



The one-time mining capital of Broken Hill, way out west in New South Wales, has a rich history and a surprisingly strong connection to the arts. UTE JUNKER plumbs the hidden depths of this remote town.

Art & the outback

Bells Milk Bar is certainly not your average outback watering hole. Belly up to the bar in search of a thirst-quencher and, instead of an amber ale, you'll be served a good old-fashioned milkshake. With genuine 1950s interiors and a nice line in lime spiders and malted milks, Bells is a rare find. It's also a Broken Hill landmark, having served the community since 1892.

"It is so old, it is back in fashion," says owner Jason King, an out-of-towner who took over Bells in 2004. He says many locals remember the days when, after pub closing at 6pm, the milk bar and movies were the only entertainment in town.

"As children, they would walk down to the milk bar with the billy-can to get ice-cream to take home on a hot summer night." >



Sculpture Symposium in the Living Desert Sanctuary outside Broken Hill

Broken Hill Regional Art Gallery; Big Bench on the Line of Lode (below)



BROKEN HILL'S HERITAGE HAS SURVIVED THROUGH A MIXTURE OF LUCK AND PLANNING

Broken Hill, in far west New South Wales, is a city that wears its past on its sleeve. That is made easier by the fact that so much of that past is still standing, from the grandeur of the mighty Trades Hall, which celebrates the power of the working man, to the humble “tinnies”, homes made of corrugated-iron sheets, in which those workers lived. The town is bullish about its prospects of being added to the National Heritage List, with a decision expected this year.

Broken Hill's heritage has survived through a mixture of luck and planning. According to King, “The town's heyday stopped suddenly, and the real estate was not valuable enough for things to be knocked down and turned into something else.”

More recently, the council has used low-interest loans and fund matching to encourage property owners to preserve heritage features and use appropriate paint colours.

It's an approach at odds with the popular image of Broken Hill as a rough-and-ready outpost. The town occupies a special place in Australia's popular imagination, both as the birthplace of BHP (Broken Hill Proprietary Company Limited) and for its isolation – the nearest big city, Adelaide, is more than 500km away. It's perceived as a tough town, a place where only the most rugged could survive. However, Broken Hill has hidden depths – no pun intended.

The town was born in 1885, when miners hit upon one of the world's largest single-source deposits of silver, lead and zinc: to date, it has produced more than 300 million tonnes of ore. Mining has shaped Broken Hill literally as well as metaphorically. The Line of Lode, the



massive mullock heap formed in the mining process, bisects the town and looms over it, the most imposing topographical feature for miles. Even the town's streets pay tribute to the mining process, with names such as Argent, Silver, Chloride, Bromide, Sulphide, Mica, Silica, Tin and Bismuth.

BROKEN HILL HAS RIDDEN OUT its share of booms and busts, including the departure of BHP in 1939. Increasing mechanisation in the following decades decimated jobs. Mining continues, albeit on a much smaller scale.

The population has declined from a peak of about 30,000 in 1962 to fewer than 19,000 in the 2011 census. Yet locals say it's too early to count Broken Hill out. Mayor Wincen Cuy says the town has a history of picking itself up.

“Isolation has been our strength. We've had to be creative to make things happen, to survive.” Certainly, many of those people who left the town for the big smoke are now gradually returning. ➤

PROSPECT BROKEN HILL

They include Catherine Farry, manager of the Broken Hill Regional Art Gallery, considered one of Australia's best regional galleries. Housed in the former Sully's Emporium, the gallery was built around a collection donated by George McCulloch, one of the founders of BHP – an example of the town's strong philanthropic bent.

Farry was born and raised in Broken Hill but, like many of her friends, she left town part-way through year 12, finishing her HSC in Sydney. "Most of us couldn't wait to leave, we thought it was so boring," she says, before adding, "Many of us are back here now."

Initially, Farry returned to spend some time with her grandmother, who was then 92. But after being offered a job and meeting the man who would become her husband, she decided to stay.

Her accidental trajectory is, she says, not unusual. "People get transferred to work in the hospital, the schools or the mine, and end up staying. You hear stories about people whose cars break down and they never leave."

Bells' owner Jason King is another who is surprised to have stayed on. "I never thought I'd get attached here, but the community really welcomed me. The community here is so strong – they have been through so much. Broken Hill is my home now."

Thanks to the internet and satellite TV, outback life isn't as isolated as it once was, but Farry says Broken Hill has always had a strong social scene thanks to sporting clubs, movie clubs, even a gourmet dining club. "We also have

the Hash House Harriers who, as far as I can tell, go for runs and drink lots of beer," she says.

Broken Hill also has a surprisingly strong artistic tradition, with more than 30 galleries open to the public. "A university study found that Broken Hill has the highest proportion of artists [anywhere in Australia] who can live off their art," says Farry. Or, as Mayor Cuy says, "Our forefathers would be rolling in their graves if they knew we now have more art galleries than pubs."

THE CITY'S ARTISTIC flowering can be traced back to 1973, when an exhibition in Sydney highlighted five artists who became known as the "Brushmen of the Bush" – Pro Hart, Jack Absalom, John Pickup, Hugh Schulz and Eric Minchin. The Brushmen had varied backgrounds – Absalom was a kangaroo shooter, Hart a miner, Schulz a prospector – but while they shared a love of the landscape, their work is diverse.

"They could do the same scene and the results would be very different," Farry says. "Schulz has a naïve quality, where Minchin is very refined, with a high degree of detail." What they do share, however, is a sense of personality, which Farry regards as typical of the outback.

"These were big personalities, legendary for their wit, their expressiveness," she says.

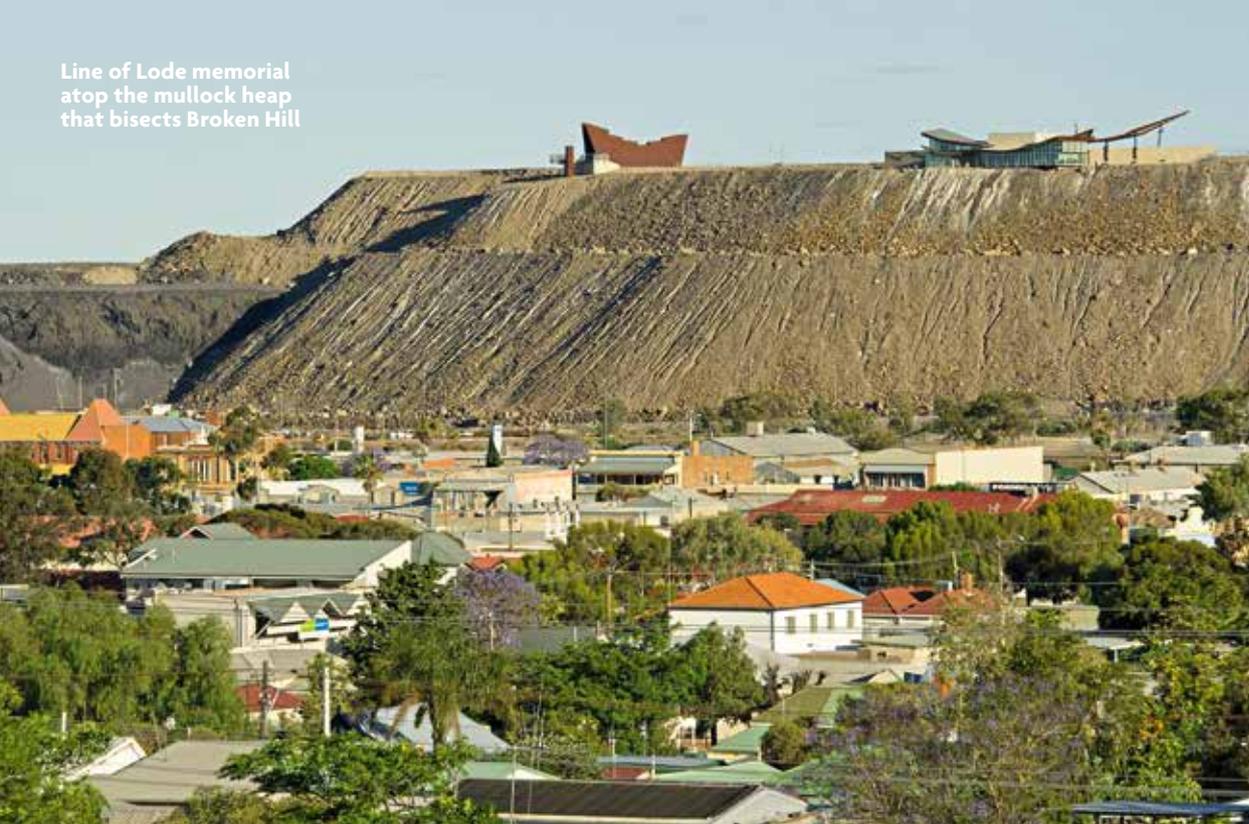
The links between art and mining are still apparent. One of the town's more intriguing galleries belongs to Kevin "Bushy" White, who uses minerals rather than paints ▶

OUR FOREFATHERS WOULD BE ROLLING
IN THEIR GRAVES IF THEY KNEW WE NOW
HAVE MORE ART GALLERIES THAN PUBS

The Line of Lode
Miners Memorial



Line of Lode memorial atop the mullock heap that bisects Broken Hill



to create his work. For outsiders, the detailed recreations of life down the mines, displayed in a replica of a mining gallery, are fascinating.

If Broken Hill is a place where miners can reinvent themselves as painters, it's also a place where dreams can falter. The city's most famous artistic attraction can be seen as a tribute to a quixotic dream. The Living Desert Sculpture Symposium, which celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2013, was the brainchild of Lawrence Beck. With funding from the local council, he invited sculptors from around the world to create an open-air gallery in the desert outside town.

Things did not go smoothly. Instead of the soft Wilcannia sandstone Beck had his eye on, they ended up with sandstone granite, an incredibly hard rock. The project ran short of money and the sculptors found themselves relying on the community. "The Rotary Club cooked for them, people sharpened their tools for them – they gave them the practical support they needed," says Farry.

Despite borrowing tungsten carbide hand tools from local miners, most of the sculptors were defeated by the hard stone, their works little more than reliefs. Two artists from Georgia, in the former Soviet Union, were the exception – their pieces defiantly three-dimensional. However, it's still an impressive endeavour and the Living Desert Sanctuary, where the symposium's 12 sculptures are located, has several good walking trails. The art works are at their best at sunset.

MEANWHILE, BROKEN HILL is making plans for the future. Key target areas include tourism and clean energy – plans for both a 53-megawatt solar power project and a wind farm project near Silverton (which, with a potential capacity of up to 1000 megawatts, could eventually generate up to 4.5 per cent of current NSW power consumption) are well underway. The city's airport connects it with major cities and towns: direct to Sydney, Adelaide and Dubbo; via Mildura to Melbourne. And many visitors are on self-drive holidays. As well as exploring galleries and heritage buildings, they can go down into an actual mine – fascinating, but not recommended

for the claustrophobic – or visit the majestic memorial that sits on top of the Line of Lode, commemorating the 800 miners who lost their lives throughout the mines' operations.

The town has several good dining options, including Thom, Dick & Harry's in the former Royal Hotel for lunch (354 Argent Street, 08 8088 7000), and Trinder's Restaurant inside the ornate Astra building (393 Argent Street, 08 8087 5428). Accommodation is largely limited to three- or four-star offerings, although a farmstay at Mount Gipps Station, a working sheep station, offers a taste of the outback (mountgippsstation.com.au). The town's most luxurious lodging, the Broken Hill Outback Church Stay ([125-129 Patton Street, brokenhilloutbackchurchstay.com](http://125-129PattonStreet.com)), has three bedrooms and a fully-equipped kitchen in a refurbished romanesque church.

The council's commitment to art is also continuing, with a startling project from Australian-born, New York-based artist Simone Douglas lined up to begin as a prototype in July-August this year (the full-scale production will be in 2015), an installation titled *Promise*. Douglas is planning to build a 35m boat of ice in the desert outside town. After it melts, drenching the desert floor with water, she anticipates wildflowers will bloom, creating an after-shadow of the boat. The project will be filmed as a documentary exploring the region and Douglas' work.

Douglas, who has been visiting Broken Hill since she was a student, says the council embraced her vision. "The crazier and more insane the idea, the more they're on board with it."

She says she chose Broken Hill because of a deep love for both the landscape and the community.

"They are quintessential Australian characters. It takes a really special person to go out there and make a life. They're rough diamonds, but they're also deeply poetic. Get them onto the topic of the landscape and they're off for the next five hours – many of them will even tear up when talking about it."

✈ For airfares to Broken Hill call Qantas on 13 13 13 or visit qantas.com