

# On the high road

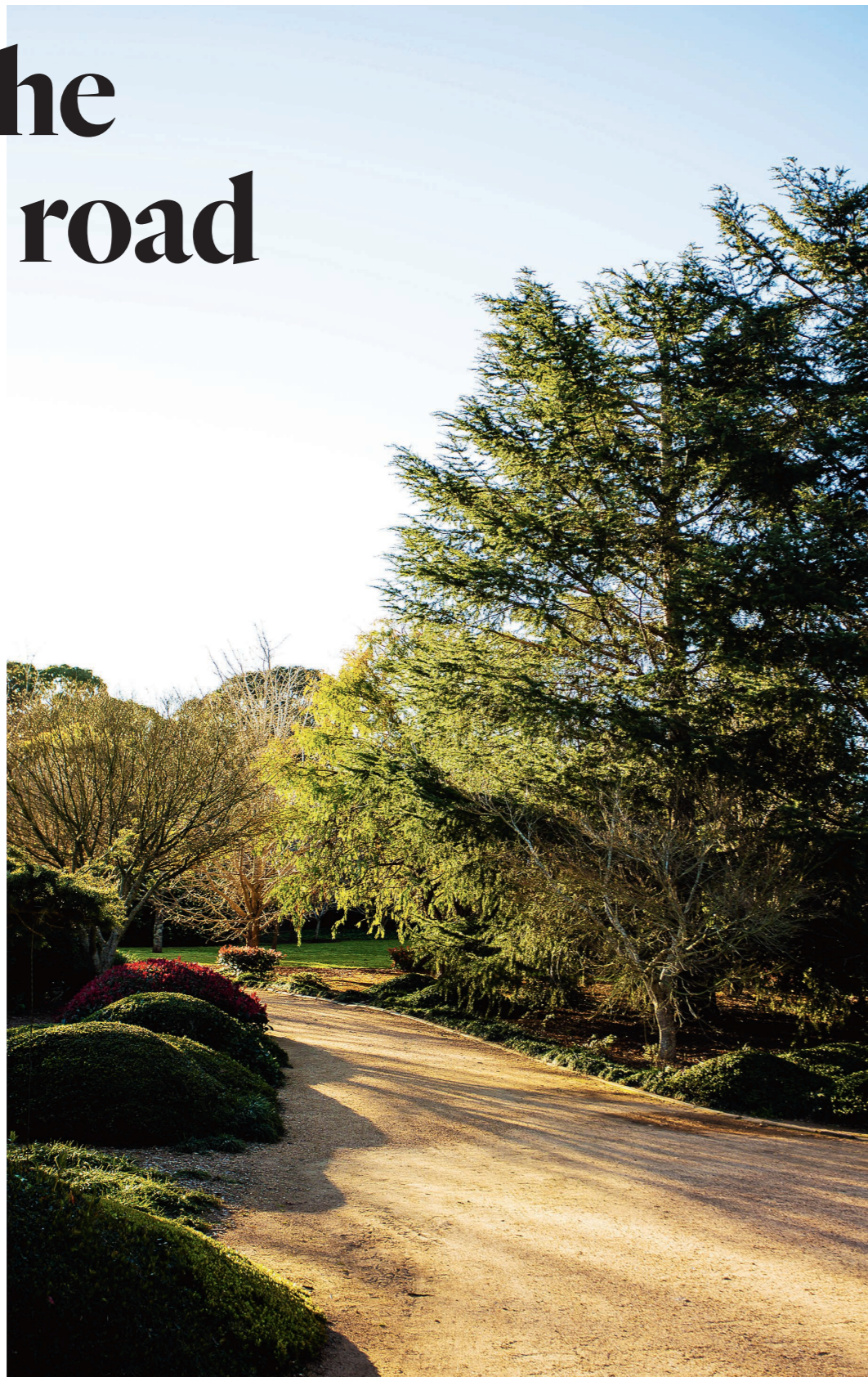
With its cool vibe and manicured urban streetscapes, Queensland's Garden City has a new edge. And if you want to get your boots dirty, head to the outskirts, writes **Simon Webster**.

Photography by Kara Rosenlund.

ONE  
PERFECT  
WEEKEND

TOOWOOMBA

Queensland



AUSTRALIA'S BIGGEST regional inland city is getting a bit hip in its old age. A food-and-arts scene has sprung up to complement the aroma of flowers and the sense of history that permeate Toowoomba's fresh mountain air. Business visitors flying into the airport, Brisbane West Wellcamp (Australia's newest passenger airport), might want to think twice before flying out straight after their meeting. Stick around for a couple of days and let the Garden City grow on you.

## Day 1 AM

You're on top of the Great Dividing Range in Toowoomba so you'd be mad not to check out the views. Start your weekend by taking the short drive up to Picnic Point and feast your eyes on the Lockyer Valley and Table Top Mountain.

The Picnic Point Cafe and Restaurant ([picnic-point.com.au](http://picnic-point.com.au)) offers superb breakfasts (try the wholemeal buttermilk pancakes with bacon and maple syrup or grilled chipolatas with scrambled eggs and herb-crusted tomato) in a stylish space with big windows that make the most of the vantage point. You may be lucky enough to be there on a clear day but a Toowoomba fog can be just as dramatic.

Down the hill, the Cobb+Co Museum ([cobbandco.qm.qld.gov.au](http://cobbandco.qm.qld.gov.au)), part of the Queensland Museum, is home to the National Carriage Collection. It has sulkies, buggies and other horse-drawn vehicles that were once the main form of transport around these and most other parts.

Now you've got a taste for history, head back in time. The Warrego Highway will take you all the way to outback Charleville if you let it so pay attention and make sure you turn off about half an hour out of Toowoomba,



at Jondaryan. Back in the 19th century, Jondaryan Station, covering 121,000 hectares, helped put Australia on the sheep's back. Today, a walk around the heritage-listed Woolshed at Jondaryan ([jondaryanwoolshed.com.au](http://jondaryanwoolshed.com.au)) gives an insight into how folks used to live out here on what was a remote Darling Downs station. You might even get to ride in a wagon.

Jackie Howe Festival of the Golden Shears (September 2-4) is the year's main event and features shearing competitions, sheepdog trials, live music, tours and feasts.

Ju Raku En Japanese garden at the University of Southern Queensland (opposite); Toowoomba's city centre (top); First Coat festival artist Lisa King's mural on Bowen Street

## Day 1 PM

Back in town, the rest of the afternoon offers the chance to explore Toowoomba's urban side. First Coat ([firstcoat.com.au](http://firstcoat.com.au)) is an annual street-art event in which artists are invited to paint murals on Toowoomba's walls, alongside a program of pop-up bars, live music and workshops. Next year's First Coat will be the fourth and is scheduled to be held on May 19 to 21 but you can check out murals from previous years at any time.

Download the First Coat app and explore the city on foot while taking in the street art along the way. With 80-plus murals, including a powerful one of an Aboriginal child's face by Melbourne artist Adnate (49 Neil Street) and a very cool elephant by Brisbane's Fintan Magee (488 Ruthven Street), you could spend an hour or an entire weekend doing this.

If caffeine is required, this traditionally conservative town has developed a hipster edge in recent years and some funky little coffee shops are tucked away among the pretty tree-lined streets and heritage buildings. Try Ground Up Espresso Bar (501 Ruthven Street), Crazy Goat Espresso (490 Ruthven Street) or Bunker Records (229 Margaret Street), where you can browse vinyl while you sip.

For more art before dinner, the Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery ([tr.qld.gov.au](http://tr.qld.gov.au)) has a permanent collection from the 16th to the 20th centuries as well as a varied exhibition program.



### Overnight

The day has been about the old and the new Toowoomba and your accommodation combines the two. Behind stained-glass windows in the city centre is the lobby of Quest Toowoomba ([questapartments.com.au](http://questapartments.com.au)), which seamlessly blends a beautifully restored old brick church with a new six-storey apartment block out the back. It's sleek, stylish, comfortable accommodation, offering everything from studios to three-bedroom apartments – plus a gym, should you have any energy left to burn.

In all likelihood, after the day you've had, you won't want to wander far for dinner. Just two minutes' walk away, Tapestry ([tapestrybar.com.au](http://tapestrybar.com.au)) is a great spot for a pre-dinner drink with its booths and stone floors, a craft beer selection and bar food. Walk through the back doors and you'll find yourself in Fitzzy's on Church ([fitzys.com](http://fitzys.com)) where, in a large, informal dining room, the quality fare includes pizzas, steaks and seafood.



(Far left) A New Yorker burger at Fitzzy's on Church; Bunker Records is home to a cool vinyl collection and in-store café (left and below)



### Day 2 AM

You're going for a drive – but first, some nourishment. Toowoomba these days has plenty of great choices for breakfast; I recommend The Finch ([thefinch.com.au](http://thefinch.com.au)). The café recently doubled in size by expanding into the space next door and is now a light-filled place of exposed brick walls and a high pressed-metal ceiling. Owner Dan Farquhar offers some seriously good dishes including roasted mushrooms from nearby Goombungee served with garlic, thyme and fetta on Turkish toast.

Driving south from Toowoomba, you'll pass through some classic Australian country: broad plains and paddocks with mountain backdrops. Heading up into those peaks, just past the pretty village of Killarney, your destination is Queen Mary Falls, about an hour and a half from Toowoomba.

The Queen Mary Falls Circuit is a 40-minute bushwalk that takes you below, around and above the falls, which plunge a dramatic 40 metres from a surprisingly serene Spring Creek before heading onwards into the Condamine River.

A 10-minute drive up the road is Spring Creek Mountain Café ([springcreekcottages.com.au](http://springcreekcottages.com.au)), where owner-chef Bev Ruskey serves excellent beef-and-shiraz pies at tables overlooking the gorge and mountains.

## About Toowoomba

The gateway to Queensland's west, Toowoomba is a two-hour drive from Brisbane and perches on a crest of the Great Dividing Range, 700 metres above sea level. Once a quiet farming community with some well-heeled residents and numerous private schools, the region is embracing the arts, food and multiculturalism. A friendly, small-town vibe prevails in the Garden City, with its distinct seasons and heritage buildings. The population of 163,000 is expected to exceed 216,000 within the next 20 years and the locals seem pretty happy with their lot in life, even if they do sometimes complain about the weather.

**Day 2 PM**

On the way back to Toowoomba, stop at the Darling Downs Zoo ([darlingdownszoo.com.au](http://darlingdownszoo.com.au)), 40 minutes out of town. The brainchild of the Robinsons – Steve (who ran away with the circus as a young bloke) and Stephanie (who liked to scare her sister with lizards) – this privately owned zoo is smaller than most and focuses on importing species to improve breeding in Australia.

Seeing Stephanie smooch up to a tiger, albeit through a fence, as if it's a pussycat makes you realise she is a special breed herself. "You're either an animal person or you're not," she says. "It's a bit of insanity."

It may seem like a family activity but many adults are drawn here by the animal encounters: the chance to get up close with big cats, monkeys, meerkats and zebras. Says Stephanie: "One man recently did all four in a day."

**After dark**

There's still time to visit the Art Deco Empire Theatre ([empiretheatre.com.au](http://empiretheatre.com.au)). Opera, musicals and ballet are part of the impressive program. Or just grab some popcorn and watch a film at one of the town's movie houses.

For dinner, try Kajoku (07 4564 9229), which offers an excellent selection of Japanese and Korean food, including barbecue dishes you cook yourself on a hotplate built into the table. Service is friendly and unnervingly quick – alas, it's all over before you know it. ●



A fly-drive weekend to Toowoomba may take in (clockwise from top left) a show at the Empire Theatre, a visit to the Darling Downs Zoo or a picnic in the Japanese garden

**Don't miss...**

Toowoomba isn't called the Garden City for nothing. You should make time to explore at least a couple of the 150-plus public parks and gardens. Highlights include the University of Southern Queensland's serene Ju Raku En Japanese garden ([usq.edu.au](http://usq.edu.au)) and Queens Park ([tr.qld.gov.au](http://tr.qld.gov.au)), home to walking tracks and the botanic gardens, as well as the headquarters of the city's Carnival of Flowers (September 16-25; [tcof.com.au](http://tcof.com.au)), a 10-day extravaganza of live music, food and wine.

**GETTING THERE**

QantasLink flies to Toowoomba from Sydney, with connections from other Australian capital cities. [qantas.com](http://qantas.com)

**WTB**