

Upper Hunter heaven

Unearth the hidden gems of Singleton and surrounds

Story: Michelle Meehan.



Lake St Clair is a mecca for fishing and boating lovers.

Since the early-to-mid 1800s, rich, alluvial soils and a vast seam of coal have been attracting settlers, pastoralists and miners to the bucolic landscapes surrounding the Hunter River, 200km north-west of Sydney. But while agriculture and coal mining have long been the economic backbone of this flourishing rural region, these days there are plenty of other elements inspiring a visit to Singleton and surrounds.

From award-winning wineries and fine dining restaurants, to heritage architecture and luxury accommodation, Singleton provides a gateway to the many attractions of the Upper Hunter, with plenty of surprises just waiting to be unearthed. Founded by English immigrant Benjamin Singleton in the early 1820s, the region was renowned for its fertile soils, with agriculture dominating the landscape and the local industry for many years.

Singleton's central location on the New England Highway makes it a great base for exploring the attractions of the wider Upper Hunter, including its natural assets. With a water storage capacity about half the size of Sydney Harbour and fish stocks that include Australian bass, golden perch and silver perch, Lake St Clair (30 minutes north of Singleton) is a mecca for fishing and boating lovers. Wollemi, Yengo, Towarri and Barrington Tops national parks provide countless hikes, camping grounds, lookouts, waterways and mountain bike trails for outdoor enthusiasts to explore

Railway driven boom

When the railway line was finally extended to Singleton in 1863 the town underwent a rapid period of growth and many of its large, elegant homes date back to this time. ▷



Homestead Retreat was built in 1912 and has been beautifully restored to its former grandeur.



The view from the wraparound veranda at Homestead Retreat.



Gourmet hamper from Moss & Twine.

Highlights of this Colonial-era building boom can be seen as part of the Singleton Heritage Walk, which is spread over several kilometres around the centre of town, taking in 37 points of interest including several State Heritage listed buildings. These include the former Post Office, a magnificent Victorian Italianate building that adds to the historic charm of George Street, as well as one of the most distinctive buildings in Singleton, Ewbank, which was constructed in 1884 for the Bank of New South Wales and is now a private residence.

Singleton and surrounding Upper Hunter regions are well known for their historic homes, including Minimbah House, a 45-room Victorian Italianate mansion built between 1875-1877 that sits on the south-eastern outskirts of town.

Central attractions

Once a bustling country town, Singleton has been transformed over the years into a sophisticated commercial centre with a mix of retailers, cafes and restaurants.

Most are located along the main city centre precinct on John Street, which has undergone a revitalisation program

in recent years to enhance the streetscape. The diversity of businesses setting up shop in Singleton reflect the town's increasingly cosmopolitan residential and visitor profile, with unique boutiques such as Moss & Twine sprinkled throughout the CBD. Opening in 2016, this locally-owned business sells a range of gorgeous gifts, gourmet foods and hampers, while also producing stunning seasonal bouquets through its expanded floristry service.

Singleton's café scene has also flourished in recent years, featuring menus that cater for everyone, from the most discerning coffee connoisseurs and gourmards, to those just looking for a quick, hearty meal. Top picks include Munkeeskins, Cervo'z and the more recent addition, The Mochaccino Bar, which opened late last year.

Stay in style

While many of the region's oldest properties remain private homes, others have thrown their doors open to visitors as charming bed and breakfasts and homestays, such as Retreat Homestead at Jerry's Plains, around 40 minutes from Singleton.



Hollydene Estate's cellar door is located on the iconic Arrowfield property.



Hollydene Estate offers premium wine, sparklings and liqueurs.



Fine dining at Vines Restaurant at Hollydene Estate.

Photo: April Jostie

Built in 1912 using cypress pine and ironbark cut from the surrounding 150 hectare property, the traditional country homestead was beautifully and sympathetically restored by its current owners in the early 2000s. Located at the foot of the Wollemi National Park, the Retreat Homestead offers three bedrooms, two-and-a-half bathrooms and a lovely wraparound verandah from which to enjoy the magnificence of the sun setting over the mountain ranges.

For those who prefer to base themselves in town, Singleton has a variety of modern hotels, motels and accommodation options, from the relaxed country pub style offerings at The Royal Hotel and The Caledonian through to the stylish four-star Quest serviced apartments just minutes from the main street shopping district. The one, two and three bedroom self-contained units are ideal for both a short stopover and longer stay.

The region's natural assets have also been used to create a very different trail for visitors to follow, with a strong viticulture industry providing a premium wine tasting experience across the Upper Hunter.

Venturing further afield

Known as "the tranquil side of the Hunter Valley", the Broke Fordwich wine sub-region is located 20 minutes southwest of Singleton and was first planted to grapes in the early 1900s, with its wines recognised for their slightly richer, softer style whilst still maintaining their unique Hunter Valley characteristics.

Cellar doors are sprinkled through various regions in the Upper Hunter including Jerry's Plains (30 minutes north west of Singleton), where Hollydene Estate offers an impressive range of premium wines, sparklings and liqueurs ▷



A cosy place to enjoy a meal at The Cottage.



Dry aged beef is the signature dish on the menu at The Cottage.

from its cellar door at the iconic Arrowfield property, as well as a sumptuous bite to eat at Vines Restaurant.

In the fine mix of family-run vineyards and cellar doors other highlights include Margan Wines (and its award-winning on-site restaurant), Nightingale Wines with its luxury spa villa accommodation, and Catherine Vale Wines, which is known for its northern Italian varieties and is the only producer of Arneis and Dolcetto in the Hunter Valley.

Twenty minutes further north in the picturesque rural surrounds of Denman you'll find Two Rivers Wines (located on the banks of the Hunter and Goulburn rivers) and the unique Small Forest winery run by Atsuko Radcliffe, Japan's first female winemaker and the only Japanese winemaker to establish a wine brand in Australia.

The Upper Hunter is also home to a range of fine dining venues, with The Cottage at Scone a must-visit for anyone travelling to the region. Housed in a grand old 1860s-built country homestead which has been lovingly



The Cottage chef Colin Selwood.



With its grand proportions and period features The Cottage at Scone is a fabulous dining venue.

restored by its owners Michael and Shanny Crouch, The Cottage restaurant is run by New Zealand native Colin Selwood. He spent years working in some of Sydney's most well-known restaurants before first moving to the Upper Hunter in 2010 to establish the award-winning dining destination, Graze, at The Willow Tree Inn. After an 18-month stint in Melbourne, the chef eagerly returned to the Upper Hunter to open a restaurant of his own at The Cottage. While the menu reflects Colin's classic French training with influences of Asian and Mediterranean flavours, the restaurant's signature is the grassfed beef that is hung in a purpose-built, humidity controlled, dry ageing room for a minimum of six weeks before being served in the restaurant.

With so much on offer within Singleton and surrounds, it's well worth exploring this gateway to the scenic, historic and gastronomical delights of the Upper Hunter district to see what hidden gems you can find. ◇