



WHAT'S THE GO WITH LITHGOW?

Once a post-industrial town going to seed, Lithgow has reinvented itself as an irresistible tourist destination that's only two hours' drive from Sydney WORDS ELLEN HILL PHOTOS DAVID HILL

WITH HIGGLEDY-PIGGLEDY LANEWAYS and street art, organic waffles and kombucha, steampunk festivals and hipsters, you'd almost swear this was the trendy Sydney suburb of Newtown. But we're actually in Lithgow.

This town has capitalised on its relics and natural heritage, adding a refreshing modern layer and reinventing itself as a vibrant destination. It's now tempting visitors who were previously intent on clearing the Blue Mountains for the better-known tourist haunts of Bathurst, Orange and Mudgee in the NSW Central West.

Hartley Historic Site, about halfway between the bottom of Victoria Pass and the Lithgow township, is one of the region's top drawcards. The National Parks and Wildlife Service has restored many of the site's buildings, which now house welcoming cafés and art galleries. It's worth staying in the newly-restored St Bernard's Presbytery or down the hill at Old Trahlee (it has a separate cot room for babies) just to have the place to yourself and soak up the atmosphere. At sunset, the grand Blue Mountains escarpment glows amber and mist rises in eerie phantom shapes.

Continuing along the Great Western Highway, the rippled landscape is sprinkled with cows, sheep and lichen-covered boulders. In September, tourists traipse past Lake Lyell to picturesque locations such as Rydal. The tiny hamlet is a sea of yellow daffodil heads nodding to the pulse of wind under every tree in the park, next to the railway station and around the old schoolhouse and police station.

Heading to the Lithgow township, the dawning of a new era is evident in its rise of eating out options. Five years ago, you were hard-pressed to find a worthy coffee on a Saturday afternoon in Lithgow. Today, numerous cafés offer cheery havens until sunset, with several extending the hospitality well after dark. There's even a healthy new grab-and-go at one end of town to compete with the fast food at the other end, where countless motorists have stopped for a quick bite over the decades.

Tim Standing is the executive chef at upmarket Esk Restaurant located in the revamped Lithgow Workies Club. He arrived from Sydney two years ago and is gradually infusing the contemporary Australian menu with regional produce and multicultural influences. Those crying out for traditional bistro