



#STAY CATION!

HOLIDAY LIKE A HERO IN YOUR HOMETOWN

➔ WORDS MICHELLE MEEHAN - Features Writer

Winging your way to an exotic location might sound like the ideal way to spend your summer holidays.

But throw in the headache of having to organise passports, travel insurance, connecting flights and foreign currency conversions and there's certainly something to be said for keeping your vacation plans a bit more 'low key'.

At *intouch Magazine* we know how lucky we are to live and work in an area as vibrant, beautiful and diverse as Newcastle, Lake Macquarie or the broader Hunter region.

So this month we've decided to celebrate the long list of reasons to ditch that far-flung travel itinerary and make the most of what's on offer right here on our doorstep.

We've slopped on some sunscreen and slapped on our rose-coloured 'tourist' sunnies to compile a summer 'staycation' *#bucketlist* of Insta-worthy things to see and do, with a range of free and paid experiences that showcase exactly what makes this region so great.

#StretchYourLegs – Bathers Way and the Newcastle Memorial Walk

One of the best ways to get to know a new place is to ditch the motorised transport options and explore the city on foot.

Even locals who think they know the ins and outs of every back street will spot something they've never noticed before when they slow things down a notch to stretch their legs with a leisurely walk.

While our region has plenty of picturesque walking trails, it's hard to go past **Bathers Way** and the **Newcastle Memorial Walk** when you're narrowing down the list to that single "must-do" experience.

Connecting Newcastle's five main beaches from the Merewether Ocean Baths to Nobbys Beach, Bathers Way traces a scenic 5.8km long trail along the edge of the city's spectacular coastline.

It also links up with the spectacular Newcastle Memorial Walk between Strzelecki Lookout and Bar Beach. Built to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the ANZAC landing at Gallipoli in 1915 and the commencement of steel making in Newcastle, the 450m-long clifftop walkway provides unsurpassed views of the ocean, city and up into the Hunter

Valley. It is also an excellent location for a spot of whale watching during the peak migration season from June through to November.

Notable mentions: The 1km stretch along the break-wall to Nobbys Head provides a much shorter coastal highlight, with the steep climb to the iconic Nobbys Lighthouse (accessible 10am-4pm every Sunday) well worth it for the spectacular 360-degree views from the top.

The Fernleigh Track is a local favourite for joggers and cyclists, stretching 15km along a former rail corridor from Adamstown to Belmont, while the Lake Macquarie sculpture walk and fitness trail winds along 2km of foreshore between Eleebana and Warners Bay, with plenty to see and do along the way.

#BackToNature – Hunter Wetlands Centre

Newcastle has an amazingly diverse topography, from its kilometres of sandy beaches to the dense bushland of the Glenrock State Conservation Area.

Just 15km from the coastline is yet another amazing natural asset – the Hunter Wetlands Centre.

Bursting with wildlife on the land, in the air and below the surface of its waterways, the 45-hectare site has been carefully conserved and rehabilitated to become a vibrant ecosystem of national and international significance.

Explore its extensive network of walking and cycling trails, or get closer to the action by hiring a canoe to paddle a meandering 2km route around Ironbark Creek. There's also guided walking and 'buggy' tours and Segway adventures, as well as dipnetting, magpie geese feeding and reptile talks for

the kids. Naturally, the site is also a birdwatcher's wonderland, with more than 1000 birds spotted at the wetlands centre every month.

With all these activities on offer, you're sure to work up an appetite, so either pack a picnic to enjoy by the water's edge or relax on the verandah overlooking the main pond while you savour a bite to eat from the on-site café.

Notable mentions: Mountain bikers, joggers and hikers flock to the pristine surrounds of Glenrock State Conservation Area. Located just 5km from the centre of Newcastle, it boasts more than 34km of single track and management trails in the northern half of the park, as well as a diverse range of environments from deep gullies and coastal rainforest to beaches, rocky cliffs, waterfalls and rock pools.

Blackbutt Reserve in Kotara occupies over 182 hectares of natural bushland, with opportunities to enjoy nature trails, wildlife exhibits, children's playgrounds or passive recreation activities, while further up the Hunter Valley the Watagans National Park offers a stunning wilderness experience, with hiking, biking and 4WD adventures, panoramic lookouts and quiet campgrounds for longer escapes.

#TakeADip – Caves Beach

With five magnificent beaches along a 6km stretch, it's no wonder Newcastle is a mecca for sun-seekers.

But travel a little further down the coast to the Swansea Peninsula, and you'll find a truly magical seaside experience at Caves Beach.

Located to the north of Hams Beach, Caves Beach is a 300m-long stretch of pristine coastline ideal for swimming and popular among local surfers for its reliable point break.

Of course, the main attraction for tourists is the network of sea caves located along the foot of the cliffs at the southern

end of the beach, near the surf lifesaving club.

You'll need to time your visit with the movements of the ocean, however, with the naturally-occurring nooks and crannies of the caves only able to be explored at low tide.

Notable mentions: Newcastle's iconic Bogey Hole is the oldest ocean pool on the east coast of Australia, hand-hewn out of a wave cut rock platform by convicts in 1819 for the personal use of Major James Morisset. These days it is a popular swimming spot among locals and visitors, accessible from King Edward Park. The Merewether Baths provide a more sheltered swimming location with two large swimming pools, including one suitable for younger children. It is renowned as the largest ocean baths complex in the Southern Hemisphere.

#StepBackInTime – Morpeth

Located in the Maitland local government area on the banks of the Hunter River, the charming village of Morpeth has a rich and vibrant history that stretches back to the early 1800s.

Originally part of a 1000-hectare grant made to Lieutenant Edward Charles Close in 1821, the township of Morpeth began to emerge in 1834 and went on to become one of the busiest inland river ports in NSW.

Now a vibrant tourism destination known for its cobblestone laneways filled with an interesting collection of cafes, speciality shops, art galleries and boutique stores, Morpeth is also popular among history buffs for its stunning heritage architecture.

The free Morpeth Heritage Walk brochure list 25 places of historical interest around the beautifully preserved river port, with many of the town's most impressive sandstone buildings built along the main thoroughfare of Swan Street including the CBC Bank (1889), the Morpeth Court House (1862) and the Arnott Bakehouse (1851), where Australian biscuit icon



Morpeth

William Arnott had his original bakery.

The darker side of the village's history can also be discovered by those who dare to take the Morpeth Ghost and Heritage Tour, where you will be regaled with tales of ghosts, hauntings, dark history, murder and strange folklore.

Notable mentions: As one of oldest settlements in Australia, Newcastle is chock full of heritage highlights including Christ Church Cathedral, Miss Porter's House, the Convict Lumber Yard and the towering battlements of Fort Scratchley, which famously fired on an attacking Japanese submarine in 1942 to become Australia's only coastal fortification to fire on an enemy naval vessel.

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#TakeInTheView – Tomaree Head

One of the best things about visiting Newcastle and the surrounding regions are the variety of amazing views on offer, from striking urban landscapes to tranquil ocean vistas, and the towering treetops of our national parks that form a lush green tablecloth over the land.

While there are countless spectacular spots where you can take in the views, Tomaree Head in Port Stephens has to be one of the most magnificent.

Located at the far end of the peninsula at Shoal Bay, Tomaree Head towers 161m above sea level, with the climb to the summit offering an at times taxing yet very rewarding challenge.

From the top, you'll enjoy panoramic views of Yacaaba Head, Cabbage Tree, Boondelbah and Broughton Islands from the north platform, with Zenith, Wreck and Box Beaches, Fingal Island and Point Stephens Lighthouse sure to impress from the south platform.

Don't forget to pack your binoculars for a spot of dolphin or whale watching, and make sure you take the extra time out to visit the historic World War II gun emplacements along the Fort Tomaree Walk on the way back down.

Notable mentions: There's plenty of places to check out awesome coastal views in Newcastle too, with King Edward Park one of the best multi-functional spaces to explore, with lush green gardens and towering Norfolk Pines providing the perfect picnic backdrop, a multi-level playground to keep the kids entertained and, of course, the stunning scenery, best viewed from Shepherds Hill. Head further afield, and it's hard to go past the 412m-high Mount Sugarloaf, which is home to the television and radio transmitters that broadcast into the

Hunter Region. A short but at times steep walk to the summit will pay off with spectacular 360-degree views over Newcastle, Lake Macquarie and the coastline.

#ActionPackedAdventure – Sand Dune Safaris

If you're looking for a little more action, these holidays there are plenty of options to choose from across the region. Combining one of Newcastle's biggest assets with the need for speed, Sand Dune Safaris is a must-do for visitors and locals alike, with a host of adrenaline-filled activities on the largest moving sand dunes in the Southern Hemisphere. Launch yourself from the top of one of Stockton's highest dunes and surf or slide down the silky-smooth sand as part of a sandboarding adventure, or take a stunning 4WD journey to discover the history behind the last legal squatter settlement in Australia – Tin City, while also learning more about the Aboriginal and military history of the area.

Notable mentions: With such spectacular waters off our coastline there's plenty of options to dive into an action-packed experience and learn how to sail, snorkel or surf, or enjoy the view from above with a skydiving or paragliding adventure. For those who want to push their limits even further, take to the air with Newcastle's very own "Top Gun", Red Bull Air Race pilot Matt Hall, whose team of Matt Hall Racing pilots offer heart-pumping aerobatic joy flights over Lake Macquarie and Newcastle.

#CultureVultures – Art Galleries

Tickling off a #bucketlist for the region isn't just about seeing the sights or getting active in the great outdoors – we're also home to a thriving cultural scene of art galleries, museums, theatre productions, writing festivals and more.



Try Sandboarding at Stockton Sand Dunes

In particular, our vibrant community of resident artists ensures that, regardless of which part of the region you choose to visit, there's sure to be a cultural morsel or two to snack on during your stay with countless independent and private art galleries to explore.

There's also the region's major public art galleries in Newcastle, Maitland and Lake Macquarie, which showcase a mix of locally-based artists, works from their permanent collections and some of the most exciting touring exhibitions on offer from both nationally and internationally renowned artists.

All three also host regular art workshops and school holiday programs, encouraging budding artists of all ages to ▶

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Circa 1876, Halls Road Pokolbin

learn new techniques and interactively engage with the exhibitions.

Newcastle Art Gallery is home to one of Australia's major art prizes, the prestigious \$50,000 Kilgour Prize, while the Maitland Regional Art Gallery and Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery offer an exciting program of exhibitions throughout the year.

Cooks Hill Galleries in Bull Street is one of Australia's leading commercial art galleries and a must-visit for art enthusiasts.

Notable mentions: With such a rich cultural history to draw on, the region is naturally also home to a number of fabulous museums and galleries, including Newcastle Museum, and a few hidden gems you might not be as familiar with including the South Seas Island Museum in Cooranbong, which has everything from a full-size Solomon Island war canoe to spears used by past cannibals and Fijian wooden pillows.

#ShopTilYouDrop – Darby Street, Newcastle

There's nothing that screams "holidays" quite like a souvenir shop packed full of tacky trinkets that you'll no doubt take home and leave to gather dust on the shelf.

But just because you're taking a "staycation" doesn't mean you have to miss out on the mementoes.

Rather than feeling obliged to stop by one of the cheesy tourist traps, you can instead explore the region's vast network of charming boutiques and quirky local businesses and pick up something a little more original.

If you're looking for something distinctly different, you can't go past the funky mix of stores trading their wares in the cosmopolitan heart of Newcastle's retail scene, Darby Street.

Offering everything from the latest street designer wear, to second-hand books, quirky homewares and one-of-a-kind handcrafted jewellery, Darby Street's unique boutiques and gift shops will provide the perfect spot of retail therapy, with the bonus of around

25 cafes and restaurants to choose from once you've worked up an appetite.

Notable mentions: If you're looking for homemade or handcrafted "souvenirs" then make sure you head to one of the region's sensational artisan markets, such as the monthly Olive Tree Market at Newcastle's Civic Park, or the equally inspiring Handmade in the Hunter Market, which is held at Kevin Sobels Wines in Pokolbin several times a month.

Foodies are also well catered for at the weekly Newcastle City Farmers Markets, held at Newcastle Showground each Sunday.

#TemptYourTastebuds – Hunter Valley Vineyards

The region has a few famous "eat streets", but there's nowhere quite like the world-renowned Hunter Valley Wine Country to tempt the taste buds.

With hundreds of major label wineries and family-owned boutique cellar doors to explore, not to mention some of the finest restaurants in the Hunter, a trip to Pokolbin or the surrounding smaller wine regions of Lovedale and Broke is a must for every "staycationer". Drive yourself for a self-guided wine tasting or book a seat on one of the countless tour bus companies winding their way around the vineyards and spend a day (or two) exploring the many different tastes of the valley.

With so many destinations to choose from, you might want to check out www.yourhuntervalley.com.au for a spot of inspiration before you go!

Notable mentions: The revitalisation of The Levee precinct in Maitland has seen several new cafes, small bars and restaurants open their doors along the riverside shopping strip, with the area fast gaining a reputation as a growing culinary hot spot. Being known for its cuisine is nothing new for Beaumont Street, Hamilton, however, with the multicultural melting pot's array of eateries a mecca for those looking to taste the flavours of the world far closer to home. ■



Eventful summer across the city

December

- UNTIL 17 FEB OLSEN ORMANDY: A CREATIVE FORCE EXHIBITION, NEWCASTLE ART GALLERY
- UNTIL 24 FEB SUPERNOVA SUMMER OF SCIENCE, NEWCASTLE MUSEUM
- 2 BIKERS TOY RUN, STOCKTON TO WICKHAM PARK
- 14 CAROLS BY CANDLELIGHT, KING EDWARD PARK
- 31 NEW YEAR'S EVE, NEWCASTLE FORESHORE*



January

- 6 - 27 CELEBRATION OF CRICKET, TWO MAJOR JUNIOR CRICKET CARNIVALS, NO.1 AND LOCAL GROUNDS
- 8 - 24 CITY OF NEWCASTLE T20 SUMMER BASH, NO.1 SPORTSGROUND AND SUBURBAN GROUNDS
- 26 AUSTRALIA DAY FAMILY FRIENDLY CELEBRATIONS, VARIOUS LOCATIONS*



February

- 9 - 10 AUSTRALIAN BOWL RIDING CHAMPIONSHIP, EMPIRE PARK
- 9 FEB - 21 APR FLORIBUNDA: FROM THE COLLECTION EXHIBITION, NEWCASTLE ART GALLERY
- 16 LIGHT UP NEWCASTLE LANTERN WALK, NEWCASTLE FORESHORE
- 16 - 17 AUSTRALIAN BOARD RIDERS BATTLE, NEWCASTLE BEACH

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