

THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN

MAGAZINE

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THE HUSBAND WHISPERER

How to save a marriage

IN DINGOES' DEFENCE

Graziers' new best friends?



OPERATION BABUSHKA

**A WOMAN IN SYDNEY,
HER GRANDMA TRAPPED IN KYIV.
CAN SHE PULL OFF A DARING RESCUE?**

By Will Swanton

BENDIGO, VICTORIA

Fit for The King

BENDIGO TAKES CENTRE STAGE WITH A LANDMARK ELVIS EXHIBITION

Elvis Presley and Bendigo? If the pairing at first seems epically unlikely, the good burghers of the gold rush city are having none of it. The whole place has clearly pledged allegiance to The King. The 2m-high Viva Bendigo sign that illuminates the city's central piazza tells you so, and tributes – many drinkable, it turns out – are everywhere: in the music shop and cinema, the bakeries, restaurants and bars, in Rosalind Park and on the Shake, Rattle & Roll cocktail tram. In town with a special someone? You might like to say It's Now or Never at Hustler burger joint and bar, where during Elvis season the in-house marriage celebrant can get you hitched (for real) with a side of fries. As this is country Victoria and not Vegas, 30 days' notice is required – not exactly shotgun, but it's the thought that counts.

At the heart, figuratively and literally, of all this madness is Bendigo Art Gallery, an institution that has carved a reputation for stellar exhibitions showcasing cultural icons, Grace Kelly, Mary Quant and Marilyn Monroe among them. This

year, on the 45th anniversary of Elvis's death, they've pulled off an exclusive with more than 300 objects from Graceland, hand-picked by Bendigo curator Lauren Ellis. The contents of the Memphis mansion/museum rarely travel outside the US, and this collaboration – with pieces ranging from photos and letters to the star's favourite convertible and a whole room of bedazzled jumpsuits from the Vegas years – is special enough to have drawn Priscilla Presley to Bendigo, 150km north-west of Melbourne.

On opening weekend, the intel in the View Street arts precinct is that the startlingly good-looking septuagenarian is staying in a secret location. Word has it she ate at local restaurant Masons and chatted with locals at a cafe near the gallery, just along from the music shop with the display of Blue Hawaii ukuleles. One thing is certain, she will tell visiting media in her soft voice: all this would have meant the world to her modest ex. "This is everything he wanted."

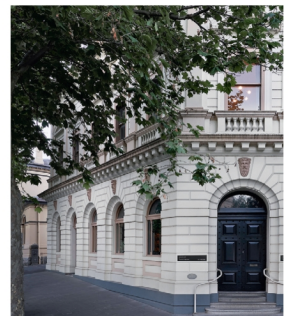
We'll return to see more of the exhibits later in the weekend, but in the meantime Elvis is coming to



PHOTOGRAPHY: KATE MINOTT/LEVIN SCHWARTZ
THE WRITER WAS A GUEST OF WEST VICTORIA



He's entered the building: Elvis: Direct from Graceland exhibition at Bendigo Art Gallery. Top, Priscilla Presley at the





PHOTOGRAPHY: KATE MINOTTI/LEVIN SCHWITZ
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 ay at the opening; Balgownie Estate cellar door. Below, Fool's Goldburger at Hustler; Bendigo Ernest Hotel and suite



lunch at Balgownie Estate, a short drive out of town. The winsome winery's Burning Love package includes champagne and lunch on the lovely new cellar-door terrace, kicking off two days of wining and dining and song-title punning; the evening's clambake is at Ms Batterhams, an excellently moody establishment and one of several top eating and drinking holes – many in imaginatively repurposed historic buildings – that support Bendigo's claim as Australia's first UNESCO City of Gastronomy. I am not entirely sure what that means, but I'm sure Elvis would approve.

At cool laneway bar and diner The Dispensary, we graze on creative share plates and raise an All Shook Up gimlet to the new Bendigo – and the old Elvis. New and old appear to cohabit effortlessly in this city, at least from a tourist's POV: a new rooftop bar, Nimbus, earns points for being exquisitely impossible to locate, and while the glamour of the gallery draws visitors in droves, so does the nation's oldest working pottery and the annual Lost Trades Fair; at the latter, the largest fair of its kind in the world, we stand in awe at the tents of coopers and bootmakers, weavers and rocking horse carvers and dozens of other craftspeople – and pledge to return with more time next year.

As it happens, we're staying at Bendigo's newest hotel in the city's oldest former bank, erected in 1864 and perfectly located parkside on View Street. Original features including a cellar, bank vault and a vintage bullet hole in a thick glass window combine in the Ernest Hotel with modern luxury furniture and a stunning array of good Australian art; none of the 10 suites has the same layout. Owners and art collectors David Cook-Doulton

and Martin Shew deliver guesthouse-style hospitality in a chic five-star package, so charming it's tempting to linger in the lounge after a divine breakfast of fruit, local croissants and granola, St David yoghurt and – our final Elvis treat on this golden weekend – “blue suede choux” eclairs with little chocolate heels. Thank you, Bluebird Patisserie. Thank you, Bendigo. *Thank-you-very-much.*

Perfect for: Cultural tourists.

Must do: visit Elvis: Direct from Graceland, until July 17 (bendigoartgallery.com.au). Check out one of the region's many wineries, including Balgownie Estate for glamping by the vines and a long alfresco lunch, or St Anne's for Rock'n'Roll Pizza Sundays. The 150th Bendigo Easter Fair is on April 15-18; Bendigo Writers' Festival May 12-15.

Dining: Former corner store Percy and Percy serves a brilliant breakfast in its leafy courtyard. For lunch, ask your doctor before attempting Hustler's ultimate Elvis tribute, the Fool's Goldburger featuring a 150g patty in a jam donut bun with peanut butter, bacon, raspberry jelly and potato chips. For more refined dining, top choices include award-winning Masons, Ms Batterhams and popular steakhouse The Woodhouse.

Getting there: Bendigo is about 1hr 50 mins' drive from Melbourne; QantasLink flies direct from Sydney.

Bottom line: Suites at Bendigo Ernest Hotel from \$269 per night; hotelbendigo.com.au

visitvictoria.com; bendigotourism.com