



# THE KING OF ALL FESTIVALS

Small towns come alive during their festivals but none come close to the sheer hilarity and fun of the annual Parkes Elvis Festival

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**PARADING ABOUT** (1) A young Elvis, aka Jake Rowley, sorts things out with the California Highway Patrol before the parade. (2) Official festival ambassador 'Alvis' Gersbach. (3) Entering to walk in the street parade is as simple as signing up. (4) The 'unofficial' rugby match plays out in front of campers at Pioneer Oval.



**ELVIS LIVES!**  
Elvis tribute artist  
Pete Storm had  
plenty of fans.

It's mid-January in central NSW and the temperature is on the wrong side of 40 degrees. Fortunately it's also happy hour and some resourceful RV owners are trying to beat the heat through soaking their feet in a paddling pool with a beer in hand. However, there are some local 'lads' who are suiting-up for a game that's not for the faint-hearted and they, too, are sipping cold ones.

Their attire involves long-sleeved, flared-leg white jumpsuits, black wigs, aviator sunnies and copious gold chains. The game they're preparing for is an unsanctioned rugby union match between the Reddy Teddies and the Blue Suede Shoes. There's no question their skin-tight white jumpsuits do a fine job of showing off, often, fuller figures. Some suits are even transparent but, fortunately, underwear has been deemed mandatory. Welcome to the wacky world of the Parkes Elvis Festival, where fun and frivolity are free and anonymity is just a wig away.

You might know Parkes as home to the CSIRO radio telescope featured in the Aussie movie *The Dish* (2000). Ordinarily a service town for the region's crop and livestock industries, in the second week of January it morphs into party central, hosting what is billed as the largest Elvis festival in the southern hemisphere. Twenty-five thousand fans flock from all corners the country and across the globe, exploding the town's usual population of 12,000. It's like "schoolies for grown-ups",

as one fan quips, and the ordinarily quiet town throbs with affable, energising vibes.

You don't have to be a diehard Presley fanatic to enjoy this feel-good festival. You don't even need to don fake sideburns or break out the bobby socks – though you'll have more fun if you do. The King's songs also transcend genres and generations, so it's a family-friendly festival that sees kids of all ages having as much fun dressing up, dancing and singing along as their parents and grandparents.

I confess I'm not much of a fan – I've never seen an Elvis movie, I'd fail at Elvis trivia and I previously thought ETA meant estimated time of arrival (here, of course, it means Elvis tribute artist). But I love to dance and secretly crave slipping on kitten heels and cat eye sunglasses. So I conscript a girlfriend and catch the Elvis Express train from Sydney for a rollicking rock 'n' roll ride to the 25th Parkes Elvis Festival.

Like many good ideas, the festival evolved over a few drinks, following an Elvis-themed birthday party held at the Gracelands Hotel. Although fun from the get-go, it wasn't initially embraced by everyone in town. It's a different story now, with the whole community involved, including enthusiastic volunteers, and it injects a welcome \$13 million at a

traditionally quiet time of year.

It's anything but quiet now, with the voices of ETAs – both local and international – purring, crooning, serenading and resonating around town. Some performances send shivers up the spine, or bring tears to the eyes, but mostly they fire up the urge to rock out! There's dancing in the street, in the park and in the pubs and clubs. One couple even tell me they come just for the dancing.

The headline artists are Pete Storm from the UK, whose career took off following a karaoke session, and Texas-born Jake Rowley, who's the spitting image of a brooding young Presley (though I wish he'd crack a smile occasionally). The line-up of Australasian ETAs, led by John Collins, is equally impressive, each with their own Elvis style. These guys deride the term impersonators; they're not trying to be Presley, but pay tribute to the world's best-selling solo artist in keeping his music alive. Judging by the cheering, whistling and stage-storming fans in Parkes, they do a fantastic job, as does the talented and versatile Elvis in Concert Band from Adelaide.

New Zealand's Brendon Chase ends up winning this year's Parkes Ultimate Elvis Tribute Artist Contest and his prize is going on to the Elvis Presley Enterprises-endorsed world semi-finals in Memphis in August, so it can be a life-changing moment.

The pumping heart of the festival is alcohol-free Cooke Park, in the middle of town, where action plays out on the main stage to a surging backing track of cicadas. Huge misting fans attempt to take the sting out of the heat and I can understand why the fountain is fenced off. People lounge under the trees or take a seat under the shade shelter. The aroma of slow-smoked pork and wood fired pizza waft from the food stalls as I sip an icy mango frappe and watch the jovial crowd ebb and flow.

Fashions range from civvies to full Elvis regalia and even Presley tattoos. Guys of all ages proudly sport bejewelled jumpsuits, like locals 11-year-old Bob McEwan, who dyed his hair for the event, and Al 'Alvis' Gersbach, whose suit, imported from Canada, set him back around \$1000. Al, a grader driver for Parkes Council, has been dressing as Elvis for the last 10 years and is now an official festival ambassador.

Flouncy petticoats swirl under full-skirted dresses, while pencil skirts evoke retro elegance, as worn by Miss Priscilla

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#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We acknowledge that the Wiradjuri people are the traditional custodians of the Parkes region and so pay our respect to their elders, past and present.

#### DON'T MISS

- Busking, shop window displays, and street art along Clarinda Street.
- The Festival Photography Competition Exhibition at the library.
  - The Renewal of Vows ceremony.
  - The Northparkes Mines Street Parade.
  - The King's Castle Elvis Exhibit and Parkes Motor Museum.

#### BEST TIME TO VISIT

The Parkes Elvis Festival is held in the second week of January. The 2018 festival runs from January 10–14 with a '68 Comeback theme. Visit at any time of the year to explore 'The Dish', Henry Parkes Centre, Peak Hill Open Cut Gold Mine and McFeeters Motor Museum. Catch the Tullamore Irish festival at Easter, the Trundle ABBA Festival in May, the Parkes Picnic Races on the June long weekend, AstroFest in July and Trundle Bush Tucker Day in September.

#### FACT FACTS

- Book caravan sites as early as you can (regulars book year-to-year). If you leave it too late, put your name on waiting lists for last minute cancellations. Buses also run from the towns of Peak Hill, Forbes, Cowra and Orange.
- If you don't have space to accommodate non-caravanning friends, get them to sign up for the home hosting program, which finds beds for visitors in local homes at a set price of \$89pp per night.
- Sign up for the festival newsletter at the official festival website to learn when ticketed events go on sale (though there's no shortage of free shows). Get a program and plan your activities so you don't miss personal highlights.

#### MORE INFORMATION

Parkes Elvis Festival – [parkeselvisfestival.com.au](http://parkeselvisfestival.com.au)  
Parkes Visitor Centre – [visitparkes.com.au](http://visitparkes.com.au)

2017, Jackie Batt, and author Tara Moss, who is attending the festival for the second time. Friends and family groups dress alike, many taking inspiration from Elvis' movies. Every effort is appreciated, from the humble and ill-fitting to the seriously sensational. People eagerly snap photos of each other and friendships form. If you're a dress-up-come-lately there are some fabulous shops in town and market stalls in Cooke Park waiting to kit you out. An inexpensive pair of sunglasses is all it takes to get in the groove.

The Northparkes Mines Street Parade is a catwalk of eclectic fashions, including Mayor Ken Keith [pictured on page 81] in his Elvis finery, along with floats, classic cars and motorcycles, vintage caravans, cyclists, pedal cars and walkers. This year's Viva Las Vegas theme sees a dazzling rainbow of sequined, feathered and stilettoed showgirls, plus other casino-inspired costumes. There are troupes of leaping 'Elvii' (which, I learned, is the correct plural term) and dancing Priscillas, and even a cardboard Elvis Express.

Some people spend a whole year designing and preparing co-ordinated costumes, like Bonnie Von Torque, aka Samantha Figgins, from Perth and her mother Sylvia, whose group of 18 family and friends, aged 21 to 75, are staying at Spicer Caravan Park for the fifth year. Their communal site buzzes like the backlot of a movie set, with costumes hanging from van doors, a sewing machine at the ready, and accessories and makeup galore.

As classic car enthusiasts, Sylvia has brought her Oldsmobile and Bonnie her Stingray Corvette, and both participants are full of praise for the event. "It's a big, happy, party festival," says Bonnie. "The van park is so accommodating, and if you don't know everyone in the park, you will by the time you leave!"

Spicer Caravan Park puts on in-park entertainment in the evenings with an ETA, and pizzas or a sausage sizzle for those who don't want to cook or travel back to town. The atmosphere can get "wild and electric", says manager Jody Elliot. "It's great fun."

To accommodate caravans and campers the town extends existing facilities and opens up parks and sports grounds to double its regular 700 powered and unpowered sites. An hourly shuttle connects the caravan parks, homestays and museums with Cooke Park, so there're no worries about drink driving or parking. Catching the shuttle is a hoot, with mutual costume admiration, cheeky conversation and spontaneous singing. If you can't wait an hour, taxis are less than \$10 around town.

I get 'all shook up' trying to fit in as many of the 120 scheduled events as I can,



from concerts and documentary viewings to the joyful Renewal of Vows Ceremony, where 40 couples communally declare their love under a relentless sun.

The festival fosters participation: in the parade, dancing, photography and poetry competitions, and in Elvis and Priscilla look-a-like contests. You can voice your inner Elvis at karaoke or immerse yourself in memorabilia at The King's Castle museum. "You can get total Elvis saturation while you're here," says fan Faye Macnee from Merimbula, who with husband Les is staying at the Showground in their converted bus.

In the unlikely event of Elvis overload there are detox options, like visiting The Dish or Twisted River winery, McFeeters Motor Museum in Forbes or the Open Cut Gold Mine Experience at Peak Hill.

Yet for the cheering fans at the 'unofficial' rugby match, played in front of campers at Pioneer Oval, it appears you can never have too many Elvii, no matter how dishevelled. A 'match' is possibly overstating what resembles an all out rumble, with naked chests, ripped jumpsuits and wigs awry. It's all good fun, ending in a draw and accolades from wives, girlfriends and offspring.

Monday morning feels like a shrivelling party balloon as Elvii leave the building. But back onboard the Elvis Express we eke out the good vibrations all the way back to Sydney. As Elvis would say, "Thank you, Parkes, thank you very much". ACH-RV



**ALL SHOOK UP**  
**(1)** Bonnie Von Torque (showgirl on the far right) and her family and friends in the street parade. **(2)** You can also see classic car and caravan combinations in the parade like this pickup and Sunliner.

