



surf and turf

There's more to the New South Wales Central Coast than its beautiful beaches and lakes, as KIRSTEN COLVIN discovers

We were something of a novelty when we moved to the Central Coast. Why? We didn't own a car. When we finally succumbed, we hit the road, with toddler in tow, to see what we'd been missing. Quite a lot, it turns out. There are lakes to the north, the hinterland to the west, and to the south and east along the coast, rugged beaches and picture-perfect seaside towns. Head off on the weekend (most things are open), and if you have time, take the back roads to see the real Coast... and the natural beauty the locals take for granted.

1 **Rainforest Sanctuary**
The Australian Rainforest Sanctuary, known to locals as the Forest of Tranquility, is a pocket of warm-temperate rainforest in Ourimbah. It's in a sheltered valley, so there are plenty of subtropical species, too, such as bangalow palms. There's a

10-minute flat walk (perfect for little legs), or a more challenging 100-minute loop through humid rainforest on one side of the valley and drier, open forest on the other. Plant labels are dotted about the place, as well as study stations for budding botanists. We'll be heading back for firefly season – from November 16 to December 21 in 2013. I've heard that seeing even a handful of fireflies whizzing around you at twilight is a magical experience.

2 **Australian Reptile Park**
If gardens don't captivate your kids, the Australian Reptile Park on the Pacific Highway at Somersby will. There's plenty for animal lovers along the nature walks (look, kids... alligators... bats!) and kangaroos on the loose in other areas. Spider World is a little kooky (the giant mechanical spider – slightly terrifying for younger viewers), but you can brush up on which spiders to

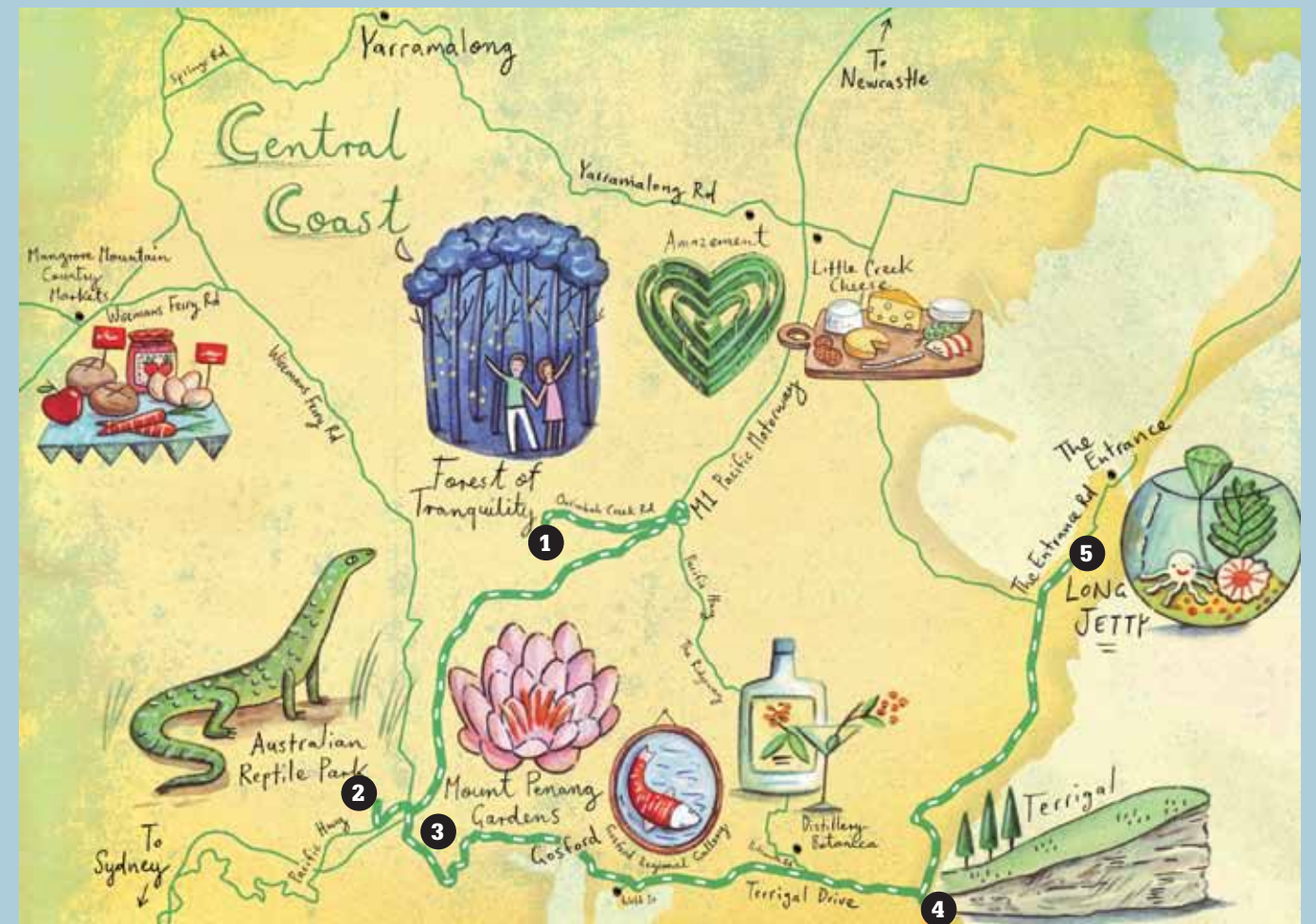
avoid in the garden. The country's spider and snake antivenom stocks are produced here – you can watch funnel-web spiders being milked at one of the daily shows.

3 **Mount Penang Gardens**
Set on 6ha, the gardens on Parklands Road, Kariong, are worth a visit for ideas on how to use native plants in your garden, and to see what's flowering when. From November to February, it's usually the spectacular lotuses and waterlilies, although the warm weather this year has brought everything on early. I never tire of seeing those blousy lotus blooms and sculptural seed pods. Elsewhere, the established gardens are laid out in distinct areas, from the dry dragon garden, to a cool rainforest fissure.

4 **Terrigal**
The population of this swanky seaside town swells in summer, so sneak in early or late in the day to avoid the traffic. Follow the Esplanade past the main beach, turn left as it curves right and you'll see The Skillion. Be warned: no visit to Terrigal is complete without a walk up this steep headland. It takes fortitude, but the views up and down the coast are spectacular, and the crash of the waves on the rugged coastline makes for an invigorating soundtrack to the start or end of your day.

5 **Long Jetty**
About 3km south of The Entrance is Long Jetty, a drive-through suburb that's slowly transforming into a destination, thanks to its pockets of retro cool. The corner of Thompson St and The Entrance Rd is where it's at. Next door to The Glass Onion Society cafe is the pick of the bunch for the botanically minded: Octopus's Garden (open Thur–Sun). This 'living gallery' is as pretty as a picture, with hanging moss ball planters, vertical gardens, inspiring cut-flower displays and succulents planted into vintage books! ►

4 HOLIDAY FUN
Intersperse days at the beach with trips to gardens, fauna parks and funky shops.



on the road... pack the car and go for a drive

To get to the Central Coast, drive north on the M1 (the old F3) from Sydney. Take the Gosford exit for Kariong and Somersby, or the Ourimbah exit if you're heading for the **Forest of Tranquility**.

If you fancy a scenic, hour-long inland drive, turn left after the **Australian Reptile Park** and head north to the Yarramalong Valley. From spring, the scarlet rosettes of the 6m-high gymea lilies along the roadside are an arresting sight.

If you time it right (last Sunday of the month), stock up on produce at the **Mangrove Mountain Country Markets** (cnr Wisemans Ferry and Waratah Rds). At **Yarramalong**, stop for a Devonshire tea, or drive 15 minutes east to **Amazement** (170 Yarramalong Rd, Wyong Creek) for a coffee overlooking the heart-shaped maze. The property has lots of fun mazes and farm animals.

Further east, Yarramalong Rd becomes Alison Rd. Stop in for a tasting at **Little Creek Cheese** (12, 141–155 Alison Rd, Wyong).

From Wyong, drive east to Tuggerah, and on to **The Entrance**. Sited where Tuggerah Lake meets the sea, this town has been a magnet for tourists since the 1800s. Head north to tour the lakes or south, via Long Jetty, to **Terrigal**.

On your way back to Gosford, stop at **Distillery Botanica** (25 Portsmouth Rd, Erina). Meet owner

and artisan distiller Philip Moore, founder of Renaissance Herbs, for free tastings and a tour of the still, then look around the herb garden that feeds his liqueurs and spirits.

When you've nearly completed a full circle back to Gosford, stop in at **Gosford Regional Gallery** (36 Webb St, East Gosford) for a stroll around the Japanese garden. The gallery shop is great for arty Christmas gifts and also sells fish food (\$1) for the kids to feed the koi in the garden's ponds. **GA**

travel tips

Reader Lee-Anne Patterson emailed us this tip: "When travelling with kids, take fold-up scooters. They fit easily in the boot or on the floor in the back seat of most cars. When you stop for a break, kids can burn off extra energy with a quick scoot around." Email your travel tips to roadtrip@gardeningaustralia.com.au or write to Roadtrip, Gardening Australia, Locked Bag 5030, Alexandria NSW 2015.