PRAISE THE SUNSHINE

Boasting an impressive 300 days of sunshine a year, the country town of Mareeba in Queensland’s far north is the latest venue to host a Celebrate Country Series meet, with race organisers hoping to take full advantage of the town’s inviting weather.

By Cameron McPherson

An hour’s drive west of Cairns along the Kennedy Highway, Mareeba sits on the Atherton Tableland in Far North Queensland and has a population of just over 10,000 people.

According to Allan Joseph from the Mareeba Heritage Museum and Tourist Information Centre, Mareeba is best known for its unique climate and pleasant weather.

“Mareeba is much drier than surrounding regions such as Cairns and Atherton. The town sits in a rain pocket on the Tableland, which blesses us with 300 sunny days every year,” Allan says.

Despite the absence of rainfall in the town, Mareeba always has plenty of water thanks to the intersecting rivers as well as the nearby Tinaroo Falls Dam. In fact the town’s name is derived from an Aboriginal word meaning ‘meeting of the waters’, named such because of the town’s location on the confluence of the Barron River, Granite Creek and Emerald Creek.

The dam provides irrigation water for the region’s agriculture, an industry that is booming in Mareeba.

The frost-free climate allows Mareeba farmers to grow almost any crop they desire. Driving through the plantations on the outskirts of town is akin to driving through a living fruit salad, with an abundance of tropical fruits like mangoes, lychees, pineapples, paw paws and bananas adding plenty of colour to the landscape during growing season. The region also has a strong coffee industry, producing approximately 80 per cent of the coffee grown in Australia. Avocados, sugar cane, nuts and vegetables also regularly punctuate the farming landscape.

“Mareeba is a nice little town filled with friendly people. It has been getting quite busy and has expanded a lot in recent years,” Allan says.

“It is very multicultural. Each year the town holds a multicultural festival to celebrate and embrace the different nationalities living and working throughout the town.”

The various nationalities present in Mareeba’s cultural landscape have all left their mark on the town’s culinary scene. The central business district flaunts restaurants, cafés and coffee shops, all of which serve up tantalising treats for the tastebuds. The town offers a great choice of international cuisine, however it’s its great Italian meals that the town prides itself on.

While there are plenty of local tourist attractions around the town, such as the Mareeba Heritage Museum and Golden Drop Tropical Fruit Winery, the town’s location also makes it a great base for exploring all North Queensland has to offer.

“The surrounding towns are also great places to spend a day exploring. Nearby Chillagoe’s famous limestone caves allow visitors to channel their inner Indiana Jones, and the town of Irvinebank is a step back into the early days of mining. Best of all, the tropical paradise of the Daintree Rainforest is just over an hour away by car.

While there is certainly no shortage of places to go and things to see around Mareeba, come Saturday, March 2, all eyes around the town will be set firmly on the track, as the Mareeba Turf Club hosts the next meet in the Celebrate Country Series.

Having gained momentum in the last few years, the club moved its regular March meet to Australia Day for 2013, with Mareeba’s inaugural Celebrate Country meet filling the gap.

“We call it ‘country racing at its best’,” claims...
Mareeba Turf Club secretary John Thurlow.

"Mareeba has a beautiful ground and racing is really well supported by the community. We're only a small country racing club, but we had 1500 people at our Boxing Day races last year, so the club is definitely growing."

John is hoping the Celebrate Country meet will build on the success of the Boxing Day races, and if the on-track action is anything to go by, punters will be in for a great day of racing. "We have very competitive fields at our meets, with horses mainly coming from Cairns and Innisfail, as well as around the Tablelands," John says.

"With the great prizemoney being offered by Racing Queensland and the State Government, I expect very good attendance by owners and trainers."

**10 THINGS TO DO AROUND MAREEBA**

1. **Take a coffee tour**
   With Mareeba producing 80 per cent of the coffee grown in Australia, it is in no way short on coffee plantation visits! It is a 5 min drive from the Turf Club and learn about the roles these plants play in the history of our greatest coffee.

2. **Visit the Worbirdos**
   Mareeba Airport is home to an extensive collection of ex-military aircraft including a Spitfire, Hurricane and Mustang. A great day out for aviation enthusiasts.

3. **Try something fruity**
   Presenting a unique twist on the common winery. Golden Pride has made it easier for fruit-lovers to purchase quality wines made from 100 per cent locally grown mangoes. Sample the distinctly sweet flavour of their mango series, explore the vast mango 'vineyard' and take home a bottle or two to impress your friends at dinner.

4. **Mareeba Heritage Museum**
   This small but fascinating museum delves into the history of the region by visiting the Mareeba Heritage Museum. The museum features 22 displays, including Aboriginal culture displays, a settler's hut, telephones exhibition, printing press and motor car ambulance. The centre's friendly staff are also a great source of local knowledge about the area and its attractions.

5. **Float above the clouds**
   Unfortunately, the best way to take in the Mareeba and Atherton Tablelands area is by air. There are a variety of options for air ballooning around the region, each allowing you to float majestically among the clouds as the rising sun illuminates the landscapes below you.

6. **Tinaroo Falls Dam**
   Do a scenic drive south from Mareeba will take you to Tinaroo Dam. The marina takes sit on the edge of Darwin State Forest and is a great spot for sailing, waterskiing and swimming, as well as plenty of good fishing. Out of the water there are wonderful walking trails to explore, as well as the cascading Tinaroo Falls.

7. **Drive the Kuranda Range**
   The Kennedy Highway connects Mareeba with Cairns and the east coast. This route passes through the Atherton Tablelands, a scenic pass through the mountains that is a must-drive for driving enthusiasts and lovers of a good view alike.

8. **Great Barrier Reef**
   Mareeba lies only 1 hour's drive west of the coast and the Great Barrier Reef. One of Australia’s natural wonders, the reef is home to an abundance of marine life of all shapes, sizes and colours. Tours regularly depart from Cairns.

9. **Experience the Outback**
   To the west of Mareeba lies Australia’s natural contrast to the Reef, the Outback. Experience the iconic Australian landscape, experience, a once in a lifetime adventure, on an organised tour, or load up a four-wheel drive and tackle it on your own. The adventure is up to you.

10. **Granite Gorge Nature Park**
    Located just 30 minutes outside Mareeba, Granite Gorge Nature Park is home to rare and endangered rock wallabies that are only seen here. The park also features possums, gliders, lizards, quolls, turtles and echidnas. On-site cabin accommodation is available.

Even though it is a country club, the grounds at Mareeba Turf Club are top notch. The turf track underwent drainage improvements in 2012 to transform it into a fantastic all-weather track.

The club hosts four official meets a year, however it isn’t unusual for the Mareeba Turf Club to also host two or three of Cairns’ and Innisfail’s meets during the season when their tracks are too wet to use.

Horse racing has a long history in Mareeba, with the club dating back almost 120 years. That relationship with the town continues, with a strong local attendance at the Turf Club’s meets and sponsorship support by local businesses.

While the meetings draw a number of visitors from Cairns, the majority of out-of-town guests come from the towns such as Georgetown, Dinburah and Chillagoe.

"A lot of the visitors from out west don’t want to go into Cairns because it’s too busy, so instead they come to Mareeba because it’s a true country-style meeting," John says.

"People from out west use our meets as a way to catch up with their friends and family from Mareeba and Cairns."

The atmosphere at Mareeba’s racing meets is typical of country racing, with a friendly and fun environment for the young, the old and families. Racegoers seek shelter from the north Queensland sun in the cool shade of the fig trees that populate the central garden area.

The club has also recently moved the bookmakers out under marquees in the garden as a way to reduce crowding and entice casual punters.

**ON THE TURF**

**THE CELEBRATION OPEN HANDICAP**

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<th>Prize Money</th>
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<tr>
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<td>900m</td>
<td>Class B Of $5500: 1st $3650, 2nd $1100, 3rd $550, 4th $200</td>
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**QTIS ADDDED STAKES MAIDEN PLATE**

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<td>1123m</td>
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<td>900m</td>
<td>For non-QTIS horses: Of $5500: 1st $4500, 2nd $1100, 3rd $550, 4th $200</td>
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**EVENTS – MAREEBA**

Off-track the racecourse has a large, well-stocked bar and commercial kitchen to provide food and drinks for guests, while the young and young-at-heart can be kept entertained by the jumping castle.

Fashion and racing have always gone hand-in-hand, and like every race meet worth its salt the Celebrate Country meeting is expected to feature a hefty contended fashioned fashions on the field competition. Categories include ladies, men and over-50s, with substantial prizemoney up for grabs.

A live band will also be performing on the day to keep the crowd entertained, playing on into the evening before the racemeisters migrate across the road to the unoffcial post-race venue, the Mareeba Leagues Club, for dinner and festivities well on into the night.