

WILD TIMES AT NARRABRI – By Stephanie Jackson

Exploring the natural attractions and national parks that envelope this Australian town.

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Peace and quiet were once in short supply in the Narrabri region of NSW as volcanoes erupted, a meteorite made a fiery descent and left its impact on the landscape, and deep beneath the earth's surface subterranean waters boiled with the furies of hell. That was in the distant past, but although nature has been in a more subdued mode in recent centuries, wild times and a hint of violence have continued to colour the region.

It might not have been violence that landed George Clarke, a 19th century convict, in the slammer, but a wild lifestyle was his only option after his escape in 1826. He was accepted into the local Kamilaroi tribe, and with his two aboriginal wives, George, the first white man to live in the Narrabri region, settled down to domestic bliss. When he was recaptured in 1831, he spun colourful yarns about his adventures, and told of an immense



river that flowed into a vast inland sea. It was this exaggerated tale that spurred explorer Thomas Mitchell to pack his bags and head to the region later that year. Pastoralists followed in his footsteps; then came traders and other business people, and ultimately the town of Narrabri was born.

It's a quiet and peaceful town today, but it wasn't always that way. There were wild and angry characters among the inmates of the gaol that was built in 1882 and that is now the town's museum. Raised voices echoed down the hallways of the 1864 courthouse. Preachers threatened parishioners with damnation in the town's 19th century churches, and angry words after an over-indulgence of ale occasionally flowed from the bar of the old Club House Hotel and echoed through its elegant Victorian-era foyer. These buildings, elegant architectural reminders of that past era, remain, but harmony is now the order of the day in Narrabri.

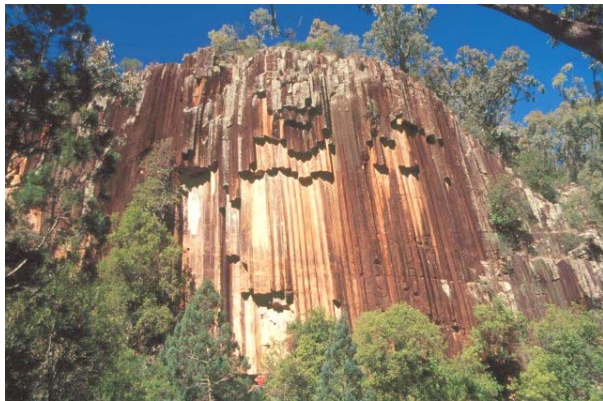
The existence of a great river and an inland sea proved to be merely a figment of George Clarke's imagination, for only the diminutive Namoi River crosses the plains that surround Narrabri and snakes past the town. There's a generous serving of peace and quiet at the parklands that sprawl along the river's banks, but things can erupt into violence – at least from a fish's perspective – if you toss a line into the water and, when your patience is rewarded, a Murray cod, yellow belly, or catfish struggles to escape its fate.

At Narrabri Lake, on the south-western edge of the town, there's a hint of violence too as waterbirds that call this tranquil spot home demonstrate an occasional flutter of aggression as they squawk and splash among the reeds.

To the east of the town the words 'violence' and 'wild' come with capital letters. Violence was perpetrated here by volcanic eruptions that, around 17 million years ago, created the rugged Nandewar Ranges, a vast area of which is within the Mount Kaputar National Park. And wild? Well, with 37,950 hectares of tangled wilderness, jagged peaks that rise to 1,524 metres, and deep valleys cloaked with almost impenetrable forests, this park is wild enough to satisfy anyone's interpretation of the word.

Get out and about in this spectacular wilderness area and you'll discover a profusion of wildflowers, tiny waterfalls, ferns, and sub-alpine vegetation dominated by snow gums, mosses, and gently waving grasses. The creatures that thrive here include many rare and endangered species such as tiger quolls, and although most are so wild that visitors seldom glimpse them, the park's more familiar residents - kangaroos - appear deceptively at ease when faced with human company.

With walking trails leading through dense forests to mountain-top lookouts, to the remains of the crumbling Yulludunida volcanic crater, along old lava terraces, and to the summit of Mount Kaputar itself, there's plenty to Ooh! and Aah! at along every meandering route. And I guarantee that you'll be engulfed by a silence bred by awe when, with a 360-degree bird's eye view, you gaze out across the wild, tree-cloaked landscape that stretches to every jagged horizon.



At the northern extremity of the national park, Sawn Rocks, a unique geological formation created in the region's volcanic past, rises among a forest where today the only sounds are of wrens twittering, and the breeze muttering through crowded wattle trees.

In the extensive cotton fields that wrap themselves around Narrabri there have long been voices of anger as farmers complained about the ravenous insects that threatened to destroy their crops, and droughts brought a

flood of despair. Drop into Narrabri's impressive Cotton Centre complex, and you'll discover what the commotion has all been about. In the 3-D video theatre, the strands of a complex story are woven into a presentation that will introduce you to the cotton industry from its origins to its glowing future. Press a few buttons on the centre's high-tech interactive displays and you'll find out if you've got what it takes to be a cotton farmer, if you're strong enough to press a bale of cotton, and what impact genetically modified cotton will have on farmers and on you, the consumer. And you're in for a few surprises when you discover the diversity of products that are derived from an unattractive little plant to which the economy of Narrabri is irrevocably tied.

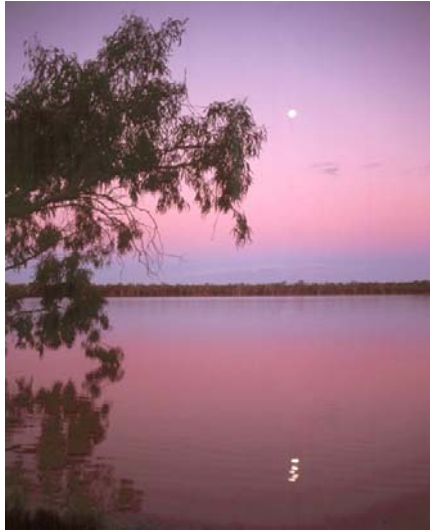
With the introduction of GM cotton, the growl of crop dusting planes rarely disrupts the peace and quiet of the rural landscape. And scientists, on watch at the observatory some 25 kilometres west of Narrabri, confirm that all is quiet on the frontiers of space too.



Visitors are welcome to drop in to the CSIRO's Australia Telescope complex where astronomers, with the aid of the Compact Array - a series of six 22-metre diameter antennas, are listening in to everything that's happening in the depths of outer space. The gigantic skeletal structures that each weigh 270 tonnes and move along a three kilometre long track, are an impressive sight, and tower over the

adjacent visitors' centre. Here displays explain all you'll ever need to know about radio astronomy, and show the stunning photographic results of years of eavesdropping on what appears to be the silent blackness of space.

That silence was shattered millennia ago, so the story goes, as a meteorite roared towards the earth on a journey that came to a violent conclusion some four kilometres west of the observatory. Where once there was a terrifying blast of destruction, there is now serenity, for the three-kilometre wide crater the impact created has become Yarrie Lake. The most aggressive sound here comes from ducks that, with incessant quacking, plead for a bit of tucker from visitors camped at the park on the banks of the lake that is little more than two metres deep. Although it's shallow, it's deep enough for swimming, boating, and yabbing, and the water, according to the park's caretaker, is literally crawling with monstrous yabbies. All you have to do is set a trap and wait for them to wander in, and while you're waiting, you can sit back and watch some of the 70 species of birds - waterbirds and those of the adjacent Pilliga forest – that call into the park on a regular basis.



Nineteenth century travellers making the journey with Cobb and Co from Narrabri through the Pilliga forest were in for a wild ride through some unquestionably wild country. After 70 kilometres of dust and bruises they quenched their thirst at the Cuttabri wine shanty that, having dispensed a good drop or two of alcohol continuously since its establishment in 1882, remains a licensed premises where modern day travellers can stop for a meal, a light snack, a cuppa, or something more potent.

It's another 30 kilometres to the tiny township of Pilliga that lies on the northern edge of the forest. And if you've come looking for wild activities, you'll be disappointed, for Pilliga, with a population of merely 140, is a quiet and sleepy spot where not a lot happens.

There's a deathly silence at the town's historic cemetery where those who lived and worked among the forest remain in its embrace for eternity. There's not a lot of noise at the bowling club either, where the action takes place on a unique black bowling green. But there's incessant noise and visible evidence of violent subterranean activity two kilometres east of the town. Steaming artesian bore water, at a constant temperature of 38°C, gushes into a nine metre long pool, and if you want to soak up Pilliga's relaxed pace of life, this is the spot to do just that.



The 400,000-hectare Pilliga State Forest, the largest natural cypress pine forest in the southern hemisphere, has been filled with angry voices and tears of despair in recent years as those whose livelihoods depend on timber faced the news that huge tracts of the forest would soon be closed to logging. But that's good news for the emus, kangaroos, and wallabies that call the forest home; for smaller creatures including possums, bettongs, echidnas, and a colony of around 15,000

koalas that reside here too; for the more than 240 species of birds, including endangered species such as mallee fowl, glossy black cockatoos, and regent honeyeaters that flutter among the dense vegetation; for the 60 species of reptiles that slither and hop through the undergrowth; and for tiny, rarely seen animals such as the Pilliga mouse.

If you want to see really wild wildlife, then you've come to the right place, for if you're lucky – or perhaps unlucky – you might come face to face with a Yowie – the ape-like

creature that is said to roam through the forest, and whose gigantic footprints were discovered in a creek near Pilliga.



Salt caves, from which early settlers extracted salt to preserve their meat, are hidden in the depths of the forest, and from a nearby rocky knoll that rises unexpectedly from the jumbled vegetation, the view is one of a confusing wilderness where the greatest danger you'll face is getting lost in the maze of more than 2,700 kilometres of tracks that criss-cross the forest.

You can camp beside a small dam close to the caves – or anywhere else that takes your fancy in the state forest, at the Pilliga baths, or by the Namoi River north of the town where, locals say, enormous Murray cod are always eager to take a fisherman's bait. And if, after having discovered the wild side of the region, soaking up a little more peace and quiet is on your agenda, add Burren Junction, 63 kilometres north of Pilliga, to your itinerary. This quiet little town consists of just a few houses, a pub, and a general store, but three kilometres away there's continual action at the artesian bore baths where hot water splashes into a shaded pool 24 hours a day. You can camp here free of charge, but if you've had your fill of life on the wild side, the hustle and bustle of civilisation, Narrabri style, is only an hour's drive away.



