

Escape the City

THE REGIONAL CENTRES OF NEW SOUTH WALES OFFER ALL THE BENEFITS OF A RELAXED, AFFORDABLE LIFESTYLE WITHOUT THE TRAFFIC, EXPENSE AND CHAOS OF SYDNEY'S BIG SMOKE.

Tell Sydneysiders that they can cut their daily commute by a quarter and slash their mortgage by a third while still having access to great coffee, and they'll probably ask: "What's the catch?" But an increasing number of former city slickers are discovering the only obstacle to a cheaper lifestyle is actually deciding to take the plunge.

According to Evocities, a NSW regional resident attraction campaign, more than 3600 new households have migrated to their seven partner cities and surrounds since 2010.

One of the main drivers attracting people to those destinations – Albury, Armidale, Bathurst, Dubbo, Orange, Tamworth and Wagga Wagga – is affordable real estate.

In a report being prepared for Evocities by .ID Consulting, figures show the median house price to income ratio in the last Census was 4.7 per cent, compared with a huge 8.4 per cent in Sydney.



Kirsten Craze

Kirsten Craze is a freelance journalist who has been writing about property in Australia and overseas for more than 15 years.

Making the move

Jason and Karen Triggs moved to the Bathurst region with their two young children in January 2018, after spending years tackling traffic and dealing with skyrocketing property prices.

"Everything was just becoming harder than it needed to be," Jason explains. "We lived in Sydney's Northern suburbs and I was working on the other side in Alexandria. The kids spent their time in car seats, and sometimes we were too busy to even have breakfast at home, so they'd be eating toast in the back of the car.

"Plus, for our new place we ended up paying about a third of the total cost of our home in Sydney, so it's been completely transformational," he adds.



PHOTOGRAPH: EVOCTIES

Today the Triggses are not only closer to work and the dream of living mortgage-free, they are connecting with the community.

"You actually get to know your neighbours," Jason says. "In Sydney we'd been living in the last place for about five years and I couldn't tell you the first names of the people on one side, and we'd only see the ones on the other side at Christmas. It's completely different here."

He admits that before heading west he, like many other Sydneysiders, had preconceived ideas about regional life.

"I thought I'd have to re-train and I was uncertain about what work I could do, but there's actually no shortage of jobs here."

Now working with a local start-up, Jason has seen firsthand that a regional area can provide better work opportunities than the overcrowded Sydney market.

"Being a smaller community, it's actually easier to get stuff done. You can get involved

with key regional stakeholders in your field, or even get a meeting with the mayor," he says.

Albury Mayor and Evocities chairman Kevin Mack is living proof of that regional reality.

"Anyone who wants to move to Albury will get a personal tour with the mayor," he says enthusiastically.

The scheme is successfully educating people about life in regional NSW: "People in Sydney can be guilty of living in their own bubble. They're too busy doing what they're doing and don't see the forest for the trees.

"These are vibrant regional cities that have evolved to offer a lifestyle as good as, or better than, Sydney's. I think regional living now far outstrips city living," Mr Mack says, adding that other misconceptions about regional life are low earning potential and volatile property prices.

"If you do the numbers – add up the time and money you save in terms of transport, and the money you save on a mortgage – I'm sure that ▶





PHOTOGRAPH: EVOCITIES

A BEAUTIFUL AND AFFORDABLE HOME IN DUBBO

in 10 years in a regional city you'll have saved a lot more money, and get more return on your investment, than you would in Sydney," he says.

Crunching the numbers

Cameron Kusher, senior analyst at CoreLogic, says that despite significant residential house price growth in regional NSW over the past five years (some Evocities locations have seen values rise by as much as 20 to 30 per cent), a cooling Sydney property market will spread elsewhere.

"A lot of what happens in regional NSW is dictated by what happens in Sydney," he explains. "However, you haven't had the deterioration in housing affordability in regional cities like you've had in Sydney – but now with tighter credit and fewer investors out there in the marketplace it will affect other parts of the state as well.

"I don't think these markets will experience the same conditions Sydney is going through, the sort of falls that we're seeing in Sydney. But certainly I think there will be an impact on demand, and that's going to, at the very least, slow down the rate of growth in those areas."

When new Tamworth resident Neil McLennan thinks about how long it would have taken him to buy his first property in Sydney he laughs awkwardly. "I would have been well into my late 40s before I could have even entertained the idea," he says.

Last year the single 28-year-old bought a one-bedroom apartment in Tamworth outright for \$132,000.

As a community aged care worker, Neil's salary did not permit him to buy anywhere near family or friends in Sydney. "Where I used to live in Roseville, a unit would have cost me about \$800,000. Here a really good two-bedroom unit would be about \$180,000," he says.

"I was sick of fighting with traffic in Sydney, but for me the big motivator was being able to afford a place of my own. The job and the social life I knew would just come naturally after that."

He adds that while it is often young families or retiring couples who tend to make a treechange, singles can have just as much success starting over. "I think it's easier to fit in here because everyone is so laidback and approachable, and there's so much going on," he says.

"If you're thinking about moving, get out there and visit the Evocities over a weekend and see what's on offer – then hop online and see how much properties cost compared with what you'd have to settle for in Sydney."

Looking to the future

Growing regional cities are a natural way forward as Sydney's population hits breaking point according to Geoff Brailey, a social demographer with McCrindle.

"Wages just aren't keeping up with property prices, particularly in Sydney, so that challenge is impacting those trying to enter the housing market. People who are younger, with young families, or maybe in those pretty secure jobs around teaching and nursing, are looking towards rural, regional options," he says.

In its 2015 Future of Sydney Report, McCrindle asked people what their five greatest challenges living in Sydney were. First it was the high cost of living, then the cost of housing, followed by traffic and commute times, then employment prospects and, finally, the overall stress of life.

"I think the misconception of life in regional areas being limiting is now worth challenging. These towns offer a real quality of life. The time savings, the cost savings, the enhanced social capital: they're the advantages regional areas have over urban areas, and yet they're not disadvantaged in terms of a lot of the lifestyle and cultural aspects," Geoff says. "And they've also got some of the most beautiful terrain in their backyards, so we really need to celebrate their stories."

He adds that as the population of NSW continues to grow, urban areas and regional areas need to come closer together.

"For NSW there's an opportunity to really think through that connection, which would involve accessible flights, train and road connections, as well as that digital infrastructure to make sure we're able to live and work and play well together," he says. "We need to ask ourselves: How do we help that synergy across a state where we have five million people living in Sydney, which is just a tiny geographical footprint of this beautiful and large state?"

AusBiz.



PHOTOGRAPH: EVOCITIES



CHANGE IN MEDIAN HOUSE PRICES

SYDNEY

- Median house price \$980,000
- Three years - 18.8%
- Five years - 56.8%

ALBURY

- Median house price \$330,000
- Three years - 8.2%
- Five years - 17.9%

ARMIDALE

- Median house price (council - Armidale Dumaresq) \$350,000
- Three years - 1.6%
- Five years - 7.7%

BATHURST

- Median house price (council - Bathurst regional) \$434,500
- Three years - 20.4%
- Five years - 27.4%

DUBBO

- Median house price \$362,000
- Three years - 9.7%
- Five years - 30%

ORANGE

- Median house price \$400,000
- Three years - 17.6%
- Five years - 21.2%

TAMWORTH

- Median house price (council - regional) \$350,000
- Three years - 12.1%
- Five years - 25%

WAGGA WAGGA

- Median house price \$359,000
- Three years - 12.2%
- Five years - 18.8%