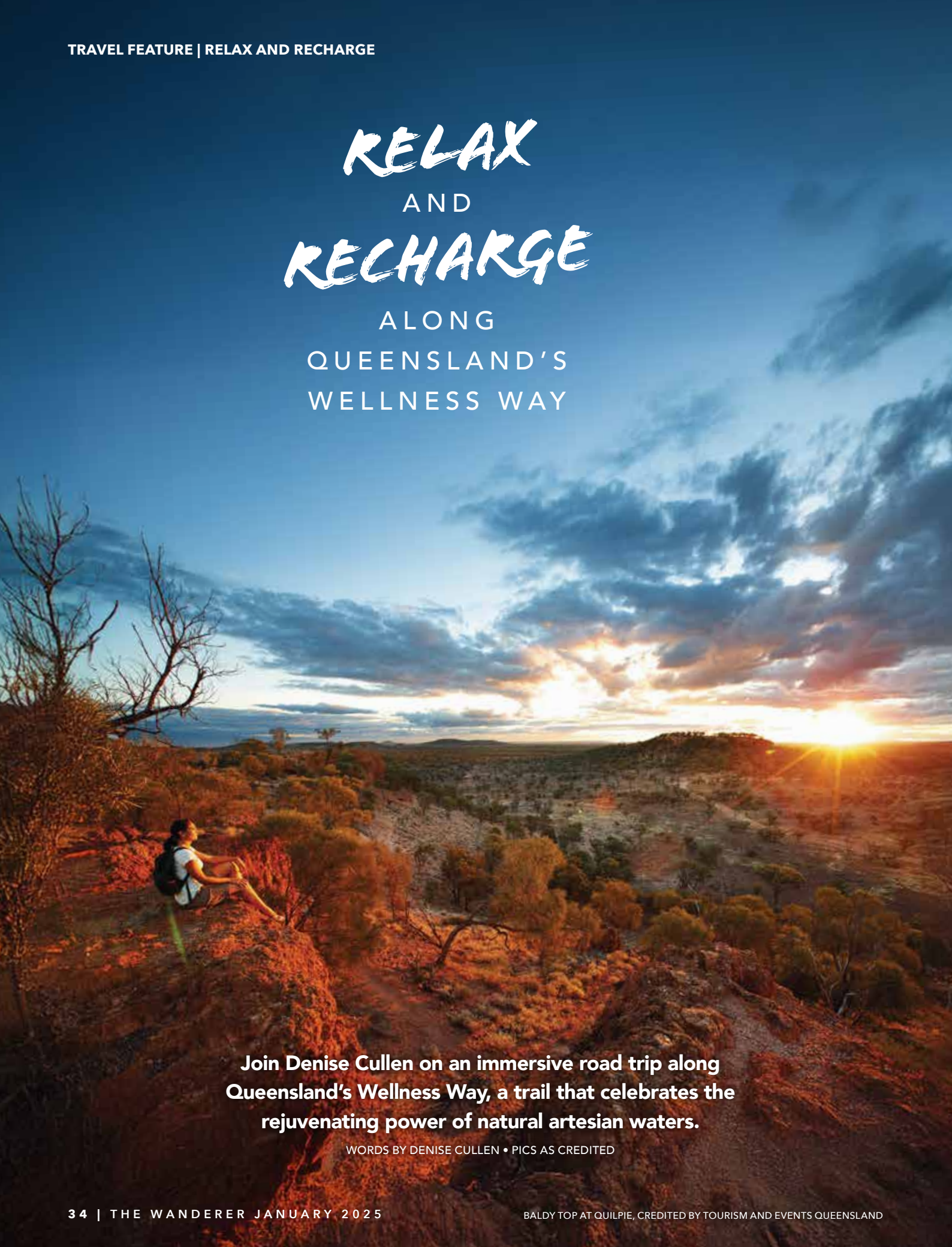


# RELAX AND RECHARGE

ALONG  
QUEENSLAND'S  
WELLNESS WAY



Join Denise Cullen on an immersive road trip along Queensland's Wellness Way, a trail that celebrates the rejuvenating power of natural artesian waters.

WORDS BY DENISE CULLEN • PICS AS CREDITED

A flock of corellas takes flight as I sink into Gudhala (eaglehawk) Pool at Cunnamulla Hot Springs in south-west Queensland.

Perched on the edge of the coffee-coloured Warrego River, this new facility boasts seven sinuous pools containing mineral-rich artesian waters that bubble up out of the ground at somewhere between 38-43°C.

Fortunately, for hot, thirsty, dusty travellers who arrive in the warmer months, there is also a cooler (26-28°C) pool and cold (10°C) plunge pool.

“Nah, not for me,” says one bather, as he dips a toe in the latter before beating a hasty retreat to the Naiaru (stars) Pool (40-42°C).

Cunnamulla Hot Springs is the newest destination on Outback Queensland’s Wellness Way – a trail comprised of 24 different hot springs, pools, spas and bathhouses, which tap water from the Great Artesian Basin (GAB).

The nearby Artesian Time Tunnel at the Cunnamulla Fella Visitor Information Centre tells the story of this geological wonder.

Hundreds of millions of years ago, sediment was laid down as ancient rivers, lakes and oceans covered much of Australia – compressing sand and gravel into porous sandstone that stores and channels water.

Over time, layers of clay and silt sealed the sandstone, creating a vast pressurised aquifer.

The GAB extends over 1.7 million square kilometres, providing the only source of fresh water across much of the continent.

Without it, mining, farming, and many other industries, would crumble.

But its potential to refresh road-weary travellers is only just starting to be realised.

Back at Cunnamulla Hot Springs, under the shade cast by eucalyptus trees, I bob, float, and consider the benefits of bathing in natural hot springs.

Geothermal mineral waters are believed to relieve muscle tension, boost circulation, provide pain relief, reduce stress, promote skin health, improve sleep, enhance mood, and fire up metabolism.

Who wouldn’t want a piece of that?



CUNNAMULLA HOT SPRINGS OVERLOOK THE WARREGO RIVER



CUNNAMULLA HOT SPRINGS CREDITED PAROO SHIRE COUNCIL



ST GEORGE SANDYTOWN RIVER CRUISES

## DOUBLE DELIGHT AT ST GEORGE

My goal is to visit a handful of the destinations dotted along the south-west Queensland portion of the Wellness Way.

The trip started a few days earlier, at St George, six hours inland by road from Brisbane.

I arrived just in time to clamber aboard the Sandytown River Cruises vessel for a sunset cruise along the Balonne River led by Captain Brett Schweikert.

As we edged our way upstream, the long-time local pointed out whistling kites' nests and other curiosities.

He also explained how two artesian bores now service the entire town (a third was decommissioned).

"The water comes out at 70°C - which is hot, and even more so in summer, so most dwellings have a cooling tank for the bore water," Brett said.

After disembarking, I took the short drive down to Pelican Rest Tourist Park. Its 12-metre heated therapeutic pool is one dot on the Wellness Way map and is only open to guests.

I plunged into its clear sapphire waters to shake off a long day.

## PUBLIC AND PRIVATE BATHING OPTIONS ABOUND

The following morning, I made a beeline for the town's second facility - the Balonne Artesian Thermal Hot Springs (BATHS) at the St George Aquatic Centre.

I descended the steps into the limpid, kidney-shaped pool (34-38°C).

This early in the morning, I had it all to myself.

I inhaled deeply and registered the silky feeling of the water.

Later, as I was packing up my gear, I noticed that my skin had a satiny sheen.

From St George, it's three hours by road to Charlotte Plains - a working sheep and cattle station and campgrounds located just outside Cunnamulla.

I navigated a red dirt road to a check-in shed before being greeted by a woman wearing an insect-repelling brim hat and brandishing a fly swish.

"There's no farm tours currently because it's too boggy," she explained.

The first order of business was gathering wood, lighting a campfire and planning tomorrow's soak.

Charlotte Plains' bore has been gushing since it was first sunk in 1892.

The water emerges at the bore head naturally heated to 42°C.

When owner Robyn Russell installed a handful of freestanding bathtubs, she had no idea what a hit they'd be.

But competition for the baths is fierce.

Although I set an alarm to ensure I would rise early enough to snag my choice of spot, more organised bathers had braved the dark and beaten me to it.

I settled in to wait, watching steam rising from the occupied tubs against a backdrop of the rising sun.

Eventually, it was my turn. I glided into the water and emerged, looking like a freshly boiled lobster.

Charlotte Plains also offers a private bathing experience comprising an al fresco hut containing two baths overlooking the striking red dirt landscape.

It's a rustic, down-to-earth experience that's quite different to the grounded glamour of Cunnamulla Hot Springs.

Can't decide between the two? You might as well visit both. They're located less than 40 minutes (by road) from each other.



## VENTURING ON THE OPAL TRAIL

The next morning, I made tracks to Yowah, which is the home of 'Yowah Nuts' – an impressive core of opal encased in a shell of red-brown ironstone.

A fossicking area lies just outside the town, and tin huts bearing signs that say 'Opals for sale'.

I ordered a coffee and scones at the Yowah Nut Café and listened to the barista and a weathered-looking miner discussing the opals on display.

When she ducked out the back, he turned to me. "She makes a great coffee, considering it's in the middle of nowhere," he said.

People don't come just to try their luck on the opal fields.

The town's obsession with bathing was clear when I stepped into the Artesian Waters Caravan Park shop, where there's an entire set of shelves devoted to tapware.

Yowah boasts two of the stops on the Wellness Way. The first is the caravan's ramshackle collection of bathhouses painted in rainbow colours, where I grabbed a private tub, turned on the taps, and soaked in a bath that's been millions of years in the making.

The town's second spot for bathers is the two pools that make up the Yowah Artesian Bore Baths.



EULO'S ARTESIAN MUD BATH CREDITED PAROO SHIRE COUNCIL

## EULO WIELDS OVERSIZED INFLUENCE

From Cunnamulla, the small town of Eulo, population 94, is a further 45-minute drive.

After dodging a mob of emus who had wandered across the road in front of me, I pulled up at a nondescript 'Artesian Mud Baths' sign.

A woman emerged from a house and led me to an open-air cubicle with thatched walls, a scented gidgee fire, and a three-metre-long bathtub that was filling up with warm artesian water flowing from taps affixed to a tree.

She handed over a sombrero hat.

"If the flies are bothering you, put it on – they don't like being under a shade," she said.

Parrots chattered in the trees overhead as she poured me a glass of merlot to accompany the cheese, olives and chocolates that were positioned on a bath caddy.

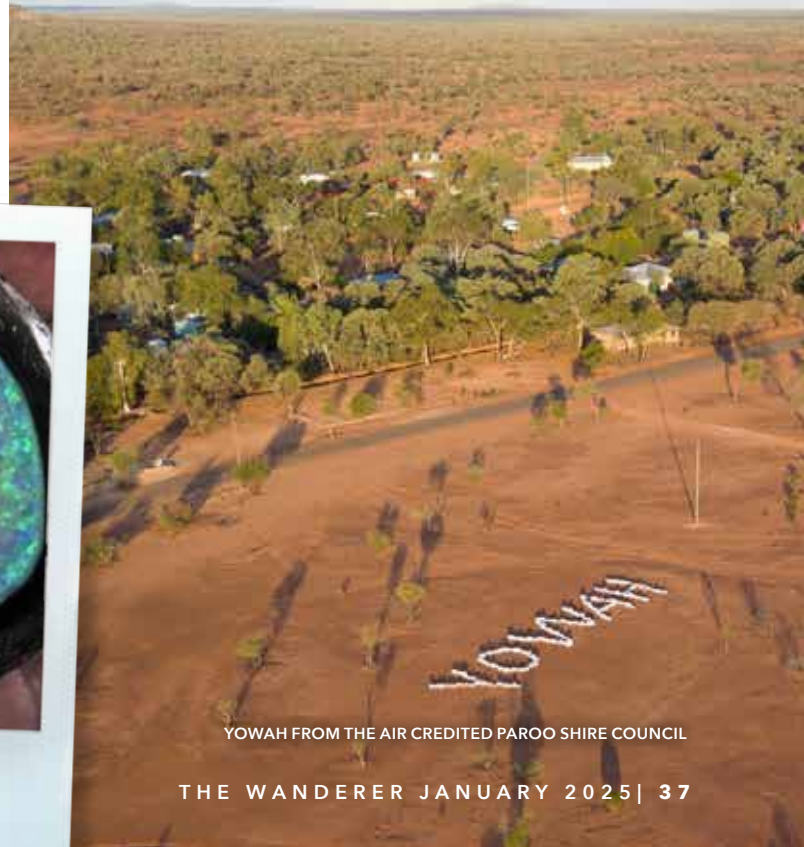
She then explained how to slather on proffered thick, milky clay.

I entered the bath and lay back to view the unbroken blue sky.

A couple of cubicles away, a man was singing – a spirited, upbeat baritone that matched my mood.



YOWAH NUTS CREDITED PAROO SHIRE COUNCIL



YOWAH FROM THE AIR CREDITED PAROO SHIRE COUNCIL

## SOAKING IN THE LAKESIDE VIEWS

My next destination was The Lake Quilpie, located about two hours' drive north.

Soon after I arrived, Dan Hoch, who owns the property with wife Louise, took me out for a tour of the 2,500 acre property where they run sheep, cattle and Kalahari red goats.

The Lake Bathhouse, containing two clawfoot tubs in a tin shed, is a relatively new addition.

It allows guests to unwind in warm artesian waters while watching the sun set over Lake Houdraman.

I was so relaxed that I almost fell asleep here - before being jolted awake when a group of mischievous kids (as in, baby goats) tried to gatecrash my session.

The following day, I headed out to the boulder formation called Baldy Top.

Although it's only a 10-minute scramble to the lookout at the top, climbers reap rewards that are disproportionate to their efforts - with wraparound views of the surrounding landscape.



## HEADING FOR HOME

From Quilpie, I travelled four hours east to Mitchell.

The Great Artesian Spa here is midway through a makeover, but Bree Jiggins took me for a tour of the community centre, gym and other facilities.

The Great Artesian Spa comprises two large pools of artesian water – a spa which is maintained at around 38°C, and a cooler pool that gets down to 13°C in winter.

Jiggins has seen an uptick of interest in hot springs bathing.

“A lot of people are doing longer term stays, so two- and three-day passes are massive,” she says.

I was disappointed that I didn’t crack the last hot springs on my itinerary – until I realised that the inconveniently timed renovations had given me the perfect excuse to return.

After all, Mitchell is only six hours by road from Brisbane.

And with several hours of hot springs bathing under my belt, I’ll be relaxed, refreshed and ready for the next journey.

