

A Special Place

for a Unique Getaway from Perth



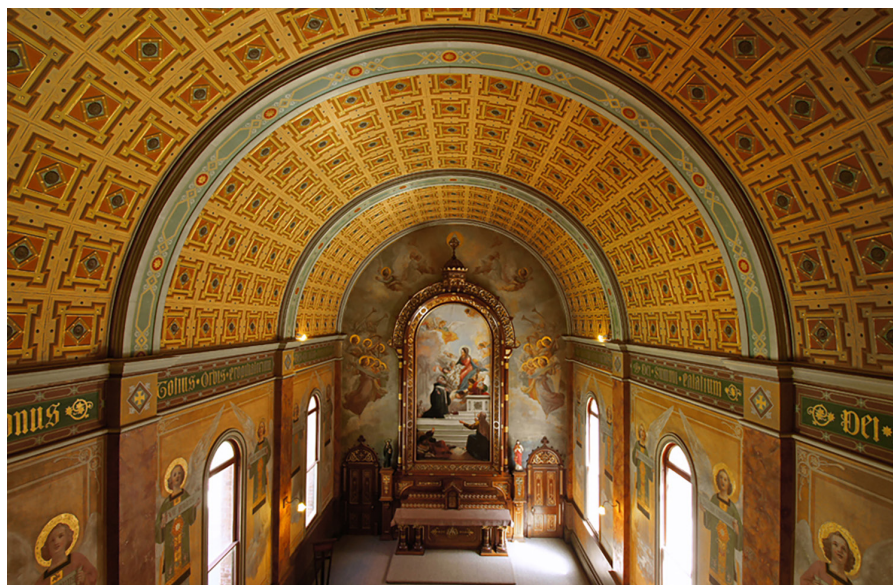
“What’s there to do outside Perth?” A question commonly heard at city tourist centres. Visitors to Western Australia – even the locals – know it’s a big state, but many don’t want to take the leap to visit the “big” tourist attractions, which can involve lengthy travel and big expense to get to.

There are, of course, some good options closer to Perth and one of the best is New Norcia. An easy hour and a half drive north on the Tonkin Highway lands you in a part of rural WA that will take your breath away. You could be excused for thinking you’ve landed in some quaint Mediterranean terrain, replete with picturesque architecture and the lure of old-world monkish charm. This is Australia’s only monastic town.

Above: the Gothic-style St Gertrude’s College, once a boarding school for girls.

Right: the interior chapel at St Ildephonsus’ College, part of the twice-daily tours.

Take a swerve off the Great Northern Highway and already the peace and quiet settle in. The Benedictines who own and operate this unique town call it “Pax”, Latin for peace – their specialty, along with prayers and hospitality. Whether you’re here for a day or a weekend, they’ll make sure you’re taken care of – through the many cultural attractions on offer, wide open spaces to wander, and comfortable accom-



modation, suitable for all tastes and budgets.

No need to bring your own brew, Salvado's Café will lure you with the fine aroma of barista coffees and New Norcia-made specialities, including their delectable nut cake, Pan Chocolatti, and homemade pastries. A new licence means you can also enjoy a cool mug of Abbey Ale or a fine drop of New Norcia Abbey Shiraz or Chardonnay with your meal.

If you're keen on culture, a wander over to the Museum and Art Gallery will fill a good part of your day. Here you can learn about New Norcia's rich past and colourful characters. Founded by Spanish monks in the mid-19th century, the site was originally a mission to Aborigines. At the turn of the century the focus turned on education, with the building of two magnificent colleges, the Byzantine-style St Ildephonus' for boys, and the Gothic St Gertrude's for the girls.

Today the marvel of New Norcia is enjoyed through tours, either the twice daily guided tours – which gets you inside to view the buildings' hidden treasures, including the resplendent college chapels – or a leisurely self-guided tour with the freely available Town Map in hand. Interpretive signs throughout the town tell stories of the early settlers, the history of their mission and educational enterprise, and the daily life of a Benedictine monk. You can even join the monks during one of their six daily prayers in the monastery oratory.



The extensive collection of artwork at the Museum & Art Gallery, New Norcia.

While history, culture and a powerhouse of photo ops are its prime appeal, New Norcia also holds sway for spiritual seekers. A stay in the Monastery Guesthouse will get you close to the lives of the monks and their daily cycle of work, study and prayer. The Institute of Benedictine Studies holds regular retreats on spiritual topics from the Benedictine Experience to the Female Benedictine Mystics of the Middle Ages. Reading material abounds in the Guesthouse Reading Room, but maybe a quiet walk along the river to the iconic apiary is enough to get you close to the source. There's even a hermitage available to hire for some serious solo time-out.



The Abbey Church at New Norcia, built 1861, renovated 1908.

Recently the monks have extended their hospitality and cultural offerings to include fine-dining, such as the five-course Abbot's Table designed with seasonal produce and Abbot John's creative zest for cookery. "It was honestly the best dining experience I have ever had", reviewed Cathy and Tom from Perth, "and the service and hospitality were second to none".

Resident pianist monk, Fr Robert Nixon, also draws crowds eager for classical concerts at the chic New Norcia Hostel, where guests can overnight in classical style and modern comfort. The monks recently opened the venue to outside functions – one of the more unique options for your next family or organisation's event. Thanks to the initiative of their new Director of Visitor Service, the town now boasts a wide variety of accommodation styles to suit a range of needs.

For over a century-and-a-half, the monks of New Norcia have adapted to the changing times. It's part of their original mission and demonstrates their determination to



Guests at the seasonal Abbot's Table enjoy a five-course meal prepared by the Abbot chef, Fr John Herbert.

keep the site available and welcoming to all who come. "We found it both restful and interesting," said Carl and Judy, on holiday from Sydney. "We hope that a way may be found to continue to support the community in this most special place".

The Monastery Guesthouse welcomes overnight visitors to experience Benedictine hospitality.

