

Early morning light bathes the Hebel Hotel, a classic outback Aussie pub complete with a traditional hitching rail and a reputed connection to members of the Kelly Gang.

THE GREAT INLAND WAY

Take your foot off the accelerator and explore outback Queensland on one of Australia's great road trips.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MANDY MCKEESICK

AUSTRALIANS LOVE A ROAD TRIP,

and with international travel plans shelved for the foreseeable future, we're taking the opportunity to explore our own backyard. Tropical north Queensland will attract many, and the shortest road route there from major southern cities is along the Great Inland Way, from Orange in New South Wales to Cooktown. But rather than putting the foot down for the entire 2595km, the middle section – the 750km from Hebel on the border to Emerald in central Queensland – provides the perfect opportunity to slow down, stay a while somewhere, and get off the beaten track.

There is something for everyone on this section: the romance of expansive cattle stations with their attendant rodeo-riding, horse-loving lead characters; some of Australia's best inland fishing, and plenty of paddling places to drop in a canoe; a secluded retreat where you can have your body pampered and soul revived; stunning ranges surrounding the world-famous Carnarvon Gorge; and classic outback pubs. You'll discover all sides of the cotton story and find remote wineries and freshly brewed coffee in the least-expected corners.

The Great Inland Way is entirely sealed, but dirt-road side-trips entice the adventurous along historic Cobb & Co. routes and tempt with the lure of precious gems. No matter what time of year you travel, there will be festivals, fishing competitions, traditional country shows and a plethora of horse events.

So let's start exploring.

ALONG THE BALONNE

With a road trip as hefty as the Great Inland Way, you may choose – although it would mean missing the delights of places such as Dubbo and Lightning Ridge – to knock off the first 550km through northern NSW in one go, by which time you'd be ready for a beer. Luckily Hebel, roughly 4km past the border into Queensland, can oblige. The Hebel Hotel, with its rickety hitching rail and colourful murals by legendary outback artist John Murray, has long been a welcome stop for travellers including, if rumour is believed, members of the Kelly Gang. According to official history, Dan Kelly and Steve Hart were killed at the Glenrowan siege when bushranger Ned was captured. But another story goes that they fled to the relative obscurity of Hebel. Stranger things have happened.

The only commercial buildings in this hamlet with a population of about 70 are the General Store and the Hebel Hotel, which is managed by Kim York and Merv Pullen. They first came to Hebel last year when COVID strangled tourism and the police and army were present at the state border crossing. Now, at the start of this year's tourist season, Kim and Merv have returned and are flat out.

"Hebel's like home," Merv says. "I've made more friends here in one and a half years than I have in my previous 54 and it's been good coming back. I know the area, I know the people and I know how this old building runs. It's the quintessential Queensland pub."

Hebel is on the Lower Balonne River Floodplain with the Bokhara River on its doorstep. From here it's possible to follow



Customers enjoy a beer and a yarn on the verandah of the Hebel Hotel. The pub opened in 1894 as a Cobb & Co. changing station before later operating as a hotel. It was originally known as the Commercial Hotel.



Hebel Hotel managers Merv Pullen and Kim York (above) are enjoying brisk trade this year after the restrictions and challenges brought on by COVID early last year. Nikki and Scott Puller (below) escort guests on a guided tour of the vast cotton-growing property Cubbie Station near Dirranbandi in QLD.

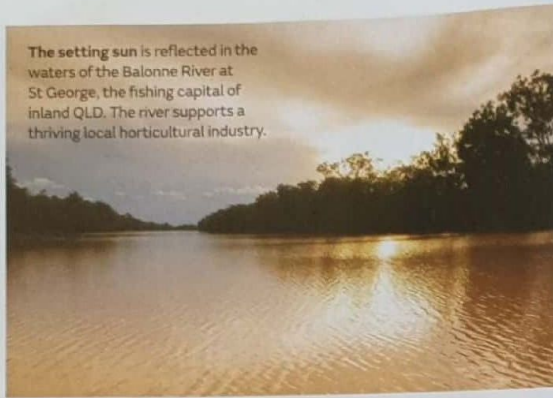


the braided river system of the Upper Murray River Catchment north for another 270km. Along the way you'll find the town of Dirranbandi (population about 600), a 40-minute drive from Hebel. Dirran, as it's affectionately known, is home to Cubbie Station, the Southern Hemisphere's largest irrigation property: 93,000ha, plus 22,000ha of irrigated cropping fields. This vast producer of cotton, which receives flak elsewhere about its water use, is appreciated by the locals.

"Cubbie looks after Dirran really well. They source goods in town where they can and have a preference for employing locals," says Nikki Puller, who runs the town's only caravan park with her husband, Scott. "During the drought we got sick of people asking where Cubbie was hiding all the water so we worked with the company to develop guided tours," she says. Now several times a week Nikki and Scott pile interested tourists into their minibus for a close-up view of this agricultural behemoth.

Until this year, Dirran could have been considered a drought epicentre, but much-prayed-for rains have made the "land of the croaking frogs" come alive again, as paddocks turned an almost-forgotten green and anglers danced in excitement.

Dirran is one of those well-kept fishing secrets, with free camping on the Balonne Minor River and a popular Easter weekend fishing competition and Carp Muster drawing crowds from across the region.



The setting sun is reflected in the waters of the Balonne River at St George, the fishing capital of inland QLD. The river supports a thriving local horticultural industry.

▼ The most westerly QLD winery, Riversands Wines in St George, run by David (pictured) and Alison Blacket, is a popular stop with grey nomads and other tourists.



There's a free campsite on the banks of the Balonne at Fishermans Park, Surat, (above), offering drinking water, toilets and a dump point. One of several secret camping spots on the Balonne Minor River at Dirranbandi (right).



Following the water upstream brings you to St George (population 3000) on the Balonne River, where weirs and dams enable a thriving horticultural hub. Among the carrots, garlic, blueberries, onions and ubiquitous cotton lies one of Queensland's three main tablegrape-growing areas. It is also home to the state's most western winery, Riversands, run by David and Alison Blacket. With a garden oasis, cafe and wine tasting, this is a popular stop on the tourist run.

"Grey nomads are our bread and butter," David says. "We produce red and white wine and sparklings, but fortifieds are our flagship." Indeed, it is one particular fortified, with the memorable name of F^{ing} Good Port, which brings in the business. "It's our biggest seller by far," David says. With an eye for diversity, he runs winery, heritage and horticultural tours, working in collaboration with local producers to showcase the region.

The afternoon is well spent on the water after a lazy lunch and wine tasting at Riversands, and Brett Schweikert of Sandytown River Cruises is the bloke to see about that. He'll take you along a 6km stretch of the river, past grand houses owned by cotton dynasties, and point out anything from whistling kites overhead to the best fishing spots for Murray cod and yellowbelly.

Brett has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the town's history and natural environment. He grew up in St George, swimming in and skiing on the Balonne, with nights spent around campfires. "Give me the river any day," he says. "It's a great backyard."

My journey along the Balonne next brings me to Surat (population 400), where there's popular free riverbank camping at Fishermans Park and plenty of fish waiting to jump on your line. Want to identify those fish? A 25,000L freshwater aquarium is alongside the Cobb & Co. Changing Station Museum. "In August 1924 the last Cobb & Co. coach in Australia left from Surat to Yuleba," Maranoa regional councillor Johanne Hancock says, explaining the historical connection to the town.

The complex offers a detailed insight to Cobb & Co. with a museum of permanent and temporary exhibitions and the showpiece working replica coach, named *Tommy Thompson* after one of the last coach drivers.

"Even though there is a romantic element to the Cobb & Co. story, I reckon it would have been a very hard journey," Johanne says, "and although you can take a trip back in time at Surat, you will also experience true modern country hospitality."



Daraki Weatherall with a carp caught in the Dirranbandi fishing competition.



The TopX crew in action auctioning cattle at the Roma Saleyards. Livestock from as far away as SA is brought here for trading.

"THE ROMA SALEYARDS ARE THE MARKET INDICATOR FOR ALL CATTLE MARKETS ACROSS AUSTRALIA."

CATTLE AND COWBOYS

The major rivers are left behind in Surat as the drive north enters fair-dinkum cattle country, and in Roma you can visit the largest cattle trading hub in Australia. Cyril Close is one of those fabled cattlemen you might be imagining. He's worked on stations across Queensland, ridden the bulls and broncs in rodeos and is now co-owner of stock and station agency TopX. "The Roma Saleyards are the market indicator for all cattle markets across Australia, drawing cattle from as far away as South Australia and Northern Territory," he says, between selling steers to his big-hatted, boot-wearing, jeans-clad audience.

Visitors, identified by their more urban attire, can wander through the newly opened Interpretive Centre at any time or, on Tuesdays, can join an organised tour of the sales. "Tours are a good thing because they showcase our industry," Cyril says. "I'll have people pull up to talk and they are just gobsmacked by our way of life, but this is just what we do."

Roma's other big drawcard is natural gas, which was first found here in 1900. Not far past the saleyards you'll find The Big Rig, where Australia's oil-and-gas history comes alive. Self-guided tours are available, and most evenings the Night Show Sunset Experience (with some of that famous Riversands port) offers a sound-and-light exposé of the drama involved in developing today's multimillion-dollar industry.

Roma has a population of almost 7000 and is a good place to stock up before again hitting the road for the hour-long drive northwards, often behind semitrailers carting gargantuan gas-field equipment, to the small town of Injune (population 450).

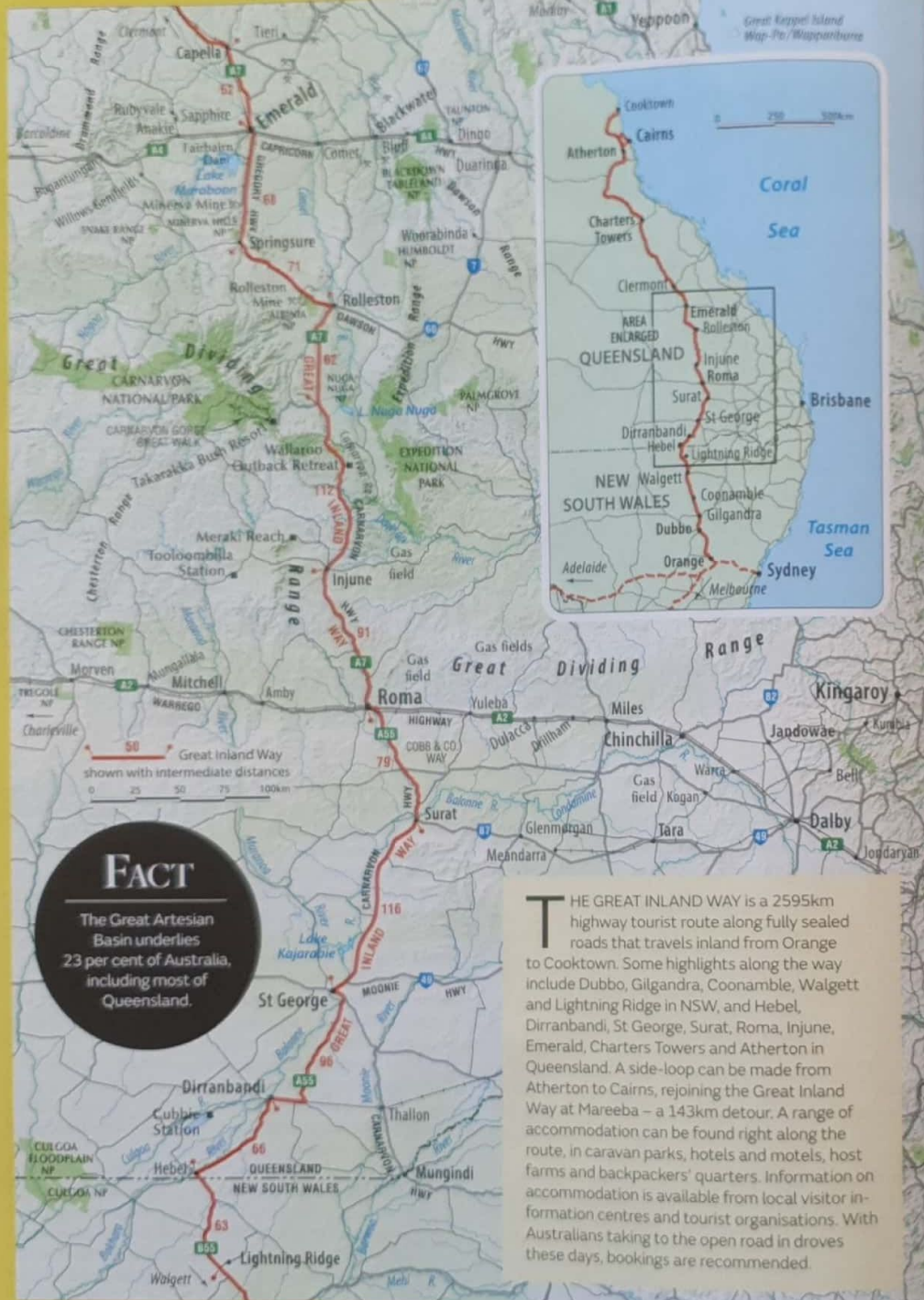
The people of Injune are horse and cow mad and you're likely to have rocked up just as the races, gymkhana, cutting event or rodeo is on. If not on in Injune then there's likely to be a similar event at Tooloombilla Station, about 45 minutes west through the Great Dividing Range.

If you're especially lucky, you'll hit town a couple of days before the campdraft and witness big mobs of cattle coming off the rangeland stations, being walked to town with a ring of stockriders in attendance.

On one organic rangeland station you'll find Meraki Reach, a place to soothe the body, mind and soul where Ellie Jackson is your host. "Meraki has a little bit of everything," she says. "We're a wellness retreat and a hideaway. We've got accommodation and a kitchen, a sauna and yoga swings. I can help you relax with a massage and nourish your body with fresh organic food."

"We host drum-making workshops and group sound healing, but if all you want to do is sit in the spa with a wine and watch the sunset, then that's fine as well." Among the crystal singing bowls and cushion-lined tips, you will find "Ellie's Range" hand-made cosmetics, but her goat's milk soaps are so popular you'll have to shoulder the locals aside to get some.

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FACT

The Great Artesian Basin underlies 23 per cent of Australia, including most of Queensland.

THE GREAT INLAND WAY is a 2595km highway tourist route along fully sealed roads that travels inland from Orange to Cooktown. Some highlights along the way include Dubbo, Gilgandra, Coonamble, Walgett and Lightning Ridge in NSW, and Hebel, Dirranbandi, St George, Surat, Roma, Injune, Emerald, Charters Towers and Atherton in Queensland. A side-loop can be made from Atherton to Cairns, rejoining the Great Inland Way at Mareeba – a 143km detour. A range of accommodation can be found right along the route, in caravan parks, hotels and motels, host farms and backpackers' quarters. Information on accommodation is available from local visitor information centres and tourist organisations. With Australians taking to the open road in droves these days, bookings are recommended.

THE GREAT INLAND WAY



Easter in the country.

TIMING YOUR TRIP

As with any travel to inland Australia the best time of the year is March–October and this ensures you'll find a special event on each month (and the coffee cart will be open in Rolleston!).

This list is a guide only; dates are subject to change because of COVID restrictions. Check local visitor centres for confirmation.

- **March:** Road to Roma Country Music Festival; Toowoomba Rodeo and Campdraft (near Injune); St Patrick's Day Races (Springsure)
- **April (Easter):** Easter in the Vines (St George); Easter in the Country (Roma); Central Highlands Easter Sunflower Festival (Emerald)
- **May:** Springsure Mountain Challenge (cross-country running); St George Show; Roma Show
- **June:** Ag-Grow Emerald field days; Dirranbandi Fishing Competition; Injune Races
- **July:** Cotton Cup at St George Races; St George Yellowbelly Country Music and Poets Festival
- **August:** Gemfest on the Gemfields (Anakie); Cobb & Co. Festival (Surat – plan now for the next festival, which will be the 100-year anniversary in 2024)
- **September:** Surat Diggers' Race Day
- **October:** Injune Rodeo



Injune rodeo.



The working replica coach at Surat's Cobb & Co. Changing Station.

THE COBB & CO. WAY – SURAT TO YULEBA

A RECOMMENDED side-trip is the 76km Cobb & Co. Way from Surat to Yuleba, following the route of Australia's last horse-drawn stagecoach service. The delivery of passengers and mail along this route by coach was about an 11-hour trip with four changing stations along the way to swap tired horses. For creek crossings and boggy areas, saplings were cut and placed in the path of the coach to create a 'corduroy road', no doubt providing a thumping ride. Today the Cobb & Co. Way

is an easy drive along bitumen and well-maintained dirt roads with numerous signs indicating places of interest. Find flowering waterlilies on hidden lagoons, hear tales of highwaymen who became cattleduffers and rediscover the Berangee ghost. Halfway between Yuleba and Surat, camp for free at The Maryanne, a delightful spot with a small lake for canoeists, and agate and petrified wood for the rock hounds. It's a 60km drive west along the Warrego Highway to rejoin the Great Inland Way at Roma.

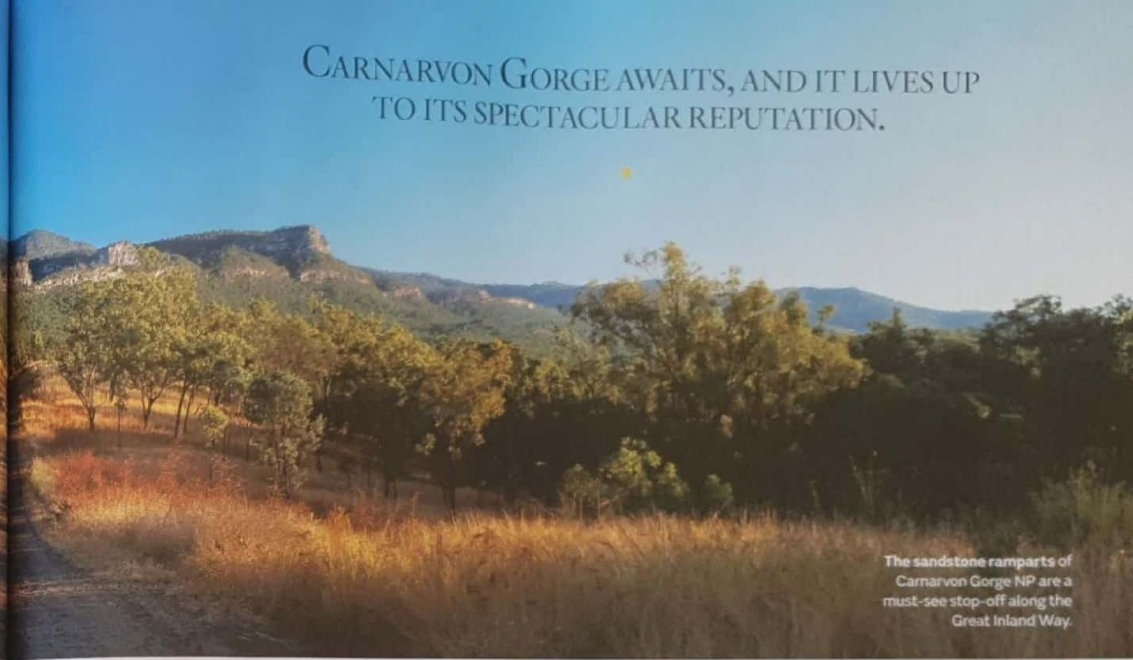


THE GEMFIELDS – EMERALD TO RUBYVALE

BEFORE LEAVING Emerald, a recommended side-trip takes you 60km to the west, where you could strike it rich at the Sapphire Gemfields. You may think of sapphires as brilliant blue hues, and you'd be right, but they also come in a range of other colours, from golden yellows to marine greens and sunset pink-oranges. There are even 'partis', which are a combination of two or three colours. Fossicking needs a licence, but offers the chance to find a rainbow. Last year one couple, on their first

day of fossicking, found a 25-carat golden yellow sapphire on the surface. Taking it to the Brown family's Rubyvale Gem Gallery for cutting, they walked away with a beautifully faceted gem. Those not wanting to get a fossicking licence can visit Pats Gems and have a coffee while washing and sieving for sapphires in her backyard complex. Pat has been mining for sapphires for most of the 47 years she's been in the area. "Once you've found your first sapphire, you're hooked," she says with a grin. "We call it gem fever."

CARNARVON GORGE AWAITS, AND IT LIVES UP TO ITS SPECTACULAR REPUTATION.



The sandstone ramparts of Carnarvon Gorge NP are a must-see stop-off along the Great Inland Way.

Back in Injune you'll meet some of the friendliest locals on the whole trip volunteering at the visitor centre seven days a week. The pine-clad centre, reflecting the town's cypress forestry industry, has a diverse collection of handmade goodies, a plethora of local information and a newly installed virtual reality experience. The volunteers love sharing stories of their area and will let you know which horse sport is on the weekend you're in town, and then point you in the direction of the region's prize jewel – Carnarvon Gorge.

GORGEOUS

Winding along the Great Inland Way as it enters the Carnarvon Range, it's hard to imagine prettier country. Ancient cycads and eucalypts line the road as it dips and winds between the hills and mountains, following a creek here or an open grassy woodland there, guarded all the while by stark sandstone cliffs. Through some of the steepest sections the roads are unfenced and cattle graze right up to and onto the bitumen. Be careful driving between sundown and sun-up – black cattle on a black road at night can be hard to see.

Side-trips can be made to the Arcadia Valley, renowned as some of the best cattle country in Australia, and Lake Nuga Nuga, an ideal spot to drop the canoe and connect with the birdlife. Nuga is particularly stunning when the water lilies are flowering, forming a purple carpet across the lake's surface.

Back on the Great Inland Way you could make an overnight stop in the glamping tents of Wallaroo Outback Retreat, a 30,000ha working cattle station set among the wild ranges. What sets Wallaroo apart is its collaboration with the ecologists of Boobook Ecotours, and a visit here is not complete without a tour with Boobook's expert guides, who will give you an insight into not only the flora and fauna of the area, but also the Indigenous heritage.

▼ The ethereal beauty of the Amphitheatre is accessed via a steep ladder and a cleft in the vertical white sandstone cliffs.



But Carnarvon Gorge awaits, and it lives up to its spectacular reputation. Those feeling fit can walk the 9.7km along Carnarvon Creek to camp at Big Bend before continuing on the 87km Great Walk circuit. Those not quite as adventurous can spend several days walking the easier tracks, exploring exquisite Indigenous rock-art galleries, fern-clad grottoes and the ethereal majesty of the Amphitheatre, a cavernous hideaway accessed by a ladder and a cleft in the vertical white sandstone cliffs.

There are several accommodation options just outside the national park, each offering its own unique flavour. Sandstone Park is set high on a ridge; dogs and campfires are allowed and the views circle for 360 degrees.

Takaraka Bush Resort on Carnarvon Creek has everything from unpowered campsites to cabins – and platypus in the creek's clear waters. Carnarvon Gorge Wilderness Lodge, recently reopened after fire damage in 2018, is closest to the gorge and has 28 luxury safari cabins and an onsite restaurant. The biggest accommodation tip for Carnarvon Gorge is book early.

HEADING NORTH

On your last day at Carnarvon Gorge it's recommended you climb up a series of ladders and 300 steps in the dark to witness sunrise at Boolimba Bluff. Then it's back on the road and by mid-morning you're going to need a coffee. If that's the case, don't bypass Rolleston (population 120), a 1.5km diversion off the Great Inland Way, just past the Springsure turn-off. Here a barista-trained local volunteer serves a brew from a mosaic-adorned cart in a small park. The coffee cart is the brainchild of local grazier Bloss Hickson. "Bloss saw Rolleston looking pretty tired and ordinary with no reason for anyone to stop. She could see the town disappearing and didn't want that to happen," Rolleston's ex-pubican Kay Becker relates. "So we started the coffee cart with assistance from the council and now we can't stop. It's just gone gangbusters."

Money raised from this community venture was initially used to rejuvenate the park and the historic buildings within it. "We paid for the cart and then we bought outdoor furniture, put down turf in the park, re-stumped the old post office and gave it a new verandah and steps," Kay says. Now the volunteers are reaching out to fund other community organisations: the perfect small-town success story.

It's another 71km along the Great Inland Way to Springsure (population 1000), driving past cropping country and turn-offs to coalmines. Springsure, sitting snugly surrounded by the volcanic peaks and ranges of Minerva Hills, is perhaps the most scenic

town on the route, and a must-see stop-off for those who chase the setting and rising of the sun. The Minerva Hills National Park shadows the town and a hairy bit of road ascends to the cliff tops. Leave the caravan behind and familiarise yourself with the area during the day – then you'll know what you're in for when you drive up to Eclipse Gap Lookout the next morning in the dark to take in another spectacular sunrise.

Head further north and another small diversion off the main route will bring you to Fairbairn Dam. This is the perfect place to launch a boat, catch a feed of fish and relax before crossing the dam wall and arriving in the largest town on this part of the Great Inland Way – Emerald. With a population of 14,000, it has all the amenities you'd expect from a large regional centre.

Kerri and Wayne Deakin opened the Emerald Central Palms Motel in 2007 and have created a welcoming haven for visitors. "It's a home away from home, and as you can see, they keep coming in," Kerri says. "We keep things simple but we're open 24 hours and I'll take phone calls all night. I believe we should look after all our visitors, and if I can't fit them in, I'll ring around till I can find them a bed." Kerri is a one-woman walking advertisement for Emerald. "The three top things to do are: go to the visitor centre with the giant sunflower [a 25m-high easel in the likeness of Vincent Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*], then the heritage-listed train station and our beautiful botanic gardens," she says.

If Kerri lets you leave, there's still another 1000km before you hit the Atherton Tableland. Having slowed down by now and got into the swing of this road trip, it would be a shame to miss the rest: Capella's Pioneer Village; Theresa Creek Dam near Clermont; the isolated Belyando Crossing roadhouse; the gold town of Charters Towers; Undara Lava Tubes; and a wondrous soak in the waters of Innot Hot Springs. But those are tales for another day.

PHOTO CREDIT ABOVE: COURTESY TOURISM AND EVENTS QUEENSLAND