



HUNTER VALLEY DISCOVERY

Christmas Lights Spectacular

1 – 5 DECEMBER 2020

DAY 1: It was 8 am Tuesday, with the usual parking restrictions around Penshurst, so we were collected from the Connelly Street carpark. Just 25 members which allowed our coach seating to be appropriately distanced, though it wasn't compulsory to wear masks. The lovely Sam from McDermott's Chartours was our driver and it was so great to see him again after all this time. He was glad of the few days away also, after spending a great deal of the past months ferrying train passengers around during suburban trackwork. Very repetitive and not exactly his scene.

It was a cloudy day, but the sun would appear later. As expected, it was a long, congested drive until we reached the newly-opened NorthConnex, a nine km tunnel motorway, linking the M2 at West Pennant Hills to the Pacific Hwy at Wahroonga. Fantastic and took slightly less than 10 mins! Before we knew it, we were on the M1, and arrived at Brooklyn a few minutes before the 10 am departure of the Riverboat Postman, a very popular trip on the Hawkesbury. In our original itinerary, we were to cruise the Brisbane Water, departing from Gosford, but there was a problem with that boat. We were more than happy with the Riverboat Postman however - three hours of cruising this pretty waterway, with morning tea as soon as we boarded and a substantial ploughman's lunch.



Next was the Ken Duncan Gallery at Erina Heights. We were ushered into the theatrette for a couple of audio-visual presentations of Ken's famous photos, followed by an afternoon tea in their adjoining café and a wander around their shop with a few purchases being made. Left there around 3.30, heading towards Maitland via Tumbi Umbi – Sam had always been intrigued by the name and today was determined to pay a quick visit. Not sure whether it lived up to his expectations though! It had been a long day and, feeling rather weary, we arrived at the Old Maitland Inn at Rutherford just after 5 pm. This was to be our accommodation for the four nights which allowed unpacking of suitcases and making ourselves really comfortable. Dinner in the motel was at 6.30 pm, celebrating Sandra Cooper's birthday with a free wine and a surprise cake adding to the ample desserts on offer. As we were drifting off to sleep, a severe thunderstorm hit. It had earlier caused havoc in Sydney, but we were more fortunate with smaller hail and no obvious damage to the motel or our coach.



DAY 2: A much cooler, cloudy and showery morning, with a lovely cooked breakfast at 7 am. Leaving the motel at 9 am, we did see one casualty of last night's storm – a massive tree branch had demolished a caravan in the front garden of a house. Starting on Wollombi Road, we headed to the Hunter Valley Gardens via back roads, arriving in Pokolbin 40 minutes later for a two-hour stay in much-improved weather. Serina, from our tour organiser Trade Travel, was there to greet us and to ensure that all was going to plan – which was a nice touch. Sadly, due to COVID-19 restrictions, the tractor train wasn't running which meant that a handful of us, unable to walk the distance, spent the time in their coffee shop. We had been forewarned that the train wouldn't be available, but it was difficult to understand the reasoning, as the Gardens weren't crowded (that would certainly change on our return Friday night) and it would have been easy to abide by any restrictions in this open-sided vehicle. Our visit here was followed by a short drive to the HV Gardens Shopping Village with plenty of time to wander the quaint stores and to purchase lunch.

Brokenwood Winery followed and, after a group photo, we were ushered inside and seated at three of the circular 'pods' within their new and immaculate 1400 sq m cellar door. Established in 1970, Brokenwood Wines has evolved from a weekend venture for self-professed hobby winemakers into one of Australia's most reputable wine labels. Brokenwood was founded by a trio of Sydney-based solicitors, Tony Albert, John Beeston and James Halliday, who paid a then record price of \$970 per acre for a 10-acre block in the foothills of the Brokenback Ranges. The original block was destined to be a cricket ground for the local community, but was instead planted with Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz. These days, the vineyard is entirely planted to Shiraz. We were there about an hour and enjoyed generous servings of several red and white wines, before it was time to head to Kurri Kurri and its famous murals.

On arrival in town, we collected our extremely knowledgeable guide, Graham, who informed us that (due to COVID) we were his first group in almost a year, so he was 'champing at the bit' to show us around his adored home town. He spent well over two hours with us and, even with Sam driving several km around town, it was only possible to view around half of the area's murals, the first painted in 2003 and now totalling 60 (with more to come). We promised Graham that we'd return another time to see the rest! A quick drive back to Rutherford for a 6.30 dinner in our motel.



DAY 3: Showers around and cool. After another early breakfast, we departed at 8.30 for the 30-min drive to Tocal Homestead at Paterson. We'd visited here some years back, but today there was confusion as to where our guide, Phil Naughton, would join us on this large property that is also home to Tocal Agricultural College. In the end, we found Phil at the college, then returned through the paddocks (passing a couple of mildly amused horses) to the homestead. A short talk first, seated outside the home and praying that it didn't rain – it didn't, followed by a stroll around this beautiful property and its wonderful old buildings including a magnificent 1867 barn designed by Edmund Blacket, before touring the house built in the early 1840s. The very informative Phil accompanied us on the coach back to the dining area of the college where he supervised a welcome morning tea.



A pretty drive towards Raymond Terrace, then Williamtown just a few km north of Newcastle. Here at the RAAF Base was Fighter World and a hangar containing a collection of 15 aircraft from WW1 to the modern era. We all know how much boys love their toys, but even the females in our group found this place fascinating, plus there was no shortage of volunteers to answer our questions. A sandwich lunch had been organised in the adjoining Fighter Beans Café, very tasty and plentiful.

Whilst there, we were treated to the sights and sounds of RAAF jets overhead. Every effort was made to capture them in photos, but their lightning speed made this difficult (see speck in the right-hand photo which may or may not have been a F/A-18A/B Hornet that just happened to cease its many years of operation out of Williamtown only a few days later). The base also shares its runways with Newcastle Airport, the 13th busiest in the country, but any commercial aircraft were quiet today.



Returning to Raymond Terrace, a visit had been arranged to the convict-built, timber slab Sketchley Cottage (now Sketchley Pioneer Cottage and Museum). The original home was destroyed by fire in 1857, but William Sketchley (with generous donations from neighbours) converted his barn into the current residence. Here, it was the family home from the late 1850s to 1970. However, in 1977 and having been donated to the Raymond Terrace Historical Society the previous year, this quaint cottage was moved by road from the Doribank Estate to its current site, adjacent to Bettles Park. It was officially opened in August 1979 after much restoration work by members. The separate Museum was built in 1988 and additions were made in 1994. The very pleasant volunteers showed us around the house and museum, but sadly photos were only permitted outside. To compensate, each of us was given a pack of six black and white postcards which were well received.

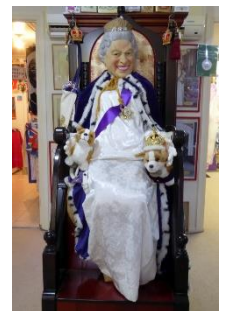


Leaving here in the late afternoon and with heavy peak hour traffic en-route, there was only a short amount of time at Mortels Sheepskin Factory shop at Thornton where a few of us made purchases. The tour was not able to go ahead. Dinner back at the motel was at 7 pm.



DAY 4: Breakfast was again very early, but there was time to relax afterwards with departure at 9.30. It was a beautiful day and it was going to be warm, as we headed back through Maitland for the short journey to the pretty village of Morpeth on the Hunter River. The morning was free to explore the shops and enjoy a morning tea/lunch at our own expense. Our group certainly contributed to Morpeth's economy in that short time, and Sam managed to fill in a couple of hours on the 2.5 km heritage walk of 25 significant sites most of which are centrally located in Swan and High Streets. At 1 pm, we headed back to our motel to pack our bags for the following day's departure, and freshen up for this evening's Christmas dinner and lights at the Hunter Valley Gardens.

Mid-afternoon, we departed for a little place near Cessnock called Nulkaba and Monarchs in the Hunter, arguably Australia's largest private collection of British Royal Memorabilia. Here, to protect the owners, we were required to wear a mask, but first they provided us with an afternoon tea in an outside, undercover area. We were then free to wander inside and what a fabulous collection it was. Jan Hugo's interest was sparked 40 years ago when she was given a 25p commemorative coin marking Prince Charles' engagement to Princess Diana. Every day, they add to more than 10,000 items covering most members of the Royal Family and taking over all the rooms in their home – incredible! Limited photos were permitted, but there's plenty to see on their website as well as an excellent Ch 7 interview from December 2019: <https://7news.com.au/the-morning-show/monarchs-in-the-hunter-is-one-of-the-largest-collections-of-royal-memorabilia-c-599751#>.



Pokolbin and the Gardens were a quick drive away. Christmas dinner was provided on arrival and we were the sole occupants of their Garden Terrace Restaurant, unusual for a Friday night. Sue Moore, one of our members living in Port Macquarie, joined us which was a lovely surprise. It was time, then, to wander through the Gardens, but, because it didn't get dark until at least 8.30, more time allowed here would've been beneficial – something to remember for another occasion. On the other hand, Sam, who was faced with a 45-min drive back to Rutherford and the added worry of animals on the unlit country roads, needed to be considered - fortunately, there wasn't a problem. As we left, it was interesting to note that their enormous carpark was now at capacity and hundreds of people were still entering – all pre-booked. There would've been thousands already inside, many understandably were overly excited children. To anyone considering a visit, it is well worth it, but stay away from weekends if possible.



DAY 5: 7 am breakfast and an 8.30 departure, after giving our suitcases to Sam a little earlier. By 9.30, we'd arrived at Newcastle Museum. Some of the galleries were closed (due to COVID), but we would've spent about an hour here, after staff kindly allowed us into the premises before the usual opening time. Information taken from their website:

Newcastle Museum was originally founded in 1988 as a major Bicentennial project and has been located in the Honeysuckle Railway Workshops since 4 August 2011. The original idea for a Museum in Newcastle was developed by a consortium of interested parties, including the institution of Engineers and Supernova Inc. who worked hard to promote the idea of a regional Museum in the 1980s. The site originally selected by this group was the Honeysuckle Railway Workshops, then still in the hands of the State Rail Authority. Moves to acquire that site failed and a decision was made to acquire and restore the former Castlemaine Brewery in Hunter Street, Newcastle West. The Castlemaine Brewery was home to the former Museum from 1988 until 2008 when it closed to allow for the new Museum in Honeysuckle to be built.

Sam, who had, of necessity, parked some distance away, dashed (sight unseen) back to the coach and miraculously appeared at the Museum's front door to collect us. Such a gem!

The final event on our five-day trip was a three-hour NOVA cruise on Newcastle Harbour which the majority of us hadn't had a chance to do in the past. The M.V. "The Princess" was licensed to carry 216 over the two decks, there were just two smaller groups on board which was not great financially for the cruise company, but very comfortable for us. Along with the Christmas lunch and bonbons, was a single entertainer who put on a great show, despite playing to such a small audience. Newcastle Harbour foreshore was interesting also; the variety of old and new buildings of the city itself, and certainly the port was busy with some massive cargo ships including one, the name of which caught our eye, "Wolverine", a 200 m bulk carrier built in 2015. According to its website, the ship had arrived in Newcastle on 22 November and departed on 5 December which was the day that we happened to see it. Sailing via Singapore and as of 4 January 2021, it was currently in Port Qasim in Pakistan!

It was now 2 pm and time to head home. The raffle was drawn, a thank you to Sam, one of Elizabeth's quizzes plus a comfort stop and, before we knew it, it was 5.15 pm and we'd arrived in Penshurst. A great trip – we'd covered 742 km in those five days and it all ran like clockwork. A big thank you to Trade Travel, to Elizabeth and, of course, to our wonderful driver Sam. After the awful past months, it was a real treat to finally be on the road again!

