

GO WITH THE FLOW
An upstream view
of the Nepean
River toward the
Blue Mountains.

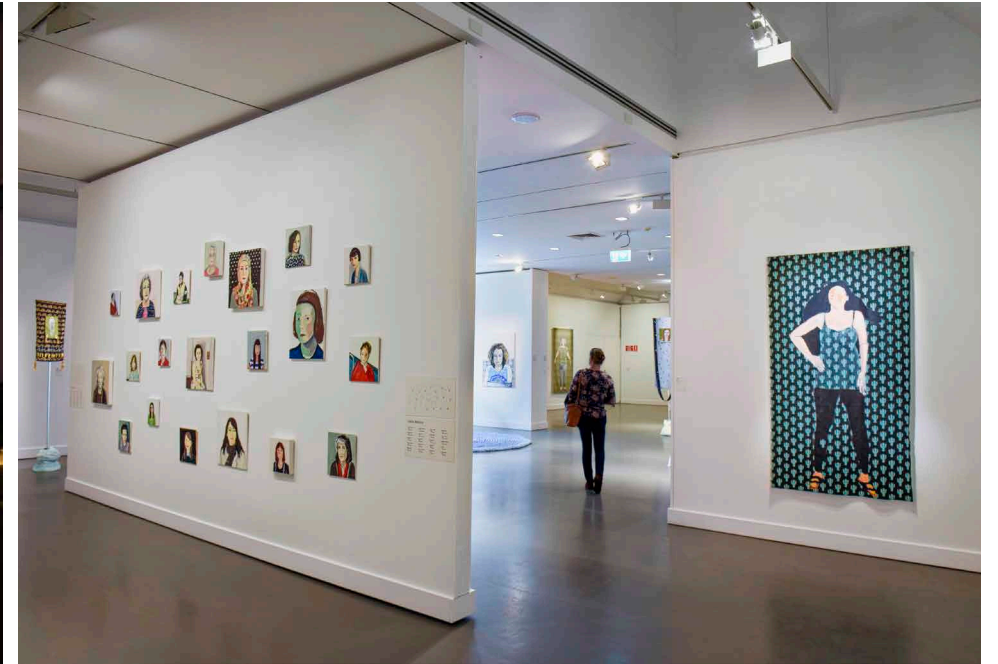
A River Runs Through It

Once a place to pass through on the way to Sydney's Blue Mountains, Penrith is coming into its own.

— by Ellen Hill

It's just before dawn when the first rowers slip onto the Nepean River. The rhythmic *splosh, splosh, splosh* of their oars through inky water breaks the silence as long, narrow shells glide out of the morning mist. Along riverside paths winding beneath towering gum trees, joggers and cyclists exchange hushed greetings while sulphur-crested cockatoos announce the coming day with squawks from the treetops.

As first light spills over the Blue Mountains escarpment into Western Sydney, the mist lifts from the river and the sky is washed in tangerine and rose. The Nepean glints silver as it flows through



a landscape that has shaped human life here for thousands of years. By the time cafés begin filling with regulars, the river has been awake for hours.

Most visitors know Sydney through its harbor. Fifty kilometers west, this other waterway tells a quieter story. The Nepean River, which becomes the Hawkesbury downstream, has long been a place of movement, nourishment and gathering for the Indigenous Darug people, whose creation story tells how this landscape was shaped by a giant diamond-eyed eel. Today, the river still sets the rhythm of life in the suburban city of Penrith.

If you've never heard of Penrith before, you may soon. In October, **Western Sydney International Airport** (wsiairport.com.au) will begin operations 13 kilometers to the south, providing a second gateway to Australia's most popular destination while helping ease pressure on Sydney Kingsford Smith Airport on the shores of Botany Bay. Singapore Airlines will introduce a daily service to Western Sydney from November 23, with Vietjet following next year with flights from Ho Chi Minh City and Bangkok. Inbound passengers looking to explore another side of Sydney will find Penrith and the foothills of the Blue Mountains on the new airport's doorstep.

The best way to begin a visit is with a stroll along the Great River Walk, a seven-kilometer pathway that follows both sides of the river, passing viewpoints, picnic spots, and playgrounds. On the Emu Plains side, where the traffic noise from the M4 bridge fades to birdsong, my first stop is the **Penrith Regional Gallery** (penrithregionalgallery.com.au).

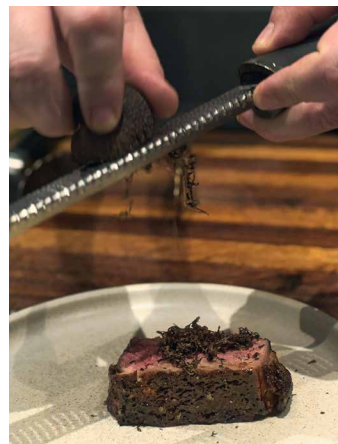
Formerly the residence of artists Gerald and Margo Lewers, both influential figures in Australian modernism, the property now hosts free exhibitions in its sleek main gallery — on my visit, the first major solo show by senior Dharug artist Leanne Tobin — while the surrounding heritage gardens are an attraction in their own right.

For lunch, I grab an umbrella-shaded table on the terrace at **Laughin' Boy Café** (laughinboy.au), enjoying river views and a lobster-and-prawn roll as the afternoon sun scatters diamonds across the water. It becomes clear that the Nepean River isn't just Penrith's most recognizable landmark. It's the city's living room.

Beyond the river, public art spills into streets and parks, while **The Joan** (thejoan.com.au), a performing arts center named for the famed Australian opera singer Joan Sutherland, anchors the city's creative life with theater, music, and visual arts that reflect Penrith's evolving cultural scene.

Not far away is Western Sydney's first five-star hotel, the 152-room **Pullman Sydney Penrith** (pullmanpenrith.com.au; from US\$175 a night), which opened in 2023 alongside a shiny new convention center. The building's undulating exterior nods to the Nepean River, while its interiors echo the layered rock and vegetation of the Blue Mountains

EASY DOES IT
Above, from left: Penrith lends itself to waterside picnics; the curved facade of Pullman Sydney Penrith references the winding Nepean River; an exhibition space at Penrith Regional Gallery. Below: Shaving truffle over a premium cut of meat at Sinclair's.



through timber, sandstone, and organic forms. A highlight is Marcel Bar & Bistro, whose name and Bauhaus-inspired design reference legendary architect Marcel Breuer's only Australian project, the nearby former Torin factory building. Expect contemporary bistro fare served in a relaxed dining room that fills quickly in the evenings.

"Penrith is a can-do town," says the hotel's general manager, Charlie Young, describing a city that has evolved from a place people drove past on their way to the Blue Mountains, into one they're starting to seek out. "People here have heart. They have passion. They have drive. Once people come out here, they love it."

Penrith's appetite is more casual at **Manufactor** (manufactor.com.au), where a former copper-tube factory has been transformed into an industrial-chic makers' and dining precinct, its old warehouses enlivened by murals and the smell of food hitting hot grills. Come hungry: there's smoky Southern barbecue at Brisket Boys, Louisiana-style fried chicken from Flappy's, and traditional Indian sweets and savory treats from Sweet India.

If there's one table in town worth planning ahead for, it's **Sinclair's** (sinclairsrestaurant.com.au). Occupying the upper floor of The Log Cabin, a rebuilt century-old pub on the Nepean River, this is the first restaurant in Penrith to earn a coveted Chef's Hat (Australia's answer to Michelin star ratings), thanks to the deft touch of head chef Scott Mills.

"We want to showcase what Western Sydney has to offer," Mills says as he preps a dish at his open

kitchen's ironbark grill. "Every single item on the menu has at least one component that's sourced locally, and when I say locally, I mean within 50 kilometers of the restaurant."

For years, conversations about Sydney's dining scene rarely ventured west of the CBD. Restaurants like Sinclair's are beginning to rewrite that map. The cooking is refined without being fussy, with the quality of the ingredients doing much of the work in dishes like smoked Windsor duck empanadas and Tajima wagyu striploin, which is carefully seared over the fire and rested before serving to allow its marbling to render slowly.

But food isn't the only reason to linger by the river. Adventure comes naturally in Penrith, whether cruising aboard the Mississippi-style paddlewheeler **Nepean Belle** (nepeanbelle.com.au), hiking into the Blue Mountains, or bouncing through the rapids at **Penrith Whitewater Stadium** (sport.nsw.gov.au/penrithwhitewater), a manmade white-water rafting course built for the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

My own visit ends on an adrenaline high at **iFLY Sydney** (ifty.com.au), an indoor skydiving facility right across from the Pullman. Swapping walking clothes for a flight suit, I step into the wind tunnel to the roar of giant fans. Moments later I'm airborne, panic quickly giving way to exhilaration as my instructor steadies me.

And outside, somewhere below the misty Blue Mountains, the Nepean keeps flowing through a corner of Sydney that has waited a long time to be discovered. ☘

Ready for takeoff

Australia's first major new airport in more than 50 years, Western Sydney International is located about 50 kilometers west of Sydney's CBD, right on Penrith's doorstep. Co-designed by Cox Architecture and Zaha Hadid Architects, its terminal draws inspiration from the Blue Mountains and surrounding Cumberland Plain, with a dramatic sculptural ceiling that filters natural light from a network of skylights in a way that evokes sunlight sifting through the curling bark of eucalyptus trees. Operating around the clock, Sydney's new international gateway features state-of-the-art facilities, an intuitive layout, and 24-hour dining and retail outlets.