

ROAD TRIP

AMAZING JOURNEYS, SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES

HISTORIC HARTLEY

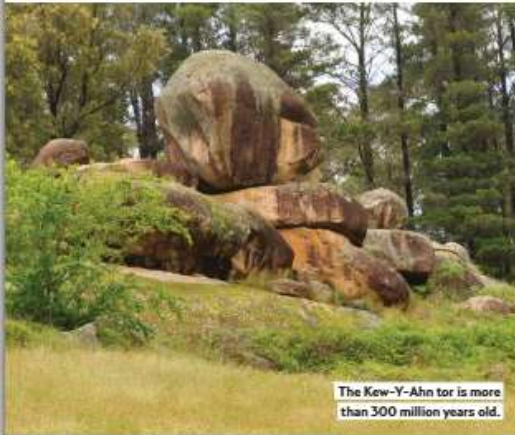
Long playing second fiddle to Lithgow and associated with tedious school excursions, this forgotten village warrants closer examination

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A family of Irish immigrants, the Finns, constructed many of Hartley's buildings.



The Kew-Y-Ahn tor is more than 300 million years old.

NEARLY EVERY COUNTRY town in NSW was founded with visions (and, in many cases, delusions) of grandeur. The surviving buildings in Hartley, a village west of the Blue Mountains, stand testament to this optimistic outlook.

Most imposing is the courthouse, which first put Hartley on the map. Prior to its construction in 1837, there was no place to secure prisoners between Penrith and the founding agricultural town of Bathurst, so colonial authorities decided to build one near the River Lett. Designed in Greek revival style and constructed from finely hewn sandstone blocks, the courthouse remains largely intact today. It was an all-purpose edifice, containing a courtroom, magistrate's chambers, and two prison cells (one for men and one for women). Supporting local law and order while housing prisoners en route to Penrith or Bathurst meant there could be up to 35 men crammed into a cell no bigger than the average lounge room. Some convicts etched their names into the hardwood framing and the inscriptions are still clearly visible.

But while the courthouse gave Hartley its initial *raison d'être*, an enterprising family almost single-handedly turned it into a town. John and Mary Finn and their eight children arrived in NSW in 1839. The rector in their hometown of Tralee in Ireland had told the Finns about his son's progress as a magistrate in Hartley, so they set out across the Blue Mountains to make a similarly fortunate life. They bought several plots of land and erected six buildings, five of which still stand today.

Throughout the 1840s, the Finn family ran the pharmacy, post office, and general store. When gold was discovered in Bathurst in 1851, Hartley served as a staging point for those headed west to seek their fortune and soon became a boom town. But in the 1870s a new rail line between Sydney and Lithgow bypassed Hartley and made the town obsolete almost overnight.



Hartley's 1837 courthouse was built to last.

Some convicts etched their names into the hardwood framing and the inscriptions are still clearly visible

It's thanks in large part to another family, the Corneys, that we can spend a few days living Hartley's colonial past. In the 1940s, the Corneys restored some of the town's derelict buildings and made their own contribution, a service station, which still stands today and has itself been restored.

Among the buildings preserved is Old Trahlee (spelling could be rather fluid until the 20th century), our lodgings during our stay in Hartley. Originally a Finn family residence, it retains many of its original historic features but doesn't want for comfort, with two gas fireplaces, a continuous hot water system, and disabled access throughout. The only real limitation is the kitchen, which is functional but not likely to impress any wannabe Matt Prestons or Maggie Beers. Mobile internet service is also peculiarly sketchy; depending on where we're standing in the house, we might have two bars of 4G or only a few bars of 3G.

Heat is typically a concern when travelling to country NSW in November, but an unseasonable cold front brings unsettled weather and chilly temperatures. When the sun does come out so does a trio of Cunningham's skinks. These communal, blue-tongue-sized reptiles typically find respite in caves and logs, but they consider the hollow below the wheelchair access ramp on Old Trahlee's front porch a more than acceptable substitute.

The brief sunny aspect also encourages the humans in Old Trahlee to emerge and explore their surroundings. Up the hill, obscured from view at street level, is St John the Evangelist Anglican Church, which still conducts services once a month. It stands opposite the Royal Hotel that dates back to 1849, and it's

View of the Great Western Highway from Hassans Walls Lookout.



Credit: Blue Mountains Library, Local Studies, Auropics.com.au

TOP SPEED TO TRANQUILITY

Ask Katoomba hipsters if they can you direct you to the speedway and they'll look at you in disbelief and horror. But, only a three-minute drive from the stunning B&B, Chataleine, there's a forgotten Blue Mountains secret.

Opened in 1946, Catalina Park derived its name from the Catalina flying boat in the middle of its lake. Back then, children could climb aboard and play with the plane's controls. Col Wright, whose family owned a service station at Wentworth Falls until it was destroyed by bushfires in the mid-1950s, says the battery must have still been connected, since he once managed to crank the old seaplane over. Tearooms, a miniature train, Ferris wheel, swimming pool, and a pocket cinema also attracted families to the park.

In the 1960s, screaming engines echoed through this leafy gully and hundreds of spectators watched on as touring cars and motorcycles orbited the Catalina Park Raceway. Ghosts of this motorsport phase remain: rusty signs, guard rails and faded markings. While walking the track we meet a group of sprightly seniors who call themselves 'Jacktrackers'. One of them, Liz Benson, says her husband Glen was a flag marshal here in his teens. "He loved it but, in the end, the track was unsuitable due to the fog," she says.

Today it's known as Garguree (The Gully) and is an important place for the local Gundungurra and Darug people. By 1890, European settlement had dispossessed Aboriginal families from the ridges, valleys and surrounding plains, so they made Garguree their home. These traditional owners were pushed out again when Catalina Park opened, but it's now a place of tranquility and spiritual significance. — Dorian Mode



Now a peaceful walking track, Catalina Park once played host to leisure grounds and a racing circuit.



The Tiny Chapel's welcoming party.



The Lolly Bug's brightly-painted VWs are hard to miss.

Searching for treasures in the gorgeous Highfield Gardens.

WHERE WE ATE

SAVOY
This café retains some Art Deco features and the coffee is surprisingly good. Breakfast fare, light lunches and proper main meals suit all ages.
28 Katoomba St, Katoomba

CAFÉ HARTLEY
It looks suspiciously like a produce market with a token coffee sign outside (and, ergo, terrible coffee inside), but Café Hartley is the real deal, with a full menu and Fish River Roasters coffee spilling from its espresso machine at an early hour.
2430 Great Western Highway, Hartley

ALCHEMY WOODFIRED PIZZA
First-rate pizza just a short drive from Hartley and the alfresco area enjoys lovely farmland views.
2360 Great Western Highway, Little Hartley

EL LATTE
This little slice of Victorian laneway café culture has cosy industrial chic décor and a friendly atmosphere.
81 Main Street, Lithgow

CLUB LITHGOW
Clubs have replaced pubs as the beating hearts of country towns and they're a reliable dinner option for tired parents with grizzling children.
2C Lithgow Street, Lithgow



From top to bottom: Old Trahlee dates back to the 1840s; the Tiny Chapel in the Megalong Valley is always open to the public; gregarious Cunningham's skinks emerge from beneath Old Trahlee's porch to sun themselves (weather permitting).



Credit: John Saenger/DPIE

not hard to imagine a man sinking a half a dozen ales and then stumbling across the road to confess his sins.

Back down in the lower section of the village is the old Hartley post office, which was completed in 1852 and served the community for 130 years before closing in 1982. In recent years, the Alexander family ran a café out of this historic building, but the double-whammy of a bushfire claiming their family home and loss of business due to COVID saw them forced to close the café's doors. Its side passage now serves as an entranceway of sorts to the smaller historic structures at the rear of the property (including a four-seat 'privy' dating to the 1870s) and the 350-million-year-old tor known as Kew-Y-Ahn, which sits atop a steep hill. My son is concerned it will tumble down, and it certainly gives that impression.

Metal sculptures alongside the track hint at its ultimate destination, the Tasman Gallery. Owner, blacksmith Ron Fitzpatrick, creates metal sculptures and jewellery and you can watch him ply his trade downstairs or explore his gallery upstairs. His property neighbours more historic buildings, including St Bernard's Church (its presbytery is also leased as accommodation) and the derelict Shamrock Inn.

If you've ever travelled west of the Blue Mountains via the Great Western Highway, you've probably noticed The Lolly Bug. It's hard to miss with its brightly painted Volkswagen Beetles, one a classic bug and the other the retro-styled version from the early noughties. There are a lot of lolly shops in country Australia, but we'd be surprised if another offers a wider selection of chocolates, lollies and chips from around the world. A visit is not recommended for those watching their waistlines.

Loaded up with junk food, we take Browns Gap Road out to Hassans Walls, a remarkable geographic feature that historians believe Governor Lachlan Macquarie named after similar 'walls'

Our kids are handed 'treasure maps' and have to go around the maze-like paths ticking off hidden sculptures

he saw in India. Even more impressive than the walls themselves is the lookout, which gives an unbroken vista of Hartley and beyond. We can literally 'see our house from here', and when we return to Old Trahlee we're able to pick out the ridge that provides the lookout's eyrie.

The weather continues to deteriorate and the next day it's so cold the Cunningham's skinks stay holed up under the porch. We pull on our puffer jackets and set out to explore neighbouring Little Hartley. The area has become renowned for its 'Central Tablelands Garden Trail' - private gardens that are open to the public through the 'My Open Garden' project. But most pale in comparison to Highfield Gardens on John Grant Road and it's not merely for those who like to stop and smell the roses. At the entrance, our kids are handed 'treasure maps' and they have to go around the maze-like paths ticking off hidden sculptures. We almost miss the snail at the end until Cody trips over his own feet and, lo and behold, discovers it secreted in the bushes nearby. Upon our return we find little markets and a nursery where we can buy seedlings of the flowers we've been photographing. Tea, cordial and biscuits are served in the lavishly decorated reception area known as the Gatehouse and around the corner is a sausage sizzle.

Tucked away in the hills beyond Little Hartley, the Tiny Chapel is, as the name suggests, a chapel in miniature, right down to its stained glass windows and a pew that overlooks the valley to the west. It's located at the front gate to owner Sherry Weller's property and she says she was inspired to

My daughter spots a red-bellied black snake crossing the path

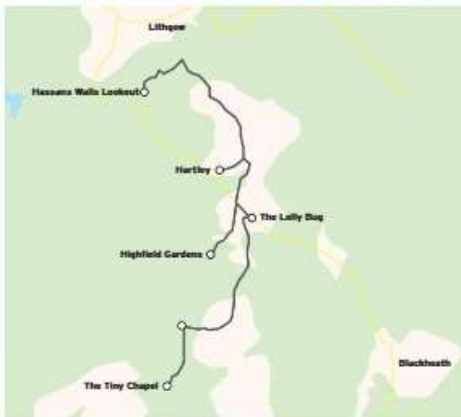
build it after seeing similar chapels in the US mid-west in the 1970s. Most days her two friendly donkeys come down to the fence to welcome visitors. Like a pair of family dogs, the donkeys chase our Mitsubishi Outlander along the fence line to say farewell as we depart.

We take the trail down to the River Lett on our final morning. In recent years, this trail has been treated to a boardwalk fashioned from 16 tonnes of recycled plastic and timber waste, which should last 70 years. The river is flowing almost to rapids with recent rains and a short way along we encounter yet more historic buildings. Leslie Rowson constructed a hut and an electrical engineering workshop in the mid-20th century to serve his gold leases. We take some photos on the river's sandy shore and are about to depart when my daughter spots a red-bellied black snake crossing the path (just as well, I probably would have trod on it). The snake beats a hasty retreat under a rock, clearing the path for our safe return.

We then bid old Hartley village farewell and head up Victoria Pass, with a view to showing our kids the Three Sisters at Echo Point. As many a tourist has discovered, visiting the Three Sisters can be hit-and-miss – on a foggy day this famous formation is enveloped in an impenetrable white shroud. But the gusting winds that have kept us rugged up the whole trip finally work in our favour and, not only are the sisters visible, so are the breathtaking ridgelines and canyon-like valleys that surround them. While the Blue Mountains has a multitude of interesting places to visit, it's worth remembering the area between the mountains and Lithgow has an awful lot to offer, too. 📍



Recent rains add some whitewater to the usually tranquil River Lett.



WHERE WE STAYED

OLD TRAHLEE

One of two historic buildings in Hartley that now serve as holiday accommodation, it's named after the hometown of the Irish settlers who built it (see main story). nationalparks.nsw.gov.au

CHATELAINE COTTAGE

This Katoomba property pays homage to the Art Deco era with a touch of Hollywood Regency décor. Everything is done to a very high spec and there's even a billiard table. You can sit by the fire with your glass of complimentary port or wine, or perhaps enjoy champagne on the deck taking in sweeping views over the wind-tickled eucalypts in the Jamison Valley.

mountainwhispers.com.au



Strong winds ensure a clear view of the Three Sisters at Echo Point.



GET WAY OUT THERE

For a road-trip experience like no other, Alice Springs to Uluru via the Red Centre Way should be at the top of your bucket list

TALK TO ANYONE who has visited the Northern Territory's Red Centre and you'll get captivating yarns of gorges, chasms, meteorite craters, Indigenous cultural experiences and starry desert nights. And at the end you'll no doubt hear them say, "You've just got to get out there."

This is because a visit to the Red Centre is one of those spiritually uplifting experiences that words can only go so far to describing. The best way to see it all is on an extended road trip following the Red Centre Way between Alice Springs and Uluru. The route is packed with so many opportunities for adventure in iconic landscapes and destinations that you should allocate at least a week to truly do it justice.

Alice Springs is your start point and is overflowing with pioneering history and outback charm. Soak in the town's panoramic view from Anzac Hill memorial lookout and visit the many art galleries below, such as Yubu Napa, where you can view stunning Indigenous artworks and meet the artists.

Your road trip will take you through Tjoritja/West MacDonnell National Park to explore the awe-inspiring Simpsons Gap, Standley Chasm, Ellery Creek and Ormiston Gorge. Trek through otherworldly landscapes, cool down in pristine waterholes and then retire to the rustic comforts of Discovery Parks Glen Helen. Those with 4WDs can continue on the

Meerenie Loop (a permit is required) dirt road to the ancient meteorite site of Gosse Bluff, before seeking out the heart-stopping beauty of Kings Canyon. For 2WD vehicles, drivers will need to loop back around to Alice Springs and follow the Stuart and Lasseter highways to reach the canyon.

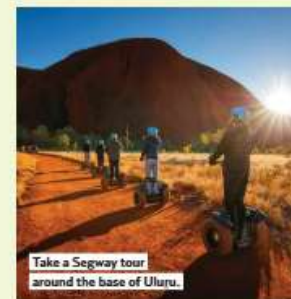
Put on your hiking boots for the three-hour Kings Canyon Rim Walk and marvel at the 400-million-year-old sandstone formations. Spend a few nights at nearby Kings Creek Station's luxury tents and enjoy an Aboriginal cultural tour at Karrke.

Back on the Lasseter Highway to Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, you'll pass Mount Conner, commonly known as 'Fooluru' after visitors who mistake it for Australia's most famous rock. Once

You'll know that nothing else on earth can come close to Uluru's wonder

you reach the real thing, you'll know that nothing else on earth can come close to Uluru's wonder. Explore the Field of Light art installation and enjoy fine-dining under the stars at the open-air Tali Wiru dining experience. Choose from guided walks, biking, hiking, Segway and camel tours, and art classes. You'll be amazed at how much there is to do alongside Uluru.

Call **1300 431 459** or visit mynrma.com.au/redcentre to book your off-the-beaten-track adventure along the Red Centre Way today.



Take a Segway tour around the base of Uluru.



Connect with the ancient landscape and Indigenous culture.