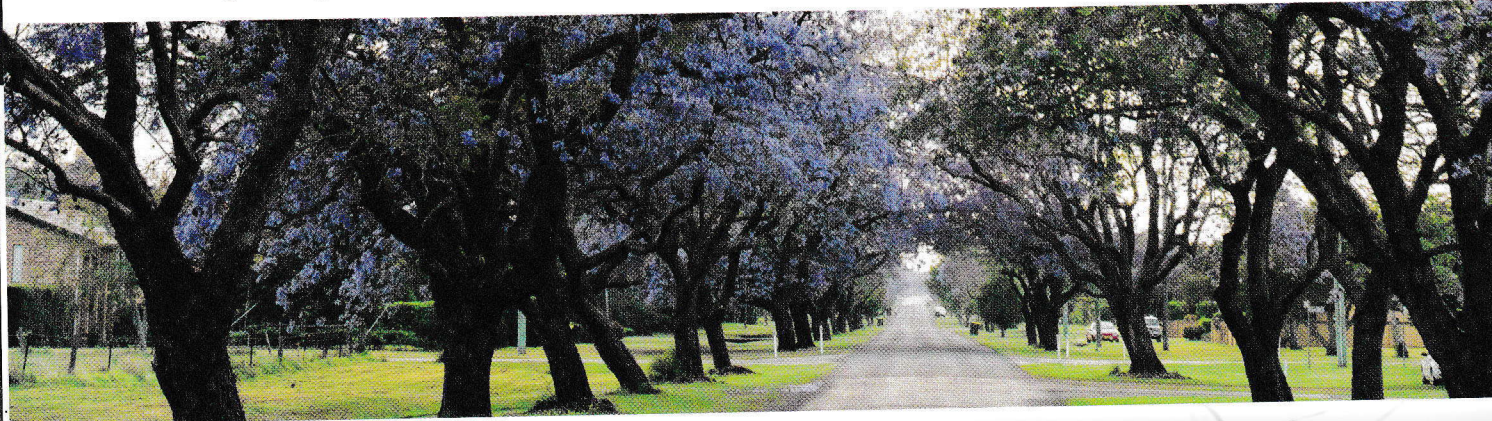




P U R P L E

H A Z E



FROM TOP: *The jacarandas extend out to Grafton's surrounding countryside; The Clarence River hugs the town.* OPPOSITE (from top): *Head to Grafton at the end of October to celebrate an explosion of colour; Jacaranda Avenue in full bloom.*



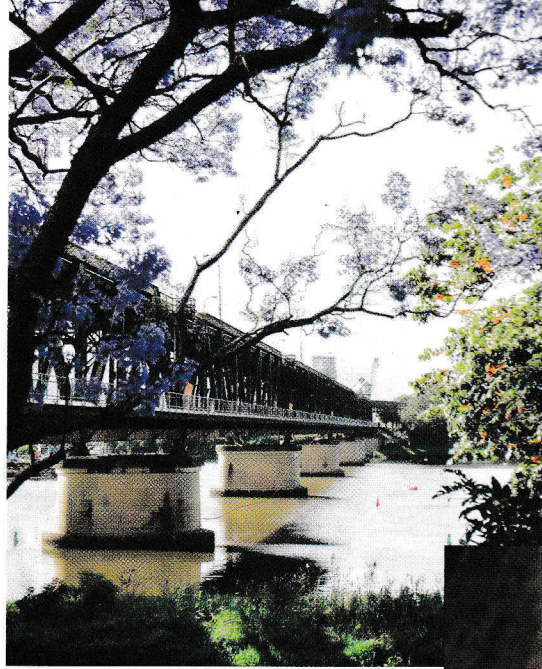
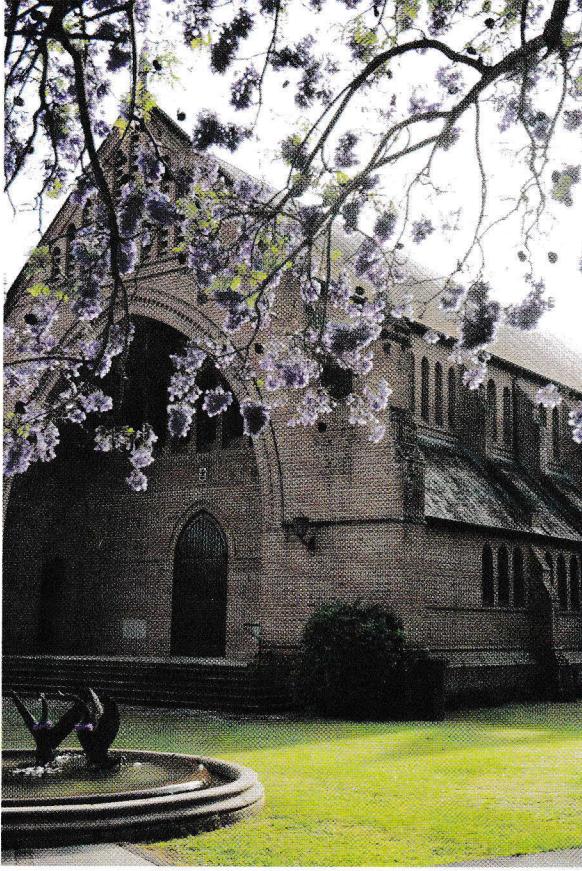
Broad country avenues become archways of LILAC GRANDEUR as nature *PAINTS A PORTRAIT* in this heritage town. Grafton's JACARANDA season is a thing of beauty, writes *JUSTINE MCCLYMONT*.

A HOT AIR BALLOON DRIFTS in the early morning breeze, moving gracefully over the Clarence River. The water shimmers below like a mirror to the clouded sky. From my view on the Grafton Bridge I watch as the balloon travels slowly, past the lush green riverbanks, carefully tended heritage houses and tree-lined streets. In the distance I can see purple blossoms dancing in the breeze. It's an impressive river, this one, a wide expanse carrying tales and stories of a bygone era. Like the time a seed merchant planted some jacaranda trees here 139 years ago.

The first city established on the New South Wales north coast, Grafton in the Clarence Valley is home to over 1400 jacaranda trees. Known for their vibrant colour, the jacarandas put on a stunning display each spring as they burst into bloom. For a few short weeks from mid-October to early November, the 'Jacaranda City' is transformed into a festive celebration of nature's beauty.

As I walk under the archways of lilac on Jacaranda Avenue (of course), the dappled light peeks through the branches of delicate blossoms and fern-like leaves. It's 6.30am, but I'm not alone. Cars are starting to drift into town, filled with visitors keen to capture the jacarandas in the early morning light. Story has it that back in 1879 the aforementioned seed merchant, Henry Volkers, planted the first jacarandas in Grafton on this very street. Volkers had established a close connection with the director of Sydney's Royal Botanic Garden who sent the early specimens up from the capital for planting. The trees, of South American origin, soon thrived in Grafton's subtropical climate. →





Like the cherry blossoms of Japan, there's something magical about a place that celebrates just for the sake of beauty.

Obviously smitten with the trees and their distinctive blooms, the community held the first Jacaranda Festival in 1934. Now in its 84th year, Grafton's Jacaranda Festival is the oldest floral festival in Australia with many of the early traditions, like the annual crowning of a local as the 'Jacaranda Queen', still carried out to this day. This year's festival (from 27 October to 4 November), boasts a program featuring hot air ballooning, open gardens, bus tours and a food festival, not to mention an exhibition of the richest regional drawing prize in the country (with a prize value of \$40,000) at the Grafton Regional Art Gallery.

To say that Graftonians are passionate about their prized trees would be an understatement. On the morning of 'Jacaranda Thursday' the whole town seems to go purple crazy. Walking down Prince Street past the grand old buildings, there's a buzz in the air with shopfronts decorated in purple regalia and staff dressed up in costume to entertain the crowds. It's good old-fashioned frivolity, reminiscent of a simpler time when rural communities had to make their own fun. "I've been a Grafton girl all my life and I still have my breath taken away by the jacarandas," says Leah Wallace, current coordinator of the festival.

But it's not just the locals who are taken by the beauty of these trees. As I turn to look at the majestic canopy along Turf Street, which must in itself have nearly 100 Jacaranda trees, I notice a Chinese couple dressed in full wedding attire. "The Chinese population in particular have a real affinity with the colour purple," explains Leah.

"Couples come to have their wedding photos taken here. We even had a surprise marriage proposal in our float procession last year. The bride was in love with the festival and her boyfriend, now fiancé, wanted to surprise her. He contacted us beforehand and I helped arrange it for him. It was a very nice moment," she says.

Like the cherry blossoms of Japan, there's something magical about a place that celebrates just for the sake of beauty. As I walk through See Park, time seems to slow to a more leisurely pace, all the better to indulge in the experience and the warm spring sunshine. Visitors picnic on a purple carpet of flowers, while children hold out their hands to catch the purple blossoms as they fall elegantly from outstretched tree branches. A moment caught in time in one of nature's – and Australia's – most colourful festivals. ❁

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Even Christ Church Cathedral's swan statues wear purple garlands; Wander the length of Grafton Bridge; Purple delights picked up from Hank's Kitchen, the oldest bakery in town and a much-loved local institution. OPPOSITE (from top): Spring comes with an unparalleled beauty in Grafton; Take the time to simply cruise down the residential streets during jacaranda season.



MEMORABLE JACARANDA EXPERIENCES

1. PICNIC UNDER THE JACARANDAS – Stroll, drive or cycle around Grafton's jacarandas before stopping at See Park to picnic under the blossoms. Local business Now We Picnic can set up a styled picnic or deliver a hamper to your door.

2. JACARANDA BUS TOUR – Take in the sights with a tour of the tree-lined avenues and heritage precinct and a stop at See Park to photograph the jacarandas. Guided by a local gardening guru, this two-hour tour includes light refreshments and runs twice daily between 29 October to 3 November.

3. FEAST FOOD FESTIVAL – Temp the tastebuds on Saturday 3 November with a variety of food stalls, craft beer, fine wine and live music by the Clarence River.

4. HOT AIR BALLOONING – Take in a bird's eye view of the jacarandas and the mighty Clarence River with a sunrise balloon ride.

5. OPEN GARDENS PROGRAM – Wander through country gardens in the grounds of riverside heritage houses, Schaeffer House Museum and the historic Southgate Hall.

6. JACARANDA THURSDAY – Mix it up with the locals as they go purple mad in the main street on the morning of 1 November with markets, performances, fancy dress and all manner of purple coloured food. Only for the light-hearted!

7. GRAFTON REGIONAL ART GALLERY – Visit one of Grafton's most beautiful and prestigious heritage buildings to view the annual Jacaranda Acquisitive Drawing Award exhibition, starting 26 October.



BEST SPOTS TO SEE THE BLOOMS

- 1 Jacaranda Avenue, Pound Street, Grafton
- 2 See Park, Grafton
- 3 Prince Street, Grafton
- 4 Turf Street, Grafton
- 5 Ryan Street, South Grafton

DETAILS

Getting there

Grafton is just off the Pacific Highway an hour's drive north of Coffs Harbour. Rex operates daily flights between Sydney and Grafton Airport. Grafton is also serviced by NSW TrainLink and bus companies.

Staying there

ANNIE'S BED & BREAKFAST

Experience country hospitality at its best with a stay in your own private suite at this 1904 heritage-listed cottage in Grafton. anniesbnbgrafton.com

THE GREY HOUSE

Relax in this 130-year-old worker's cottage that has been stylishly restored with mid-century and contemporary furniture, right in Grafton's heritage precinct. thegreyhouse.com.au

BELVOIR B&B COTTAGES

Choose from charming Ivy Cottage or Dairy Cottage, located on a picturesque rural property at Clarenza just five minutes outside of Grafton. belvoircottages.com.au

CLARENCE RIVER BED & BREAKFAST

Stay at one of the valley's finest country retreats with private balconies overlooking the Clarence River; just a 20-minute scenic drive from Grafton. clarencriver-bnb.com.au

For further details see jacarandafestival.com

