

EXPLORING THE WILD SIDE OF GLEN INNES – By Stephanie Jackson

Uncovering the olde worlde charm and outdoor attractions of this Australian town

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Peer into the heart of the NSW town of Glen Innes, and all you may see is the hustle and bustle of urban chaos, but look a little harder and you'll discover a hint of olde worlde charm hidden among the symbols of modern day commerce.

The town's elegant 19th century buildings with their ornate facades, its museum with its impressive collection of more than 10,000 items, and the Standing Stones that represent aspects of the town's Scottish heritage are all worth a look. But it's what lies beyond the realms of concrete and glass, beyond the town's throbbing heart that is the irresistible attraction, for Glen Innes is surrounded by stunning landscapes that will take your breath away.

If you are like me and have a passion for exploring the wild side of the great outdoors, you'll find plenty to get excited about here, for there are numerous national parks and nature reserves within an 80 kilometre radius of the CBD. Whether you use a caravan park in the town or in the nearby villages of Emmaville or Torrington as a base from which to make day trips to the wild side of Glen Innes, or camp in the heart of a forest where adventure comes with a generous helping of silence, I guarantee your passion will be ignited by the natural beauty you will discover.



If you're prepared to get your hands a little grubby, there's a chance you'll be dazzled by what lies beneath the earth too, for in the Glen Innes region sapphires, emeralds, garnets, zircons, and other gemstones lie only a scratch below the surface. With a little help from locals who will point you in the right direction, on a fossicking tour, or at one of the region's many designated fossicking reserves, there's a good chance of unearthing a glittering souvenir of Glen Innes.



With plenty of time up my sleeve, I headed to the first of the many must-see places on my itinerary – to Warra National Park, 35 kilometres south-east of the town.

There are no designated camping areas in this 2,024-hectare park, so I set up my camper van in a small clearing among the forest that spills down from the surrounding hillsides to secluded valleys and reed-choked swamps. It's here that the diminutive Sara River begins its journey to

unite with Australia's largest easterly flowing river, the Clarence, but with the track to the river and to a popular camping area known as The Green suitable only for vehicles with high ground clearance, something my van lacks, getting to the heart of this park on foot was my only option.

Rosellas, wrens, cockatoos, honeyeaters, and wallabies eyed my progress from a discreet distance as I followed a minute stream that muttered through the forest, and scrambled among the granite boulders that lay scattered through the dense vegetation like the building blocks of some giant's fallen castle. With the brown of bark, of bracken, and of leaves strewn across the forest floor; greens of every hue from emerald to olive; and the gold of wattles that bloomed in profusion, Warra National Park was painted with all the vibrant colours that Nature has at her disposal.



Wattles were blooming at Kings Plains National Park too, and here I set up my van, made a cup of coffee, and waited in silence for some of the more than 120 bird species that call the park home to appear. The trickling water of the nearby King's Plains Creek beckoned me to explore further afield, and I set off along a faint trail that nudged its way along the creek's bank until it vanished among a confusion of boulders.

From here, the route to the park's most impressive feature was a rugged one, demanding a hint of agility as I scrambled through and around a succession of rock pools, and over and among vast slabs of lichen-coated granite. The creek, with its incessant chatter, made its way through the jumbled boulders that pave its route, and came inevitably to a precipice from where its clear waters plunged through a gorge to the valley 70 metres below.



A vastly different sound – the sound of jubilation - had once echoed across the landscape to the north of King's Plains, for in 1872, vast deposits of tin were discovered there at Vegetable Creek. The mining boom gave birth to a township that was home to more than 2,500 miners, but the wealth from tin was short-lived, and today that town, Emmaville, 39 kilometres north of Glen Innes, boasts a population of merely 300.

It's a sleepy village where there is not a lot to do other than chat to the locals. But passing the time of day with the friendly folk of Emmaville has its rewards, for most are eager to let visitors in on a few secrets. One of the region's best camping spots, a newfound friend boasted, is 12 kilometres east of the town on the banks of the Severn River. It's a good place for fossicking and fishing too, he assured me, but if you'd like trout on your evening menu, there are rivers and streams near the highway township of Deepwater where anyone with a little knowledge of the art of fishing has a good chance of catching a whopper.

The caretaker of Emmaville's mining museum is a man who's also eager to tell a yarn or two, and here, among the relics of the past and a gallery of photos, the town's story unfolds. But it is two dams south of the town, which were constructed to service the Y Water tin mine, that are the mining era's most stunning visual legacy. Nature has transformed what were once ugly scars on the landscape with a cloak of reeds and low forests that now wraps itself around each dam. And with the harsh sounds of mining activities replaced with the subtle calls of the numerous birds that frequent these picturesque lakes, the disguise is complete and all signs of any past association with the dust and noise of mining has been obliterated.

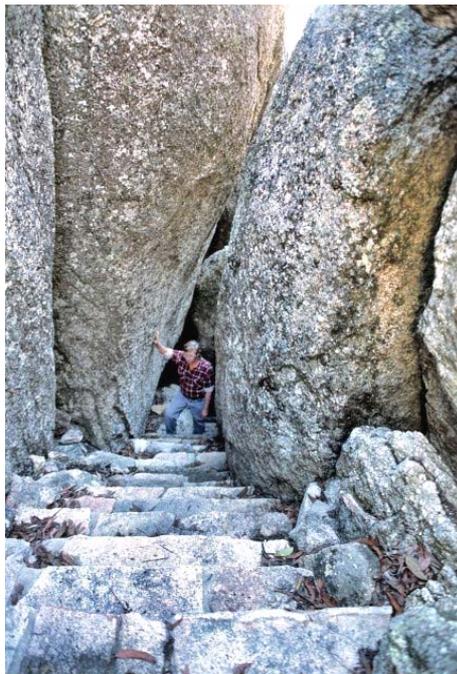
Nowhere was the ugly face of mining so conspicuous as at the Ottery mine north of Emmaville where, from 1920 to 1957, arsenic was extracted. Little remains of the mine's infrastructure other than a tall brick chimney and rows of brick chambers from where the precipitated arsenic, that still coats the bricks, was removed by hand. It's a place where the warning to look but not touch should be heeded without question.

Further north, yet still only 70 kilometres from Glen Innes, lies the 30,000-hectare Torrington State Conservation Area, where, from the roof of his cavernous hideout, the 19th century bushranger known as Thunderbolt had a bird's eye view of this vast wilderness.



Wallabies scurried across my path, and black cockatoos screeched skywards as I entered the forest and began the one kilometre hike to the outlaw's retreat to see what he had seen. I clambered up the steep narrow steps that wind through secluded caverns, and up the ladder that leads to the summit to be greeted with a scene of grandeur, for here, above the forest canopy, the view is one of a world where trees rule with no hint of intrusion from the symbols of mankind's civilisation.

The landscape encompassed by the Torrington State Conservation Area is dominated by granite boulders, forests, heathlands, creeks, and swamps, and from my campsite beside Blatherarm Creek, the best that this wild place has to offer was literally on the doorstep. I followed trails forged by wildlife through the forest undergrowth, and that led through low forests of banksias with tall



amber blooms, past golden tufts of grasses and sedges, past ferns that scrambled among the boulders and spilled across shaded pools along the creek's contorted course, and through a wild garden of minute wildflowers - all part of this glorious wilderness where more than 750 plant species and 190 animal species thrive.

Inquisitive wallabies peered from the shadows as evening approached, and I was confident that, as a new day dawned, and with patience, I would eventually see the more elusive residents of the forest, or hear their voices, the flap of their wings, or their muffled footsteps as they passed discreetly by.

I had hoped to see all the natural wonders of the Glen Innes region, but I'd dawdled too long, and my time was running out. There was time for a brief visit to the Mann River Nature Reserve, east of Glen Innes, where I picnicked, in the company of blue wrens, on the banks of the diminutive river. And there were a few hours to spare to 'Ooh' and 'Aah' in amazement at the grandeur of the rainforests of the Gibraltar Range National Park and the adjacent Washpool National Park.

With more of the spectacular mountainous landscape and its forests, streams, and waterfalls still to be discovered along the many kilometres of walking tracks that criss-cross these two parks, my return to the wild side of the Glen Innes region will be just a matter of time.