

Hamlet with a heart

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City slicker Rachel Smith falls in love with an old goldmining town that's just a hop, skip and a jump from Tamworth.

There's nothing quite like the thrill of stumbling upon a country town that you can write home about. After all, there are only so many clock towers, corner pubs and rustic streetscapes you can take in before towns start to blend into a dusty, red-brick blur.

Nundle, a former gold-rush village about 45 minutes' drive south-east of Tamworth, at the end of the Fossickers Way, is different.

You could drive through the hamlet's historic main drag in 20 seconds but you wouldn't dream of it: Nundle demands a coffee call, a beer break, a shopping stop, even an overnight stay if you can beat off the other punters who've fallen in love with the place before you.

It wasn't always like this. Just under a decade ago, Nundle's businesses were going broke and the 300-odd locals were packing up and moving on. But change blew in from the big smoke thanks to Peter and Judy Howarth, who bought up buildings and slowly coaxed the town back to life.

We set off from Tamworth to drive through surprisingly lush farmland given the drought. Admittedly, the Peel River is low but it's still a sparkling oasis sprinkled with boaters, picnickers and campers on its banks.

We cross rickety bridges, past grazing lambs and postcard-pretty homesteads before reaching our destination, nestled at the western foothills of the Great Dividing Range. It's a far cry from the buzz, big hats and boot-scooting of Tamworth - and although new-look Nundle isn't short of visitors, it doesn't feel like a tourist trap either.

Wandering by The Peel Inn, we get a hooroo and a smile from a couple of leather-skinned locals sitting outside sinking beers. They're obviously fixtures in this 140-year-old watering hole, which has slaked the thirst of gold diggers, bushrangers, farm workers and travellers. The inn was built by William McIlveen in 1860 but, as the legend goes, was won soon after by John Schofield in a card game and has stayed in the Schofield family since. The playing cards that sealed the deal are in a glass case next to the main bar.

I'm tempted to shoot the breeze in the public bar or put away a hearty pub lunch in the vine-covered courtyard out the back but something is luring me to a little red door on the main street.

The former bank building is now the Jenkins Street Guest House and Restaurant - an elegant retreat oozing style from every corner. Its six rooms - three with ensuites - are comfortable and uncluttered, with Persian rugs warming polished wooden floors and beds dressed in crisp damask linen. Some have balconies and all look out over the leafy, Balinese-style outdoor deck, a prime place to enjoy what we've come here for: the food.

The edgy menu makes use of local ingredients where possible and the one-hatted chef, Nick Cummins, has landed the restaurant a not-too-shabby 14/20 in The Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide 2008. It's easy to see why: the smoked trout ravioli with wasabi lemon zest cream and trout caviar - made with produce from the nearby Arc-En-Ciel Trout Farm - is the kind of dish you close your eyes to savour. The honey- and lavender-glazed chicken on creamy mash - so tender it almost falls off the bone - isn't far behind.

Once fed and watered, it's a toss-up. Do we don headlamps and venture into the newly opened goldmine for a history lesson, find our own fortunes with a pan and a prayer in Swamp Creek or search for the region's crystals or sapphires at a fossicking site? Well, maybe. But not before I shop.



First stop is the Nundle Woollen Mill, one of the last working mills in the country. A guide takes us through its workings as we peek over the balcony to the factory floor, watching the antique machinery churn out old-fashioned spools and balls of yarn. The hand-knitted garments sold here are made locally and the shop stocks everything from cardigans to baby knits. Tempting - but the main drag of Jenkins Street beckons.

Country boutiques often look as if they're stuck in a '70s time warp, so the Powder Room - a haven of designer duds, jewellery and homewares - is a welcome surprise. Jenkins Street Antiques and Fine China is worth a potter, as is the Odgers and McClelland Exchange Store. Established in 1891, it feels like a blast from the past, packed with shiny cooking tools, colourful aprons, homemade soaps, loose teas. I buy two mixing bowls and a blue colander that, rationally, I can't live without.

About this time, my companions get that glazed look. It's beer o'clock and The Peel Inn is a convenient hop, skip and a jump away. There's actually a free table in sight and it's not a fight to the bar. For any city slicker, that's bliss.

OK, we never found our fortune on Fossickers Way but there's tomorrow or the next day. Looks as if we're not quite ready to leave this gem yet.

Rachel Smith travelled as a guest of Tamworth Tourism and QantasLink.

FAST FACTS

Nundle is located in Big Sky Country 60km from Tamworth and five hours' drive from Sydney.

At the Jenkins Street Guest House, rates for a queen room (shared bathroom) start at \$130 a night including breakfast for two; queen rooms with ensuite are \$160 a night.

From late November, the Guest House will offer Pamper Retreats for groups at \$550 per person per night. That includes accommodation, meals, a choice of beauty treatments and the option to customise your retreat with a yoga, meditation, healthy cooking or art classes. See

<http://www.jenkinsstreetguesthouse.com.au>.

For information on Nundle, visit www.nundle.com.au