaputar** (p254) with a bottle of wine and corkscrew, that's all you'll need





GILGANDRA

☎ 02 / pop 5156

Towering grain silos greet travellers along the Newell Hwy, a proud reminder of the town's agricultural underbelly, rich in oil seed crops, legume crops, and cereals.

But even if Gilgandra's lights don't shine so bright do stop by (on your way somewhere else) and recognise the historic significance of the town as the starting point for the Coo-ee March. Learn about this WWI recruiting drive to Sydney, led by a butcher and his brother, at the local visitors centre.

Orientation & Information

Wedged between the Oxley and Newell Hwys, Gilgandra is snug up against the Castlereagh

River. The Newell Hwy turns into Castlereagh St and then Miller St.

Post office (nr Warren Rd & Wamboin St)

Visitors centre (☎ 6847 2045; www.gilgandra.nsw.gov.au; Newell Hwy; ☎ 9am-5pm)

Sights

Are you interested in farming equipment, machines such as the Howard Rotary hoe, first invented in Gilgandra in 1920? If so, you'll probably leave the **Rural Museum** (☎ 6847 0806; Newell Hwy; adult/child \$5/3; ☎ 10am-4pm Sat & Sun) without the feeling that you've been the museum's only visitor all day. Otherwise head to the **Gilgandra Observatory** (☎ 6847 2646; Willie St; adult/child \$9/6; ☎ 7-10pm Mon-Sat, from 8.30pm during summer) and look for the rings of Saturn,

or perhaps spot some Martians leaving the Rural Museum.

Sleeping & Eating

Many motels line the Newell Hwy, all with similar deals that target travellers stopping over on their way somewhere else. There's an IGA supermarket at the northern end of the main street.

Cooee Motel (☎ 6847 2981, 1800 266 333; www.cooee-motel.com; Hargraves Lane, off Newell Hwy; s/d/f \$68/74/90; ☎) A clean neat motel set back off the highway. It's a pity the block-out blinds don't block out the highway noise as well.

Anna's Place (☎ 6847 2790; mikenlibby@bigpond.com; 13 Morris St; s/d incl breakfast \$85/110; ☎) This is a pleasantly peaceful, pet friendly B&B in what was previously the town hospital.

Gilgandra Rotary Caravan Park (☎ 6847 2423; Newell Hwy; unpowered/powerd sites \$16/18, cabins \$40-60; ☎) The trees are thick with rosellas in this pretty park, but it is a little exposed and you can still hear the highway. **Rest-A-While Cabin & Van Park** (☎ 6847 2254; 108 Miller St; unpowered/powerd sites \$15/17, cabins \$55; ☎) is a little quieter, but not nearly as friendly.

Ellam's Bistro (☎ 6847 2004; Royal Hotel, 73 Miller St; mains \$8-17; lunch & dinner) Whether you choose roast of the day, bangers and mash, or the more extravagant 'deluxe steak sandwich', this classic pub grub has changed little since the 1980s... not even the price.

Next Grind (☎ 6847 2707; Newell Hwy; mains \$10-17; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Fri, to 4pm Sat & Sun) Serenely set in the grounds of a nursery it serves the freshest, lightest scones in the southern hemisphere. It is the perfect rest stop for travellers and has plenty of room for cars towing caravans.

Getting There & Away

CountryLink (☎ 13 22 32) buses run north to Lightning Ridge and south to Dubbo once daily. A **Greyhound** (☎ 13 14 99) coach ferries passengers between Brisbane and Gilgandra daily (adult/child \$140/110).

COONABARABRAN

☎ 02 / pop 3012

Coo-na-bar-ra-brn. Fun to say, it was actually derived from an Aboriginal word meaning 'an inquisitive person'. When you notice all the white dome structures that dot the countryside around town the definition becomes fitting. They are private observatories people use to peer into outer space.

But the most fantastic thing is when you first drive toward town and see the outrageously knobbly nodular shapes of the Warrumbungles, the focal point of town.

Orientation & Information

The extremely helpful ladies at the **visitors centre** (☎ 6842 1441; www.coonabarabran.com; John St; ☎ 9am-5pm) can provide you with details on the area and the Warrumbungles. You will find all you need along the main street, including the **post office** and an **ATM**.

CTC (☎ 6842 2929; 71 John St; per hr \$6; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) For internet access.

NPWS (☎ 6842 1311; 30 Timor St; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri)

Top Shop (☎ 6842 2066; 9 Camp St; ☎ 9am-5pm) This store specialises in all things fishing.

Sights & Activities

Skywatch Observatory (☎ 6842 3303; Timor Rd; adult/child \$15/9; ☎ viewing 7-10pm) Just west of the town centre it has a planetarium and astronomy exhibition and night-time star gazing. Or head to **Siding Spring Observatory** (☎ 6842 6211; www.siding-spring-exploratory.com.au; National Park Rd; guided tours adult/child \$11/9; ☎ 9.30am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat & Sun) 27km west of town, for some of the world's major, and Australia's largest, telescopes.

Sleeping

Imperial Hotel (☎ 6842 1023; imphotel@tpg.com.au; 70 John St; s/d \$25/35; ☎) A heater, electric blanket, sink, TV... what more could one want? This place is perfect for the low maintenance traveller.

Coachman's Rest Motor Lodge (☎ 6842 2111; coachmans_rest@bigpond.com.au; Newell Hwy; s/d \$77/88; ☎) A good place to base yourself when in Coona. The gardens are stately but the brick interior is a bit ick. There is a restaurant with some tasty choices (mains \$20 to \$25).

John Oxley Caravan Park (☎ 6842 1635; Newell Hwy; camp sites \$14-19, cabins \$39-49) Very friendly, so nice the owners will hire you linen (\$8). Large basic cabins on the south side of town.

Eating

Bi Lo (☎ 6842 1911; 64 Dalgarno St) is good for groceries.

Woop Woop Café (☎ 6842 4755; 38a John St; mains \$10-15; ☎ breakfast & lunch) This rustic little restaurant is pretty hard to find, so ask if you're lost. Family run with friendly service they recommend you try the Farmhand Platter. Open till 5.30pm weekdays and 5-ish on weekends.

Wattagan Estate Winery (☎ 6842 2456; Oxley Hwy; ☞ 10am-5pm Fri-Mon) While Eme the Emu instinctively ducks, dives, and weaves outside, step indoors to view a range of emu oil products (rendered from farmed emus... yes, they're basically boiled-up for the oil). Luckily the port tastes sooo good. Oh and the chardonnay. Did you sample the sparkling...?

Getting There & Away

CountryLink (☎ 13 22 32) buses connect with trains at Lithgow and run to Coonabarabran every day except Saturday (adult/child \$70/45). **Greyhound** (☎ 13 1499) coaches have a service connecting Brisbane to Coonabarabran (adult/child \$120/100).

WARRUMBUNGE NATIONAL PARK

Snap, crackle, pop went the Warrumbungle volcano as it erupted 17 million years ago. The honey lava slowly oozed from numerous vents, often solidifying before hitting the ground, building massive lava domes. Many years under the weather and the softer sandstones eroded away to reveal monstrosities such as the **Breadknife**.

This is the most striking, geologically significant, and accessible national park in the Northwest. Culturally embraced by the locals with a calendar of events catering for everyone, from **Wildflower Week** to the **Warrumbungle Marathon**. There is a NPWS 'Discovery' programme during school holidays where you can learn about Aboriginal culture, identify flora and fauna, go on guided bushwalks, or get your rocks off learning about the local geology.

The best time to visit is in the shoulder seasons, spring and autumn. Summer can be very hot and Jack Frost will visit your camp in winter.

Information

The **Warrumbungle National Park visitors centre** (☎ 6825 4364; ☞ 9am-4pm), 37km west of Coonabarabran, has loads of information on the park's flora, fauna and facilities. A shop sells ice and camping supplies and grab your \$7 (daily) entry permit before pursuing the peaks.

For more information on the park, *Warrumbungle National Park* by Peter Fox is an excellent guide published by the NPWS. It has detailed walking information. Lonely Planet's *Walking in Australia* details the Grand High Tops walk.

Sleeping

Tooraweenah is a hidden little hamlet at the foot of the Warrumbungles. Weenah by name, weeny by nature, everything here is tiny. Even the butchers shop (opposite the pub) is cutesy! Park yourself at **Tooraweenah Tourist Park** (☎ 6848 1133; unpowered/power sites \$15/18; cabins \$40-55; ☎) or perhaps **Mountain View Hotel/Motel** (☎ 6848 1017; s/d \$40/60).

But there's a more civilised accommodation option closer to the park at **Kookaburra Cabin** (☎ 6842 2663; www.warrumbunglesglasshouse.com; Tibuc Rd; r \$85) a quaint little cottage that is ideal for some peace and quiet. It's adjacent to the **Glass House Gallery** (☞ Wed-Mon 10am-5pm).

Tibuc Cabins (☎ 6842 1740; www.coonabarabran.com/tibuc; Timor Rd; r \$90-110) Think mountainous wilderness, mudbrick cottage, a toasty log fire and tender moments with the one you love (or perhaps the one you lust). Bring your own linen, or hire on-site. The turn-off to the farm is 17km from Coonabarabran.

Camping

A third alternative is to camp inside the park at a couple of camping grounds that can be booked through the NPWS visitors centre. The main and largest is **Camp Blackman** (unpowered sites adult/child \$5/3, powered sites adult/child \$8/4), but **Camp Wambelong** (sites adult/child \$5/3) is a tad more peaceful. Maybe leave the car behind and head for the walk-in camps such as **Camp Pincham** and **Balor Hut** (adult/child \$3/2). Or camp in the back country for free and pitch your tent wherever you like (within reason of course).

Getting There & Away

The park entrance is 33km west of Coonabarabran, but you can also get here on smaller roads from Gulargambone or Coonamble, both on the Castlereagh Hwy to the west of the park.

GUNNEDAH

☎ 02 / pop 9500

Gunnedah's adopted daughter Dorothy Mackellar penned her most famous poem 'My Country' around these parts. She was inspired by the Gunnedah landscape in the heart of the Liverpool Plains. And today the country is still sunburnt and in desperate need of flooding rains. You get the feeling not much ever changes here, even the koalas look settled.

Information

The **visitors centre** (☎ 6740 2230; www.infogunnedah.com.au; Anzac Park off South St; ☞ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-3pm Sat & Sun) is just south of the railway lines from the town centre – look for a statue of Dorothy on her horse.

Library (☎ 6740 2190; 291-293 Conadilly St) For free internet access.

Post office (☎ 6740 2040; cnr Elgin & Conadilly Sts)

Sights

Cute and cuddly, they cling to the trees outside the visitors centre and have been known to wander down the road to the shops, probably for eucalyptus drops. Take a stroll along the **Bindeah Walking Track** and up to **Porcupine Lookout**, as you are sure to spot some more koalas there.

Water Tower Museum (☎ 6742 1184; adult/child \$3/1; ☞ 2-5pm Sat) Just uphill from the visitors centre it contains the usual array of old local items plus a Dorothea Mackellar display.

Gunnedah Rural Museum (☎ 6742 4690; Oxley Hwy; adult/child \$5/2; ☞ 9am-3pm) You could check out all things rural here, although you would be better off satisfying your farming jollies all at once at **Ag-quip** (☎ 6740 2230; www.agquip.farmonline.com.au) It attracts 100,000 other like-minded individuals in August each year.

Waterways Wildlife Park (☎ 6742 1826; Oxley Hwy, 7km west of Gunnedah; adult/child \$5/3; ☞ 10am-4pm) One wonderful selfless woman has been rescuing little critters since the beginning of time. Sure the park has seen better days, but it's nice to support her work and it's a great day out for the kids.

Sleeping & Eating

Alyn Motel (☎ 6742 5028; alynmotel@bigpond.com; 351 Conadilly St; s/d \$81/91; ☞ ☎) Modern simple rooms keep the bod warm at night thanks to electric blankets. It's worth paying a little bit extra to stay in a deluxe room.

Roseneath Manor (☎ 6742 1906; 91 Maitland St; s/d incl breakfast \$85/95) Built in 1878 this Victorian manor is found in the quietest and oldest street in Gunnedah. It's enveloped in a Federation picket fence and guarded by two very placid Dobermans.

Gunnedah Tourist Caravan Park (☎ 6742 1372; 51 Henry St; powered sites \$22, cabins \$59-75; ☞ ☎) If you are towing a caravan it's best you stop here as it is the only place in town.

Two Rivers Brassiere (☎ 6742 0400; 313 Conadilly St; mains \$14-26; ☞ lunch & dinner) Located inside the

Gunnedah Services & Bowling Club this is the local favourite, which is understandable when you can get lunch for \$8.

Red Embers Restaurant (☎ 6742 6766; 359 Conadilly St; mains \$24-29; ☞ dinner Tue-Sat) An elegant mix of old and new, this is the ultimate dining experience in a tired old town. Malay fish curry is delivered complete with coconut for texture and fruit chutney to take the edge off.

Getting There & Around

Harvey World Travel (☎ 6742 2211; 149 Conadilly St) will take care of most travel bookings. **Big Sky Express** (☎ 1800 008 759) flies to Sydney daily (except Saturday) or get a daily **CountryLink** train (adult/child \$90/50). **Lowder & Sons Bus & Coach Service** (☎ 6792 1665, 0427 944 421) has a school bus run to Narrabri (but it runs on school days only).

NARRABRI

☎ 02 / pop 7250

The younger sibling to Moree, Narrabri also boasts a snail-paced main street. It turns into a highway that bisects the cotton crops to link the two towns. Cotton dandruff litters the roadside verges and green space-invaders harvest crops along the Newell Hwy. Head northeast for respite in Mt Kaputar National Park.

Information

The **visitors centre** (☎ 6799 6760; www.visitnarrabri.com.au; Newell Hwy; ☞ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 2pm Sat & Sun) is located on the main street, Maitland St, which runs parallel to Narrabri Creek. Here you will find multiple ATMs to withdraw those hard-earned dollars.

Joblink (☎ 6792 5188; 5/100 Maitland St) For cotton jobs, also check out www.jobsearch.gov.au/harvesttrail or ring 1800 062 332

Library (☎ 6799 6790; Doyle St) For free internet.

Post office (cnr Doyle & Maitland St) For all your postal needs.

Sights & Activities

The **Australian Cotton Centre** (☎ 6792 6443; Newell Hwy; adult/child \$8/6; ☞ 8.30am-4.30pm) An exhibition dedicated to the region's big cash crop. It will take you from the cotton seed to the T-shirt.

Australia Telescope Compact Array (☎ 6790 4070; Yarrrie Lake Rd; admission free; ☞ 11am-4pm) OK so they're not as big as the telescope at Parkes (featured in the Aussie film *The Dish*), but hey, there are six here, so who's complaining? This is the first point of call for UFOs entering

the atmosphere and you don't have to be nerdy to enjoy the displays, but it does help.

Sleeping & Eating

There are bakeries and pubs on Maitland St and visit **Woolworths** (opposite the visitors centre) for all your grocery needs.

Narrabri Backpackers Bed & Breakfast (☎ 6792 6473; dshweiki67@hotmail.com; 30 Mooloolbar St; dm/tr incl breakfast \$20/40; 📞) It is housed in an old pub in what was once the happening side of town. You will find friendly hosts, clean rooms, and good value accommodation.

Aalbany Motel (☎ 6792 4211, 1800 024 211; 38 Cooma Rd; s/d \$72/81; 📞 📺) One of many that line the Newell Hwy all offering the same services at the same standard, which is pretty standard.

Highway Tourist Village & Caravan Park (☎ 6792 1438; www.caravanparknarrabri.com.au; 86-92 Cooma Rd; sites \$26-36, cabins \$51-85; 📞) Set a little off the highway, the cabins aren't the cheapest in town but they are clean and in the prettiest park. The camping area looks out over the river.

Outback Shack Bar & Grill (☎ 6792 1202; Narrabri RSL Club, 7 Maitland St; mains \$15-32; 📞 lunch & dinner) It's not 'Dan Kelly's herb bread' that makes this a unique place to dine, or the 'outback yabbies' caught up the road and served with lettuce and sweet chilli sauce. It actually rains inside.

Getting There & Around

QantasLink (☎ 13 13 13) flies from Narrabri to Sydney via Moree twice daily. And **CountryLink** (☎ 13 22 32) has a daily service that runs between Narrabri and Sydney (adult/child \$100/55). **Lowder & Sons Bus & Coach Service** (☎ 6792 1665, 0427 944 420) has buses that run to and from Gunnedah on school days as well as a town loop service (Rte 457C).

MT KAPUTAR NATIONAL PARK

Looking like the Raj fortresses of India, resistant rocky outcrops cling to the mountain tops of a 21-million-year-old volcano. The older sister to the Warrumbungles, the thing that most distinguishes this park from the rest is that it is so accessible by car. There's even short walks to lookouts such as the **Governor** that are accessible by wheelchair.

Feel the temperature drop and watch the vegetation change as you drive to the summit where a handful of steps leads to an expansive view. Learn more about the mountain ecology with the **NPWS 'Discovery' programme** run during school holidays. Ring the local office or check

out www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au for information on upcoming walks and talks.

Just 27km from Narrabri, head out along Tibbereena St and then Old Gunnedah Rd to the westernmost spur of the Nandewar Range. This park is popular for bushwalking, rock climbing, mountain-biking (Barraba Track) and wild flowers.

Dawson's Spring and **Bark Hut** are both established **camp sites** (sites per adult/child \$3/2) with good facilities including warmish showers and septic loos. There are also three **cabins** (per night \$55; min 2-night stay) at Dawson's Spring that can be booked at the local **NPWS office** (☎ 6792 7300; 100 Maitland St). Get in early as these are popular with the locals.

A slightly more civilised alternative is **Dulcinea Holiday Cabins** (☎ 6793 5246; dulcineacabins@hotmail.com; Mt Kaputar Rd; r \$70; 📞) located just outside the park.

Sawn Rocks, at the northern end of the park, is a spectacular 40m cliff formed of octagonal columns of basalt which took shape from very slow-cooling lava. The site is signposted off the Bingara Rd about 40km northeast of Narrabri. There's a 900m walking track that starts at the car park (suitable for wheelchairs).

MOREE

☎ 02 / pop 10,000

Colonnaded walkways shrouded in grapevine greenery do add some charm to the hectic main street. Fit for royalty, maybe not. A major cotton producing area, Moree has also tapped into the warm artesian waters without consciously tapping into the tourist dollar.

Information

Frome St encapsulates the best thing about small towns. In the block just south of Heber St you will find the **post office**, art gallery, Westpac Bank, and the Postman Hotel (opposite the post office of course).

Library (☎ 6757 3360; nr Albert & Balo Sts) Free internet. **Visitors centre** (☎ 6757 3350; cnr Newell & Gwydir Hwys; 📞 9am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat & Sun)

Cotton related work is available throughout the year for skilled workers who are not afraid of a little blood, sweat and tears. However, anyone can partake in cotton chipping over long hot days through November to January. Contact Julie at **Joblink** (☎ 6752 8488) for further info on **Project Harvest** or check out www.jobsearch.gov.au/harvestrail.

Sights & Activities

Hot Springs Health Resort (☎ 6752 2122; cnr Newell Hwy & Jones Ave; adult/child \$4/3; 📞 8am-8pm) Located behind the gaudy blue 'Health Resort', this place lends a certain 1920s atmosphere of swimming caps, deck chairs, and strongman competitions. But there are not many here, just a few locals frolicking in the hotter of the artesian pools (42°C).

Moree Plains Gallery (☎ 6757 3320; cnr Frome & Heber Sts; admission by donation; 📞 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) The Kamilaroi exhibit upstairs is a diverse display of local Aboriginal art. Kids' art classes are held on weekday afternoons conducted by **Red Art Shed** (☎ 6752 7216; lessons \$20; 📞 Tue-Thu).

Tours

Go nuts on the **Pecan and Nut Tour** or a **Cotton Gin Farm Tour** (☎ 6752 3841; adult/child \$25/13). The tours are seasonal and pretty much leave on demand, so ring ahead and book your place. If you still haven't cottoned on to the local industry, perhaps go on a day tour out to Lightning Ridge instead (adult/child \$55/28).

Sleeping

Strange as it seems, motel rooms can book out quite quickly midweek.

Moree Hotel (☎ 6752 1644; 7 Alice St; s/d \$33/50; 📞) Great rooms with balconies and TVs more than compensate for the garish green carpet and the primitive bathrooms. Special rates for long-termers; this is the place to stay while working on the cotton farms.

Sundowner Moree Motel (☎ 6752 2466, 1800 637 678; moree@sundownermotorinns.com.au; 2 Webb Ave; standard/deluxe r \$67/95; 📞 📺) The roar of 1500 semitrailers a day is juxtaposed with the tranquillity of lily-filled Broadwater Creek. Thankfully the Sundowner embraces the latter with deluxe rooms overlooking the greenery and bubbling brook.

Mehi River Van Park (☎ 6752 7188; www.big4.com.au; 28 Oak St; sites \$15-20, cabins \$55-67; 📞 📺) Neat cabins with or without linen; 24-hour highway noise with or without sleep; dreaming of sheep roaring down the highway and semitrailers jumping fences? There are no highway-free options in this town.

Eating

Moree on a Plate (☎ 6757 3350) is held in May each year. But even with all this foodie expertise about town you will still need to speak

up if you don't like salt and pepper, otherwise your sandwich is automatically doused in it.

Café 2400 (☎ 6752 6700; 123 Balo St; mains \$5-12; 📞 breakfast & lunch) There's the happy hum of the espresso machine, light meals or gourmet sandwiches with homemade relishes and dressings and free-range poultry. Long live happy chooks.

Explorers Restaurant & Bar (☎ 6752 3377; Newell Hwy; mains \$20-30; 📞 dinner Mon-Sat) It's fine dining in Moree's most elegant restaurant located inside the Burke & Wills Motor Inn.

Getting There & Away

Qantas (☎ 13 13 13) flies to/from Sydney twice daily (once on Saturdays). You could also catch a daily train (adult/child \$105/55). Otherwise travel to Dubbo on a **Greyhound** (☎ 13 14 99) coach Friday to Monday (adult/child \$70/55); and catch a coach from there to Sydney. **Crisps** (☎ 07-4661 8333) runs a bus to Brisbane.

LIGHTNING RIDGE

☎ 02 / pop 2200

This town was named after an unfortunate event in 1963 when a flock of sheep, their drover, and his faithful dog were struck down by lightning. Their singed woolly carcasses were still wafting with smoke when the town took its name from said event.

They come here from far and wide to try their luck hunting down the elusive black opal. They build castles, astronomer's monuments, tin shacks, and even houses made out of bottles. Gamesome and grandiose dreams hang overhead as they search for the precious stone, itself simply a piece of solidified silica that refracts light to give off a stunning array of colour. So the streets are trodden by eccentric artisans, true-blue bushies, and the general unconventional collective. And that is all just ridgy didge in the Ridge.

Orientation & Information

The road in from the highway becomes Morilla St, where an **ATM**, **post office** (☎ 6829 0320; 46 Morilla St) and **medical centre** (☎ 6829 1977; 1/48 Morilla St) all reside. The **visitors centre** (☎ 6829 1670; www.lightningridge.net.au; Morilla St; 📞 9am-5pm) is on your right as you enter town.

Sights & Activities

Head to the visitors centre for maps showing the **Car Door Tours**. The yellow tour is the pick if you have to choose one. Follow the signs to

DETOUR: OPAL FIELDS PUB AND PIT TOUR

Start the tour at the **Walk-In Mine** and once you have learnt to watch for potch, head south of town to the **Grawin and Glengarry Opal Fields**. In the lush grounds of the golf course you will find the **Club in the Scrub**. Have a beer here and then you're on your way, before the white dust has a chance to settle. Follow the winding road, it is as rough as the miners' hands that excavate its underbelly. The dumps on your left reveal oodles of noodlers. Stop and spend some time searching through the waste rock. Then have a quick drink at the **Sheepyard** before heading to the **Glengarry Hilton**. You should have finished the Pub and Pit Tour in a different state. If not, drive north on the Castlereagh Hwy and find the historic **Hebel Hotel**, just over the Queensland border.

Homebrew Valley then Junk Pile Museum, to get better access to the open cut and a unique view on how the other half live.

John Murray Art Gallery (☎ 6829 1130; www.johnmurrayart.com.au; Opal St; ☹ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat & Sun) He's left his mark at the Lightning Ridge turn-off, on the flying panel van, and all over the Hebel Hotel (just over the border).

Walk-In Mine (☎ 6829 0473; adult/child \$8/3; ☹ 9am-5pm) Visit the mine to get a feel for the type of environment encountered by the average opal miner. Great for those without time but make sure you take yourself out to the Grawin and Glengarry Opal Fields for the real thing.

Bottle House (☎ 6829 0618; Opal St; adult/child \$5/1; ☹ 9am-5pm) Heres an idea, let's collect 40 years worth of junk, put it in a house made of over 5000 bottles and charge an entry fee to come see it. Do go if you're extra keen on salt and pepper shaker collections or if you have spent a couple of days in town and are yet to meet one of the locals.

Hot Artesian Bore Baths (Pandora St; admission free; ☹ 24hr) If you need to relax (but not cool off!), try the 52°C pool at the northern edge of town. Four words – warm artesian water, free.

Tours

Black Opal Tours (☎ 6829 0368; adult/child \$25/10; ☹ tours at 8.30am, 9.30am & 1.30pm) and **Outback Opal Tours** (☎ 6829 4110; www.outbackopaltours.com.au; adult/child \$25/10; ☹ tours at 8.15am, 9.00am, 1.15pm & 2pm) offer virtually the same product just a different size bus.

Festivals & Events

Prove your worth and join in the shenanigans on Easter Saturday at the **Great Goat Race**. Catch a feral beast, give it some lessons on racing etiquette, let it go with 50 other goats, and bet money on which one will win. The **Opal & Gem Festival** is held at the end of July.

Sleeping

Bluey Motel (☎ 6829 0380; 32 Morilla St; s/d \$45/55; ☹) A successful attempt at a budget motel that offers everything you need: a corkscrew and face washer. Simplicities that keep smiles on faces.

Fossickers Cottages (☎ 6829 0066; www.fossickerscottages.com; 2 Morilla St; 1-/2-bedroom cottage \$120/130; ☹) Fully self-contained and handy to town as well as being Fido friendly.

Lightning Ridge Hotel/Motel and Caravan Park (☎ 6829 0304; www.ridgehotelmotel.com.au; Onyx St; sites \$13/15, s/d powered sites \$16/18, cabins \$60-80; ☹) All your accommodation needs in the one place plus Nobbie's Bistro a short walk away.

Eating

Of the people mining The Ridge, 80% were born outside of Australia. With such a multicultural population it's astounding to think the most exotic cuisine in town can be found at Wong's Chinese. Perhaps most locals are too focused on finding opal.

Star Dust Café (☎ 6829 2725; 4 Opal St; mains \$8-16; ☹ breakfast, lunch & dinner, closed Sun) One steak and salad sandwich, \$7; A Dolly Parton CD for your listening pleasure, \$26; a meal delivered with, 'Here you go dar!'...priceless.

Ridgez Restaurant (☎ 6829 0408; 1 Agate St; mains \$18-25; ☹ lunch daily, dinner Tue-Sat) There is a wide selection of cocktails which reflect the success of your day. Tropical Margarita for those who discovered opal, Harvey Wallbanger for those who didn't. Located inside the bowling club.

Getting There & Away

All bookings can be made at the **Opal Cave** (☎ 6829 0333; www.opalcave.com; 51 Morilla St; ☹ 8.30am-5.30pm) with the buses stopping two doors up in front of Ridge Real Estate. **CountryLink** (☎ 13 22 32) runs daily trains between Sydney and Lightning Ridge connecting to a coach at Dubbo (adult/child \$90/55).

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