



hot air ballooning might be one of the earliest forms of flight, but a couple of hundred metres up in a wicker basket is still one of the best ways to take in the picturesque and tranquil sights of southeastern Queensland's Scenic Rim. Filling up the huge clouds of nylon with blasts of hot air is all part of the

experience, followed by the rush of silence as the pilot turns off the gas and the balloon gently floats above the earth, drifting gracefully and silently across the picturesque countryside of Ipswich. The view may take in the meandering Bremer River, remnants of Ipswich's beginnings as a limestone quarry, its colonial buildings, old

railways and parks, and modern attractions such as vineyards, golf courses and racing circuits.

Ipswich has grown from a limestone quarry into a major industrial centre for Queensland, but the focal point of the city, the Ipswich Global Arts Link, shows off its strong cultural side.

GAL, as it is known, was created in Ipswich's former town hall, which originally opened in 1861. It was completely renovated and extended at a cost of A\$6.8 million to provide a cultural experience which includes an interactive multimedia history of Ipswich, art exhibitions, a place to relax, and Lottie's Place, said to be Australia's first permanent visual arts gallery for children.

Queen's Park, the oldest park in Queensland, dates back to 1862. It is perhaps Ipswich's best-known landmark, and is known for its shady gardens, extensive formal garden beds, bush house and sporting clubs. A central feature is the Nature Centre, which features a range of Australian wildlife,

lush, landscaped gardens, and exhibits that have been recreated to represent local bushland and flora.

Visitors to Queens Park should take the time to visit the Japanese-styled gardens, the Nerima Gardens. Named after Ipswich's sister city, they are a place of peace and tranquillity. They seek to capture the elements of a Japanese garden while retaining a distinctly Ipswich identity through the use of local plants, including rare and endangered species. The garden is expected to grow and mature for decades, if not centuries, as the Japanese consider a garden of this nature to be young at 500 years.

Stage two, which was recently completed, extended the garden by half again, with more pathways and secluded places, and a large pavilion for special ceremonies.

Ipswich has its fast side as well, especially the Motorsport Precinct at Willowbank. Powerful V8 supercars are pushed to the limit around the 3.1 kilometre circuit, but their performance seems funereal compared with the drag

racing, where top dragsters may cover a standing quarter mile in as little as four seconds and reach speeds of more than 480 kilometres an hour in a haze of tyre smoke, dust and fumes.

Petrolheads can test their skill at the kart track, which has three different horsepower karts for drivers aged from 10 years to adults.

Smoke and fire from a different era are on display at The Workshops in North Ipswich, just three kilometres from downtown. The site is the birthplace of Queensland Railways, and are the only Australian railyards from the 19th century still in operation.

The first steam rail journey in the state began there in 1864, and at their peak the workshops employed 3000 workers.

The complex includes a museum with interactive interpretations of rail history in Queensland, the workers and their stories. Visitors can view old wagons and steam locomotives, plus traditional blacksmithing and a huge model railway.

It is not all backward looking, as there

is also a simulated ride on a high-speed "tilt" train.

Ipswich's old charm continues at its Woodlands of Marburg, a grand old two-storeyed masonry plantation residence with lacy iron verandas and a central tower.

The Scenic Rim is an emerging wine district that takes in an area from Ipswich south through the Fassifern Valley through peaceful farmland and mountain scenery. Several wineries have cellars where visitors can taste estate wines and local dishes.

Golfers can take their pick from public courses to a multi-million dollar championship course with a new clubhouse set within a luxurious modern housing development.

Bed 'n breakfasts throughout the Ipswich region offer an ideal base from which to venture out. Some are modern and close to town, while others are approaching 120 years old and have been fully restored.

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