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Sunshine Coast

Stargazing experience at Narrows Escape Rainforest Retreat. (Supplied)

Dark skies about the Sunshine Coast. (Dr Ken Wishaw)

The Magical Dome at Petrichor Estate.

A place to see the stars

Imagine looking up and seeing thousands of stars scattered across the night sky, without the glow of city lights competing for attention. In the Sunshine Coast hinterland, that experience has become part of a much bigger story, with the region recently receiving Queensland's first Dark Sky Reserve designation.

In June 2026, 870 square kilometres of the Sunshine Coast hinterland received Dark Sky Reserve designation, making it Queensland's first reserve of its kind, and just the second in Australia. The designation recognises places with exceptional night sky quality and a commitment to protecting them for future generations.

By day, visitors are drawn to the rolling landscapes, rainforest walks and village charm of the Sunshine Coast hinterland. By night, attention turns skyward.

Free from much of the light pollution found elsewhere, the hinterland offers remarkably clear views of the night sky, with up to 2000 stars visible to the naked eye on a clear evening.

Stretching across communities including Maleny, Montville, Mapleton, Flaxton, Witta, Kenilworth and Conondale, the reserve highlights both the region's stargazing credentials and the environmental values that make this part of the Sunshine Coast so special.

What to do after dark

On a clear evening, the Sunshine Coast hinterland puts on a show few places in Australia can match. From the shimmering arc of the Milky Way to distant constellations and shooting stars, the Dark Sky Reserve offers visitors a chance to experience the night sky as it was meant to be seen.

For those wanting to look a little closer, Maleny Observatory and Mapleton Observatory host regular viewing experiences throughout the year, offering visitors the opportunity to observe planets, galaxies and star clusters through powerful telescopes. It's a chance to see the night sky through a different lens and gain a deeper appreciation for what lies above.

There are also plenty of ways to deepen the experience. New tourism offering Sunshine Coast Stargazing combines astronomy, storytelling and astrophotography, creating an immersive evening for first-time stargazers and seasoned skywatchers alike. Meanwhile, the region's exceptional night-sky conditions continue to attract amateur and professional astrophotographers.

Where to stay beneath the stars

The Sunshine Coast hinterland is home to everything from luxury retreats and farm stays to glamping experiences surrounded by nature. As darkness falls, many of these properties take on a different kind of charm, with clear night skies providing the perfect backdrop to an evening by the fire or a quiet moment on the deck.

Winter brings an extra touch of comfort, with warm drinks and cosy accommodation all part of the appeal.

At Narrows Escape Rainforest Retreat, guests can book the new Starstruck package, pairing two nights of luxury rainforest accommodation with a guided Sunshine Coast Stargazing experience, gourmet local treats and uninterrupted time beneath the stars. Elsewhere, Seven Peaks Farm Stay offers wide-open views across the countryside and towards the Glass House Mountains, while The Magical Dome at Petrichor Estate invites guests to fall asleep beneath a transparent canopy with uninterrupted views of the night sky.

Discover more holiday inspiration at www.visitsunshinecoast.com.au

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Sunshine Coast

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Your Sunshine Coast journey starts here – scan to read our Visitor Guide

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The iconic Riverfire marks the beginning of the Brisbane Festival. (Supplied)

Make plans for festival

Brisbane Festival has unveiled its 2026 program – the inaugural vision of new Artistic Director Ebony Bott, and a bold, expansive celebration of art, community, and the city itself.

For decades now, Brisbane Festival has been the civic heart of the city – a major part of it's cultural identity and sense of place.

Under the banner Switch On, Light Up, Come Alive, Bott's debut program does exactly what it promises, igniting Brisbane's streets, rivers, and stages with work that brings the world to Brisbane, and Brisbane to the world, from 4–26 September according to the launch press releases.

From the expansive Festival Village, South Bank to a dedicated early morning program that rises with one of the earliest waking cities on earth, Bott's aim is to create a festival that moves to the rhythm of its people.

Operating at first light to after dark, it is the only major arts festival in Australia with a program that stretches across the full breadth of the day, from sunrise ceremonies and morning yoga to late-night performances and riverside drinks beneath the stars.

Bott's says her first program includes ambitious new Australian work, hosts acclaimed international productions, many exclusive to Brisbane, and throws open its doors to audiences of all ages through expansive free and low-cost programming, reasserting Brisbane as one of the great cultural destinations in the Asia-Pacific.

"This year, Brisbane Festival is tuned to the frequency of this city – from first light through to after dark," she said.

"It is a Festival shaped by Brisbane's energy, outdoor life and sense of momentum and possibility, bringing extraordinary artists from Queensland, across Australia and around the world into theatres, parks, riverbanks and the Festival Village, South Bank."

Highlights include the world premiere of Suzie Miller's Strong is the New Pretty, sharing the untold story of how the AFLW was born; DIAVOLO's visceral, adrenaline-fuelled ESCAPE; and Luke Murphy's critically acclaimed Scorched Earth, fresh from New York's St Ann's Warehouse, alongside a program that spans puppetry, circus, immersive theatre, live music, fireworks spectacle and so much more.

The festival's opening weekend announces itself in spectacular fashion with the return of Riverfire by Australian Retirement Trust on Saturday 5 September.

One of Australia's most breathtaking annual events, Riverfire by Australian Retirement Trust lights up the Brisbane night sky and unites the city with a shimmering fireworks display launched from bridges, barges and rooftops around town, preceded by a thrilling RAAF flyover.

- For more information head to www.brisbanefestival.com.au

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A short break away

By Tania Phillips

The weather is cool – finally. Time to take it easy and plan that next holiday.

I'm just back from a week of wonderful weather, cafe's and fabulous events. I'm told that's what people down south come up here for, so it figures that we up here in Queensland would look South and find all that in Melbourne.

I love cold weather and after this past particularly brutal and humid spring, summer and autumn it was so nice to drag out long trousers and warm jackets and head to a big city where, unlike my small town, no-one knows my name and I could go to a different cafe every morning for breakfast (which I did).

It was also a chance to walk the city, hit the shops and lose ourselves down the beautiful "Diagon Alley" Alleyways of the Victorian. Eat fabulous food- Greek, Italian, Korean and visit an Ye Olde English pub. It was a glorious week of no work which coincided, not only with the week between mother's day and my birthday, but with my favourite band being in town and a new event I really wanted to check out.

I'd always wanted to watch Split Enz with my daughter and (as I'd seen them in Brisbane and Sydney) I really wanted to see them at their Australian "home-base" in Melbourne. And as a fan of Celtic Festivals, Witches Markets and the Abbey Medieval Festival I also couldn't go past being at Australia's first proper Ren (Renaissance) Faire held in the beautiful Yarra Valley (more on that in future editions and hopefully another trip south next year).

It was also Eurovision week and I had planned to be down at Federation Square to watch Delta Goodrem with hundreds of like-minded fans but it's Melbourne so it rained and I came down with a cold the night before. But it gave me a taste to travel and reading through and compiling this quarters stories has made it worse.

Mmmm now where to go next?

Hopefully you and I both, will get some tips from the winter edition.

Tania Phillips

Editorial Coordinator

Travel Today

Ready to race at Leyburn. (Supplied)

A weekend to relish

By Chris Nixon

One of Australia's favourite regional motorsport events, the Historic Leyburn Sprints, is expected to attract up to 18,000 visitors when it celebrates its 30 th anniversary in August.

The event on 15-16 August will feature two days of time trials for historic, classic and performance cars on the closed streets of the town, which is a popular destination for winter sun-seekers driving north from colder climes.

Leyburn is just less than 50 kms west of the New England Highway and roughly mid-way between Warwick and Toowoomba. It's around 210 kms from Brisbane and sits in spectacular Darling Downs scenery.

Usually home to around 350 residents, it offers only a handful of cabins as fixed accommodation, meaning council campgrounds beside Canal Creek and in nearby private properties swell with thousands of visitors in tents, caravans and motorhomes.

Many enthusiastic family groups return year after year, stay for longer than just the weekend and fill Leyburn with a happy camaraderie.

And separately, at another location adjacent to the first corner of the track, there's a highly-popular vintage caravan display. This often features up to 30 brightly renovated old vans and hot rod-style tow vehicles.

Prizes are awarded for the best vans and, with food, drinks, a giant video screen streaming the Sprints action and a close-up spectating location, this area is always busy.

While the Sprints main attraction is the motorsport competition between up to 250 wonderful cars, there are plenty of other visitor attractions.

The town's history dates back to an 1860s gold rush and many traces remain, not least the 1863-licensed Royal Hotel, said to be Queensland's oldest continuously-licensed hotel.

Uniquely, it fronts the competitors' form-up area, ensuring lively banter between drinkers and drivers.

More than 20 historical plaques around the town also offer an enjoyable family diversion.

In a special feature this year, an historical display will tell the stories of the Sprints' 30 years and of the Leyburn district.

Additionally, visitors can see a Show 'n' Shine display, car club dislay, live music at the Royal Hotel and Leyburn RSL, market stalls, a fun run, charity auction and a racing car display and buy event souvenirs.

There's plentiful food and drinks available.

Finally, Leyburn's annual VIP guest list of famous former racing drivers has attracted some great names for 2026: Dick Johnson, John Bowe, Bruce Allison, Charlie O'Brien, Colin Bond, Bap Romano and Kevin Bartlett have all said they'll be there.

The Sprints was founded in 1996 to commemorate the running of the 1949 Australian Grand Prix on an ex-wartime airfield outside town. On that occasion, 30,000 spectators were reported to have attended when Sydney driver John Crouch took the honours in his French Delahaye car.

The grand prix never returned – it's a Formula 1 fixture in Melbourne now – but the track lasted another few years and hosted racing legends such as Jack Brabham, who became Australia's three-time world champion driver only a few years later.

Moving from the abandoned airfield to the township, the Sprints has grown enormously since its low-key start 30 years ago. It's won the Queensland Motorsport Event of the Year twice - 2017 and 2024 – but never lost its friendly grassroots atmosphere. Tickets and campsites can be booked via the event website, www.historicleyburnsprints.com.au

Taking in the views. (Gavin Maroney)

Enjoying the Wauchope and Hinterland Region. (Remy Brand)

A Port to savour

As the winter chill sets in, a wonderful way to escape is by visiting Port Macquarie Hastings region on the NSW's Mid North Coast. With one of the best climates in the country, there's an abundance of winter sunshine, things to do and places to explore.

The coastal centre of Port Macquarie is the jewel in the crown, especially during the current whale migration season. Locals and visitors alike head to Tacking Point Lighthouse which is a perfect spot to see humpback whales and with recent accessibility upgrades, it's now easier than ever for everyone to enjoy the view.

In winter, it's warmer than many other beaches to take an ocean dip. Average water temperatures range from 16-19 degrees, meaning it's refreshing rather than freezing, and with an air temperature averaging 17 degrees, winter in Port Macquarie Hastings is something to savour rather than endure!

But the pristine beaches are only part of the region's allure. To the west is lush hinterland and the charming and historic townships of Wauchope, Byabarra-Comboyne and Beechwood. Here visitors can explore local markets, boutique shops and enjoy the country hospitality in cafe and pubs.

An easy drive to the south, check out the river towns of Laurieton and North Haven and the seaside village of Bonny Hills, set amongst the backdrop of North Brother which offers spectacular panoramic views.

Port Macquarie Hastings winter highlights:

- Port Macquarie Coastal Walk: A beautiful 9km walk that hugs the spectacular coastline, however it doesn't need to be done in its entirety. There are four distinct sections that help to customise the experience: Westport park to Town Beach, Town Beach to Flynns Beach, Flynns to Shelley Beach and Shelley to Tacking Point Lighthouse. It's impossible to pick the most beautiful part!
- Rainforest Walks and Whale Watching: For a different kind of natural beauty, explore the Sea Acres National Park - a 1.3km boardwalk through lush coastal rainforest at the ocean's edge. In winter, the walk is cool and tranquil, with beautiful flora and fauna to spot. Winter is prime time for whale watching along the Port Macquarie coast, with the peak months for spotting whales the end of June through to July.
- Five Coastal Villages: Take it down a notch or two and visit Lake Cathie, Bonny Hills, Camden Haven, Dunbogan and as far south as Diamond Head. These coastal villages offer a slower, more local side of the Mid North Coast and are the kind of places where people know the cafe owners by name, surf checks become part of the morning routine and afternoons drift by without much of a schedule.
- Family Time: The region is a big hit with the kids as there's plenty to do. From the skate park and playgrounds in Port Macquarie to meeting the native and exotic animals at Billabong Zoo, picking strawberries at Ricardoes and walking on the wild side at Wildnets Adventure Park, you won't be short on ideas.

Charge, scan, explore - NSW by EV

Looking to go on a driving holiday across NSW and tempted to hire an electric vehicle for the trip to beat the fuel prices?

Those wanting to explore NSW in an electric vehicle can now discover local attractions while their car charges, thanks to the launch of a first-of-its-kind interactive map.

EVenturemap combines EV charging station locations with a built-in local explorer, helping drivers turn every charging stop into a mini tourism experience.

With EV uptake surging across NSW, and petrol costs continuing to bite, the free platform arrives at a timely moment for motorists looking to travel smarter and more sustainably. Drivers simply enter a destination on eventuremap.nsw.gov.au to locate nearby charging stations.

On arrival, a QR code sticker on the charger opens a personalised guide to local points of interest - from cafes and restaurants to parks, shops, events, entertainment and toilets - all within walking distance while the vehicle charges. The QR code is not essential, just open the website and the GPS locator gives access.

EV at CSIRO Parkes Observatory, Parkes. (Rob McFarland)

"EVenturemap's key benefit for EV drivers is to make the most of their time at every charging stop and it promotes spontaneous tourism," Central NSW Joint Organisation Chair Cr Kevin Beatty explained.

"It's easy-to-use, free and helps motorists explore NSW more sustainably.

"We hope EVenturemap empowers more people to travel and plan their trips with confidence and ease, whether they're a tourist, a daily commuter, or a business traveller."

The map currently pinpoints more than 2,000 EV charging stations across NSW, with data updated regularly from the NSW Government, the Australian Tourism Data Warehouse (ATDW) and local councils. Additional EV charging operators are invited to add their locations to the platform.

The tool is not exclusively for EV drivers; anyone can use it by simply scanning the QR code or accessing the website if they are at or near an EV charger point.

EVenturemap is a free initiative for users, developed through the Joint Organisation Net Zero Accelerator (JONZA) Program, a collaboration of joint organisations and regional councils across NSW. This resource was developed with funding from the NSW Government.

Explore and plan your EV journey at www.eventuremap.nsw.gov.au

Get ready for another Gympie Muster. (Supplied)

Muster up music, fun

Gympie Music Muster is the ultimate event for lovers of great music, fun times and camping under the stars.

Famous for it's good vibe and friendly atmosphere is the perfect festival, the Muster will once again transform the Amamoor forest into a camping city 27-30 August.

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

Set amidst the picturesque Amamoor Creek State Forest, the Gympie Music Muster is a beloved Australian tradition, with over 120 performers offering a diverse lineup of country, blues, roots and heritage rock music. Head to the Gympie Music Muster website for the full list of artists and playing times.

Beyond the music, the festival features workshops, dancing, bush poets and the thrill of the bullriding and horsemanship shows in the Muster Arena. Bring the family, kids 12 and under are free and discounted tickets are available for the teens.

CAMPING and ACCOMMODATION

Camping at the Muster is an essential part of the experience, nestled in the scenic Amamoor Creek State Forest. Camping is included in the festival ticket, and four-day ticket holders can enjoy free camping for up to nine nights starting from 22 August, 2026.

AN EXTENDED STAY

Planning a trip to the Gympie Muster is the perfect chance to extend a stay and discover the region's many highlights. Rainbow Beach offers stunning coastal scenery, with four wheel drive access to Double Island Point, Inskip Point, and gateway to K'Gari, the world's largest sand island. Nearby Tin Can Bay provides calm, sheltered waters ideal for sailing, kayaking, fishing and even hand feeding wild dolphins.

Venture into the Mary Valley to explore the charming country villages of Imbil, Kandanga, Dagun and Amamoor at a relaxed pace. To the west, Kilkivan and Goomeri each offer their own character and make great stops en route to the South Burnett Wine Region.

South of Gympie, the Sunshine Coast delivers endless attractions, with Noosa only an hour from the Muster festival site, giving even more reasons to linger and explore.

To book 2026 Gympie Music Muster tickets go to www.muster.com.au

Autumn Shrine with Mount Fuji, Shizuoka.

Sunsets on the cityscape of Tokyo.

Heading to the Zojoji Temple in Tokyo.

Night time at the Peace-Memorial Park in Hiroshima.

Japan from new angle

Japan has long been a fascinating place to visit – a culture steeped in history, still in touch with it's past but also a vibrant and bustling modern nation and all of this domiciled on a conglomeration of14,125 islands.

Although of these, only about 260 to 430 are inhabited with the main four hosting the bulk of the population.

But despite being made of a myriad of islands, when modern travellers think of a trip to Japan, most primarily look to fly into Tokyo on the Island of Honshu where a large portion of the population is, immerse themselves in the culture for a few days and fly out. It feels, somehow, like a missed opportunity not to see even just Tokyo from the water.

And it seems that Viking cruise-line feels the same way because they've introduced a new 15-day Japan Discovery voyage – a round trip beginning and ending in Tokyo but taking in some of the other beautiful sights of the region.

This is a chance to sail from Tokyo on a voyage that circumnavigates Japan and crosses the Sea of Japan to the southeast tip of the Korean Peninsula.

A chance to call in at Niigata, Hakata, Sapporo and Shimizu—distinctive cultural enclaves that reveal the country's spiritual and architectural heritage.

An opportunity to experience the refined world of geisha arts during an overnight stay in Tokyo, Japan's dynamic capital, where modernity and tradition remain closely intertwined.

Niigata is renowned for its rich agricultural heritage, deep history and refined culture. It is famed as Japan's leading rice producing region and is also known for its exceptional sake, including the award winning Koshino Umesato sake, crafted by the DHC Brewery for more than a century. Rooted in traditions dating back to the Edo period, Niigata preserves its cultural legacy through the continued practice of geisha arts, while Shibata Castle offers a compelling glimpse into Niigata's samurai past.

Hakata, the historic heart of Fukuoka, is rich with cultural landmarks, ancient temples and iconic modern architecture, reflecting the city's blend of old and new. Sites of worship define the spirit of Hakata, including the Kushida Shrine and the Tochoji Temple, which blends spiritual significance with impressive craftsmanship. The city showcases its modern side with the soaring Fukuoka Tower; covered in more than 8,000 semi mirrored panels, the tower is not only a striking architectural landmark but also functions as a major broadcast antenna for TV and radio stations.

Tomakomai is a gateway to Sapporo—one of Japan's youngest major cities, offering scenic beauty through every season. This lively port hub features inviting green spaces, including Odori Park, a central boulevard of gardens and promenades, alongside street vendors and a modern underground shopping facility. Sapporo is also famed for its namesake beer—first brewed in 1876, it has become a global brand—and as the birthplace of miso ramen. Nearby, visitors can also embrace Hokkaido's geological wonders, such as the Noboribetsu "Hell Valley" and its mineral-rich hot springs.

Shimizu is a scenic city set on Suruga Bay, watched over by Mt. Fuji. It has long been a thriving harbor town and prospered during the Edo period. Today, its economy stands upon a vast fishing industry and on the export of green tea, whose leaves are cultivated in nearby hills. Beyond the city limits, wide plains reach coastal hills, and to the original burial place of the nation's first shogun. This Shinto shrine, Kunozan Toshogu, is Japan's oldest. With its flamboyant design, it is dedicated to Tokugawa Ieyasu, the leader who unified Japan after years of civil war.

The 15-day Japan Discovery voyage (roundtrip Tokyo) features three 'new-to-Viking' ports – Aomori Niigata and Hakata; Visits Japan as well as one day in Busan, South Korea; Includes overnights in Tokyo and Shimizu; Includes three sea days: Departures: 15 August 2028, 29 August 2028, 12 September 2028 and 26 September 2028.

Optional Shore Excursion Highlights:

Yame Tea & Sake Experience: Discover the award-winning Kitaya sake while sampling Japanese cuisine and learn about Yame's famed tea culture.

Geisha Performance & Dinner: Journey to the historic Furumachi district, once a thriving center for Geisha arts, and enjoy a Japanese dinner.

Noboribetsu Date Jidaimura & Noboribetsu "Hell Valley": Take a stroll around an open air village and see the dramatic "Ring of Fire," a landscape of steaming hot springs.

Included Shore Excursion Highlights:

- Vistas of Shimizu: Soak up the natural beauty of Japan's countryside exploring Mt Udo and the Miho Penninsula.
- Osaka City Tour: Visit the third-century Sumiyoshi Taisha shrine in Osaka, with its tranquil gardens, lantern-lined paths and iconic arched bridge, before passing Abeno Harukas, once Japan's tallest skyscraper, on return.
- Dazaifu Tenmangu Shrine: Journey to the Dazaifu Tenmangu Shrine, one of Japan's most culturally significant Shinto sites.

For more information head to at www.viking.com or phone 138 747.

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Salmon pepper fondue.

Chiva-Som Hua Hin.

Retreat into wellness

By Kylie Mitchell-Smith
TRAVEL WRITER/PODCASTER
www.travellingsenorita.com

Bangkok, officially known as Krung Thep Maha Nakhon, is the bustling capital of Thailand-hosting sixteen percent of the country's population.

It's a megacity, popular with locals, ex-pats and tourists alike, the ideal stopover or extended visit to the stunning islands down south or the picturesque mountainous area to the north.

The city is known as one of the best foodie destinations with over 40 Michelin star restaurants and counting.

From exquisite temples to cruising the streets in colourful Tuk Tuks, sampling tasty street food along the way.

There's more than 10 million people residing in the metropolitan area of Bangkok- not counting the tourists- so this time around I am searching for the chilled-out side of the city.

I head to Thonglor, a hip, high end lifestyle precinct popular with Japanese ex-pats and local professionals.

I check in to Ascott Thonglor Hotel, affordable and luxurious, it's just off the main road and within tranquil garden surrounds.

The ground floor restaurant 'Kinki' offers a progressive Japanese dining experience and Izakaya Bar, ideal for a late night healthy alternative.

I sample the Kaizen Taco and Uni Cavier, followed by Enoki Tempura and a hot Saki.

After dinner I head up to my comfortable abode that boosts stunning views across the city with a river adorned with temples in the distance.

The hotel is all about wellness with an expansive pool and cocktail bar set up high on level 11, a fully equipped gym, sauna, steam and lounge area.

Choosing the serenity over the mega crowds in the city, I only leave the hotel once for a Tuk Tuk tour hosted by 'Take Me Tour' that includes a private viewing of Wat Pho and Wat Arun-home to the reclining Budha.

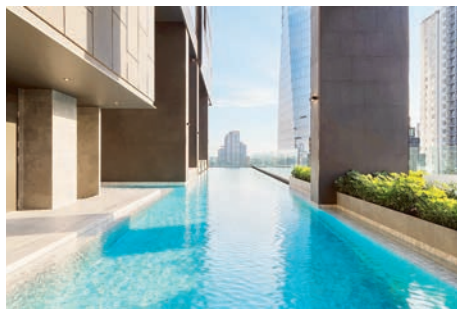
As the full moon rises over the 'City of Angels', I hop off the Tuk Tuk to explore China Town, sampling one of the best Pad Thai's I've ever had.

Tip - if you want to avoid the crowds and narrow streets you can take in the sights and sounds from the Tuk Tuk and your friendly driver will organise food to your seat.

The next day I head south for rest and rehabilitation arriving at Chiva Som, Hua Hin, one of the older and more celebrated wellness retreats on the planet.

Bathing Pavillion.

Chiva-Som Hua Hin - Beachfront.



Ascott Thonglor pool.

Celebrating thirty years the retreat offers exceptional service and a world class program with wholefood from nearby farms.

The first night is all about feeling welcomed, suitably pampered and satiated at a barbecue banquet by the sea.

I sample a variety of seafood from Hua Hin, a colourful array of tropical fruits such as the Pomelo Salad with lashings of coconut and Thai Herbs. There's a delicious and healthy dessert bar, I swear I'm eating too much of everything, but feel reassured when I notice a handy calorie counter on each dish.

The attention to detail for your overall health and happiness is immaculate. Chiva Som means 'Haven of Life' and is a place you want to wake up early for, starting the day with a guided meditation surrounded by lush gardens- ahead of a full day of activity, wellness talks and treatments.

The decadent spa spaces are impeccably designed with wellness in mind, from cold plunge pools to sauna and steam rooms including a rock reflexology walk.

Curated treatments include traditional Thai therapies, sound and crystal healing, cooking classes with the retreat chef and a rotation of visiting therapists from across the globe.

I check-out of Chiva Som feeling spiritually refreshed in a rebirthed kind of way and a knowing that thirty years later, my body is my temple.

Coincidentally the last time I visited Bangkok was 15 years ago, then 15 years prior to that - there's a pattern forming here.

Eat-

- Kinki Japanese-Bangkok
- O'K Pad Thai- China Town
- Taste of Siam- Chiva Som
- Emerald- Chiva Som

Play-

- Reclining Budha-Wat Pho
- China Town
- Hua Hin Beach

Stay-

- Ascott Thonglor Hotel
- Chiva Som Retreat

Country charm blooms

Just one hour from Brisbane, the Lockyer Valley offers something increasingly rare, space to breathe, genuine community connection and a festival that still feels proudly local.

The 2026 Laidley Spring Festival returns 11–12 September in Laidley, followed by Bee Happy Day in Forest Hill on 13 September, transforming the region into a vibrant, town-wide celebration of spring.

This isn't a ticketed mega-event or a commercial city activation, it's a main-street takeover where parades roll past heritage shopfronts, businesses dress their windows, and growers, makers and artists step forward to share their stories.

Across the weekend, visitors can experience twilight gatherings under festoon lights, highly anticipated stage program, family fun and plenty of energy, including the chance to see Bluey and Bingo on stage.

Don't miss the Show 'n' Shine, where some of the finest rides will be gleaming in the spotlight. A dedicated Spring Gardening Fair, community exhibitions and bustling markets.

Three generations line the parade route, neighbours reconnect, and visitors are welcomed like locals. It's visually rich, highly photographable and filled with authentic personalities that give the festival its unmistakable character.

Renowned private chef Tony Tierney will headline the Producer's Patch, bringing his passion for Lockyer Valley produce to the stage.

With strong personal ties to the region, Tony is a proud champion of local growers and farmers. Across a series of live cooking demonstrations, he'll showcase how to turn the Valley's incredible seasonal ingredients into delicious, inspiring dishes while sharing tips, stories and a few chef secrets along the way.

Sunday is dedicated to the little ones, Bee Happy Day in Forest Hill brings a hive of activity with artsy workshops, live shows, and plenty of treats to keep smiles wide.

In an era of curated feeds and paywalled experiences, the Laidley Spring Festival offers something refreshingly unplugged.

Guests wander, browse, taste and explore at their own pace, meeting local producers, discovering seasonal flavours and connecting directly with the people behind the produce. It's tactile, grounded and genuinely experiential, the kind of spring weekend that invites people to slow down rather than scroll.

Importantly, the festival also provides the perfect excuse for a regional short break. With boutique stays, campgrounds, glamping, motels and free rest areas across the Lockyer Valley and a pet-friendly festival precinct (on leash), it appeals to grey nomads, road trippers, young families and couples seeking an easy countryside reset within reach of South East Queensland.

Stay updated on all the latest Festival news by following the Laidley Spring Festival on social media and visiting their website at www.laidleyspringfestival.com.

The view from the Panoramic Suite. (Supplied)

Home of hidden gems

By Kylie Mitchell-Smith
TRAVEL WRITER/PODCASTER
www.travellingsenorita.com

Melbourne is the first city I ever fell in love with, for its vibrant streets, creative community, rich migrant history and striking Victorian and Gothic architecture.

A place of contrasts, where the people are both patriotic and passionate about their city.

From hosting world class sporting events like the Australian Open and Grand Prix to boosting some of the most lauded art and food spaces in the country. Such as the NGV-National Gallery of Victoria.

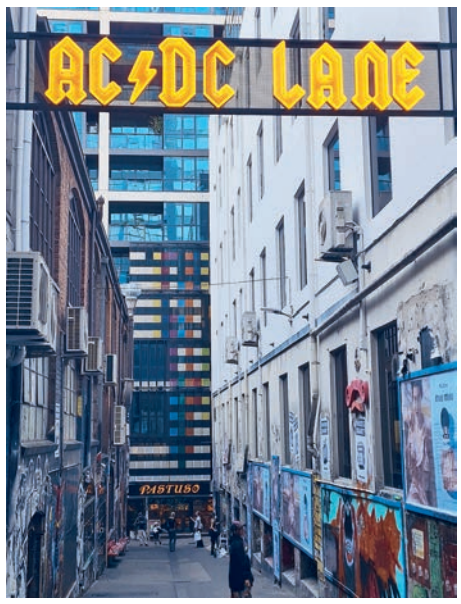
The best way to see Melbourne is by foot or catch one of the cities free trams, from the top end of Collins Street to the bottom. We take our time meandering the alleyways, discovering pop-up bars in shipping containers along the way.

Melbourne is the home of hidden gems from Italian style espresso bars to quirky artisan shops and global eateries that line the streets.

We choose to stay at Pan Pacific Melbourne on South Wharf, central to the city but far enough away from the hustle.

The striking hotel reaches high into the sky with a handy river path and pedestrian bridge that take you from one side of the Yarra to the other. Southbank and the Docklands are a stroll away, with an array of eateries like the Nodo- world class Japanese-at your doorstep.

The Pan Pacific Melbourne is known for its top tier hospitality, spacious suites with river views and the Pacific Club Lounge. We dine at the hotels acclaimed restaurant, Dock 37 Bar and Kitchen, indulging in hearty steaks, fish of the day and the freshest of local greens. Hot tip book a

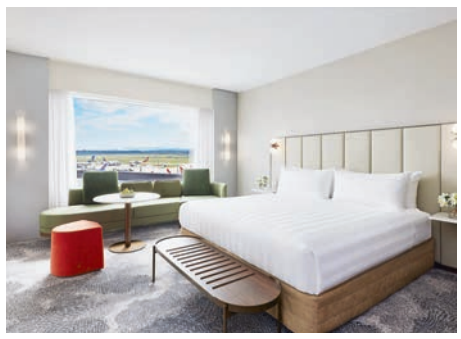


Wandering the Alleyways in Melbourne.

tiered and decadent high tea, served sky high in the lounge, capturing views across Port Phillip Bay to the Dandenong Mountains beyond.

Melbourne Convention Centre is conveniently located next to the hotel, we take a stroll through the Formula One exhibition- all about fast cars and fancy memorabilia. The Royal Botanic Gardens is along the river, with 38 pristine hectares and towering trees that slope down to the river-it's the ideal place to picnic as the sun sets over the city.

Rising to a delicious breakfast at the hotels club lounge, we then catch an old school tram bay side to St Kilda to enjoy the cities 'four seasons in one day'. We take a dip in Port Phillip Bay, followed by a coffee (Melbourne is the capital of coffee)



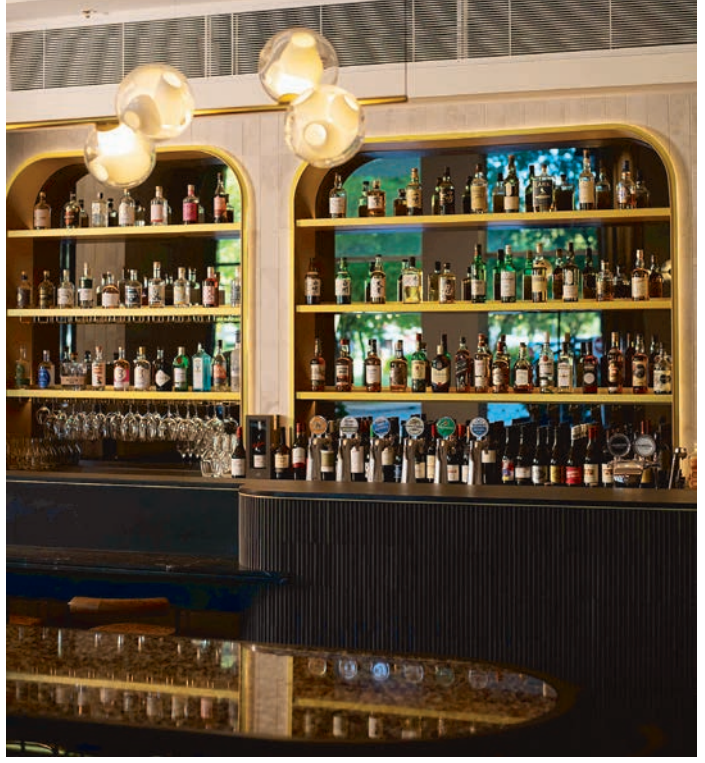
Park Royal Melbourne Airport.

at the historic St Kilda Sea Baths. Across the street is the iconic Esplanade Hotel, preserved in all its glory-it's the place to be, for live music and local ales.

We check out of the Pan Pacific Melbourne and into the newly renovated PARKROYAL Melbourne Airport Hotel, to catch some waves at nearby Urbndurf ahead of our early flight home the following day. The hotel is conveniently located next to DFO for a spot of shopping, and there's an array of good food to taste at the airport, like Melbourne's own Movida, a Spanish Tapas Bar.

The hotel's restaurant 'Airo' exceeds our expectations, we try the Garden Greens Carnaroli Risotto and the Delhi Butter Chicken, paired with Victorian wines, delicious. Bonus for long haul flights the hotel offers short stay hourly accommodation to freshen up, with full access to all facilities including the fitness centre and pool.

Whether you're planning a city getaway or a stopover, Melbourne is a city on the move. Framed by nature, it's a community that connects through the arts and major sporting events, all the while raising the nation's food bar.



Fun, food and festivals in Adelaide

By Kylie Mitchell-Smith
TRAVEL WRITER/PODCASTER
www.travellingsenorita.com

Adelaide - we went for the festivals and stayed for the food and wine.

Adelaide is known as the 'City of Festivals' (it's on their number plates) and there's every conceivable event from comedy to fringe to music. So we headed over from the East Coast to feel the vibe and get amongst the fun and frivolity of Mad March.

In celebration of our 26th wedding anniversary we booked tickets to WOMAD-World of Music and Dance-mainly for the headline act, Grace Jones.

The festival pops up in the cities expansive Botanical Gardens and is one the most popular events on the planet- an offshoot to the UK based festival created by Peter Gabriel in 1982.

Looking for a romantic stay, we opt for the centrally located, Pullman Adelaide set amongst tranquil gardens, with the cityscape as the backdrop.

Popular laneways bursting with good food and the historic Rundle Mall are a short stroll away. The locally revered Gluttony-fringe garden- is a hop down the road opposite the vibrant 'Garden of Earthly Delights'- a carnival of circus tents and street performance.

The Pullman Adelaide offers spacious, contemporary suites with garden or city views, a fully equipped gym, sauna and spa, with staff that greet you in that friendly Adelaide way. There's a cosy wine bar for sundowners and a decadent on-site restaurant-PARC Brasserie and Bar-for breakfast and dinner, boosting a menu all things South Australia.

We sample local wines from the Barossa Hills and surrounding Riverland, that complement the juiciest Chicken Kiev and lamb cutlets from the Fleurieu Peninsula. We simply can't go past the French inspired dessert menu, from the delicious Tarte Tatin to the Louis XV Chocolate Indulgence...ooh la la.

After dinner we explore the Fringe district, all about local food vendors and quirky street performers, there's even and a designated island for champagne. Festoon lighting frames the river and surrounding gardens, as punters mke their way from quirky circus tents to bars tastefully popped up in buses.

Adelaide is a walkable city, built on a grid system from the North to the South Terrace, taking in gardens, laneways and

historical plazas along the way.

The Art Gallery of South Australia is on the North Terrace, with a gallery garden and cafe to suit. The bustling railway station built in 1926 houses one of our favourite Asian restaurants Madame Hanoi- opposite the historic Playford Hotel- both Adelaide institutions.

We take off for a day trip to McLaren Vale about 30 kilometres outside of the city, renowned as one of the country's premier coastal wine regions. Rolling vineyards are framed by pristine beaches, with a terroir that produces world class wine. We head to 'Down the Rabbit Hole' one of the funkiest places to eat, wine tastings are served from an old double decker bus and the whimsical gardens are yours to frolic.

We are on a tight festival schedule but if more time affords you, keep heading south toward the Fleurieu Peninsula and catch the ferry from Cape Jervis to Kangaroo Island, it takes around 45 minutes.

The flourishing island is home to unique flora and fauna, with striking landscapes and immaculate beaches- there's an array of accommodation to suit with wine, gin and food producers at every turn.

Heading back to Adelaide for one last night of fringe, we vow to return to the city of churches and festival. We're yet to explore the thriving Adelaide Hills and Barossa Valley, credited with having some of the best food and wine in the state.

We visited Adelaide for the vibrancy of 'Mad March' but uncovered a whole lot more, it's a thriving city worthy of a visit any time of the year.

EAT

- Leigh St Wine Bar
- Parc Brasserie and Bar
- Omada Bar and Grill

PLAY

- Gluttony Fringe
- Garden of Unearthly Delights
- Down the Rabbit Hole

STAY

- Pullman Adelaide
- The Playford Hotel

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Up close and personal in the Alice Springs Desert Park. (Tourism and Events NT)

Dance like nobodies watching or you're a black-necked stork (Jabiru). (Tourism and NT, Paul Thomsen)

Up close with an Egret. (NT Tourism and Events Paul Tomsen)

Birdwatching in the NT brings rewards

Birdwatching may not be on everyone's NT itinerary, but it should be.

The Territory gets plenty of attention for its iconic wildlife, like crocodiles and red kangaroos, but what's often overlooked is its birdlife. It's genuinely extraordinary and one of those things that sneaks up on you.

More than 400 species have been recorded across the NT, and whether you've owned binoculars for 20 years or never once used a pair, birdwatching in the Territory appeals to experts and novices alike.

Part of what makes it so good is the NT's diversity of landscapes, each with their own distinct character.

The Top End is lush, shaped by floodplains, wetlands and escarpments. Further south, the landscape opens into wide horizons where the birdlife shifts again, subtle but remarkable in its own way. Both experiences are well worth having.

Kakadu is the obvious starting point, and for good reason. More than a third of Australia's bird species have been recorded within the park.

At sunrise, it's almost overwhelming: magpie geese lifting off in enormous flocks, egrets moving slowly through the shallows, jacanas trotting across lily pads like they've got somewhere important to be.

Yellow Water Billabong is one of the best spots to experience all of this, and an early morning cruise there shows you more species in an hour than most people see in a year of casual birdwatching.

Around three hours south of Darwin, Nitmiluk National Park offers another distinct Top End birdwatching experience.

Dramatic sandstone escarpments rise above the Katherine River, where deep gorges, rocky outcrops and pockets of rainforest create habitat for red-winged parrots, chestnut-quilled rock pigeons and the secretive white-throated grasswren, found in northern Australia's rugged sandstone country.

Cruises through the gorge give you a perspective you can't get any other way, while the walking tracks and canoe routes let you set your own pace.

Then there's the Red Centre, which surprises people. The desert looks sparse and compared to the Top End - it is.

But the species that live here have adapted in ways that feel almost improbable. Spinifex pigeons sprinting between rocks, zebra finches that seem to appear from nowhere, wedge-tailed eagles hanging in the thermals far above. Alice Springs Desert Park is a good introduction if you want context before heading out into the broader landscape. The walking trails are easy, and the interpretive information is genuinely interesting.

One thing that stops people engaging with birdwatching more than anything else is the assumption that birdwatchers need to know what they are doing. They don't. Any old pair of binoculars and a bit of patience will get you most of the way there. Guided options are everywhere: specialist tours, small group cruises, cultural walk. For those wanting someone to point things out and explain what they are looking at, that's easy to arrange. But going at a visitors own pace works just as well.

It's also a surprisingly good activity for kids, which probably not enough people know. The colours and the noise and the sheer unpredictability of it holds attention in a way that a lot of "educational" experiences don't.

There's something about slowing down enough to notice wildlife that changes how a place is experienced.

A brolga moving through the wetlands at dusk, the sound of something calling across open water in the dark. These aren't the moments planned for, but they're the ones that stay in the memory. The Territory is full of them. It's just a matter of looking.

Spread your wings. An Egret ready to take off. (NT Tourism and Events, Paul Tomsen)

Enjoying the birdlife of the Yellowwater Billabong at Kakadu. (NT Tourism Events/Touring)

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