



Terrestrial CELESTIAL

As **Mitch Brook** discovers, a long weekend in Dubbo is as good as time travelling through the ages and exploring the final frontier.

In the words of Albert Einstein, “He who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe is as good as dead; his eyes are closed.” So, when you visit Dubbo, keep your eyes open and you might just be astounded by what you see.

Peter Neilson of Dubbo’s Galaxy Gateway brings Einstein to mind when I visit his idiosyncratic attraction at the end of a long weekend in this city in eastern central New South Wales. Staring through the telescope at some of the celestial wonders of the universe, I reflect on the terrestrial wonders I’ve experienced over the past few days. I realise my visit to Dubbo has taken me on a trip through the ages, from pre-colonial times to the technological, and philosophical, future.

My first port of call is Dundullimal Homestead, which is set just outside of town on the first piece of land claimed this far into the New South Wales outback by European settlers. John Maughan, a squatter, made the trek out here into the unknown in 1836, pegged out a hefty 6,500 hectares for himself and built a

homestead. As the first satellite settlement in the region, it soon became a community with its own blacksmith, butcher, stables and church and even a school.

Renowned artist Tim Gratton and his wife, Suzanne, manage this National Trust house, and Tim shows me around. The three main historical buildings that remain are the homestead, the stables and the machinery shed, which now operates as the Shed Café and Function Centre. Wandering through the homestead, I’m surrounded by evidence of a bygone time: timber slab walls, an old piano and a huge family bible that served both as a book of faith and a record of the family’s lives.

“This was a guy who liked his comforts, and the comforts of the time, too,” says Tim. “You see these cobblestones?” he says, pointing at the deep grooves running between river-smoothed pebbles on the floor of the verandah. “He’d splash water in there and it would cool the verandahs on hot summer evenings. This flooring is also in the stables so the horses could be kept cool. And you’ll notice the roofs ☀

slope down very much towards the edge of the patio – that was to keep the heat out.”

The homestead is a marvel frozen in time and it's easy to imagine early pioneers, in the clothing of the period, living and working here. The Clydesdale horses munching on hay by the old milking sheds encapsulate the peaceful rural setting.

Tim and Suzanne moved from Sydney to Dubbo about two years ago and have settled well into rural life. They came out here seeking space and freedom for Tim to practise his art. Suzanne cooks a mean duck egg omelette in the Shed Café, and Tim has set up a workshop near the milking sheds.

While Tim is classically trained, he constantly experiments with various media and is particularly respected for his innovative body painting. He shows me some news clippings of work he's done with *Red Dog* actor Rachael Taylor for *Vanity Fair*. His workshop is cluttered with brightly painted mannequins, half-finished landscapes and piles of implements. I watch as he mixes gold paint using real gold dust.

At my next stop I meet Diane McNaboe, of the Mungah people, at Terramungamine Reserve, where there is evidence of Indigenous inhabitation that stretches back thousands of years in the form of grinding grooves in rocks alongside the Macquarie River, where Indigenous people sharpened their tools.

As I walk with Diane, I can hear the warble of currawongs among the tweets of other bird species. The camp site, which is set near the riverbank, offers a calm retreat from the regional centre.

Diane explains the grinding grooves to me. “This is an important site for my people,” she says. “It shows this is where they congregated and cooperated. It's one site of a linked series, and some of the grooves point the way to other sites.”

Unfortunately, many of these sites have been lost, but it isn't difficult to imagine the scene that Diane describes of her ancestors coming here, meeting other members of their tribe, sharpening their tools, exploring the scrub for food and weaving grass.

“This area is also important because history happened here,” she continues. “One of the first Aboriginal missions was set up not far from here, and this was one of the first places where Aboriginal children were taken from their parents.” ☈



Top to bottom: Dundullimal Homestead, just out of Dubbo; local artist Tim Gratton getting to work with his gold body paint for a project with local author Kerrie Phipps. **Next page clockwise from top:** Indigenous grinding grooves at Terramungamine; Taronga Western Plains Zoo wildlife.



Diane pauses and takes in the peaceful surroundings of her ancestral home. She points out where her ancestors walked and collected bush tucker, homing in on a snottygobble tree. "It's a strange name," she says, "but the fruit is good! You could come along here and take a bunch and it would be like carrying around a mini-supermarket in your pocket. The fruit will keep you hydrated and give you energy."

Back in town, I visit the Western Plains Cultural Centre, which offers a balance between Dubbo's past and present, looking back at the lives of past residents and showcasing art by current locals. The museum's permanent exhibition, 'People Places Possessions: Dubbo Stories', is a great collection of objects with local provenance and history, from Chinese taxi driver Jacky Chong's banjo made from a Willow cake tin, to the wedding dress worn by three generations of Serisier women.

The centre's gallery holds contemporary exhibitions in five spaces dedicated to local art and multimedia and hosts travelling exhibitions such as the Archibald. When I visit, the gallery has a display of Indigenous etchings, a space devoted to artworks by and for schoolchildren,

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a display of urban artwork by Matthew Begg, and the 'Terra Australis Incognita' exhibition of compelling images by Oculi, a Sydney collective of photographers.

My next consideration is the present and the future, specifically of wildlife. One of Dubbo's most renowned and popular attractions is Taronga Western Plains Zoo, which is involved in global breeding programs for endangered species such as the black rhino, Tasmanian devil and Sumatran tiger.

The zoo's open-plains approach means most of the animal exhibits are not fenced off but are separated from the public by concealed moats, giving visitors unobstructed views of the menagerie. It's a fine sight to see animals such as bongos (chestnut-coloured antelopes with stunning white stripes), giraffes and the zoo's African elephant, Cuddles, who has lived here for 35 years.

An exciting way to encounter the zoo's animals up close is to stay on the premises at Zoofari Lodge in tents-cum-cabins. A ranger takes you to visit an array of animals in the morning and at night. While some animals prefer to snooze rather than say hello, I meet a white rhino, a dozing lion and a hungry hippo munching on hay.

While Taronga looks to the future of the earth's endangered wildlife, Galaxy Gateway, which incorporates Dubbo Observatory and other space-themed businesses, looks to the skies with its 90-minute guided 'tour' of the galaxy. From the opening audiovisual presentation I learn about humanity's adventures to the final frontier, the scope of the universe and our attempts to understand and explore it, and the effects of zero gravity. ☺





Above: Although Alpha Centauri (far left) appears as a single object to the naked eye, it is actually a binary star system.

Once I've considered those stellar concepts, I head outside to the viewing area and see the skies for myself. As we're far enough away from a major city, the Milky Way's billions of stars are plain to see, stretching across the sky, even without the help of the observatory's 305mm Meade Schmidt-Cassegrain telescopes.

On this cold, clear night I examine Alpha Centauri, the closest star to earth after the sun and the brighter of the two Pointers to the Southern Cross. I also examine what's known as the Jewel Box Cluster, a grouping of about 100 stars that shine in various colours.

What most impresses me is an intimate view of Saturn. I'm expecting to see a speck – perhaps a brighter or different coloured speck – but I have a clear view of the ringed planet, even through a small telescope.

Peter and Cindy Neilson are truly excited about sharing their passion for astronomy with visitors. They have been running this Dubbo attraction for more than 11 years and are accustomed to fielding questions about the physical nature of the universe, along with existential questions about the development of the universe and humanity.

Peter directs me to a portrait of Einstein, one of his heroes. "That man was a genius of the best type: he had big ideas but he was always grounded, could relate to people," he says.

Like me, Einstein would have been rapt in Dubbo. Travelling through thousands of years of Indigenous history into colonial Australia and then into the lofty realm of space and human expansion, my eyes have been opened and I have stood rapt in awe. ☽

Round-up

GET THERE

Rex flies from Sydney to Dubbo several times daily, with connections from regional centres. www.rex.com.au

STAY

Zoofari Lodge, Taronga Western Plains Zoo Obley Road, Dubbo 02 68811488, www.zoofari.com.au

Country Apartments
230 Brisbane Street, Dubbo 02 6885 1141, countryapartments.com.au

EAT & DRINK

Two Doors Cafe Restaurant
215 Macquarie Street, Dubbo 02 6885 2333, www.twodoors.com.au

Lazy River Estate
29R Old Dubbo Road, Dubbo 02 6882 0644, www.lazyriverestate.com.au

EXPLORE

Dundullimal Homestead
23L Obley Road, Dubbo 02 6884 9984

Western Plains Riding Centre
8R Merrilea Road, Dubbo 02 6884 3155

Dubbo Botanical Gardens
Elizabeth Park, Dubbo

Dubbo Galaxy Gateway
17L Camp Road, Dubbo 02 6885 3022, www.dubboobservatory.com.au

MORE INFO

www.dubbo.nsw.gov.au
www.dubbotourism.com.au