

# Riding the rails



**Travel on NSW's historic trains is as much about the joy of the journey as the delights of the destination.**

**A**t a snail's pace, the diesel-powered engine eases its way up the spectacular Illawarra escarpment, cutting a winding path through thick rainforest with brief glimpses of the coast between the trees.

The train eventually shunts to a halt at a lookout that's so breathtaking it's difficult to persuade passengers to reboard.

You don't want to be in a hurry on a journey of its kind. Then again, no-one on board is.

It is a sleepy Sunday on the south coast and the historic Cockatoo Run, operated by 3801 Limited, is taking enthusiasts in four heritage-listed timber carriages to the Southern Highlands for a pub meal and a bit of jazz and blues.

Like many weekend rail journeys through rural New South Wales, the Cockatoo Run rekindles memories of rail's glory days, when boarding a train was essential to travel, long before cars and airlines made an impact.

The line connecting Wollongong with Robertson, Moss Vale and beyond opened in 1932 to serve a fledgling steel industry.

It cuts through thick bushland, past a waterfall or two and through several tunnels before reaching Summit Tank, where steam locomotives once took on water, and a lookout opens out to a panorama worth splashing paint on canvas.

From here, the line crosses a spectacularly high viaduct before reaching its Southern Highlands destination.

On any given weekend, train buffs can join such diesel or, in special cases, steam-powered locomotives for a journey into the heartland of the country.

The 3801 Limited five day "Easter in the Outback" steam spectacular steams out of Sydney to Narrabri on March 24. After an overnight stop in Muswellbrook the 3801 heads over the Liverpool Ranges to Narrabri where shuttle rides will operate for families in the area.



**The 3801, getting up a head of steam on the Northern line, plays a starring role in the 150th celebrations.**

Weekends will also prove to be a train spotter's delight this year, especially in and out of Thirlmere, the Southern Highlands home to the NSW Rail Transport Museum and heritage centre with its collection of 125 exhibits from bygone days.

As the CountryLink Xplorer whisks passengers from Central Station on commercial runs criss-crossing the NSW countryside, the romantic days of steam will also be relived on tours to such destinations as the Hunter Valley, Broken Hill and Albury, as well as the Southern Highlands and Moree.

Volunteers will take enthusiasts on a series of nostalgic Heritage Express rail tours to corners of the state that are sure to play significant role as NSW celebrates 150 years of rail.

The famous Southern Aurora will leave Sydney on March 10, bound for Broken Hill, to visit the mines and embrace the colours of the sunsets over the famous Silver City.

The journey also includes a tour of vast Menindee Lakes to marvel at its wildlife and to famous Silverton, almost a ghost town and film set for iconic movies such as *Mad Max 2*, *A Town Like Alice* and *Wake in Fright*.

Also in March is the museum's Festival of Steam, which attracts as many as 13,000 fans.

The festival, on March 6, will include day trips from Central Station aboard a choice of three steam locos – 3801, 3830 and 3112 – on parallel lines through the suburbs.

NSW's six operating main line steam locos will be instrumental in the 150th anniversary celebrations, the 125-year-old 1210 as much a star as the grand veterans 3112, 2705, 3526, 3830 and the legendary green 3801.

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Rides on the Thirlmere Heritage Railway to Buxton or Picton depart hourly with tickets sold on the day.

Other rail journeys to whet the appetites of enthusiasts include Easter's six-day Great North, South and West Heritage Rail Escape aboard the Southern Aurora. It departs from Sydney on March 24, bound for the vineyards of the Hunter Valley before heading towards NSW's Big Sky Country.

If it weren't for the work of volunteers, though, many of the rail journeys would be no longer. Along with the famous Zig Zag railway there's the Blue Mountains' Valley Heights Loco Depot Heritage Museum. In the northern reaches of NSW, the Dorriggo Steam Railway and Museum Limited is home to a large collection of railway vehicles and memorabilia.

And each autumn, the Maitland Steam Festival stages a race between rail and air, the 3801 against a Tiger Moth. Judging by the broad smiles on the faces of the train passengers, it's not a case of winning. It's the thrill of travelling by rail that really counts.

**MIKE SMITH**