

Vines, brews and views
in the Snowy Mountains

JANE NICHOLLS

I'm not much of a beer drinker, but the one I try at Tumut River Brewing Co is a beauty. Perhaps it's because I'm at the end of a long day's drive, pre-travel restrictions, down from Canberra to Cooma and then up the recently reopened Snowy Mountains Highway, through many kilometres of recently blackened bush and the winding descent into Tumut.

A second sip. Yes, this is my kind of beer. "You'd like German beers, then," says Tim Martin, owner and founder of TRBC, which is also a music venue and restaurant with 24 brews on tap, including 12 of his own. Strawberry Fields Forever is one of them. It's a Bavarian hefeweizen-style brew and, yes, it has real pureed strawberries in it that impart a certain tartness.

Pretty Parrot Distilling's tasting room at the back of the Oriental Hotel in Tumut is also a hot local tip, but I still have a way to drive. And I'm here just before the opening of Local at Learmont's, a new volunteer-run co-op for producers and makers, housed in a gorgeous heritage-listed store built by local draper JJ Learmont.

As dusk creeps across the hills, I head to Nimbo Fork Lodge, my base to explore a few corners of the Snowy Valleys during the next couple of days. The drive in dissolves any last knots of city stress. I stop by a boulder-strewn paddock to take photos of horses and they trot towards me, perhaps hoping for an apple. Closer to Nimbo Fork — named for its prime spot on the juncture of the snaking Tumut River and Nimbo Creek — cattle and sheep graze across the road, moving aside agreeably to let me pass.

My cottage at Nimbo Fork is vast, with a gentle view angled for the sunset and a blissful soundtrack of burbling water, noisy cockatoos and galahs, and swooping crimson rosellas. I can't go past the Snowy Mountains trout for dinner: simply baked and perfect. For many years, this place was a hunting lodge, which explains the decor in my cabin: framed collections of beautiful feathered flies, a wooden duck and some poor antlered creature's mounted head (not my fave). But hunting and fishing ornaments aside, the furnishings are light — and the bathroom, with its enormous tub looking out to the river, is gorgeous.

The next day the drive to Batlow takes me to Wilgro Orchards, started by Ralph and Judy Wilson 36 years ago. In January they lost a shed full of cider, vinegar, fences, netting and \$70,000 worth of summer's cherry crop, but their orchards and home were saved by the Rural Fire Service, and fences rebuilt with the help of Blaze Aid volunteers. Melted glass jars on display in their little shop are a sharp reminder of the ferocity of the fire, but the Wilsons have quiet determination and a truckload of crunchy fresh-royal gala apples.

PROJECT AUSTRALIA

FORTITUDE
VALLEYS

IN THE KNOW

The Snowy Valleys are within road-trip striking distance from Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra. Nimbo Fork Lodge is a 20-minute drive from Tumut. Truenorth Helicopters runs 30-minute Mountain Explorer flights from Tumut Heliport, including flying over three dams of the Snowy Hydro Scheme.

- visitsnowyvalleys.com.au
- nimbofork.com.au
- truenorthhelicopters.com.au
- cafe-nest.com
- courabyrawines.com
- boggycreekshows.com.au
- facebook.com/BraymontGarden

Up the road near Tumbarumba, Cathy and Brian Gairn's home, their Courabyra Wines vineyards, stylish tasting room, restaurant and most of horticulturist Cathy's garden were saved by a heroic friend. Before the coronavirus struck they were back serving lavish lunches and pouring their award-winning wines, the distinctive "I of 11" label designed by one of their three daughters — get Cathy to tell you the backstory.

"Courabyra means 'pleasant place, family gathering' in local indigenous language," says Cathy. "There used to be a school and 50 little



slab huts here ... fox hunters and such. Our tough-as-nails neighbour Essie lived here her whole life and when we started out, she said, 'You have to call your wine Courabyra or people will forget us'." With this year's harvest spoiled by smoke taint, they'll be relying on their restaurant and cellar door sales for some time to come.

A short drive away is the airy and charmingly eclectic Cafe Nest and Cinema in Tumbarumba (the only cinema in town), with a menu supporting local producers. Owner Laura Fraumeni also hosts a growers and

makers market in the grounds, and there will be plenty of music and food events on the future Nest calendar, too. After a lunch plate laden with delicious regional fare, her chocolate-dipped fresh fig and an excellent double-shot long black fuel my late afternoon drive out to Boggy Creek Shows.

Fourth-generation cattleman Tim O'Brien was sick of always being away from home shearing. "I had some pretty handy horses and dogs, so I thought I'd put a little show together," he says with classic stockman dryness. That was 2003, and now the acclaimed

VIRTUALLY THERE

Travel companies and tour operators are coming up with innovative ways to keep past, present and future customers engaged in their particular corners of the world. Viking Cruises has launched a dedicated "television channel" that seeks to re-create some of the experiences passengers have on its river and ocean cruises. Culture is in abundance, from classical music performances at London's Cadogan Hall and talks by historians on ancient civilisations, to virtual tours of museums and galleries that regularly feature on its itineraries. Lady Fiona Carnarvon is giving a series of tours of her English home, Highclere Castle, better known to most as Downton Abbey. This week T+I spent an enlightening 30 minutes with a curator at Oslo's Munch Museum, delving into the troubled mind of the creator of the iconic Scream paintings. Who knew the expression of horror on the subject's face could be



GETTY IMAGES

interpreted not only as an internal emotion but also as a reaction to "nature" screaming at the tortured figure (perhaps a prescient idea)? Or that the Norwegian artist generally viewed as a dark soul was a generous host who served champagne liberally? Some of the sessions are live-streamed, then

available in catch-up format, with Q&A sessions following. Wellness, cooking and languages are among the other offerings, along with the chance to catch up with crew members.

■ viking.tv
PENNY HUNTER

Oslo's Munch
Museum

BOOK CLUB

Adventurers who transport armchair travellers to exotic and often dangerous climes can usually be assured of a rapt audience. But nobody does the British duffer abroad act as convincingly or amusingly as Redmond O'Hanlon. In 1983 poet James Fenton, aware of O'Hanlon's education in natural history and anthropology, and his propensity to collect strange specimens, suggested they trot off to the Borneo jungle and explore by canoe. Fenton thought his chum would prove useful in identifying rare fauna and flora, but he was more interested in tracking animals that might, or might not, be extinct. The peril was immense, even if

O'Hanlon's account of the expedition often presented the dangers as jolly good fun. They ventured to unsurveyed places and were rewarded with physical exhaustion and utter discomfort. It reads like a Victorian-era account of colonial chaps, all



Nimbo Fork Lodge, left; Braymont Garden, top; Tumut River Brewing Co, above; Courabyra Wines, below left

act plays out in a purpose-built show ring, starring Tim's amazing horsemanship (and too-smart-by-half horses), genius dogs, target whip-cracking, shearing and even a brumby. Wife Jo is also part of the show, and if school's out you might catch trick-riding teenage daughter Harriet.

About a half-hour away, Braymont Garden puts on an impressive show, too. Since August 2013, Chris Brayne has poured passion and backbreaking work into nurturing a vast and diverse garden out of a barren stock paddock in Maragle, even producing finger limes "which you're not supposed to be able to grow here". Her son Adrian's adjoining Obsession Wines vineyard and home were destroyed by the New Year's Day fire, but Braymont miraculously survived. The property began with a "dream of being a nice garden open to the public, but ... now we have weddings, and funerals too". In her spare time, Brayne breeds South African meatmaster sheep, crested Indian runner ducks and ring-necked doves, but her pride and joy is the tree church, with silver birches growing up the steel sides of an open-air chapel with views out to Kosciuszko National Park.

The next morning, Truenorth Helicopters takes me for a stunning look at both the devastation and the beauty of the Snowys. We track over three dams in the hydro-electric scheme — Blowering, Talbingo and Jounama — and the spectacular Chimney Rock in Kosciuszko National Park. (Many of the

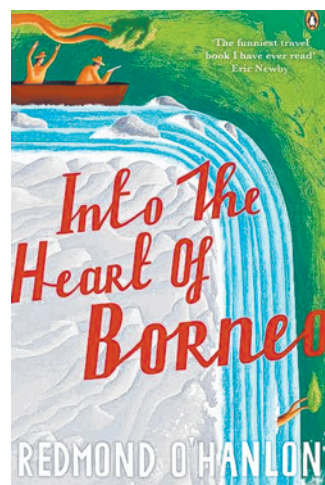
walking tracks had reopened inside the park but coronavirus has seen extensive closures.) Pilot and Truenorth co-owner Jim Ryan points out how the fires travelled, and how close towns came to peril.

The scars are physical and psychological, but after three days touring these communities I feel strangely restored. On the tranquil drive back to Nimbo Fork I stop next to a cow and bobby calf, the youngster feeding hungrily, and take this quiet moment of nurturing as an optimistic symbol of the regeneration of this spectacular region.

Jane Nicholls was a guest of Destination NSW.
■ visitnsw.com

OUR MISSION

In January and February, T+I writers hit the roads around our nation to report on regions and operators most affected by the unprecedented bushfire season. The comeback process for many destinations and small businesses continues amid the COVID-19 crisis. T+I's Project Australia series supports the domestic tourism industry and encourages you to think local when planning future holidays and weekend breaks.



pith helmets and butterfly nets, rather than the escapades of a 36-year-old. Perhaps there's a lot of licence in the telling, in a Boy's Own Annual way, such as Fenton almost being swept to his death in raging rapids. "James's bald head, white and fragile

as an owl's egg, was sweeping round in the whirlpool below, spinning, bobbing up and down in the foaming water, each orbit of the current carrying him within inches of the black rocks at its edge." He was rescued by their local guides while O'Hanlon more or less carried on birdwatching. Five years later he invited Fenton, who had barely recovered from Borneo, to join him up the Orinoco River through Venezuela's Amazon region. In brief, the poet told him he wouldn't even accompany him on a day trip to High Wycombe. Undeterred, O'Hanlon found another sidekick, Simon Stockton, and off they went on a mission that formed the aptly named book, *In Trouble Again*. It's another I would heartily recommend, although with a spoiler alert that Stockton pulled out before the end, perhaps after one too many jungle ticks embedded in his groin.

SUSAN KUROSAWA

FAB FOUR

COLOURFUL CITIES

These places celebrate all things bright and beautiful

LINDY ALEXANDER



JAIPUR, INDIA

The northern Rajasthani city of Jaipur has been known as "the pink city" since the 1870s, when Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh had all the royal and official buildings painted prior to a visit from Prince Edward Albert (later King Edward VII). The locals followed suit and soon the entire city was rose-hued. Overlooking the snake charmers, garland weavers and chai wallahs pouring steaming tea is the breathtaking Hawa Mahal (pictured). The grand, salmon-coloured palace

has intricate white piping and slanting latticework windows designed so the royal women could look upon their subjects without being seen. Just outside the city is the Amber Fort, a red sandstone edifice that was once home to the Rajput Maharajas. You can spend the best part of a day exploring the courtyards, palaces, gardens and halls, but don't miss the Diwan-e-Khas, the Hall of Private Audiences, where tiny mirrors reflect the surrounding grandeur.

■ tourism.rajasthan.gov.in

CHEFCHAOUEN, MOROCCO

Chefchaouen is like an inland sea amid the peaks of the Rif mountains. The city is worth the day's drive from Fes or Marrakech to see the many shades of blue painted on the building exteriors — sky, azure, cobalt, ultramarine, sapphire, lapis, cornflower. No one is sure why the place is awash with such colour. Some believe it began in the 1400s when Jewish people fled there to escape the Reconquista, during which Christians from medieval Spain and Portugal battled to regain land from the Moors. In Jewish teachings the colour represents the sky and reminds people of God, but others have suggested blue tones help to deter mosquitoes. Regardless of the reason, the city provides a taste of traditional Morocco. Narrow alleyways lead



past locals in loose-fitting robes sipping mint tea; men pull hot bread from fiery ovens. And once you step inside the lush gardens of the kasbah in the centre of town, there's a sense of immediate calm.

■ visitmorocco.com



GUANAJUATO, MEXICO

If a rainbow were to splinter into pieces and shower buildings with colour, the result might look like Guanajuato in central Mexico. The university town is a beautiful jumble

of ruby red, lime green, burnished orange, hot pink and electric blue colonial-era buildings. The Basilica of our Lady of Guanajuato (pictured) is perhaps the most striking, with its golden yellow facade and scarlet baroque dome. But colour isn't reserved only for churches and houses. Jardin de la Union, the city's main plaza, is framed by a thick green hedge of Indian laurel trees and purple jacarandas contrasted against the vivid buildings. Pink bougainvillea adorn the walls of Teatro Cervantes, a theatre named after the Spanish author of Don Quixote, Miguel de Cervantes. Every October the town hosts the International Cervantino Festival, a three-week extravaganza celebrating dance, music, art, folklore and theatre, with performers from all over the world.

■ visitmexico.com

ST JOHN'S, NEWFOUNDLAND, CANADA

St John's is the most easterly city in North America, and legend has it the bright dwellings dotting the hilly foreshore were painted so fishermen and sailors could spot their homes in foggy weather. It's a charming city, where colourful clusters of clapboard houses, known as Jellybean Rows, look as if they belong in a children's picture book. There are no particular patterns or approved paints citizens must use, yet most abodes are in hand-some hues that reflect the natural environs — olive green, sky blue, sunny yellow with gleaming white trim. Once the snow starts to fall (around the end of November), the city is



transformed and the houses seem to glow within their white surrounds.

■ destinationstjohns.com