

# Central Coast New South Wales



It seems a little redundant in a book about Australia's East Coast to rave about awesome beaches, but the stretch heading north of Sydney has them in truckloads. As national parks play leapfrog with towns and cities all the way, you can choose between completely deserted forest-lined sands where modern life is little more than a worrying rumour and lifesaver-patrolled paradises where a decent coffee is but a short stroll away.

Surfers will be in hang-ten heaven: pile out of your Combi pretty much anywhere the mood takes you and you'll find a decent break. If surf isn't your thing, a series of coastal saltwater lakes allows for a calmer dip.

Fresh seafood, azure water and sand between your toes – these are timeless pleasures that cut across generations and Port Stephens is the exemplar, with its collection of coves that will make grandma swoon, junior squeal and Surfer Joe stub out his joint. A spell of bad weather may not affect the surfies, but for those less bronzed and salty it's the perfect excuse to take refuge in the recesses of the Hunter Valley wine region. Indulgence isn't limited to its liquid form here. The leafy country roads are strewn with producers of chocolate and cheese, and wineries with world-class restaurants.

The Pacific Highway divides the region, a mainline blacktop cable plugged in to the electric climes up north. Many of the sights mentioned are off the highway though, and there's more besides. Maybe just throw the map away every now and then, make a few random right-hand turns, and stop and smell the salt.

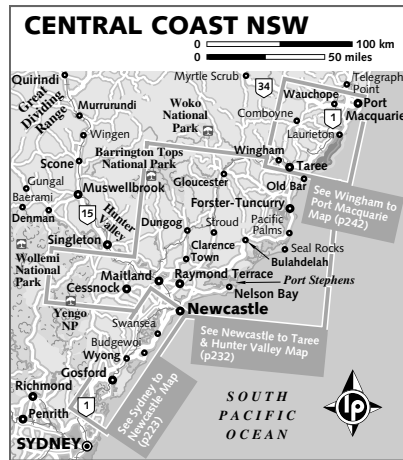
## HIGHLIGHTS

- Colonising your own empty beach at **Bouddi** (p224), **Booti Booti** (p240) or **Crowdy Bay** (p242) **National Parks**
- Marvelling at the pre-European landscape stretching endlessly from **Crowdy Head** (p242)
- Imagining the Sahara among the rolling dunes of the **Worimi Conservation Lands** (p236)
- Broadening your palate and waistline in the **Hunter Valley** (p231)
- Beach- and bar-hopping in a transformed **Newcastle** (p225)
- Cruising the bucolic country roads around **Wingham** (p241)
- Spotting koalas in **Tomaree National Park** (p236), dingoes in **Myall Lakes National Park** (p238), pythons in **Port Macquarie's rainforest** (p245) and dolphins in **Port Stephens** (p236)



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## SYDNEY TO NEWCASTLE

After struggling through the traffic of Sydney's outer suburbs the bushy vistas of Ku-ring-gai Chase and Brisbane Waters National Parks offer an intoxicating shot of paradise. From here the choice is yours whether to motor straight up the freeway to Newcastle or meander along the coast. Truth be known, neither route will be a highlight of your trip, but if you've got time to kill there are some interesting diversions on the coastal road.

### KU-RING-GAI CHASE NATIONAL PARK

The exhilarating, 14,928-hectare **Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park** ([www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au](http://www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au); admission per car \$11) forms Sydney's northern boundary, 24km from the city centre. It's a classic mix of sandstone, bushland and water vistas, taking in over 100km of coastline along the southern edge of Broken Bay where it heads into the Hawkesbury River.

Ku-ring-gai takes its name from its original inhabitants, the Guringai people, who were all but wiped out just after colonisation through violence at the hands of British settlers or introduced disease. It's well worth reading Kate Grenville's Booker-nominated *The Secret River* for an engrossing but harrowing telling of this story.

Remnants of Aboriginal life are visible today, with the preservation of more than 800 sites, including rock paintings, middens and cave art. West Head Rd offers access to

some of the best places within the park to see them. Nearly at **West Head** is the Resolute picnic area; from here you can amble 100m to **Red Hands Cave** where there are some very faint ochre handprints. About another 500m along **Resolute Track** (after a short steep section) is an engraving site. You can turn around or continue to one more site and make a 3.5km loop that takes in **Resolute Beach**.

Back on West Head Rd, just less than 2km west of the picnic area, is the **Echidna Track**, whose boardwalk provides good disabled access to engravings very near the road. Less than 1km up the road from Echidna is the **Basin Track**, which makes an easy stroll to a good set of engravings.

The **Great North Walk**, a two-week hike from Sydney to Newcastle, passes through Ku-ring-gai. This 14-day odyssey begins from the centre of Sydney and, after a short ferry ride, follows natural bushland almost the entire way to Newcastle.

It's unwise to swim in Broken Bay due to sharks but there is a netted swimming area at **The Basin** (day visit adult/child \$3/2), a shallow round inlet perfect for children and easily accessed by ferry from Palm Beach.

### Information

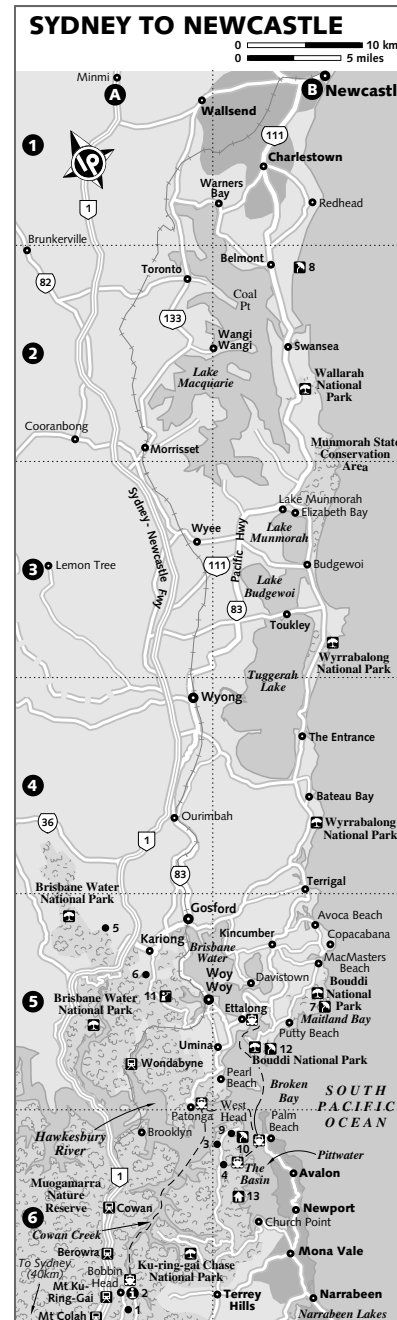
**Kalkari Discovery Centre** (☎ 9472 9300; Ku-ring-gai Chase Rd; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun) Has displays and videos on Australian fauna and Aboriginal culture.

**Ku-ring-gai visitors centre** (☎ 9472 8949; Bobbin Inn, Bobbin Head; ☎ 10am-4pm) Has a marina, picnic areas, a café (serving hot meals, coffee and snacks) and a boardwalk leading through mangroves.

### Sleeping

**Basin camping area** (☎ 9974 1011; [www.basincampground.com.au](http://www.basincampground.com.au); sites per adult/child \$14/7) Proper toilets and showers are provided. Walk about 2.5km from West Head Rd, or take a ferry or water-taxi from Palm Beach. Book ahead.

**Pittwater YHA** (☎ 9999 5748; [www.yha.com.au/hostels/details.cfm?hostelid=31](http://www.yha.com.au/hostels/details.cfm?hostelid=31); Towlers Bay; dm/d/tw/q \$28/72/72/96) Wake up to marvellous bay views at this converted 1920s guesthouse, 15 minutes uphill from Halls Wharf (this is a blissfully car-free zone – you'll need to catch the **Church Point Ferry** (☎ 9999 3492)). The surrounding bushland is dominated by magnificent purple-grey eucalypti, which harbour a welter of cockatoos and wallabies. Book ahead and bring food; demand for this idyllic retreat is high.



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### Getting There & Away

Access to the park is by ferry or via several through-roads (enter Ku-ring-gai Chase Rd off Pacific Hwy, Mt Colah; Bobbin Head Rd, North Turramurra; or McCarrs Creek Rd, Terrey Hills).

**Sydney Buses** (☎ 131 500; [www.131500.com.au](http://www.131500.com.au)) runs express services to Palm Beach (route L90, \$5.80, 1¼ hours) and Church Pt (route E86, \$5.80, 1½ hours) from near Central Station. Otherwise you can catch the train to Turramurra (\$4.20, 40 minutes) and then the 577 bus to the park entrance on Bobbin Head Rd (\$1.80, 10 minutes). From here it's a 4km walk to Bobbin Head.

The **Palm Beach Ferry** (☎ 9974 2411; [www.palmbeachferry.com.au](http://www.palmbeachferry.com.au); adult/child \$6.30/3.20; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Thu, 9am-8pm Fri, 9am-6pm Sat & Sun) runs hourly from Palm Beach to Mackerel Beach, via the Basin. If you want to continue north, it has services to Ettalong via Wagstaffe (adult/child \$9.10/4.60).

**Palm Beach & Hawkesbury River Cruises** (☎ 0414-466 635; adult/child return \$35/20) departs Palm Beach for Bobbin Head via Patonga (11am daily, plus 9am and 3.45pm Saturday and Sunday).

### BRISBANE WATER NATIONAL PARK

Facing Ku-ring-gai from the northern side of the Hawkesbury River this 11,473-hectare park extends the green belt separating Sydney from the Central Coast, preserving in part the landscape that the Guringai people enjoyed for thousands of years. Their distinctive art also survives here, engraved in Hawkesbury sandstone.

A boardwalk has been created around the **Bulgandry Aboriginal Site**, both protecting and providing access to a collection of engravings that

include wallabies, fish and a male figure. The site is 2km along Woy Woy Rd from Kariong. A few kilometres south, **Staples Lookout** has epic views over the park.

The park is known for its wildflowers (especially waratahs), in bloom from July to October. If you're lucky you might spot a koala or tiger quoll.

There are no camping facilities within the park itself, but you can pitch up at the council-run **Patonga Caravan & Camping Area** (☎ 4325 8486; sites per 2 people \$30) at **Patonga**, a small fishing village within the southern end of the park.

Similarly tucked within the park's folds is **Pearl Beach**, a sweet National Trust-listed hamlet with an idyllic beach. Its constricted location has saved it from the holiday-house sprawl of the beaches to the north, making the (mainly) wealthy Sydneyites lucky enough to have snaffled up property here that's the envy of all their friends.

**Pearl Beach General Store & Café** (☎ 4343 1222; 1 Pearl Beach Pde; mains \$15-20; ☎ breakfast & lunch daily, dinner Thu-Sat) offers a yummy selection of reasonably priced risotto, pasta and salads. Try **Pearl Beach Real Estate** (☎ 4341 7555; www.pearlbeachrealestate.com.au) for holiday apartment and house rentals.

The main road access to the park is via Woy Woy Rd at Kariong, along the Pacific Hwy. **CityRail** (☎ 131 500; www.cityrail.info) trains from Sydney (\$7.20, 1½ hours) or Gosford (\$3.80, 20 minutes) stop on request inside the park at Wondabyne. **Busways** (☎ 4368 2277; www.busways.com.au) runs services from Woy Woy station to Patonga (route 50, adult/child \$4/2).

For ferry services from Palm Beach, see p223.

## GOSFORD

☎ 02 / pop 35,000

You're not going to want to linger in Gosford, but this uninspiring town serves as the transport and services hub for the surrounding beaches. The **visitors centre** (☎ 4325 2835; 200 Mann St; ☎ 9.30am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-12.30pm Sat) is near the train station and there's a **National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS) office** (☎ 4320 4200; 207 Albany St N; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri).

The excellent **Australian Reptile Park** (☎ 4340 1022; www.reptilepark.com.au; adult/child \$23/12; ☎ 9am-5pm), well signposted from the Gosford freeway exit, offers a chance to get up close to koalas and pythons, watch funnel-web spiders being milked (for the production of antivenin) and

learn about the plight of the Tasmanian devil (the park serves as a diabolical breeding ark). On our visit we had the added excitement of witnessing a keeper struggling to shake loose a large saltwater crocodile that had gotten rather attached to his finger during feeding. There's also a wonderfully craptastic *Lost Kingdom of Reptiles* Disney-style enclosure.

Gosford has numerous **CityRail** (☎ 131 500; www.cityrail.info) connections to Sydney (\$8.60, 1½ hours) and Newcastle (\$18, 1½ hours). From Gosford station, **Busways** (☎ 4368 2277; www.busways.com.au) runs frequent services to Terrigal and neighbouring towns and beaches; less often on weekends.

## BOUDDI NATIONAL PARK

Bouddi National Park (1532 hectares) extends from the north head of Broken Bay to MacMasters Beach, 12km south of Terrigal. Vehicle access is limited but there are short walking trails leading to wonderfully isolated beaches, including lovely **Maitland Bay**. The park is in two sections on either side of **Putty Beach**, which has vehicle access (\$7). There's **camping** (☎ 4320 4203) at **Little Beach** (site per adult/child \$10/5), **Putty Beach** (site per adult/child \$14/7) and **Tallow Beach** (site per adult/child \$10/5); book ahead at busy times. Only the Putty Beach site has drinkable water and flush toilets.

Take **Busways** (☎ 4368 2277; www.busways.com.au) bus 61 from Gosford.

## COPACABANA & AVOCA BEACH

☎ 02 / pop 2680 (Copacabana), 6470 (Avoca Beach) There aren't too many showgirls called Lola in the vicinity and if there were, they'd have to learn how to surf as that's the main entertainment around these parts. Copa (in the local lingo) is particularly beautiful, with two dramatic headlands. The surf can be mountainous, so swim between the flags. There's a viewing platform for whale-spotting; look out for humpbacks from late May to early August.

At **Avoca Beach** there's a lovely curving surf beach, guarded by a string of tall pine trees. It's a low-key little place that also has the charmingly old-school **Avoca Beach Picture Theatre** (☎ 4382 1677; www.avocabeachpicturetheatre.com.au; 69 Avoca Dr; admission before/after 6pm \$10/12.50).

**Café Sirocco** (☎ 4382 6967; 204 Del Monte Pl, Copacabana; mains \$7-17; ☎ breakfast & lunch) does a mean breakfast with lots of vegetarian choices and beach views.

**Blue Bar & Restaurant** (☎ 4381 0707; 85 Avoca Dr, Avoca Beach; mains \$32-39; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) offers plenty of skilfully crafted seafood dishes, making it the top-rated restaurant on this part of the coast. Its take on surf'n'turf is beef'n'bugs (Moreton Bay bugs, of course) and the crab and orange ravioli is wonderful.

**Busways** (☎ 4368 2277; www.busways.com.au) has services to Copacabana (route 66, \$4.80) and Avoca (routes 65 or 69, \$4) from Gosford.

## TERRIGAL

☎ 02 / pop 9750

At Terrigal you'd be forgiven for thinking that Sydney's Northern Beaches had begun again. The beach is awesome and the surf's good, but the surrounding area is very built-up. It gets even more suburban as you head north through **Wamberal**, **Bateau Bay** and **The Entrance**.

Several reefs and wrecks make for good diving. In September 2008, an Australian Navy frigate, the **HMAS Adelaide**, is set to be sunk here for divers to explore. **Terrigal Diving School** (☎ 4384 1219; www.terrighaldiving.com.au; The Haven; single/wreck/double dive \$45/50/80) is Australia's oldest, having explored these waters for over 39 years.

**Ye Olde Miami Guesthouse** (☎ 4384 1919; www.miamicguesthouse.com.au; 9 Ocean View Dr; s/d \$50/65) offers cramped but clean pine-floored rooms. It's hostel style in that the facilities are shared, but there are no dorms.

**Tiarri** (☎ 4384 1423; www.tiarriterrigal.com.au; 16 Tiarri Cres; r \$110-120 Sun-Thu, \$148-168 Fri & Sat; ☎; wi-fi) has seven roomy doubles (all with courtyards) and a hilltop location near the beach. Two suites have spas (there's also a common spa), and all rooms have a TV, VCR and 'nonallergenic' doonas.

**Patcinós** (☎ 4385 1960; cnr Church St & Campbell Cres; mains \$8-17; ☎ 7am-5.30pm) may be squeezed into a tiny corner but it manages to serve the best coffees in town, along with a limited menu including salads, wraps and hotcakes.

From Gosford, **Busways** (☎ 4368 2277; www.busways.com.au) services run to Terrigal (routes 67 and 68, \$4) at least hourly.

## LAKE MACQUARIE

☎ 02 / pop 183,140

A series of saltwater 'lakes' spreads up the coast between Bateau Bay and Newcastle, the largest of which, Lake Macquarie, covers four times the area of Sydney Harbour. All of them have

channels opening to the sea, so you could easily call them estuaries, inlets or harbours – but in Lake Macquarie's case they go one better and call it a city. A series of pockets of dull suburbia dotted around a body of water hardly a city makes, but it does have some nice pelicans.

The drive between the lakes and the ocean is a pleasant if unspectacular alternative to the freeway, especially once you're past The Entrance. The route takes in stretches of **Wyrabalong**, **Mummorah** and **Wollarah National Parks**. If you feel like a dip, there's plenty of room to spread your towel at **Nine Mile Beach**.

The enthusiastic **visitors centre** (☎ 1800 802 044; 228 Pacific Hwy, Swansea; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat & Sun) has a wealth of information on the area and free internet access.

## NEWCASTLE

☎ 02 / pop 288,740

Newcastle occupies a bizarre parallel universe to its namesake in northern England. Both were once grim, grimy, industrial mill towns that in recent years have been transformed into vibrant, artsy, thoroughly pleasant places to visit. Both have a fanatical devotion to their local sports teams, albeit in different codes (here it's the Newcastle Knights rugby league squad that sets passions ablaze). And both are awash with lagered-up young people on the weekends.

That's where the similarities end. In this parallel universe it's sunny most of the time and there's a surf beach around every bend.

In 1989 Newcastle suffered Australia's most destructive recorded earthquake; 12 people died. The shake-up both required and enabled the city to start again. Now, in the midst of its tourist-fuelled rebranding, it's in serious danger of becoming cosmopolitan.

But despite the money that's been spent on attracting high-tech business, cleaning up the air, preserving the interesting architecture and greening the foreshore, that famous Hunter larrikin spirit is, thankfully, still present. Newcastle's steely past is not the albatross you might expect, and is helping to shape a confrontational arts and music scene.

## ORIENTATION

The city centre is bordered by the Hunter River and the sea. The main shopping strip is Hunter St, a pedestrian mall between Newcomen and Perkins Sts.

## INFORMATION

If you've got a laptop with wireless capability, head to Beaumont St in Hamilton where there's free wi-fi broadband. The airport also offers free wireless connections. You'll find banks and ATMs in Hunter St Mall. Most have foreign exchange.

**John Hunter Hospital** (☎ 4921 3000; Lookout Rd, New Lambton) Has emergency care.

**Library** (☎ 4974 5300; Laman St) Has internet access (per hour \$5.50).

**Post office** (☎ 13 13 18; 1 Market St)

**Visitors centre** (☎ 4974 2999; www.visitnewcastle.com.au; 361 Hunter St; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-3.30pm Sat & Sun)

## SIGHTS

### Museums & Galleries

**Newcastle Region Art Gallery** (☎ 4974 5100; www.ncc.nsw.gov.au/discover\_newcastle/region\_art\_gallery; 1 Laman St; admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) collects works by revered Australian artists (Drysdale, Nolan, Whiteley) and hosts exhibitions by international stars and young local artists.

The **Lock Up** (☎ 4925 2265; www.thelockup.info; 90 Hunter St; admission free; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Thu, 10am-5pm Fri-Sun) once held convicts but now incarcerates only the artists-in-residence who create and exhibit in this former police station (1861). There's an interesting law and order museum within the creepy, cramped cells of the old men's block.

If you're visiting after late 2009 a new **Newcastle Regional Museum** (☎ 4974 1400; www.newcastle.nsw.gov.au/discover\_newcastle/regional\_museum; Honeysuckle Dr) should have opened in the old Honeysuckle rail workshops on the foreshore. Expect lots of scientific gadgets and displays about the earthquake. Phone for more details.

Nearby, the **Newcastle Region Maritime Museum** (☎ 4929 2588; Lee Wharf, 1 Honeysuckle Dr; adult/child 5/2; ☎ 10am-4pm Fri-Sun) celebrates Newcastle's nautical nuances.

## Wildlife

Sitting in a tract of bushland with plenty of walking trails, the council-run **Blackbutt Reserve** (☎ 4904 3344; www.newcastle.nsw.gov.au/environment/blackbutt\_reserve; Carnley Ave, Kotara; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm) has enclosures featuring native critters including koalas, kangaroos and quolls, along with a cacophonous chorus of native birds. Take bus 224 (\$3, 30 minutes) from the train station to the park's edge then walk 1km to the entrance.

**Hunter Wetlands Centre** (☎ 4951 6466; www.wetlands.org.au; Sandgate Rd, Shortland; adult/concession \$6/3; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun) is a swampy wonderland, home to over 200 bird and animal species. You can hire a canoe (\$9.90 for two hours) or dip in a net and examine the results under a magnifying glass. Bring mosquito repellent if you don't want to contribute to the ecosystem in ways you hadn't intended. Take the Pacific Hwy towards Maitland and turn left at the cemetery, or catch bus 108 (\$3, 40 minutes) from the train station.

## Views

**Queens Wharf Tower**, on the waterfront, and the **obelisk** above King Edward Park provide commanding views of the city and the water. Across the river (about five minutes by ferry) is **Stockton**, a modest settlement with striking views back towards Newcastle and exposed shipwrecks in its waters.

## Other Attractions

### NOBBY'S HEAD

Nobby's used to be an island until it was joined to the mainland in 1846 to create a singularly pretty sand spit; it was twice its current height before being reduced to 28m above sea level in 1855. The walk along the spit towards the lighthouse and meteorological station is exhilarating, with waves crashing about your ears and joggers jostling your elbows.

### FORT SCRATCHLEY

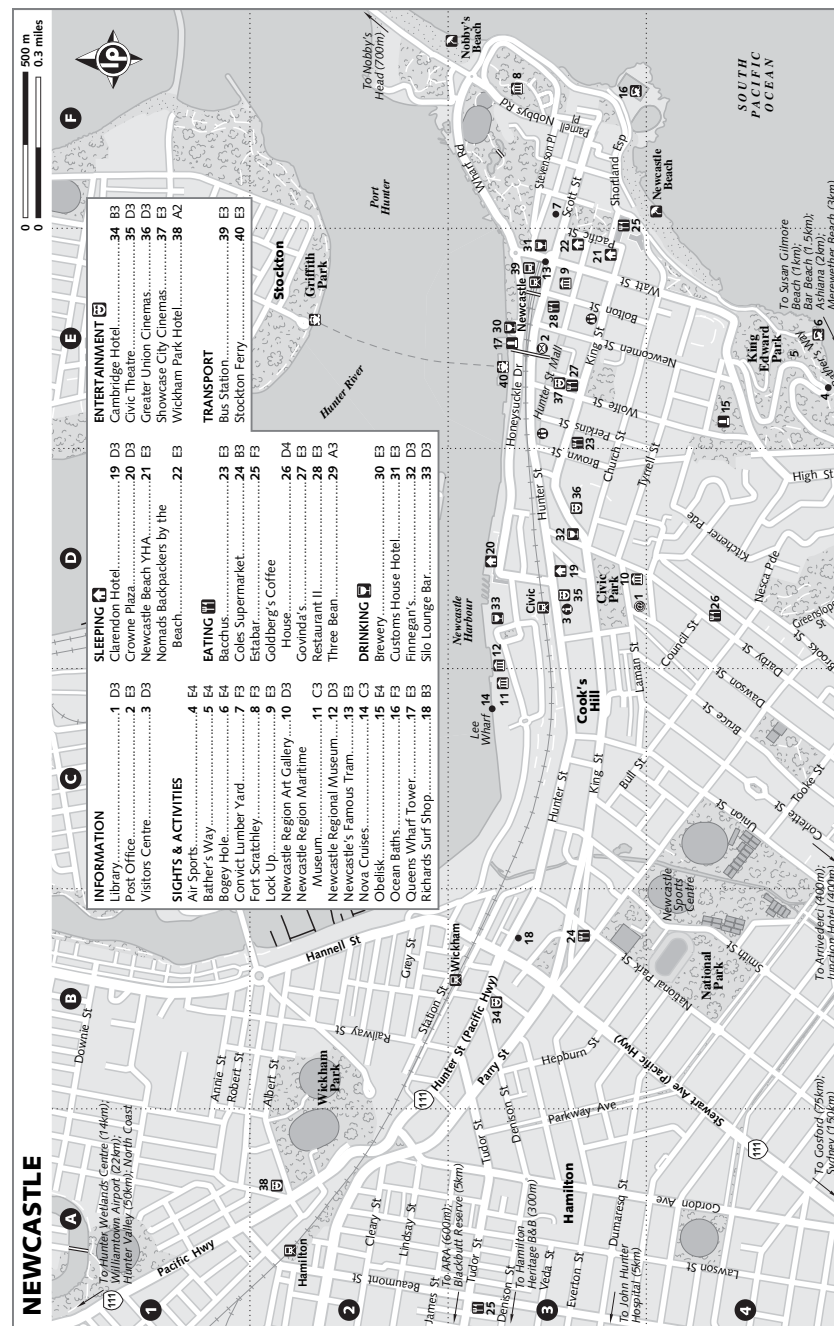
This large **fort** (☎ 4929 3066; www.fortscratchley.org.au; Nobby's Rd) was one of the few gun installations in Australia to fire a gun in anger during WWII. On 8 June 1942 a Japanese submarine suddenly surfaced, raining shells on the city. Fort Scratchley returned fire, negating the threat after just four rounds.

By the time you're reading this, the site should have reopened after four years of restoration. Call ahead for opening times and admission charges.

## ACTIVITIES

### Swimming & Surfing

At the East End, the needs of surfers and swimmers are sated at **Newcastle Beach**, but if you're irrationally paranoid about sharks, the **ocean baths** are a mellow alternative, encased in wonderful multicoloured 1922 architecture. There's a shallow pool for toddlers and a compelling backdrop of heaving ocean and



## DOCTOR SURF

It's hard to imagine a more thoroughly Newcastle lad than four-time surfing world champ Mark Richards. Born and raised in Newcastle, surfing is in his blood – his beach-loving parents have owned Richards Surf Shop (below), a Newie institution, since the early 1960s.

Richards is enthusiastic about his city's evolution. 'It's changed a lot. People have discovered it. It's now the biggest city after the state capitals, yet I think of Newcastle as halfway between a city and a country town. There's plenty of stuff going on and a vibrant nightlife but no traffic problems.'

And then there are the beaches. As Richards points out, it's rare to find a city with so many brilliant beaches so close to the centre. 'It may not have the best waves in the world but you can always find a wave,' he adds. 'The beach breaks face different directions, so there's always somewhere to surf.'

As a grommet, Richards learnt his craft on the safe breaks at Blacksmiths Beach, near the entrance to Lake Macquarie. Nowadays you're more likely to find him on Merewether Beach. It's been 25 years since he dominated the international scene, but surfing is still very much part of his routine. 'I get up at about 6am and try to get a couple of hours in before heading to the shop,' he says, 'and then sometimes again later in the evening.'

At the family surf shop travellers are sometimes shocked to find Richards behind the counter. 'I'm in the shop most of the time', he laughs, 'if I'm not out the back shaping surfboards'. That is, except for Saturday afternoons and Sundays, when he locks the doors for 'designated surf days'.

Although Kelly Slater has now beaten his record, Richards' title of the 'greatest surfer of all time' has been replaced with a simple 'Dr' after he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Newcastle. His status as Newie's favourite surfing son looks to be in no danger of diminishing.

chugging cargo ships. Surfers should goofy-foot it to **Nobby's Beach**, just north of the baths – the fast left-hander known as the Wedge is at its north end.

South of Newcastle Beach, below King Edward Park, is Australia's oldest ocean bath, the convict-carved **Bogey Hole**. It's an atmospheric place to splash about when the surf's crashing over its edge.

The most popular surfing break is at **Bar Beach**, 1km south. If your swimsuit is chafing, scramble around the rocks at the north end to the (unofficial) clothing-optional **Susan Gilmour Beach**. At nearby **Merewether Beach** the opening of the winter swimming season is heralded at its ocean baths, where blocks of ice are dumped into the water so that the cold-blooded freaks from the Merewether Mackerels Winter Swimming Club can strut their stuff. Frequent local buses from the CBD run as far south as Bar Beach, but only bus 207 continues to Merewether.

For surfing supplies, head to **Richards Surf Shop** (☎ 4961 3088; 755 Hunter St).

## Walking

The visitors centre has free pocket-sized Newcastle booklets outlining self-guided themed walking tours. **Bather's Way** leads between Nobby's and Merewether Beaches,

with signs describing indigenous, convict and natural history in between swims.

The **Newcastle East Heritage Walk** heads past many colonial highlights like the **Convict Lumber Yard**, opposite the Newcastle train station. Surrounding historic buildings have been put to good commercial use, including the old paymaster's cottage and Customs House (p230).

**Newcastle By Design** is a short stroll down and around Hunter St, covering some of the inner city's interesting architecture.

## Hang-gliding

**Air Sports** (☎ 0412 607 815; www.air-sports.com.au; King Edward Park) offers tandem hang-gliding and paragliding (from \$165).

## Cruises

If you can't make it to much prettier Port Stephens, some boats offer local cruises.

**Moonshadow's Cruz** (☎ 4984 9388; www.moonshadow.com.au) Offers dinner, lunch and evening cruises (from \$15).

**Nova Cruises** (☎ 0400 381 787; www.novacruises.com.au; Lee Wharf) Has a 90-minute Newcastle Harbour Cruise (adult/child \$22/12) and three-hour whale-watching expeditions on the weekends between late May and August. Every month it puts on a lunch cruise (adult/child \$49/29), a Hunter River discovery cruise (adult/child \$69/49) and a day trip to historic Morpeth (adult/child \$79/54).

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

**Surfest** (www.surfest.com) Hangs-ten in March.

**Newcastle Jazz Festival** (www.newcastlejazz.com.au) Jammin' late August.

**This Is Not Art Festival** (www.thisisnotart.org) Alternative cultural festival in early October.

**Mattara – Festival of Newcastle** (www.mattarafestival.org.au) Celebrates Newcastle with stalls, concerts and a parade in early October.

## TOURS

**Newcastle's Famous Tram** (☎ 4977 2270; www.famous-tram.com.au; Newcastle Station; adult/child \$15/6; ☎ 11am & 1pm Mon-Fri) trundles around the East End for 45 minutes, taking in major historical sites. On the weekends it heads to the Hunter Valley for six-hour winery tours (per person \$45). How does it do that? It's not actually a real tram – it has regular wheels with tyres.

Run by a local larrikin, **Tex Tours** (☎ 0410-462 540) offers entertaining full-day Hunter Valley winery tours (\$50), dolphin and 4WD dune tours to Port Stephens (\$65) and bush'n'beach eco-safaris to Myall Lakes (\$79).

## SLEEPING Budget

**Our pick** **Newcastle Beach YHA** (☎ 4925 3544; www.yha.com.au/hostels/details.cfm?hostelid=134; 30 Pacific St; dm/s/d from \$24/42/60; ☎) This heritage-listed building is a bikini strap away from Newcastle Beach. Inside, it's a bit like an English public school (without the humiliating hazing rituals): grand, high ceilings, plush-leather common room. There's also surfboard hire (per hour \$5), pub meals, quizzes, pizza nights, and a barbecue courtyard.

**Nomads Backpackers by the Beach** (☎ 1800 008 972, 4926 3472; www.backpackersbythebeach.com.au; 34 Hunter St; dm \$26-28, d & tw \$60-64; ☎) It's not a patch on the YHA but it's clean, small and the staff dispense knowledge on Newcastle nightlife and surfing.

## Midrange & Top End

**Hamilton Heritage B&B** (☎ 4961 1242; colaine@primus.com.au; 178 Denison St, Hamilton; s \$90, d \$120-140) It's all pastels, florals and moulded cornices in this lovely Federation-era home near the Beaumont St café strip. Rooms are reasonably sized and have en suites.

**Clarendon Hotel** (☎ 4927 0966; www.clarendonhotel.com.au; 347 Hunter St; r \$140-170; ☎; wi-fi) The Art Deco Clarendon is thickly atmospheric, with stylish furniture and lighting. There's

a bar, brasserie and lashings of conviviality downstairs.

**Ashiana** (☎ 4929 4979; www.ashiana.com.au; 8 Helen St, Merewether; r \$145-165) There's a slightly cluttered hippy sensibility to this nice old cottage near the beach, making it very homey. Two rooms are available; the larger has an en suite, the other a private bathroom.

**Crowne Plaza** (☎ 4907 5000; www.crowneplaza.com.au; cnr Merewether St & Wharf Rd; r \$250-362; ☎ ☎ ☎; wi-fi) It's a large, beige modern hotel, but it's right on the waterfront and easily the best in town. With business people as regulars, expect lower rates on the weekend and lots of dark suits.

## EATING

Newcastle's transformation has included the addition of some world-class restaurants. Darby and Beaumont are the main eat streets, rammed to the gills with culinary establishments. For self-catering, head to the **Coles supermarket** (☎ 4926 4494; cnr King & National Park Sts).

## Restaurants

**Govinda's** (☎ 4929 6900; 110 King St; all-you-can-eat buffet \$11; ☎ lunch Sun-Fri, dinner Tue-Sun) This airy, skylighted eatery serves the usual vegetarian Krishna fare (*pakoras*, rice fancies etc), loaded with taste.

**Arrivederci** (☎ 4963 1036; 53 Glebe Rd, The Junction; mains \$11-25; ☎ dinner) Tony Soprano would probably order the Steak Al Capone at this old-fashioned Italian joint, but you can just drop in for cheap pasta and pizza.

**Restaurant II** (☎ 4929 1233; 8 Bolton St; mains \$33-36; ☎ lunch Fri, dinner Tue-Sat) Restaurant II has more in common with *Terminator 2* than *Grease 2* – it's a sequel that stands up to scrutiny extremely well. An unexpected opening (a chef-provided canapé) leads through an action-packed mid-section (try the ocean trout with zucchini flowers) to a satisfying denouement.

**Our pick** **Bacchus** (☎ 4927 1332; 141 King St; tapas \$7-11, mains \$34-39; ☎ 11.30am-midnight Tue-Fri, 5pm-midnight Sat, 1-10.30pm Sun) A decadent Roman god has transformed this former Methodist church into a very atmospheric place to splurge (not purge – this isn't ancient Rome, after all). The food is exquisite – the squid ink risotto with cured scallops, divine.

## Cafés

**Estabar** (☎ 4927 1222; 61 Shortland Esplanade; mains \$6-14; ☎ 7am-10.30pm) Start the day with an excellent



coffee or a Spanish-style hot chocolate at this sun-drenched café overlooking Newcastle Beach. When the temperature soars, stop in for gelato.

**Goldberg's Coffee House** (☎ 4929 3122; 137 Darby St; breakfast \$5-16, lunch \$7-15, dinner \$12-23; ☎ 7am-midnight) A smooth café, European-style with open frontage, but featuring a typically Novocastrian twist: a wrought-iron chandelier descending like an oversize arachnid. Attracts chatty crowds of all persuasions.

**Three Bean** (☎ 4961 2020; 103 Tudor St (enter Beaumont), Hamilton; breakfast \$6-15, lunch \$14-18; ☎ 7am-5pm Mon-Fri, 7am-3pm Sat) Serious foodie attention has been paid to the menu, including notes on the provenance of the produce. It offers a welcome change from predictable café fare, although pan-seared wild rabbit livers aren't ever likely to bother our morning coffee schedule.

## DRINKING

**Finnegan's** (☎ 4926 4777; 21-23 Darby St) The place for backpacker meals, trivia, pool competitions and, on the weekends, live bands and DJs.

**Brewery** (☎ 4929 6333; 150 Wharf Rd) Perched on Queens Wharf; the views and outdoor tables are sought after by both Novocastrian office workers and uni students. Has regular live music and decent food.

**Junction Hotel** (☎ 4961 4529; cnr Corlette & Kendrick Sts, The Junction) Doubters of Newcastle chic will be amazed by the architecturally impressive make-over of this ageing pub.

**Silo Lounge Bar** (☎ 4926 2828; 18/1 Honeysuckle Dr) More smart surrounds, this time in the new Honeysuckle quarter on the waterfront. Expect smooth sounds, lots of outdoor seating, chandeliers and flocked wallpaper.

**Customs House Hotel** (☎ 4925 2585; 1 Bond St) Once HQ for confiscating contraband, this lovely old building with a scenic alfresco patio is now part pub, part bistro.

## ENTERTAINMENT

### Live Music

**Live Sites** (www.livesites.org.au) This popular council-led initiative offers a varied line-up of acts (Latin jazz, professional street performers, Indian raga music) in malls, squares and public spaces around town.

**Cambridge Hotel** (☎ 4962 2459; www.yourcambridge.com; 789 Hunter St) The Cambridge launched silverchair, Newcastle's most famous cultural export, and continues to showcase touring

national bands and local acts with live music from Wednesday to Sunday.

**Wickham Park Hotel** (☎ 4965 3501; www.myspace.com/thewicko; 61 Maitland Rd) Heralding itself as 'the home of the blues', this cosy pub has acoustic shows in the beer garden.

## Cinemas

**Showcase City Cinemas** (☎ 4929 5019; 31 Wolfe St; tickets \$12-13) Specialises in foreign and independent flicks.

**Greater Union Cinemas** (☎ 4926 2233; 185 King St; tickets \$14.50) Has mainstream releases.

## Theatre

**Civic Theatre** (☎ 4929 1977; www.civicprecinctnewcastle.com.au; 375 Hunter St) The Civic hosts theatre, musicals, concerts and dance in an evocative building designed by internationally renowned 'picture palace' architect Henry White.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

Newcastle's **airport** (☎ 4928 9800; www.newcastleairport.com.au) is at Williamstown, 23km north of the city.

**Virgin Blue** (☎ 136 789; www.virginblue.com.au) and **Jetstar** (☎ 131 538; www.jetstar.com) both fly to Brisbane, the Gold Coast and Melbourne. **Tiger Airways** (☎ 03-9335 3033; www.tigerairways.com) also covers Melbourne. **Brindabella Airlines** (☎ 1300 66 88 24; www.brindellaairlines.com.au) services Brisbane, Coffs Harbour, Port Macquarie and Canberra. If you really hate roads, **Aeropelican** (☎ 13 13 13; www.aeropelican.com.au) will take you to Sydney, as well as Inverell and Tamworth. **Norfolk Air** (☎ 1300 669 913; www.norfolkair.com) has a weekly link to its island home.

### Bus

Nearly all long-distance buses stop behind the station in Newcastle. **Greyhound** (☎ 1300 473 946; www.greyhound.com.au) heads to Forster (\$38, three hours, daily) and Port Macquarie (\$58, four hours, three daily). **Premier Motor Service** (☎ 133 410; www.premierms.com.au) has a daily bus to/from Sydney (\$30, 2½ hours) and Brisbane (\$70, 13 hours).

**Newcastle Buses** (☎ 131 500; www.newcastlebuses.info) does the Lake Macquarie run, including Swansea (buses 349 to 351, \$3, one hour). **Rover Coaches** (☎ 4990 1699; www.rovercoaches.com.au) heads to Cessnock (\$5.80, 1¼ hours) in the Hunter Valley. **Port Stephens Coaches** (☎ 4982 2940; www.psoaches.com.au) has regular buses be-

tween Nelson Bay and Newcastle (\$5.80, 1½ hours). **Busways** (☎ 1800 043 263; www.busways.com.au) has services to/from Tea Gardens (\$22, 90 minutes, three daily).

### Car

**ARA** (☎ 4962 2488; www.ararental.com.au; 86 Belford St, Broadmeadow) offers rental from \$30 a day. Alternatively, Tudor St in Hamilton has the big agencies.

### Train

A better option than the buses, **CityRail** (☎ 13 15 00; www.cityrail.info) has frequent trains to Sydney (\$18, three hours) via Gosford (\$10.60, 90 minutes). A line also heads to Branxton (\$7.20, 55 minutes) in the Hunter Valley.

Heading north, **CountryLink** (☎ 8202 2000; www.countrylink.info) services depart from Broadmeadow station to Wingham (\$25, three hours, two daily), Coffs Harbour (\$55, 6½ hours, three daily) and on to Brisbane (\$81, 12 hours, one daily).

## GETTING AROUND

### To/From the Airport

**Port Stephens Coaches** (☎ 4982 2940; www.psoaches.com.au) head to Williamstown airport frequently (\$4.80, 40 minutes) en route to Nelson Bay.

**Network All Travel** (☎ 4956 9299; www.alltravel.com.au) runs a door-to-door shuttle between the airport and the city (\$30), Port Stephens (\$45) and the Hunter Valley (\$65); bookings required. **Taxis** (☎ 131 008) to the city centre cost around \$50.

### Bus

Newcastle has an extensive and reasonably priced network of **local buses** (☎ 13 15 00; www.newcastlebuses.info). There's a fare-free bus zone in the inner city between 7.30am and 6pm. Other fares are time-based (one-hour/four-hour/all-day \$3/5.90/9). The main depot is near the train station.

### Ferry

The Stockton ferry (\$2.10) goes every half-hour from Queens Wharf, 5.15am until midnight on Friday and Saturday, 11pm Monday to Thursday and 10pm on Sunday.

### Train

Services terminate at Newcastle station after stopping at Broadmeadow, Hamilton, Wickham and Civic.

# NEWCASTLE TO TAREE & HUNTER VALLEY

From Newcastle you can choose to charge along the freeway, make a detour away from the coast to the Hunter Valley or make a series of meandering diversions along the coast. If you've got time to spare, the last two options are well worth the effort.

## LOWER HUNTER VALLEY

A spider's web of pleasant country lanes crisscrosses this verdant valley, but a pleasant country drive isn't the main motivator for visitors. Sheer decadence is. The Hunter Valley is one big gorge-fest: fine wine, boutique beer, chocolate, cheese, olives, you name it. Bacchus would surely approve.

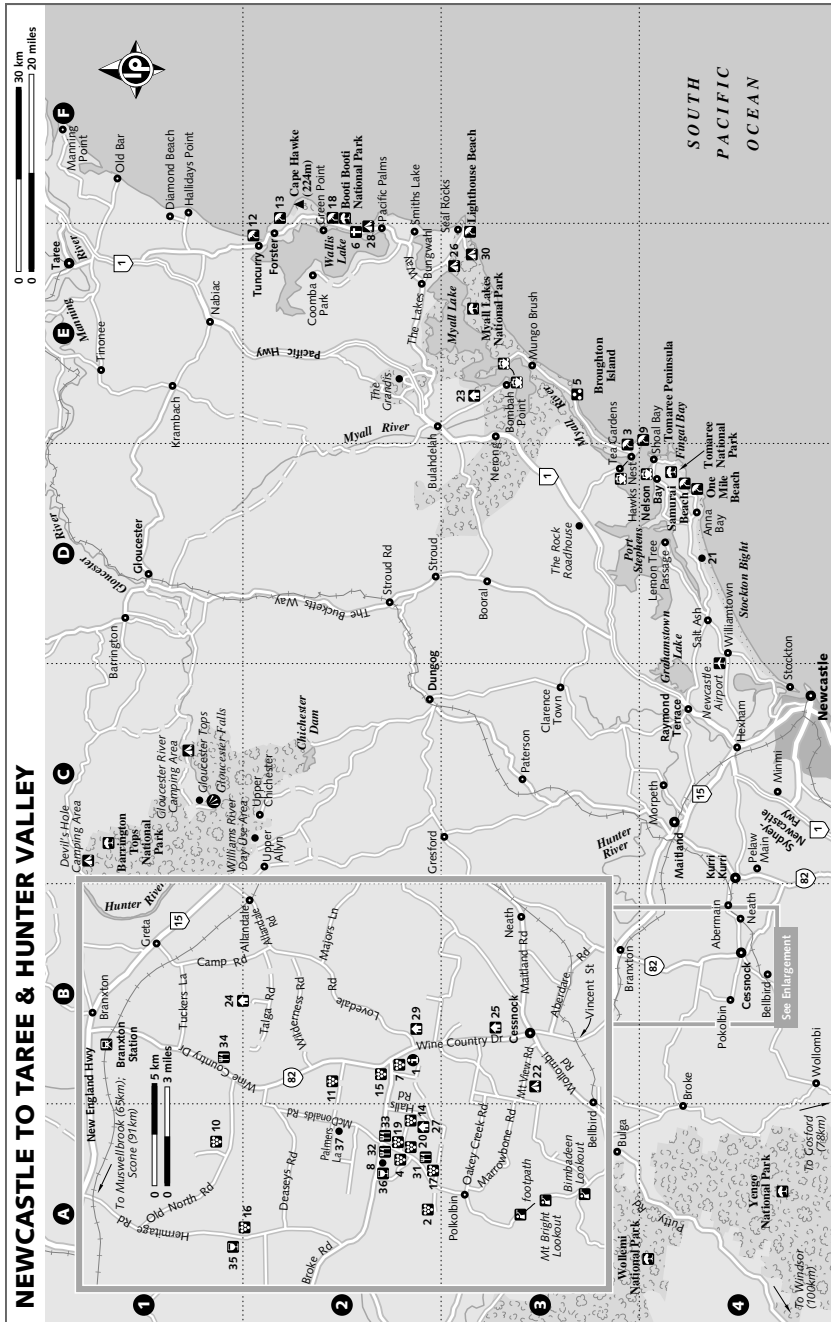
Going on the philosophy that good food and wine has got to up the odds for nookie, the Hunter is a popular naughty weekend for Sydney couples. Every Friday they descend, like a plague of Ralph-Lauren-Polo-shirt-wearing locusts. Prices leap up accordingly.

The Hunter Valley, the oldest wine region in Australia, is known for its Semillon and Shiraz. Vines were first planted in the 1820s and by the 1860s there were 20 sq km under cultivation. A Hunter sparkling made its way to Paris in 1855 and was favourably compared with the French product. However, the wineries gradually declined, and it wasn't until the 1960s that winemaking again became an important industry. If it's no longer the crowning jewel of Australian wine regions, it still turns in some excellent vintages.

The Hunter has an important ace up its sleeve: these wineries are refreshingly attitude-free and welcoming of viticulturists and novices alike. Staff will rarely give you the evil eye if you leadenly twirl your glass once too often, or don't conspicuously savour the bouquet. Even those with only a casual interest in wine should tour around – it's a lovely area, and a great direction to turn to if the weather drives you from the beaches.

## Orientation

Most attractions lie in an area bordered to the north by the New England Hwy and to the south by Wollombi/Maitland Rd. The



INFORMATION		EATING	
Visitors Centre.....1	B2	Pokolbin Horse Coaches.....(see 19)	
Audrey Wilkinson Vineyard.....2	A2	Pooles Rock Wines.....17	A2
Bennetts Beach.....3	D3	Seven Mile Beach.....18	F2
Brokenwood.....4	A2	Small Winemakers Centre.....19	A2
Dark Point Aboriginal Place.....5	E3	Tamburlaine.....20	A2
Green Cathedral.....6	E2	Worimi Conservation Lands.....21	D4
Hungerford Hill.....7	B2	<b>SLEEPING</b>	
Hunter Valley Gardens.....8	A2	Big4 Valley Vineyard Tourist Park.....22	B3
Jimmys Beach.....9	E4	Bombah Point Eco Cottages.....23	E3
Macquariedale Estate.....10	A1	Hill Top Country Guest House.....24	B2
Moorebank Vineyard.....11	B2	Hunter Country Lodge.....(see 34)	
Nine Mile Beach.....12	E2	Hunter Valley YHA.....25	B3
One Mile Beach.....13	F2	Neranie Camp Site.....26	E3
Pepper Tree Wines.....14	A2	Peppers Convent.....27	A2
Peterson's Champagne House.....15	B2	Ruins Camp Site.....28	E2
Piggs Peake Winery.....16	A2	Vineyard Hill Country Motel.....29	B2
		Yagon Camp Site.....30	E3
		<b>TRANSPORT</b>	
		Grapemobile.....37	A2
		Australian Regional Food Store & Café.....(see 19)	
		Firestick Café & Rock Restaurant.....(see 17)	
		Hunter Olive Centre.....31	A2
		Hunter Valley Cheese Company.....32	A2
		Hunter Valley Chocolate Company.....(see 15)	
		Oishii.....33	A2
		Shakey Tables.....34	B1
		Bluetongue Brewery.....35	A1
		Harrigan's.....36	A2

main town serving the area is Cessnock, to the south. Wine Country Dr heads straight up from Cessnock to Branxton, where there's a train station. To confuse matters, the bottom half of this route is sometimes labelled Allandale Rd and the top end Branxton Rd.

Heading north there are further vineyards around Broke, Singleton and the Upper Hunter.

**Information**

**Visitors centre** (☎ 4990 0900; www.winecountry.com.au; 455 Wine Country Dr; ☹ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 9am-4pm Sun)

**Sights & Activities WINERIES**

The valley's 140 wineries range from small-scale family-run affairs to massive architectural extravaganzas. Most offer free tastings, although a couple of the glitzier ones charge a small fee. Remember that the vineyards don't offer this service out of the goodness of their hearts. It's poor form if you don't buy at least the occasional bottle.

Grab a vineyard map and plot your course or just follow your nose, hunting out the tucked-away small producers. Here are a few picks to get you started:

**Audrey Wilkinson Vineyard** (☎ 4998 7411; www.audreywilkinson.com.au; DeBeyers Rd; ☹ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-5pm Sat & Sun) One of the oldies (first planted 1866), it's worth visiting more for its interesting historic display and excellent views (bring a picnic) than for its overcrowded and touristy tasting room.

**Brokenwood** (☎ 4998 7559; www.brokenwood.com.au; 401-427 McDonalds Rd; ☹ 9.30am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun) One of the Hunter's most acclaimed wineries.

**Hungerford Hill** (☎ 4998 7666; www.hungerfordhill.com.au; 1 Broke Rd; ☹ 9am-5pm Mon-Wed, 9am-7pm Thu & Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun) Shaped like a big barrel, with its 'lid' permanently propped open, this commanding spectacle stands sentinel over the lakes and valleys below.

**Macquariedale Estate** (☎ 6574 7012; www.macquariedale.com.au; 170 Sweetwater Rd; ☹ 10am-5pm Fri-Mon) A boutique winemaker that's certified organic and biodynamic.

**Moorebank Vineyard** (☎ 4998 7610; www.moorebankvineyard.com.au; Palmers Lane; ☹ 10am-5pm) Sustainable winemaking practices and delicious home-made condiments.

**Pepper Tree Wines** (☎ 4998 7746; www.peppertree.wines.com.au; Halls Rd; ☹ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-5pm Sat & Sun) Set in gorgeous, New England-style gardens. It has won over 200 awards and medals.

**Peterson's Champagne House** (☎ 4998 7881; www.petersonhouse.com.au; cnr Wine Country Dr & Broke Rd; ☹ 10am-5pm) Lovely jubbly bubbly, including some sparkling reds.

**Piggs Peake Winery** (☎ 6574 7000; www.piggspeake.com; 697 Hermitage Rd; ☹ 10am-5pm) A proper small-scale winery where the owners get their hands dirty.

**Pooles Rock Wines** (☎ 4998 7356; www.poolesrock.com.au; DeBeyers Rd; ☹ 9.30am-5pm) A big player, producing the midpriced Cockfighter's Ghost range as well as its excellent flagship wines.

**Small Winemakers Centre** (☎ 4998 7668; www.smallwinemakerscentre.com.au; McDonalds Rd; ☹ 10am-5pm) Acts as a cellar door for six boutique winemakers.

**Tamburlaine** (☎ 4998 7570; www.mywinery.com; 358 McDonalds Rd; ☹ 9am-5pm) Another excellent producer focusing on sustainable viticulture with some wines fully organic.

**HUNTER VALLEY GARDENS**

Although there's something a little Disney about it, this relatively young 24-hectare

**garden** (☎ 4998 4000; www.hvg.com.au; Broke Rd; adult/child \$20/11; ☎ 9am-5pm) has impressive floral and landscape displays.

## Tours

If no-one's volunteering to stay sober enough to drive, there are plenty of winery tours available. Some will collect you in Sydney or Newcastle for a lengthy day trip. Staff at visitors centres and accommodation providers should be able to arrange a booking that suits your needs. These are but a few of the options:

**Hunter Valley Day Tours** (☎ 4951 4574; www.huntervalleydaytours.com.au) Wine-and-cheese-tasting tours; prices vary according to group numbers (from \$89 per person).

**Hunter Valley Tours** (☎ 4990 8989; www.huntervalleytours.com.au) Small group local-run boutique tours; from \$95 per person for full day including lunch.

**Pokolbin Horse Coaches** (☎ 4998 7305; www.pokolbinhorsecarriages.com.au; McDonalds Rd) Full (adult/child \$60/30) or half-day (adult/child \$45/25) vineyard tours in an open-air carriage.

## Festivals & Events

During the warm months superstars regularly drop by for weekend concerts at the bigger vineyards. If there's something special on, accommodation gets scooped up well in advance. Check what's on at www.winecountry.com.au.

**Hunter Valley Harvest Celebrations** Two months of postharvest celebration (late April to early June).

**Lovedale Long Lunch** (www.lovedalelonglunch.com.au) Eight wineries and chefs produce gut-bursting lunches, served with music and art; May.

**Jazz in the Vines** (www.jazzinthevines.com.au) October.

**Opera in the Vineyards** (www.4di.com.au) October.

## Sleeping

Prices shoot up savagely on Friday and Saturday nights (expect around 50% higher than we've listed following) and two-night minimum stays are common. It's best to time your trip for midweek when you're less likely to be subjected to endless visions of bourgeois bonding.

## BUDGET

**Hunter Valley YHA** (☎ 4991 3278; www.yha.com.au/hostels/details.cfm?hostelid=235; 100 Wine Country Dr; site per person \$10, dm \$29-32, s \$65-75, d & tw \$77-92; ☎ ☎) In late summer this newish, custom-built hostel is packed to the rafters with

## SENSIBLE SUPPING

If you are driving, remember that to stay under the blood-alcohol limit of 0.05, men can generally have two standard drinks in the first hour and one every hour after. Women can have one standard drink per hour. Wineries usually offer 20mL tastes of wine – five of these equals one standard drink. To be extra safe: choose a designated driver; sip, then tip the remainder; use the spittoons provided; or take a tour.

working-holiday-makers, picking fruit on the vineyards. The reward at the end of a long day is a welcoming pool, clean facilities and plenty of bonhomie. The rooms can get stiflingly hot.

**Big4 Valley Vineyard Tourist Park** (☎ 4990 2573; www.valleyvineyard.com.au; 137 Mt View Rd; sites per 2 people \$30-40, cabins \$65-120; ☎) A spacious, orderly park with a pool and on-site Thai restaurant.

## MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Hill Top Country Guest House** (☎ 4930 7111; www.hilltopguesthouse.com.au; 81 Talga Rd; r \$90-180; ☎ ☎) Hill Top offers great views, horse riding, in-house massage, a pool, 4WD safaris, spa baths, a grand piano, cattle mustering, a billiards room – or just a whole lot of peace and quiet. And you thought you were here for the wine.

**Vineyard Hill Country Motel** (☎ 4990 4166; www.vineyardhill.com.au; Lovedale Rd; d/tr \$118/165; ☎ ☎) The pleasant self-contained units have decks on which to stretch out and enjoy fine valley views, preferably vino in hand. It's much better than the average motel.

**Hunter Country Lodge** (☎ 4938 1744; www.shakeytables.com.au; 1476 Wine Country Dr; s/d/tw/tr \$110/150/150/205; ☎ ☎) You'll know you're in the country when kangaroos bounce past your simple but well-furnished wooden room. With the wonderful Shakey Tables (opposite) as its dining room, breakfasts shouldn't be missed. Book the dinner-inclusive package for at least one night.

**Peppers Convent** (☎ 4993 8999; www.peppers.com.au; Halls Rd; r \$198-219; ☎ ☎; wi-fi) This grand Edwardian former nunnery has been moved hundreds of kilometres, planted among the vineyards and thoroughly renovated in a French provincial style. It makes for a lovely, lavish retreat.

## Eating

It seems that everyone expects wine luses to also be gluttons and millionaires, as the Hunter is stuffed full of expensive restaurants. Unbelievably, several local places are pricier than Sydney's best, despite lower overheads and ready access to quality fresh ingredients. That said, there are some truly excellent places to eat.

## RESTAURANTS

**Oishii** (☎ 4998 7051; Tempus Two Winery, cnr Broke & McDonalds Rds; mains \$16-25; ☎) lunch & dinner) One of the few decent spots for a good meal without causing you to haemorrhage money, this modern place serves a large selection of Thai and Japanese dishes including plenty of vegetarian options.

**our pick Shakey Tables** (☎ 4938 1744; 1476 Wine Country Dr; mains \$36; ☎) dinner) The chef's vibrant art is on the walls as well as on the plates of this fabulously eccentric restaurant. Kooky combinations (mining myriad cuisines, even Scottish) are deftly plated into fiddly masterpieces. We were particularly enamoured of the dessert that looked like Elvis' hair – made of pistachio spun sugar and served with lychee ice cream, Turkish delight and rose petals.

**Firestick Café & Rock Restaurant** (☎ 4998 6968; Pooles Rock Wines, DeBeyers Rd; lunch \$18-39, dinner \$48-69; ☎) 9.30am-5pm daily, dinner Thu-Sat) The slightly more mild-mannered Firestick by day morphs into the award-winning Rock at night. Both are terrific, albeit terrifically expensive. The delicious daytime-only crispy pizzas are an affordable route to sampling the Hunter's top rated establishment, although you run the risk of caving in once you see the innovative Mod Oz menu on offer.

## CAFÉS & PROVIDORES

**Australian Regional Food Store & Café** (☎ 4998 6800; Small Winemakers Centre, McDonalds Rd; mains \$7-20; ☎) 9am-5pm) Like the centre in which it's located, this food store champions 'indie', often organic, produce. The café makes good use of the store's excellent products.

**Hunter Valley Cheese Company** (☎ 4998 7744; McGuigans Complex, McDonalds Rd; platters \$28; ☎) 9am-5.30pm) 'Blessed are the cheesemakers' quotes the staff T-shirts, and the people inside those shirts will chew your ear about cheesy come-tibles all day long. There's a bewildering, sinful variety of styles, with free tastings available. Or you can settle down to a cheese platter.

For other yummy stuff:

**Hunter Valley Chocolate Company** (☎ 4998 7301; Peterson's Champagne House, cnr Broke & Branxton Rds; ☎) 10am-5pm) All manner of cacao derivatives.

**Hunter Olive Centre** (☎ 4998 7524; Pokolbin Estate Vineyard, McDonalds Rd; ☎) 10am-5pm) Dozens of things to try on little squares of bread – oil, tapanade, *dukkah* (a blend of ground nuts and spices), chutney etc. If you're shameless you could make it lunch.

## Drinking

**Bluetongue Brewery** (☎ 4998 7777; Hunter Resort, Hermitage Rd; ☎) 10am-11.30pm) Sample the creative and refreshing brews using the Tasting Paddle (six beers for \$10). Also on offer are pizza, pies, a pool table, tours of the adjacent Hermitage Rd Cellars (11am and 2pm, \$5) and a daily wine school (9am, \$30).

**Harrigan's** (☎ 4998 4000; Broke Rd) A comfortable Irish pub with live bands most weekends, trivia competitions and the occasional backpacker barbecue (it's not as sinister as it sounds).

## Getting There & Away

**Wine Country Xpress** (☎ 4990 1699; www.rovercoaches.com.au; one way/return \$35/60) leaves Sydney's Central Station at 8.30am daily, returning at 4.40pm (arriving Sydney 7pm). A day pass (\$70) combines this service with the Wine Rover (below).

**CityRail** (☎ 13 15 00; www.cityrail.info) has a line heading through the Hunter Valley from Newcastle (\$7.20, 55 minutes), or you can jump on at Sydney (\$22, 3¼ hours). The closest station to the vineyards is Branxton.

**Greyhound** (☎ 1300 473 946; www.greyhound.com.au) runs a daily bus from Sydney (\$64, 4½ hours) to Branxton, departing outside Central Station at 2.15pm. **Rover Coaches** (☎ 4990 1699; www.rovercoaches.com.au) has regular services between Cessnock and Newcastle (\$5.80, 1¼ hours).

## Getting Around

Without a car and sober driver your best option is to use the **Wine Rover** (☎ 4990 1699; www.rovercoaches.com.au; all day \$20; ☎) 9am-4.45pm), a hop-on/hop-off bus service plying backwards and forwards on two main routes throughout the day. To get to a specific destination, **Vineyard Shuttle** (☎ 4991 3655; www.vineyardshuttle.com.au) offers a door-to-door service for around \$10 per trip.

Both **Grapemobile** (☎ 0418 404 039; www.pokolbinbrothers.com.au/grapemobile.htm; Pokolbin Brothers Vineyard, Palmers Lane) and **Hunter Valley Cycling**



## WORIMI COUNTRY

The area from the Tomaree Peninsula to Forster and as far west as Gloucester is the land of the Worimi people, who have lived in this region for thousands of years. Very little of it is now in their possession, but in 2001 the sand dunes of the Stockton Bight were returned to them, creating the Worimi Conservation Lands (below). The Worimi people in turn entered an agreement to co-manage it with the NPWS.

Sacred places and occupation sites are scattered throughout the region. **Dark Point Aboriginal Place** in Myall Lakes National Park has been significant to the Worimi for around 4000 years. Local lore has it that in the late 19th century it was the site of one of many massacres of Aboriginals at the hands of white settlers, when a group was herded onto the rocks and pushed off.

(☎ 0418 281 480; www.huntervalleycycling.com.au) hire bikes.

## PORT STEPHENS

This stunning sheltered bay is about an hour's drive north of Newcastle, occupying a submerged valley that stretches more than 20km inland. Framing its southern edge is the narrow **Tomaree Peninsula**, unfairly blessed with near-deserted beaches, national parks and an extraordinary sand dune system. The main centre, **Nelson Bay** (population 4120), is home to both a fishing fleet and an armada of tourist vessels, capitalising on its status as the 'dolphin capital of Australia'.

Just east of Nelson Bay, and virtually merged with it, is pretty **Shoal Bay** (population 1750), with a long, sheltered beach, lumpy headland and great views across to hilly islands. The road ends a short drive south from here at **Fingal Bay** (population 700), with another lovely beach on the fringes of **Tomaree National Park**. The park stretches west around clothing-optional **Samurai Beach**, a popular surfing spot, and **One Mile Beach**, a gorgeous semicircle of the softest sand and bluest water favoured by those in the know: surfers, beachcombers, idle romantics.

The park ends at the nondescript surfside village of **Anna Bay** (population 2640), but wait till you see what it's backed by – the incredible **Worimi Conservation Lands** (right).

Opposite Nelson Bay, on the north shore of Port Stephens, are the small, pretty towns of **Tea Gardens** and **Hawks Nest** (see p238).

## Information

**Internet Café** (☎ 4984 3225; 106 Magnus St, Nelson Bay; per hr \$8)

**NPWS office** (☎ 4984 8200; www.npws.nsw.gov.au; 12B Teramby Rd, Nelson Bay; ☎ 8.30am–4.30pm)

**Visitors centre** (☎ 4980 6900; www.portstephens.org.au; Victoria Pde, Nelson Bay; ☎ 9am–5pm)

## Sights

The **Worimi Conservation Lands** at Stockton Bight are the longest moving sand dunes in the southern hemisphere, stretching over 35km. The tourist board claims the dunes are *Mad Max*-style, but if you want to talk films, think *Lawrence of Arabia* – more Sahara than out-back. In the heart of it, it's possible to become so surrounded by shimmering sand you'll lose sight of the ocean or any sign of life. In short, it's incredibly evocative. At the far west end of the beach, the wreck of the *Sygnia* founders in the water.

Thanks to the generosity of the Worimi people (see boxed text, above), whose land this is, you're able to roam around (provided you don't disturb any Aboriginal sites), camp within 100m of the high tide mark (you'll need a portable toilet), drive along the beach (4WD only; permit required) and mash up the sand dunes within the designated recreational vehicle area (permit required). Get your permits from the visitors centre or NPWS office in Nelson Bay (\$10 for three days; see left).

**Tomaree National Park** is a wonderfully wild expanse harbouring several threatened species, including the spotted-tailed quoll and powerful owl. If you keep your eyes peeled you're bound to spot a koala or wallaby. At the eastern end of Shoal Bay there's a short walk to the surf at unpatrolled **Zenith Beach** (beware of rips and strong undercurrents), or you can tackle the strenuous **Tomaree Head Summit Walk** (1km and 80 minutes return). Longer walks are detailed in a pamphlet available from NPWS.

The restored 1875 **Heritage Light House Cottage** (☎ 4984 2505; admission free; ☎ 10am–4pm) at Nelson Head has a small museum with displays on the area's history and a tea room. The views of Port Stephens are suitably inspiring.

## Tours

There are dozens of operators offering action-packed ways to spend your day. Inquire and book at the visitor centre in Nelson Bay.

## WET STUFF

**Anna Bay Surf School** (☎ 4981 9919; www.annabaysurfshool.com.au; One Mile Beach Holiday Park, Hannah Pde; half-/2-/3-day \$75/98/138) Surf lessons and board hire (per hour/day \$15/45).

**Blue Water Sea Kayaking** (☎ 0405 033 518; www.kayakingportstephens.com.au) Offer a range of paddle-powered excursions including hour-long beginner tours (\$25), 90-minute champagne sunset tours (\$35) and 2½-hour dolphin-seeking tours (\$45).

**Imagine Cruises** (☎ 4984 9000; www.imaginecruises.com.au; Dock C, d'Albora Marina, Nelson Bay) Eco-accredited trips, including 3½-hour Sail, Swim & Snorkel (\$45), 90-minute Dolphin Watch cruises (\$22), three-hour Whale & Dolphin Watch cruises (\$55) and the Sundowner Sail (\$25).

**Moonshadow** (☎ 4984 9388; www.moonshadow.com.au; 35 Stockton St, Nelson Bay) Dolphin-watching (\$21), whale-watching (\$55), dinner cruises (\$65) and seven-hour trips to Broughton Island (\$75) on big catamarans. Eco-accredited.

## SANDY STUFF

**Oakfield Ranch** (☎ 0429 664 172; www.oakfieldranch.com; Birubi Pt car park, James Patterson Dr, Anna Bay) Twenty-minute camel rides along the beach on Sundays and school holidays.

**Port Stephens 4WD Tours** (☎ 4984 4760; www.portstephens4wd.com.au; 35 Stockton St, Nelson Bay; tours \$20-75) Drive around the dunes and go sand-boarding.

**Quad Bike King** (☎ 4919 0088; www.quadbikeking.com.au; tours \$85-240) Guided quad-bike forays out on the dunes, or just a sandboarding shuttle (\$20).

## Sleeping

In Nelson Bay, Government St between Stockton and Church Sts is lined with motels and hotels, but the most memorable accommodation is around Anna Bay and Shoal Bay. There's free camping at Samurai Beach for nudists.

## BUDGET

**Melaleuca Surfside Backpackers** (☎ 4981 9422; www.melaleucabackpackers.com.au; 2 Koala Pl, One Mile Beach; sites per person/dm/d/tw \$15/28/80/80; ☎) Wooden cabins are set amid peaceful scrub inhabited by koalas and wallabies. There's a comfortable lounge area and kitchen, and the camp sites are 'free range' – you pick your own and cars are not allowed near tents.

## our pick Port Stephens YHA Samurai Beach

**Bungalows** (☎ 4982 1921; www.samuraiportstephens.com; Frost Rd, Anna Bay; dm \$29, d \$77-105, tr/q \$108/132; ☎ ☎; wi-fi) These attractively furnished wooden-floored cabins are separated by pleasant koala-populated bushland dotted with Asian sculpture. The central pool is blissful.

**Shoal Bay Holiday Park** (☎ 4981 1427; www.beachsideholidays.com.au; Shoal Bay Rd, Shoal Bay; sites per 2 people \$39-65, d \$80-210; ☎) An excellent camping ground, right on the bay, with top-notch cabins.

## MIDRANGE & TOP END

**O'Carrollyn's** (☎ 4982 2801; www.ocarrollyns.com.au; 5 Koala Pl, One Mile Beach; d \$140-215; ☎; wi-fi) Wheelchair-accessible self-contained villas and wheelchair access to a beautiful, near-deserted beach. This is spruce, feel-good accommodation, surrounded by landscaped gardens, teeming with koalas.

**Wanderers Retreat** (☎ 4982 1702; www.wanderersretreat.com; 7 Koala Pl, One Mile Beach; d \$155-270, tr \$180-295, q \$205-320; ☎ ☎) Wear your designer frayed jeans and pretend you're Robinson Crusoe in your own luxury treehouse. I bet he didn't have a spa bath, though.

**Bali at the Bay** (☎ 4981 2964; www.baliatthebay.com.au; 1 Achilles St, Shoal Bay; d/tr/q \$230/285/285; ☎) Two exceedingly beautiful self-contained apartments, chock-full of flower-garlanded Buddhas and carved wood, do a good job of living up to the name. The bathrooms are exquisite and spa treatments are available.

## Eating

Anna Bay's a dead loss, so explore Nelson Bay's marina and Shoal Bay's waterfront for further dining options.

**Red Ned's Pies** (☎ 4984 1355; www.redneds.com.au; Shop 3/17-19 Stockton St, Nelson Bay; pies \$5-6; ☎ 6am-5pm) King piemaker Barry Kelly learnt his trade in top-shelf international hotels and his philosophy is simple: he gets a kick out of watching people stare at his specials board, goggle-eyed (anyone for barbecue-bourbon-and-beef or kangaroo-teriyaki?).

**Aquabl** (☎ 4984 9999; d'Albora Marina, Nelson Bay; breakfast \$5-14, lunch \$15-26, dinner \$17-34; ☎ 8am-8.30pm) One of the more reasonably priced and hipper places on the waterfront, Aquabl is a combination café-bar-bistro that suits any time of the day.

**Zest** (☎ 4984 2211; 16 Stockton St, Nelson Bay; 2 courses \$60; ☎ dinner Tue-Sat) Rhymes with best, which

is exactly what this restaurant is on this part of the coast. Its prestigious *Good Food Guide* 'chef's hat' award proves it – you won't find another one before Bellingen. Bravely, for a fishing town, the menu emphasises game over the predictably poisson.

### Getting There & Around

**Port Stephens Coaches** (☎ 4982 2940; www.pscocoaches.com.au) regularly zips around Port Stephens' townships heading to Newcastle (\$5.80, 1½ hours) and the airport. There's also a daily service to/from Sydney (\$33, 3½ hours).

**Port Stephens Ferry Service** (☎ 0412-682117) chugs from Nelson Bay to Tea Gardens and back three times a day (\$20 return, one hour).

### TEA GARDENS & HAWKS NEST

☎ 02 / pop 1980 (Tea Gardens), 1030 (Hawks Nest) Sporting the most quaintly evocative names on the coast, this duo of towns straddles the mouth of the Myall River, linked by the graceful, curved Singing Bridge. Tea Gardens has a quiet, laid-back charm; it's a river culture here, older and genteel. At Hawks Nest it's all about the beaches. **Jimmys Beach** fronts a glass-like stretch of water facing Nelson Bay, while stunning **Bennetts Beach** looks to the ocean and Broughton Island.

### Information

**Library** (☎ 4997 1265; Marine Dr; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon, Wed & Fri, 10am-12.30pm Sat) Free internet access.

**Visitors centre** (☎ 4997 0111; www.greatlakes.org.au; Myall St; ☎ 10am-4pm) Near the bridge.

### Sleeping

**Tea Gardens Hotel Motel** (☎ 4997 0203; http://teagardens-hawkstest-hotelmotel.com.au; cnr Marine Dr & Maxwell St; s/d \$55/70; ☎) On the riverfront, this popular watering hole has cute pink and blue rooms set around a garden out back.

**Tea Gardens Waterfront B&B** (☎ 4997 1688; www.waterfrontbandb.com.au; 117 Marine Dr; r \$110-150; ☎) Has two large spotless studio-rooms set in a leafy courtyard. Breakfast is included in the rates – enjoy it over river views.

### Eating

**Cornerstone Kitchen** (☎ 4997 0666; 83 Marine Dr; mains \$5-12; ☎ 7am-5pm) Sandwiches, wraps and salads are the, ahem, cornerstone of this snazzy deli-café. That and delicious coffee.

**Nicole's** (☎ 4997 2922; 81 Marine Dr, Tea Gardens; breakfast & lunch \$5-17, dinner \$15-27; ☎ breakfast &

lunch daily, dinner Mon-Sat) Housed in a Victorian cottage, this seriously sweet café doubles as an art gallery and gift shop. The garden is seductive, with trickling water features, bird baths, much greenery and Roman statues. Good cakes, too.

### Getting There & Around

While only 5km from Nelson Bay as the cockatoo flies, the drive necessitates returning to the Pacific Hwy near Raymond Terrace and then doubling back – a distance of 83km. The alternative is the Port Stephens Ferry Service (left).

If you're continuing north, take the stunning scenic route through Myall Lakes National Park; it involves a short ferry crossing and 10km is unsealed.

**Busways** (☎ 1800 043 263; www.busways.com.au) has services to/from Newcastle (\$22, 90 minutes, three daily) and Forster (\$36, 1¼ hours, two daily) via Blueys Beach (\$22, 80 minutes).

### MYALL LAKES NATIONAL PARK

On an extravagantly pretty section of the coast, this large park incorporates a patchwork of lakes, islands, dense littoral rainforest and beaches. The lakes support an incredible number and variety of bird life, including bowerbirds, white-bellied sea eagles and tawny frogmouths. There are paths through coastal rainforest and past beach dunes at **Mungo Brush** in the south, perfect for spotting wildflowers and dingoes.

The best beaches and surf are in the north around beautiful, secluded **Seal Rocks**, a bushy hamlet hugging Sugarloaf Bay. It has a great beach, with emerald-green rock pools, epic ocean views and golden sand. Take the short walk to the **Sugarloaf Point Lighthouse** where the views are sublime; there's a water-choked gorge along the way and a detour to lonely **Lighthouse Beach**. At the time of research, NPWS was seeking an interested party to transform the historic stone lighthouse keepers cottages into holiday accommodation.

The path around the lighthouse leads to a lookout over the actual Seal Rocks – islets that provide sanctuary for Australia's northernmost colony of Australian fur seals. During summer breeding, the seals are out in abundance and you'll do well to bring binoculars. **Humpback whales** swim past Seal Rocks during their annual migration and can sometimes be seen from the shore.

### THE LAKES WAY OR THE HIGHWAY

An excellent alternative to the Pacific Hwy, The Lakes Way twists through Myall Lakes and Booti Booti National Parks before passing through Forster-Tuncurry. Shortly after leaving the highway, 4km past Bulahdelah, there's a bump road heading to the Grandis. At 76m this massive flooded gum is the tallest tree in New South Wales.

**Busways** (☎ 1800 043 263; www.busways.com.au) takes this route, charging \$36 from Newcastle to Forster.

About a half-hour by boat from Nelson Bay, **Broughton Island** is uninhabited except for mutton birds, little penguins and an enormous diversity of fish species. The diving is tops and the beaches are incredibly secluded.

Vehicle access to some parts of the park is \$7. At Bombah Broadwater the Bombah Point ferry (per car/pedestrian \$6/2.50; five minutes) crosses every half-hour from 8am to 6pm. A 10km section of Bombah Point Rd, heading to the Pacific Hwy at Bulahdelah, is unsealed.

### Sleeping

The park is well served with **camp sites** (☎ 4984 8200; www.npws.nsw.gov.au; sites per adult/child \$10/5), most of which have composting toilets and water for boiling. There are eight excellent sites along Mungo Brush Rd, between Hawks Nest and the ferry. At the top end of the park, near Seal Rocks, are Yagon camp site (by the surf beach) and Neranie camp site (by the lake). The other 12 sites are mainly dotted around the lake and are accessible either by foot, boat or, in some cases, unsealed roads. Broughton Island also has a site.

**Myall Shores EcoPoint Resort** (☎ 4997 4495; www.myallshores.com.au; Bombah Pt Rd; sites per 2 people \$34, q \$72-458; ☎ ☎) Right on the water, this well-outfitted resort has eco-friendly cabins, a restaurant and bar, petrol, gas and basic groceries. It also hires canoes (one hour \$20), bikes (one hour \$10), power boats (two hours \$65) and catamarans (three hours \$200).

**Bombah Point Eco Cottages** (☎ 4997 4401; www.bombah.com.au; 969 Bombah Pt Rd; d/tr/q \$280/285/320; ☎) Green isn't just chic on St Patrick's Day at this gorgeous, architecturally designed, solar-powered, eco-toileted bush retreat. The six

spiffy self-contained cottages are scattered among the trees.

### PACIFIC PALMS

☎ 02 / pop 680

Sneaky Pacific Palms is secluded between Myall Lakes and Booti Booti National Parks. It's one of those places that well-heeled city dwellers slink off to on weekends – which sounds perfectly dreadful, but it's actually very pleasant...and a hell of a lot nicer than Forster up the road. If you're camping in either of the parks you might find yourself here when the espresso cravings kick in.

Most of the houses cling to **Blueys Beach** or **Boomerang Beach**, both long stretches of golden sand. **Elizabeth Beach**, just inside Booti Booti, is the nicest and has lifesavers at peak times.

The volunteer-run **visitors centre** (☎ 6554 8799; Boomerang Dr; ☎ 9am-4pm) has internet access (\$2.50 per 15 minutes) and some arts and crafts for sale.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Blueys by the Beach** (☎ 6554 0665; www.blueysbythebeach.com.au; 186 Boomerang Dr; r \$110-125; ☎ ☎) It's closer to the shops than the beach, but that's a minor quibble. This standard but friendly motel has large tidy rooms and is a solid option in a settlement catering mainly to the wealthy in private homes.

**Twenty by Twelve** (☎ 6554 0452; 207 Boomerang Dr; mains \$5-19; ☎ 7.30am-2pm) Camping is all very well, but try getting a coffee like this out of a billy can – let alone a drool-worthy moist muffin from a barbecue. It also sells local organic produce and delicious deli treats.

**Hueys at Blueys** (☎ 6554 0222; 201 Boomerang Dr; mains \$11-15; ☎ dinner) Dishes up tasty thin-crust pizza and surfer wisdom.

**Recky** (☎ 6554 0207; The Lakes Way; mains \$14-21; ☎ 11am-late) If you want to be formal, it's the Pacific Palms Recreation Club. Yep, it's one of those sign-in clubs with cheap booze and a bistro (serving generous seafood platters). It overlooks lovely Wallis Lake and has a reputation as a live music venue.

### Getting There & Around

**Busways** (☎ 1800 043 263; www.busways.com.au) stops on the way between Tea Gardens and Forster. **Forster Bus Service** (☎ 6554 6431; www.forsterbus.com.au) heads to Forster (\$8.60, 25 minutes) twice daily on weekdays.

## BOOTI BOOTI NATIONAL PARK

This 1567-hectare **national park** (vehicle admission \$7) stretches along a skinny peninsula with **Seven Mile Beach** on its eastern side and **Wallis Lake** on its west. The northern section of the park is swathed in coastal rainforest and topped by 224m **Cape Hawke**. At the Cape Hawke headland there's a **viewing platform**, well worth the sweat of climbing the 420-something steps.

You won't really be darkening the door of a church if you visit the **Green Cathedral** as there is no door. This interesting space (consecrated in 1940) consists of wooden pews under the palm trees, looking to the lake.

There's self-registration camping at the **Ruins** (camping per adult/child 14/7), at the southern end of Seven Mile Beach, with an **NPWS office** (☎ 6554 0446) nearby.

Avoid Forster's motel mania at **Lakeside Escape B&B** (☎ 6557 6400; www.lakesideescape.com.au; 85 Green Point Dr, Green Point; r \$155-165; 📶), seven minutes out of town in the Green Point fishing village. The en suite rooms look over Wallis Lake and there's a spa. Breakfast is included.

## FORSTER-TUNCURRY

☎ 02 / pop 18,380

Forster-Tuncurry are twin towns facing off on either side of the sea entrance to Wallis Lake. Forster (pronounced Foster) is like a mini Gold Coast – high-rises everywhere – but even less interesting. Thankfully, the beaches are nice, the lake's pretty and there's an abundance of water sports possible. Dolphins and pelicans seem to like the place, so it can't be too bad.

The **visitors centre** (☎ 6554 8799; www.greatlakes.org.au; Little St, Forster; ☎ 9am-4pm) is by the lakeside. There's internet access at the **library** (☎ 6591 7256; Breese Pde, Forster; ☎ 10am-6.30pm Tue, 10am-5.30pm Wed-Fri).

## Sights & Activities

Imagination doesn't seem to have troubled the early settlers much if the beach names are anything to go by. **Nine Mile Beach** at Tuncurry is consistently the best for surf, but **Forster** and **Pebbly Beaches** can also be good. Further south there's **One Mile Beach**, which is north of **Seven Mile Beach**. The lake is tops for paddling. There are large **ocean pools** at Forster Beach and near the harbour entrance in Tuncurry.

**Tobwabba Art** (☎ 6554 5755; www.tobwabba.com.au; 10 Breckenridge St, Forster; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) is

one of the best known and largest Aboriginal artistic communities in NSW. It's a great place to purchase authentic indigenous art.

The **museum** (☎ 6554 6275; Capel St, Tuncurry; adult/child \$3/1; ☎ 1-2pm Tue & Wed, 1-4pm Sun), off South St, has a set of historic buildings (a windmill, a lock-up etc) and relics from local pioneer families.

Popular dives in the area include the **Pinnacles**, the huge wreck of the **SS Satara** and **Seal Rocks**, where there are grey nurse sharks to cosy up to. **Dive Forster** (☎ 6554 7478; www.diveforster.com.au; Fisherman's Wharf, Memorial Dr) offers double boat dives (\$100), equipment hire (an extra \$50) and PADI open water courses (\$490). It also runs a 2½-hour **Swim With Wild Dolphins Cruise** (swimmers/nonswimmers \$60/35) where you're hooked onto a rope while the boat moves through the water and, hopefully, attracts the interest of the dolphins.

**Amaroo Cruises** (☎ 0419 333 445; www.amarooocruise.com.au; Lakeside, Memorial Dr; adult/child \$40/25) offers two-hour cruises most days, touring around Wallis Lake before heading out to the ocean, where you'll usually see dolphins and sometimes whales, sea turtles and sharks.

Most of the marinas along Little St hire out boats, canoes and even aqua bikes.

## Sleeping

**Forster Beach Caravan Park & Marina** (☎ 6554 6269; www.forsterbeachcaravan.com.au; Reserve Rd; sites per 2 people \$32, cabins \$65-143) This sprawling, well-ordered space – virtually a self-contained village – is backed by the mighty breakwall. Villas and cabins are available.

**Dorsal** (☎ 6554 8766; www.dorsalhotel.com.au; 1 West St; r \$200-260; 📶) Modern and medium-rise without being hideous, the Dorsal has nicely furnished, spacious rooms with views and balconies. There's also a gym and continental breakfast is provided.

## Eating

**Coffee Grind** (☎ 6557 5155; 59 Wharf St; mains \$5-10; ☎ 9am-4pm) The name says it all: this shiny, tiny place serves the best brew in town.

**Sotos Café** (☎ 6555 4337; Marine Pde; breakfast & lunch \$8-12, dinner \$15-20; ☎ breakfast & lunch daily, dinner Thu-Sat) Tuck into the substantial marinated tofu salad while peering at pelicans on the lake from the terrace of this excellent little café. Vegetarian and vegans are well catered for but carnivores shouldn't worry, there's still bangers and bacon for brekkie.

## DETOUR: BARRINGTON TOPS NATIONAL PARK

This 74,000-hectare World Heritage wilderness lies on the rugged Barrington Plateau, which rises to almost 1600m. Northern rainforest butts into southern sclerophyll here, creating one of Australia's most diverse ecosystems, with giant strangler figs, mossy Antarctic beech forests, limpid rainforest swimming holes and pocket-sized pademelons (note: it is illegal to put pademelons in your pocket).

There are many walking trails and lookouts, and camping is permitted at various places, including Devil's Hole (free) and Gloucester River (sites per adult/child \$10/5). Be prepared for cold snaps, even snow, at any time. Being a rainforest, it gets a lot of rain – about 1600mm annually. All drinking water must be boiled.

**Canoe Barrington** (☎ 6558 4316; www.canoebarrington.com.au; 774 Barrington East Rd) runs white-water trips out of its riverside lodge, 14km from Gloucester. Weekend packages including accommodation, food and guide cost \$350. Kayaks can be rented from \$55 daily, and accommodation starts at \$60 per person.

The **Barrington Outdoor Adventure Centre** (☎ 6558 2093; www.boac.com.au) offers one-day (\$125) or two-day (\$335) kayaking and mountain biking adventures.

The park is vast and can be approached by many routes. There's a beautiful alpine drive between Scone and Gloucester along Barrington Tops Forest Rd, although it's a little rough on the western end. From Newcastle, the road through Morpeth and Paterson to Dungog is dreamy, passing by rolling green fields, historic towns, frolicking horses and stands of silver birch and ghost gums.

There's no public transport to the park; the nearest trains stop in Dungog and Gloucester.

**Casa del Mundo** (☎ 6554 5906; 8 Little St; mains \$19-29; ☎ dinner) Authentically Spanish, the chef splits his time between here and his homeland. Expect excellent tapas, wicked sangria and the odd dose of live music.

## Getting There & Away

**Greyhound** (☎ 1300 473 946; www.greyhound.com.au) has a daily service, travelling between Sydney (\$61, 5¼ hours) and Brisbane (\$88, 10½ hours) via Port Macquarie (\$50, 1¾ hours).

**Busways** (☎ 1800 043 263; www.busways.com.au) has services to Sydney (\$55, six hours, daily) and Newcastle (\$36, three hours, three daily) via Pacific Palms.

**Forster Bus Service** (☎ 6554 6431; www.forsterbus.com.au) plies the local streets and heads to Pacific Palms (\$8.60, 25 minutes) twice daily on weekdays.

## WINGHAM TO PORT MACQUARIE

### WINGHAM

☎ 02 / pop 4820

Combining English county cuteness with a rugged lumberjack history, Wingham is a lovely little town serving the upper Manning Valley. Federation-era buildings surround **Central Park**,

a large, grassy square that was once the town's common and still hosts cricket matches.

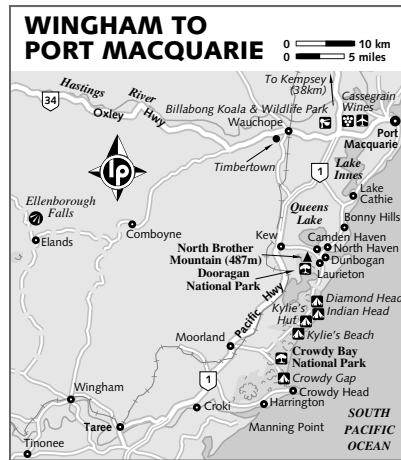
The timber industry is remembered with a 31-tonne brush box log on the edge of the common, testimony to the might of the valley's vanished forests. The 'wing' part of the town's name is evoked by a Vampire Jet mounted nearby, which serves as a war memorial.

Facing the square, the **museum** (☎ 6553 5823; 12 Farquhar St; adult/child \$3/1; ☎ 10am-4pm) has farm machinery, a reconstructed pioneer bedroom and more, including tourist information.

Just east of the town centre, down Farquhar St, is a picnic spot on a bend in the wide Manning River. Don't miss close-by **Wingham Brush Nature Reserve**, a 10-hectare vestige of dense subtropical flood-plain rainforest, alive with birds. There are wheelchair-accessible boardwalks via the massive buttress roots of huge, otherworldly Moreton Bay figs. Up in the trees you may see the maternity ward and nursery of the grey-headed flying foxes, which spend the summer months here in their thousands.

Wingham's **market**, held on the second Saturday of the month beside Central Park, has fruit and vegetables, handicrafts and nanna's cakes by the dozen.

Near Wingham, **Tinonee** (population 740) is a tiny heritage town. The drive between the two is dotted with art and craft galleries and cafés.



## Sleeping & Eating

**Australian Hotel** (☎ 6553 4511; 24 Bent Sts; s/d \$25/45) Country sorts prop up the bar in this character-filled pub facing Central Park. Meals are around \$22. The old-fashioned rooms upstairs share bathrooms, but they're clean enough and open onto an attractive wide balcony.

**our pick Bank** (☎ 6553 5068; www.thebankandtellers.com.au; 48 Bent St; s/d \$120/135; wi-fi) Ever fancied being a bank manager? You won't get to shatter someone's dreams of owning their own home, but you will get to sleep in style in the en suite rooms fashioned from this solid 1929 bank. The original manager's apartment is the biggest, but most have separate sitting rooms. Add an extra \$20 on weekends.

**Tellers Café & Restaurant** (☎ 6553 5068; 48 Bent St; breakfast & lunch \$4-16, dinner \$24-30; ☎ breakfast & lunch Wed-Sun, dinner Thu-Sat) The ebullient hostess

## DETOUR: ELLENBOROUGH FALLS

If you're fond of country drives, the 40km route from Wingham to the Ellenborough Falls is a doozy. About 10km of it is unsealed and full of potholes but the countryside is bucolic. As the road climbs steeply to the Bulga Plateau, farms give way to native bush once exploited for its cedar. The falls plunge 200m in one dramatic drop into a gorge below. The best view is from The Knoll, an easy short bushwalk. A more strenuous walk leads to the base, taking about 30 minutes down but 45 minutes back up.

of the Bank also runs this wonderful place downstairs, serving interesting food with a vaguely Italian slant.

## Getting There & Away

**CountryLink** (☎ 8202 2000; www.countrylink.info) trains stop here twice daily on the journey between Sydney (\$67, 5½ hours) and Coffs Harbour (\$32, 3½ hours) via Newcastle (\$25, three hours).

## HARRINGTON & CROWDY HEAD

☎ 02 / pop 2350

A short detour from the highway follows the Manning River to its mouth where the pleasant fishing village of Harrington is sheltered by a spectacular rocky breakwater and watched over by pelicans. It's the sort of lazy, leisure-orientated hamlet popular with both holiday-makers and retirees – 30% of the population is over the age of 65. An oceanside lagoon provides a safer swimming alternative to the excellent surf beaches nearby.

**Big4 Harrington Beach Holiday Park** (☎ 6556 1228; www.big4harringtonbeach.com.au; Crowdy Rd; sites per 2 people \$42-45, cabins \$110-190; ☎ ☎) is on the way to Crowdy Head, behind the lagoon. It's large and shaded, with well-kept facilities.

**Harrington Hotel** (☎ 6556 1205; 30 Beach St; s/d \$45/55) is a spruce, spacious pub with a great bistro serving excellent platters and pizza (mains \$14 to \$27) to patrons blissing out on the large waterside terrace. Live bands perform most weekends. The standard pub-style rooms (shared facilities) are clean enough, and rates include a continental breakfast.

**Crowdy Head** is an even smaller fishing village 6km northeast of Harrington at the edge of Crowdy Bay National Park. It was supposedly named when Captain Cook witnessed a gathering of Aborigines on the headland in 1770. The views from the 1878 **lighthouse** are absolutely breathtaking – out to the limitless ocean, down to the deserted beaches and back to the apparent wilderness of the coastal plain and mountains. It's like Cook never arrived at all.

Stay at the cute **Crowdy Head Motel** (☎ 6556 1206; www.harrington-crowdy.com/CHM/; 7 Geoffrey St; dm/s/d \$35/84/99), an older-style place with friendly service, small but pleasant rooms and chairs outside from which to contemplate the views.

## CROWDY BAY NATIONAL PARK

Known for its rock formations and rugged cliffs, 10,001-hectare Crowdy Bay National

## THE COAST ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

The tiny town of Kew marks the start of this 49km alternative route that passes through forest reserves (and some suburbia), with pockets of splendid coast; it's a much more picturesque route than the section of the Pacific Hwy between Kew and Port Macquarie. Along the way, you'll pass **Doorang National Park**, dominated by **North Brother Mountain** with lookouts and incredible views. Nearby is **Camden Haven**, a cluster of sleepy villages around the wide sea entrance of **Queens Lake**. **North Haven** is an absolute blinder of a surf beach. North of here, the coast road passes **Lake Cathie** (pronounced cat-eye), a shallow body of water suitable for kids.

Park backs onto a long and beautiful beach that sweeps from Crowdy Head north to **Diamond Head**. There's a lovely 4.8km (two-hour) loop track over the Diamond headland.

The roads running through the park are unsealed and full of potholes, but the dappled light of the gum trees makes it a lovely drive (vehicle entry \$7). If you enter the park at Crowdy Head and continue through to Laurieton you can head all the way to Port Macquarie without touching the motorway (see boxed text, above).

There are basic **camp sites** (☎ 6586 8300; site per adult/child \$10/5) at Diamond Head, Indian Head, Kylie's Hut, Kylie's Beach and Crowdy Gap, but you need to bring water.

## PORT MACQUARIE

☎ 02 / pop 39,220

Pleasure has long replaced punishment as the main purpose of Port Macquarie. Formed in 1821 as a place of hard labour for those convicts who reoffended after being sentenced to Sydney, it was the third town to be established on the Australian mainland. Now Port, as it's commonly known, is overwhelmingly holiday-focused, making the most of its position at the entrance to the subtropical coast.

Comparisons with Newcastle, its slightly older but much bigger sister, are perhaps inevitable: they both sit at the mouth of a river and have beautiful surf beaches at every turn. When Newcastle was covered in soot from heavy industry, Port Macquarie was easily the prettier sibling. But now that Newcastle's

had work done, Port seems a little dull in comparison.

What it does have over Newcastle is a surfeit of reasonably priced accommodation options. And koalas. Enough of them to justify a hospital for the insanely cute tree-huggers.

## Orientation

The city centre fronts the mouth of the Hastings River. The beaches begin at the mouth to the river and continue south. Hastings River Dr gets you out to the Pacific Hwy heading north and Oxley Hwy hits the Pacific Hwy heading south.

## Information

**NPWS office** (☎ 6586 8300; 152 Horton St;

☎ 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri)

**Port Macquarie Base Hospital** (☎ 6581 2000; Wrights Rd)

**Port Surf Hub** (☎ 6584 4744; 57 Clarence St; per hr \$6.50; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, noon-2pm Sat, noon-4pm Sun) Internet access.

**Post office** (Palm Court, cnr Short & William Sts)

**Visitors centre** (☎ 6581 8000; www.portmacquarieinfo.com.au; cnr Gordon & Gore Sts;

☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat & Sun)

## Sights

### BEACHES

Port Mackers is blessed with nine awesome beaches. Surfing is excellent at **Town, Flynns and Lighthouse Beaches**, all of which have lifeguards in summer. The rainforest runs down to the sand at **Shelly and Miners Beaches**, the latter of which is an unofficial nude beach and the closest thing the town has to a gay venue.

It's possible to walk all the way from the Town Wharf to Lighthouse Beach. Along the way, the **breakwater** at the bottom of town has been transformed into a work of community guerrilla art. The elaborately painted rocks range from beautiful memorials for lost loved-ones to 'party hard'-type inanities.

## KOALAS

Koalas living near urban areas are at risk from traffic and domestic animals, and more than 200 each year end up at the **Koala Hospital** (☎ 6584 1522; www.koalahospital.org.au; Lord St; admission by donation). You can walk around the wards (open-air enclosures) any time of the day, but you'll learn more during the tours (3pm). Some of the longer-term patients have signs



detailing their stories. Check the website for details of volunteer opportunities.

For more koala action head to the **Billabong Koala & Wildlife Park** (☎ 6585 1060; 61 Billabong Dr; adult/child \$15/10; ☎ 9am-5pm) outside town, just west of the intersection of the Pacific and Oxley Hwys. Make sure you're there for the 'koala patting' (10.30am, 1.30pm and 3.30pm). The park has a koala breeding centre, although if this facility is anything to go by, koala dating requires a lot of sitting around looking stoned. There are heaps of other Australian critters here, along with international visitors such as monkeys.

## NATURE RESERVES & PARKS

The **Kooloonbung Creek Nature Park** (cnr Gordon & Horton Sts; admission free) is close to the town centre. Home to many bird species its 50 hectares of bush and wetland can be explored via walking trails and wheelchair-accessible boardwalks. It includes the **Port Macquarie Historic Cemetery** (Gordon St), bizarrely built above what was the early settlement's main water supply.

**Sea Acres Rainforest Centre** (☎ 6582 3355; www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au; Pacific Dr; adult/child \$8/4; ☎ 9am-4.30pm) protects a 72-hectare pocket of coastal rainforest (a candidate for national park status) alive with birds, goannas, brush turkeys and, so as to be truly authentic, mosquitoes (insect repellent is provided). While there's no charge for wandering through the other paths in the rainforest it's worth paying the admission to the ecology centre and wheelchair-accessible 1.3km-long boardwalk. Fascinating one-hour guided tours by knowledgeable volunteers are included in the price. Call ahead for times of bush tucker tours led by Aboriginal guides.

## HISTORIC BUILDINGS & MUSEUMS

Most of Port's historic buildings are in the city centre. The 1835 **Garrison building** (cnr Clarence & Hay Sts) is camouflaged by an uninspiring array of fast-food shops. Next door, the 1836 **Port Macquarie Historical Society Museum** (☎ 6583 1108; 22 Clarence St; adult/child \$5/2; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat) has fared better, its labyrinth of rooms including a costume gallery. Opposite is an 1869 **courthouse** (☎ 6584 1818; adult/child \$2/0.50; ☎ 10am-3.30pm Mon-Fri).

The 1824, convict-built **St Thomas' Anglican Church** (☎ 6584 1033; Hay St; adult/child \$2/1; ☎ 9.30am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Fri) is one of Australia's oldest and still has its box pews and crenulated tower, echoing the Norman churches of southern England. The walls are over half a

metre thick, comprising 365,000 handmade bricks. A spiral staircase heads up the tower to a small collection of historic documents and vestments. From here three ladders continue to the roof and excellent views of the town.

**Roto House** (☎ 6584 2180; Lord St; admission by gold coin donation; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat & Sun), next to the Koala Hospital in Macquarie Nature Reserve, is a lovely Victorian villa (1891) with interesting displays about its original owners.

Between Miners and Lighthouse Beaches, little **Tacking Point Lighthouse** (1879) commands a headland offering immense views up and down the coast. It's a great spot to watch the waves rolling in to the long beautiful stretch of Lighthouse Beach.

The old pilot house above Town Beach has been converted into a small **Maritime Museum** (☎ 6583 1866; 6 William St; tour adult/child \$5/2; ☎ 10am-4pm). There's a small extension of the museum at the wharf, where bookings are taken for the MV *Wentworth* (p246).

While on the maritime theme, you can tour the **Alma Doepel** (☎ 6583 3513; adult/child \$3/1; ☎ 9am-5pm), a 1903 three-masted schooner permanently moored near the bottom of Horton St.

## OBSERVATORY

Stargazers will enjoy the small **observatory** (☎ 6584 9164; www.pmobs.org.au; Rotary Park, William St; adult/child \$8/5; ☎ 7.30-8.30pm Wed & Sun, 8.15-9.15pm during daylight saving).

## WINERIES

The Hastings Valley has a long history of wine-making, but the half dozen working vineyards scattered around the area hardly qualify it as a wine region. They're all quite far apart, but if you're in the mood for a country drive, grab a *Wine Trail Guide* from the visitors centre. Semillon and Chambourcin grapes do well here.

**Bago Vineyards** (☎ 6585 7099; www.bagovineyards.com.au; Milligans Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm) Watch out for wallabies and goannas on the picturesque, partly unsealed forest drive to this vineyard 22km out of town, south of Wauchope. Every second Sunday of the month it hosts live jazz afternoons (adult/child \$5/free).

**Cassegrain Wines** (☎ 6582 8377; www.cassegrainwines.com.au; 764 Fernbank Creek Rd; ☎ 9am-5pm) The best known, with arguably the finest wine. Its restaurant, Ça Marche, is worth the trip.

**Douglas Vale Historic Homestead & Vineyard** (☎ 6584 3792; www.douglasvalevineyard.com.au; Oxley



Hwy; ☎ 10am-3pm Wed, Sat & Sun) Founded in 1859, wine is produced from remnants of the little-known Isabella grapes planted in the 1860s. It's opposite the TAFE college.

## Activities

**Port Macquarie Surf School** (☎ 6585 5453; www.portmacquariesurfschool.com.au) offers a wide range of lessons and prices.

**Kayak Tours** (☎ 6584 1039; Sea Rescue Shed, Buller St; 2hr trip \$35) runs guided trips into the upper reaches of the Hastings River.

Camel rides are available south of town with **Port Macquarie Camel Safaris** (☎ 6583 7650; www.portmacquariecamels.com.au; Matthew Flinders Dr; 20min \$20; ☎ 9.30am-1pm Sun-Fri).

## Tours

The Maritime Museum runs harbour tours on Tuesdays and Thursdays aboard its restored boat, the **MV Wentworth** (☎ 6584 2987; Clarence St, Town Wharf). A two-hour tour starts at 10.30am (adult/child \$15/10), with a one-hour tour at 1pm (adult/child \$10/6).

**Port Macquarie Cruise Adventures** (☎ 1300 555 890; www.cruiseadventures.com.au; 74 Clarence St, Town Wharf; adult/child from \$15/10) offers dolphin-watching, whale-spotting, oyster-guzzling, lunch, sunset, river and everglades tours.

## Sleeping

Port offers a decent range of boudoir options, ranging from a clutch of tidy hostels to a multitude of apartment-style resorts. Competition among the hostels is fierce, so expect lots of free perks – breakfast, transfers, bikes, boogie boards, internet access etc. A better strategy for some of them would be employing staff who can smile.

For private apartment rentals, get in touch with **Laing & Simmons** (☎ 6583 7733; www.portreal.estate.net; cnr Horton & William Sts), which promotes itself as a carbon-neutral agency.

## BUDGET

**Sundowner Breakwall Tourist Park** (☎ 6583 2755; www.sundownerholidays.com; 1 Munster St; dm \$25, sites per 2 people \$36-42, cabins \$95-274; ☎ ☎) With extensive facilities and a roomy feel, this quality place is right by the river mouth. There's a backpackers' area with a separate kitchen and lounge.

**Ozzie Pozzie Backpackers** (☎/fax 6583 8133; 36 Waugh St; dm \$27, d\$65-75; ☎) The clean rooms are bright and there's a range of activities on offer, along with free bikes and boogie boards.

**Port Macquarie Backpackers** (☎ 6583 1791; www.portmacquariebackpackers.com.au; 2 Hastings River Dr; dm/d/tr \$28/69/84; ☎ ☎) Easily identified by the globe out the front, this heritage-listed house has pressed-tin walls, comfy bunks and the friendliest atmosphere of any hostel in town. The veranda is a popular meeting place. Traffic can be noisy, but loads of freebies compensate.

**Port Macquarie YHA** (☎ 6583 5512; www.yha.com.au/hostels/details.cfm?hostelid=26; 40 Church St; dm/tr \$30/73, d\$65-89; ☎) A neat and compact hostel close to Town Beach with tidy, bright rooms.

## MIDRANGE

**HW Lord St Motel** (☎ 6583 5850; www.hwmotel.com.au; cnr Lord & Burrawan Sts; r \$90-180; ☎ ☎) At the cheaper end of the motels, this option has reasonable-sized, clean and comfy rooms. The décor's a bit '70s but the bed linen is crisp and new.

**Beachside Holiday Apartments** (☎ 6583 9544; www.beachsideholidays.com; 48 Pacific Dr; apt from \$135; ☎ ☎; wi-fi) This fun place is right across the road from Flynn's Beach. The units are large, have balconies and face either the ocean or the enticing pool.

**Glasshouse HW Boutique Motel** (☎ 6583 1200; www.hwmotel.com.au; 1 Stewart St; r \$145-165; ☎ ☎) The HW is a renovated older motel with lots of sharp 1970s angles. Many feature balconies with views over Town Beach; deluxe spa units are available.

**Beachcomber Resort** (☎ 6584 1881; www.beachcomberresort.com.au; 54 William St; apt \$145-195; ☎ ☎; wi-fi) Close to the beach and the centre, the 22 large self-contained units range from studios to two-bedroom apartments, all set around a beautifully landscaped pool.

## TOP END

**Mantra Quayside** (☎ 6588 4000; www.mantraquayside.com.au; cnr William & Short Sts; apt \$182-229; ☎ ☎; wi-fi) As slick as it gets, the elegant apartments in this central midrise are fully self-contained with all the modern gadgets. The highlight is the heated rooftop pool and barbecue area. The units facing William St have views over St Thomas' Church but penance is provided by rowdy boofheads spilling out of the nightclub across the road.

**Flynn's Beach Resort** (☎ 6583 3338; www.flynn'sbeachresort.com.au; cnr Pacific Dr & Ocean St; apt \$224; ☎ ☎; wi-fi) Flynn's Beach is across the road from this large complex with extensive, lush gardens and a fancy amoeba-shaped pool. All

units have two bedrooms, spacious balconies and pleasant living spaces.

## Eating

### RESTAURANTS & CAFÉS

**Stunned Mullet** (☎ 6582 8320; 24 William St; breakfast \$5-15, lunch \$14-30, dinner \$29-34; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Australian idiom lesson: to look like a stunned mullet is to wear an expression of bewilderment. It's exactly the sort of look you might adopt while struggling to choose between the delicious Mod Oz menu items in this chic eatery. For brekkie, try the homemade granola with lemon myrtle-flavoured yogurt. It's better than a poke in the eye with a burnt stick.

**Cedro** (☎ 6583 5529; 72 Clarence St; breakfast \$5-15, lunch \$15-17; ☎) breakfast & lunch Mon-Sat) On a sunny day you can sit on the street between the palm trees, order the Bedouin eggs and plan your next nomadic move. The food's excellent and it's not all exotic; those with simpler tastes can opt for fish and chips.

**Rainforest Café** (☎ 6582 4444; Sea Acres Rainforest Centre, Pacific Dr; mains \$8-16; ☎) breakfast & lunch) You may be surrounded by lush foliage but don't expect bush tucker; the talented and gregarious chef is as French as they come. The focus is on healthy sandwiches, salads and pasta constructed from quality ingredients.

**Fusion 7** (☎ 6584 1171; 124 Horton St; lunch \$10-17, dinner \$25-32; ☎) lunch Thu & Fri, dinner Tue-Sat) It's completely surprising that this restaurant: a) isn't exorbitantly expensive; b) doesn't serve wine (but you can bring your own); and c) is in Port Macquarie at all. Chef Lindsey Schwab worked with the father of fusion cuisine Peter Gordon in London, returning to be closer to his family. Expect the unexpected.

**Café 66** (☎ 6583 2484; 66 Clarence St; meals \$15-29; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) This agreeable, unreconstructed Italian eatery has good coffee and reasonably priced pasta, risotto and grills. Book ahead on Tuesday nights when half of Port tries to squeeze in for two-for-one pasta.

### QUICK EATS & SELF-CATERING

**Peloton** (☎ 6583 6522; 163 Gordon St; snacks \$5-10; ☎) 6.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri, 7.30am-12.30pm Sat) Tucked inside Gordon St Cycles, this excellent espresso bar's fit and friendly staff will get you on your bike in no time, buzzed up with the town's best coffee and tasty muffins.

**Organic Belly** (☎ 6582 4495; 2 Murray St; ☎) 10am-5pm Mon, 9am-5pm Tue-Wed & Fri, 9am-6pm Thu, 9am-2pm

Sat) The place to stock up on organic and Fair Trade produce.

## Drinking & Entertainment

Things can get rowdy on weekends, so the council has imposed a lock-out policy on bars and clubs, which means that if you're not in a venue by 1am, you're not getting in.

**Beach House** (☎ 6584 5692; 1 Horton St) In the historic Royal Hotel, this place goes off on the weekends. Take in the waterfront view from one of the outside tables.

**Majestic Cinemas** (☎ 6583 8400; www.portcinemas.com.au; cnr Horton & Clarence Sts; adult/child \$11/9) Latest blockbuster and the odd indie flick.

**Glasshouse** (☎ 6581 8888; www.glasshouse.org.au; cnr Hay & Clarence Sts) At the time of research this centre was still being constructed, but an impressive programme of theatre and opera had already been announced.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Port Macquarie Airport** (☎ 6583 1904; Boundary St) is 5km from the centre of town (\$10 in a taxi).

Both **Qantas** (☎ 13 13 13; www.qantas.com.au) and **Virgin Blue** (☎ 136 789; www.virginblue.com.au) have daily flights to Sydney. **Brindabella Airlines** (☎ 1300 66 88 24; www.brindabellaairlines.com.au) has services to Brisbane, Coffs Harbour and Newcastle.

### BUS

**Greyhound** (☎ 1300 473 946; www.greyhound.com.au) stop three times daily on its way between Sydney (\$64, 6½ hours) and Brisbane (\$88, nine hours), via Forster (\$50, 1¼ hours).

**Premier Motor Service** (☎ 133 410; www.premierms.com.au) heads daily to Sydney (\$55, 6¼ hours), Newcastle (\$43, four hours), Kempsey (\$15, 45 minutes) and Brisbane (\$62, 8½ hours).

## Getting Around

**Busways** (☎ 6559 7712; www.busways.com.au) runs local bus services.

The Settlement Point ferry (per car \$3) operates 24 hours. A 10-minute trip on a flat punt gives you access to North Beach and Pilots Beach.

For car rentals, **Hertz** (☎ 6583 6599; www.hertz.com.au; 102 Gordon St) is one of several agents in town. For bikes, try **Gordon St Cycles** (☎ 6583 3633; www.gordonstreetcycles.com.au; 163 Gordon St; per 2hr/day \$15/30).



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