

Way out west

CHRISTINE KNIGHT and family experience the fun, food and culture that awaits in NSW's Central West.



It's never too early to introduce your kids to a great Aussie tradition of a road trip so, with a goal to discover as much of the history and culture that lies on Sydney's doorstep as we can, my husband and I headed west to recreate the holidays of our childhoods and introduce our five-year old daughter to this beautiful part of Australia.

Enchanted Oberon

The first stop on our quest to explore the Golden West is **Oberon**, a three-hour drive from Sydney and Canberra. Romantically named after Shakespeare's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', it's a pretty little town on the edge of the Blue Mountains with plenty to see and do nearby. **Jenolan Caves**, home of the famous Cathedral Chamber, is a half-hour drive by car, and **Mayfield Garden**, a stunning cool-climate garden inspired by the grand country estates of England, is a short drive past the centre of town.

We spend an idyllic day at Mayfield Garden, running down paths that wind through ponds and over bridges through a stunning landscape that enchants us all. It feels like we've landed in a Monet painting or have become characters in 'Alice in Wonderland', all at the same time.

Back in time

Bathurst is an historic town best-known to rev-heads as the home of the car-racing circuit known as **Mount Panorama**. While it's fun to drive up the track, albeit at a more sedentary pace than its famous racers, it's also the spot to amble along pretty tree-lined streets in one of Australia's oldest inland colonial settlements. But along with cars and architecture, we also find fossilised dinosaur eggs and more than 2000 fossil and mineral specimens at the **Australian Fossil and Mineral Museum**. We spend hours playing at the all-abilities Adventure Playground with its dinosaur statues and footprints, dual flying fox, slides, maze and sandpit. It's hard to drag our daughter away, even when ice cream at **Annie's Old Fashioned Ice Cream Parlour** is on offer.

Going for gold

While **Orange** has, in recent years, become well known for its wineries and fine food, it's long been a favourite place to enjoy getting back to nature. **Orange Botanic Gardens** features 17 hectares of landscaped gardens and historic buildings to explore, while the **Orange Adventure Playground** offers imaginative timber play equipment for kids to enjoy.

Orange is a city rich in culture and the **Orange Regional Gallery** is home to a significant collection of more than 500 artworks by some of Australia's finest artists. **Orange Regional Museum** is another highlight, with artefacts that reflect the stories, cultures and places of the region and hands-on school holiday programmes. A little further out, at historic **Hill End**, we go panning for gold. We don't strike it rich during our visit to the 1870s gold mining town, but it does take me back to my own childhood, when I recall my Dad's camera taking an unexpected dunking in the river while we were panning.

Underground Adventures

The chief spot of interest for us in Wellington is the **Wellington Caves**, which are eight kilometres south of the town, located at the junction of the Macquarie and Bell Rivers. The guided tour through the Cathedral Cave, Gaden Cave and Phosphate Mine reveals incredible calcite crystal formations and leads to conversations with my daughter about stalagmites and stalactites, and which is which. The Phosphate Mine is another must-see in Wellington. Dating back to 1914, its muddy walls are lined with megafauna bones dating back to the Pleistocene Period and it's a place so fascinating it even aroused Charles Darwin's curiosity.

Zoo much fun

The most western point of our road trip, **Dubbo**, is best-known as the home of **Taronga Western Plains Zoo**. We spend two incredible days at the zoo, cycling between the exhibits at the incredible sprawling zoo to visit animals



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01 Zooming around Dubbo Zoo 02 Dubbo Zoo 03 Annie's Old Fashioned Ice Cream Parlour 04 Bathurst Street 05 Mudgee Vineyard © Amber Hooper NSW Tourism
06 Australian Fossil and Mineral Museum 07 The Gingerbread Cafe. Images 01,02,03,04,06,07 © Christine Knight

such as the endangered Asian elephants, black and white rhinos, meerkats, a Sumatran tiger, which is napping when we find him, and a very rare bongo.

The town of **Dubbo** itself is also worth a visit, especially the **Old Dubbo Gaol**, with its impeccably preserved 19th century buildings and stories of prison life. Also worth a visit is the **Dubbo Observatory**, which is the second largest observatory in Australia, and **Flip Out**, which was Australia's first trampoline playground.

The land of wine and honey

At **Mudgee**, there are plenty of great vineyards to explore including family-friendly **Lowe Wines**, where kids can visit a mini animal farm while mum and dad sample some of the organic wines. **Leaning Oak Dairy** is another great spot for kids. Here, you can sample the sensational sheep and goat's cheeses made on the property before stopping for a cuddle with the much-loved farm animals.

We make a stop at **Honey Haven** and are delighted by the range of honeys we can try. Our daughter declares lavender honey to be her favourite, while we like the Manuka blend. If you have time to linger, there is a putt putt course on site, but we prefer to watch the bees hard at work, and sit down at the cafe to enjoy fresh scones.

We venture further into the town to walk its pretty historic streets; a great lunch spot is **Blue Wren Winery** – the large garden area is a fab spot for the kids to enjoy a run around before hitting the road again.

Into the Blue

Lithgow is famous for its **Zig Zag Railway**, but it's closed when we make our road trip, so we vow to visit when it reopens in late 2017. There are plenty of other things to do in the area, however, from the **Glow Worm Tunnel** in the Wollemi National Park to the **Blue Mountains Botanic Garden** in Mount Tomah. On our way home we drop by **The Lolly Bug** shop in Hartley Valley. With more than 2000 lines of confectionary in stock there is literally something for everyone. Our little connoisseur loves the Jelly Belly beans, and I can't go past the freshly made fudge. There's also time for afternoon tea at **The Gingerbread House**, an old church converted into a cafe with a play area. There couldn't be a sweeter way to end a road trip. ●

Central West Report Card



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