

Travel

Vine time to visit

Autumn is a wonderful time to head west and taste the delights of Stanthorpe, writes **Des Partridge**

THE inspiration to chase shades of autumn came after hearing again a much-loved live recording of Brisbane jazz diva Clare Hansson at her keyboard performing the timeless *Autumn Leaves*.

"The autumn leaves drift by my window, those autumn leaves, of red and gold..."

Not exactly our window when we enjoyed the experience, but through the large glass door opening on to the vine-covered balcony of our spacious room at The Vines Motel in Stanthorpe, 900m above sea level on Queensland's border with NSW.

In parkland across the road, south to the border at Wallangarra, and on to Tenterfield, trees were tinted in unmistakable autumn shades.

Our timing turned out to have been immaculate, as on this mini-break we experienced three days of crisp "Queensland: beautiful one day, perfect the next" kind of weather.

The autumnal shades provide fire-tinged colours throughout this region, matching the experience familiar to residents of more temperate climates than our subtropical southeast Queensland.

Yet, to take in the view, it's only a 2½-hour drive from Brisbane.

So we reached The Vines, close to the commercial centre of Stanthorpe, in time to scout local venues for lunch, settling on The Coffee Spot where they do a particularly good pumpkin soup served with a big bread roll, fine coffee, as you'd expect, and sensibly offer half-size servings of baked cheesecake.

The Vines was opened in 1994 by the Minasi family, Raff and Pina, and son Tony, and recently was sold to Michael and Lucille Jensen, who are maintaining the high standard the motel enjoyed.

Packages — \$419 per couple for two nights, cooked breakfasts, an Italian dinner for two at the nearby Anna's Restaurant with a complimentary bottle of wine, and a comprehensive guided winery tour conducted by ebullient Chris Pascoe of The Grape Escape tour company — have been



EAT, drink and be merry... have a glass of wine at the Ballandean Estate Winery with owner Mary Puglisi, left, and tuck into a delicious antipasto platter at Anna's in Stanthorpe.

drawing visitors to the district since 1996.

In tourism, "package" can have nasty connotations, with menu restrictions and pared-down facilities, but The Vines' version is generous.

It was suggested when we booked that we should eat dinner at Anna's (80m from the motel) on the first night, as the meals were generous, and there was considerable food involved in the winery tour to be taken the next day.

The advice was well taken, as there was no exaggeration with the description of Anna's notion of a serving: helpings from an extensive menu of dishes prepared Italian-style were truly daunting.

The restaurant, which has an extensive wine list including local varieties, is a remodelled 1915 Queenlander, and we were glad of wall heaters to keep out the chill.

Breakfast at The Vines matched Anna's in the size of meal portions, but there was time for a brisk walk along Quart Pot Creek before The Grape Escape's bus collected us for our six-hour tour of five district wineries.

Cellars visited were Bald Mountain, Robinsons, Ballandean Estate, where we had lunch (as if we needed it), Golden Grove and

Rumbalara and tastings of some of the region's best wines were offered at each.

To tide us over before we reached Puglisi's Ballandean Estate restaurant for lunch, tour host Chris Pascoe offered nibbles of nuts, cheese, biscuits, ginger and chutney, as though we had need of more food.

Most of the wineries have competed in the state's most prestigious wine awards, conducted annually by *The Courier-Mail* and the Sheraton Hotel.

With visitors generally buying at least a bottle or two from each of the wineries visited, you don't have to worry about storing your wine, as Chris has a supply of empty boxes on the bus for his day-trippers.

At the end of the day, with our box filled to its dozen capacity with varieties from most of the wineries, we were able to effect a simple transfer of the bottles from the tour bus to our car boot for the journey home the next day.

The wine tour crisscrosses an area where there are now more than two dozen wineries, so we made plans to return to explore even more of those not included in the tour.

Back at The Vines before dusk, we strolled through the business area looking for a simple dinner and

found the uncomplicated menu and the roaring fires in the dining area of The Country Club in Maryland St to our liking.

A visit to Girraween National Park, just south of Stanthorpe (which in spring boasts wildflowers blooming among the park's famous granite outcrops) is another "must" while in the district.

We made a brief stop there before making the drive back home, travelling via Warwick and then on to Leyburn en route as a visit to Broncos forward Shane Webcke's Royal Hotel was always intended to be part of this mini-tour.

Webcke, who subleases the historic property, was not on hand — something about training with the Broncos perhaps — but we enjoyed learning about the area's history from the information displayed in the hotel alongside large posters of assorted Broncos triumphs.

Did you know that the first Australian Grand Prix was staged at Leyburn in 1949?

We discussed this fact (and Jack Brabham's appearances in Leyburn in the 1950s) as we motored home through the spectacular sweep and colours of the Downs country surrounding Toowoomba, vowing to visit the Granite Belt again for its spring spectacular.

Just the facts

The Vines Motel and Cottages, Wallangarra Rd, complete Stanthorpe Experience package, \$419 per couple. \$160 extra person (triple share). \$300 single. (Prices apply to December 31, 2004). Tel: 4681 3844. Fax: 4681 3843
Website: www.thevinesmotel.com.au
E-mail: thevines@halenet.com.au

Anna's Restaurant, intersection of Wallangarra Rd-O' Mara Tce, a la carte dining Mon-Thu, buffet dinner Fri-Sat. Tel: 4681 1265. www.annas.com.au

The Grape Escape, daily winery tours (included in the package), \$60 others. Progressive dinner tours \$85 per person through June, July, August. Tel: 1300 361 150. Fax: 4681 4762. www.grapeescape.com.au

