

IN SEARCH OF THE AMAZING

A SCULPTURE TRAIL IN CENTRAL NSW
ADDS ANOTHER DIMENSION TO THIS
RURAL ROAD TRIP



IT STARTED with the letter 'a', which sat alone for three years. As funds grew and farmers and tradespeople volunteered their time and skills, more 2.5-metre steel alphabet characters materialised.

In 2017, to much excitement, seven bright red letters rolled through the Central NSW town of Forbes on the back of a semi-trailer en route to their permanent home among golden grasses and river red gums west of town, the first installation of Sculpture Down the Lachlan (SDL). The art trail follows a 100km section of the Lachlan River, Australia's fourth longest, between Forbes and Condobolin.

Spelling 'amazing', the sculpture became a metaphor for what the community had achieved, and motivation for their ambitious plan of a world-class art trail. The council adopted it as their tourism tagline: Amazing Forbes NSW.

This first piece was designed by local artist Rosie Johnston, who conceived SDL after visiting Bondi's Sculpture by the Sea in 2011. The Forbes Art Society eagerly took up her vision for large-scale artworks immersed in the Aussie landscape to attract tourism, while the council and government grants provided finance.

Following drought, COVID, mouse plague and floods, SDL officially opened in 2024. We're here on an art-themed road trip, adding Parkes to make it a triangular route.

"Forbes is a quintessential country town, but it's got a quirky edge," says tourism manager Nina Hooper at the old shearing shed visitor centre. "The thing I love is in the middle of our very traditional country town we've got a Gillie and Marc statue, which is really cool."

It's definitely cool and some would say controversial. *Pyramid* in Albion Park represents love and acceptance, yet the nudity of Rabbitwoman and Dogmen have garnered letters of complaint. "But it makes you think," says Nina, "And that's what art is supposed to do."

The sculptures, 12 in town and 13 along Lachlan Valley Way, tackle themes of nature, history and culture, and issues like conservation, rural challenges, immigration and Indigenous injustice. Some are humorous, such as bronze mongrel *Leroy* lifting his leg on a street pole and *Rosa* the bronze kelpie waiting for her master outside the post office – both by artist Brett Garling of Dubbo.

Art is vital for rural communities says Coralie Crouch, who teaches pottery from her home studio, with students

WORDS & PHOTOS
BRIAR JENSEN



FROM TOP The eight-tonne 'amazing' installation that gave rise to the sculpture trail; Gillie and Marc's *Pyramid* sculpture became the talk of town in Forbes.

LEFT *Ute of Arms* by Brad Brown and Scott Edwards.

Tears well as I walk among 15 androgynous figures in bronze with varnished timber hearts

travelling from Parkes for lessons. She says it's more difficult for people to find time for hobbies now though, especially working women.

Other Forbes locals hope the town's new art and culture centre being built in the old ambulance station will facilitate more opportunities for art. Civic pride is palpable and smartly painted gold-rush era buildings surround tranquil Victoria Park. We lunch at the Vandenberg Hotel where Henry Parkes, known as the Father of Federation, addressed 2000 people from the balcony in 1887.

Lake Forbes, an annexed oxbow of the Lachlan River, curves through town and is edged with parklands, playgrounds and a free camping area. We walk sections of the 10km lake track, taking in the Wiradjuri Dreaming Story Poles that give insight into local First Nations culture. There's plenty of colonial history at the museum and the cemetery where bushranger Ben Hall is buried.

Hot wind blows dry seed heads across the road like tumbleweeds as we head to Top Paddock Silo Stay. Kylie and Adrian Matthews are owners of the cattle farm beneath Mount Tallabung and have joined two old wheat silos with an open plan kitchen and dining room. Here we pour ourselves a wine, sit at the honeyed timber table and watch the sunset over the paddocks before heating up our pre-ordered beef bourguignon.

In the morning, peacocks strut across the lawn and resident labrador, Ted, begs a pat. We head out on a farm tour with Kylie, back from teaching Pilates in town, and learn she farms regeneratively and has planted over 4000 tree seedlings. As we give Braveheart (the 550kg hand-

raised steer) a scratch, a stud bull demonstrates his worth with the ladies.

We head back towards Forbes to Gum Swamp Wildlife Refuge, a wetland haven where bird hides overlook drowned river red gums, their bleached limbs perfect perches for waterfowl. This is the start of the Lachlan Valley Way section of SDL, with artworks every 10km along the Travelling Stock Reserve, a corridor of crown land used for droving cattle and sheep during drought.

Wide-open spaces see sculptures scale new heights. A dinosaur-sized filigree steel goanna, *Varanus*, pauses between gum trees, tongue probing the air; a kangaroo with a cricket bat reverses perspectives in *Road Kill*; the stainless-steel chain *Bird in Hand* channels environmental responsibility; and life-size leaping bronze brumbies embody Aussie spirit.

The standout in scale and placement is a noble First Nations hunter looking pensively over his shoulder. Magnificent from a distance, the six-metre-high steel figure is captivating up close. Artist Damian Vick says it's the most powerful and important sculpture of his career to date.

Tears well as I walk among 15 androgynous figures in bronze with varnished timber hearts. *Between the Silence and the Heartbeat* is Adelaide artist Clancy Warner's moving representation of indifference to First Nations deaths within white society.

Condobolin, or Condo as it's known locally, marks the end of SDL and lightens the mood with Utes in the Paddock. I've longed to see this quirky Aussie collection since reading about it in *Open Road* in 2009 when it was at Burrawang West Station near Ootha. It now resides in a paddock behind Condo's flash new visitor centre and café.

Utes in the Paddock sprang to life after station owners Graham and Jana Pickles visited Cadillac Ranch in the US. They replicated the concept using old Holden utes painted by outback artists as an antidote to extended drought. I catch up with one of the original artists, Condo local Karen Tooth. She recently published a colouring book on the

installation's back story, full of intriguing titbits about the artists, like Midnight Oil musician Jim Moginie, Mental as Anything original bass player Steve Coburn and Archibald prize winner Adam Cullen.

"I'd never painted something so big before," says Karen about her ute piece. "It was exciting to be involved with some really well-known artists. They were good mentors, encouraging and inclusive."

When the Pickles sold Burrawang West Station they offered the utes to Lachlan Shire, hence their new location. Karen's creation, *Dame Edna's Looute*, features Dame Edna in an outdoor dunny and is a favourite.

Lightning Ridge artist John Murray, who painted the first ute in 2008, recently collaborated with local First Nations

FROM TOP Damian Vick's majestic *Heart of Country* sculpture depicting an Indigenous hunter in Corten steel; Kylie Matthews from Top Paddock Silo Stay.



MORE INFORMATION

Sculpture Down the Lachlan
sculpturedownthelachlan.com

Utes in the Paddock visitlachlanshire.com.au
Top Paddock Silo Stay toppaddocksilostay.com.au
Condobolin RSL Club condobolinrsl.com.au
The Buchanan 1894 thebuchanan1894.com.au



FROM LEFT Glen Star's *Varanus* at Gum Swamp Wildlife Refuge celebrates the significance of goannas to the Wiradjuri people; *Bird in Hand* is a reminder from artist Michael Van Dam for us to protect the environment and its creatures.

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Views of the Lachlan Valley from Mount Tilga; the heritage-listed post office building in Forbes; kitchen and dining bliss at Top Paddock Silo Stay; Lake Forbes.



It's a bit of a climb but the vista over the Lachlan Valley is a 360-degree diorama of landscape art

artist Bev Coe on a new ute for inside the visitor centre. We see more of Bev's work, including large-scale weaving, on a walk through the Wiradjuri Study Centre, a hub for cultural appreciation, learning and development.

A gallery space features work by other local First Nations artists backdropped with a mural by Darren Cooper. Timber doors and conference tables with intricately carved crocodiles are practical works of art within the circular compressed-earth building.

The Lachlan River edges town, but manmade Gum Bend Lake is 3km west and the spot for activities from boating to bird watching. Free camping, a children's playground and walking track make it popular with families.

We score the newest accommodation in town at Condobolin RSL Club, where they're still building the motel room steps as we arrive. After a drink at the RSL it's an easy walk to the Railway Hotel for dinner and Café Romo for breakfast.

Before heading to Parkes, we detour 10km north of town to Mount Tilga, once claimed to be the geographical centre of NSW. It's a bit of a climb but the vista over the Lachlan Valley is a 360-degree diorama of landscape art.

We end our trip with an elegant and luxurious stay at The Buchanan 1894, a two-storey Victorian mansion from Parkes' gold rush days. Current owners Steve Lindsay and Dave Johnstone bought the property in 2023 and spent 12 months restoring it. Divided into private suites with communal access to the grand staircase leading to the library and balcony, it feels sumptuously aristocratic, minus servants, and is filled with art and antiques.

We've visited Parkes before for the joyful and jocular Elvis Festival, but apart from a visit to CSIRO's Observatory, also known as The Dish after the Aussie movie of the same name, we haven't explored much of town. We now start at the Henry Parkes Centre, a hub of history and culture with museums, Elvis exhibits, and a Gates of Graceland replica. At the Wiradjuri Amphitheatre, we walk Garradyang Garden, which features silhouetted steel native animals peeping out between plants commonly used by the Wiradjuri people.

More public art is planned beside the boardwalks of new wetlands currently under construction on the edge of town. Water birds have already moved in, well before installation of the planned viewing hides.

The public art trail around town makes a leisurely stroll from the Buchanan. There's a statue of Henry Parkes and Elvis (of course), along with colourful murals by local artist Jac Clark. But it's a coiffed and jump-suited Emu Elvis mural by John Murray that makes me smile.

Parkes, Forbes and Condobolin might be small places in Central NSW but they're 'amazingly' big on art. **OR**