Country flair

Tamworth is living up to its new reputation as cosmopolitan regional centre, reports Pamela Wilson.

Not a cowboy hat in sight. Not one! I saw more cowboy hats on Oxford Street during Sydney's Mardi Gras than I did when I holidayed in Tamworth, Australia's country music capital.

I'll admit I was four months shy of the Australian Country Music Festival which Tamworth hosts every January, but I still felt cheated. It was akin to not seeing a 'guns and ammo' shop in America, a tuk tuk in Thailand and an Elvis impersonator in Parkes.

When I expressed my disbelief at the lack of turned-up Stetsons to David Woodward, Tourism Tamworth's marketing and public relations manager, he thought it was funnier than a hen's night at karaoke.

"The cowboy hats come out on the weekend," he laughed. "We're a business centre during the week. You know, we're a very cosmopolitan city."

Chuckling as he wandered off to find me a golden guitar brooch and matching tattoos for the kids, David left me to my thoughts.

I realised he was right. I hadn't noticed when we arrived in town – because I was looking for cowboy hats – but there was definitely more to this town than just its reputation as the country music capital of Australia and its big, tacky guitar that stands like a sentry on the southern approach to town.

With its new $30 million Australian Equine and Livestock Events Centre (it's the massive spaceship off the side of the road just south of the city) and ample conference facilities, the town is busily promoting itself as a regional conference, business and events hub.

Fortunately for tourists like us, this marketing strategy and increased investment in infrastructure only makes Tamworth more appealing because of the accompanying injection of funds in the town's services and attractions.

For example, there is none of that shabby or tired feel to the main strip that defines some of Australia's regional towns.

Tall, flourishing trees shade pedestrians as they wander along the wide, paved footpaths of the shopping precinct and there is not a single shopfront boarded up and pasted with old newspapers.

Further, when we asked about a nice restaurant to dine at for a combined birthday/anniversary dinner, we were surprised to learn that thrice-awarded Michelin chef Ben Davies ran two slick restaurants, Montys and The Workshop, a short walk from our accommodation.

Taking this opportunity to dine on gourmet cuisine, we weren't disappointed with our four-course degustation meal that included a tartlet of wild mushrooms, blue-eyed cod with parmesan polenta, and tempura John Dory confied in duck fat peas and trout caviar.

The kids munched on the healthiest looking home-made pizzas I've ever seen, as well as hand-cut chips and crisp vegies.

According to Tamworth's official tourism guide, there are 70 restaurants and eateries to choose from so there's no need to subsist on roadhouse fare here.

Had we not had two little people in tow, we could have finished dinner and headed off to the new Capitol Theatre, a 402-seat proscenium arch theatre, which was hosting the touring production of Australia's *Steel Magnolias*.

To me, all this seemed very impressive for a town that, according to one local, "was just a country town with one event on the calendar" 10 years ago.

But I did wonder whether Tamworth's cosmopolitan charm disappeared for those 10 days when, as another local admitted in hushed tones, 'the rednecks come to town' for the music festival and the population swells from its usual 38,000 to 50,000.

"It can get rowdy and feral, especially on the river where camping is allowed," he confided.

But the image of a rowdy Tamworth was hard to conjure up as I sipped Chardonnay from a long-stemmed glass and sliced into my caramelised pear tart tatin with rum and raisin ice cream at Ben's The Workshop.

The following day, having woken to clear skies and the scent of hay, we decided to explore town.

Our first adventure was a leisurely stroll along the path that scoots beside Peel River and runs parallel to the main strip, Peel Street.

Enjoying the mid-week quiet and leisurely pace that is a rarity in the city, we also fed the ducks and skimmed stones on the clear ponds at Bicentennial Park.

But we were soon ready to ramp up the pace, so we mounted our bicycles to ride to the Big Golden Guitar.

After all, although we were too early for the music festival, we were still keen to catch a little country music buzz.

Unfortunately, we didn't find a buzz of any kind at the Big Golden Guitar.

Sure, we were excited as we jostled for a posse in front of the huge monument for the mandatory holiday snap, but once inside we found the vibe all but non-existent.

Little more than an overpriced souvenir outlet with an op shop attached, the Big Golden Guitar could barely contain our interest for even a few minutes.

Some folk may find the Gallery of Stars Wax Museum appealing, especially as it's only one of three wax museums in Australia, but we were ready to get back in the saddle after a quick look around.

The next stop did, however, have us city slickers enthralled.

Strolling through The Walk the Country Mile exhibit back at the tourist centre, we admired colourful collages of singing greats from the past, enjoyed video profiles of Slim Dusty and Gina Jeffries on a loop and ran our fingers down the timeline of country music milestones.

Tuckered out from our bike ride, we opted to rest our weary legs in the car as

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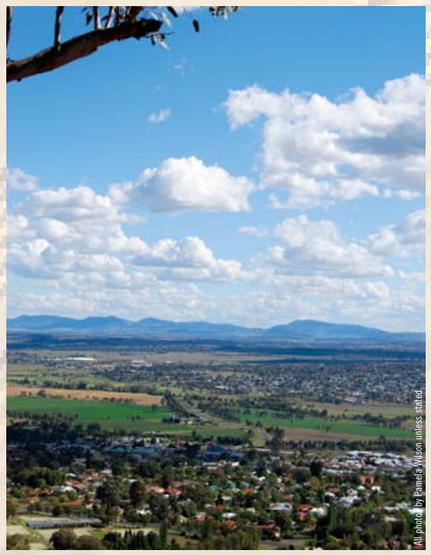
we drove to the Oxley Lookout to get a rock climber's view of town.

As we reclined on a picnic rug with a bottle of wine and a plate of cheese and biscuits, we all fell into blissful silence as we watched the sun sink beyond the horizon behind Tamworth.

Well and truly over my disappointment at not seeing even a smattering of cowboy hats, in that moment I realised Tamworth had managed to impress me with its unique fusion of cosmopolitan savvy and country charm.

TAMWORTH ATTRACTIONS

- **Arts, crafts and exhibits:** Tamworth has three outlets for lovers of the arts. The Tamworth Regional Craft Centre showcases local works while the Tamworth Regional Gallery hosts local and touring exhibits. There is also the Weswal Gallery for fine arts. Meanwhile, learn how Tamworth got its other nickname – the City of Lights – at the Powerstation Museum. (Alright, I'll tell you now. Tamworth was the first town in the Southern Hemisphere to get electric street lighting.)
- **Amuse the kids:** One of our favourite activities with the kids was scootering and riding around the skate park beside the river, but there are other options if you don't fancy fixing skinned knees out of hours. There are the 28-hectare botanic gardens and the Endeavour Marsupial Park a few streets east of the CBD, and if you are there on the third Sunday of every month, take a trip on the Tamworth Miniature Railway.
- **Manilla:** Often referred to as a 'fisherman's paradise', Manilla is about 40km north of Tamworth. Apparently, the waters in and around Manilla, including the Manilla River, Lake Keepit (30km south-west of Manilla) and Split Rock Dam (14km north of Manilla) are full of golden perch, jew fish and murray cod. If high altitude activities are more your thing, this town is for you. It's popular amongst paragliders and aero sport fanatics because of its thermals.
- **Warrabah National Park:** For canoeing enthusiasts, the rapids in the Namoi River in the Warrabah National Park about 65 km north-east of Tamworth can offer a thrill. There are sections of the river where all one needs to have fun is a blow-up lilo. The area also attracts bushwalkers, fishermen and rock climbers.



All photos by Pamela Wilson unless stated.

Tourism NSW

INSET TOP: Captions to come from Helen xxxxxx xxxxx xxxxxx xxxx xxxxxxxx.

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Tamworth district views; The Golden Guitar; Xxxxx xxxxxxx xxxxxx xxxxxxx xxxxxx xxxxxx; Xxxxxxx xxxxxxxx xxxxx xxxxxxxxxx.

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