

HOME BASE

A golden glow as the rush is back on

While many cities struggle to cope with population growth, Bendigo has flung open its doors, writes **Mary Costello.**

INCREASING population growth in our regional centres rather than in Melbourne should provide benefits for both city and country residents. Such a strategy would help contain urban sprawl — and the associated pressure on infrastructure — while offering home seekers a less hectic, more affordable and more community-centred lifestyle.

Bendigo is one small city that's been steadily attracting new residents. The opulence of its gold rush era is evident in the grandeur of its heritage-listed buildings, historic gardens and stately streetscapes.

Despite its historic credentials, there's nothing fossilised about this vibrant city, which sits at the centre of Victoria — 150 kilometres northwest of Melbourne — and services a huge area of the state.

This has always been a place of energy and innovation. It's the city where Myer and the Bendigo Bank originated and the Bendigo goldfield is still one of the most productive in the world. Since 2006, the City of Greater Bendigo has been pro-

gressively upgrading the city centre, now bustling with shops, cafes, hotels and galleries.

Bendigo is renowned for its arts and crafts. Bendigo Pottery, in the suburb of Epsom, has been producing handsome, durable, and distinctively Australian pottery since 1858. A major tourist destination, Bendigo Pottery features a museum, cafe and gallery spaces for potters and artists. Down town, the Bendigo Art Gallery, the Capital Theatre, and the La Trobe University Visual Arts Centre form the nucleus of a lively arts precinct in View Street.

Bendigo's bushland setting is another significant asset. There are kilometres of cycling and walking tracks around the city and the 17,000-hectare Greater Bendigo National Park offers bird-watching, scenic drives, horse-riding, camping and fossicking. Residents also have access to extensive sports facilities, including Bendigo Stadium and Bendigo Aquatic Centre; and council has plans to build a second aquatic and leisure centre to cater for the growing population.



While this is already a very liveable place, the City of Bendigo is working on a range of community and economic development strategies to improve liveability, upgrade transport links, promote tourism and further boost its population of 100,000. That includes promoting multicultural diversity by attracting skilled migrants to the area.

The Chinese have been a part of Bendigo since the gold rush, their contribution and culture celebrated in the Golden Dragon Museum and in the restored 1860s Joss House, the oldest still in use in Australia.

A more recent Asian influence is evident at the Atisha Centre, a Buddhist retreat comprising a study centre and monastery, 15 minutes from the city.

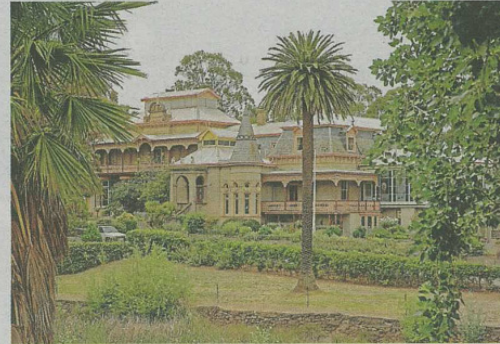
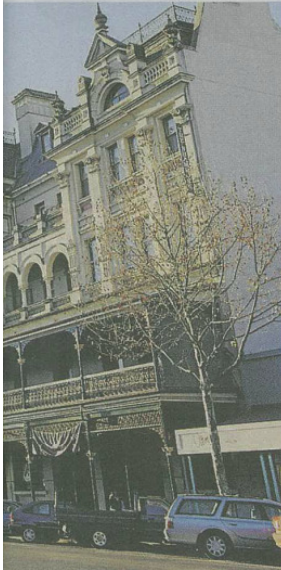
A shrine — the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion — is now under construction in the centre grounds. It is designed as a duplicate of the Great Stupa of Gyantse in

Tibet and, when completed, will be the largest stupa in the western world.

Wherever they come from, more people means more development; and in 2009-10, Bendigo building approvals reached record levels. When, in May, Simonds Homes submitted a development application for Evergreen Waters, a \$250 million residential project, Mayor Rod Campbell welcomed the proposal — the largest ever planned for Bendigo.

"The Evergreen Waters proposal is the type of development that was envisaged when the city embarked on its residential development strategy. It ticks many of the boxes like quality design and sustainability," Cr Campbell says.

"This development is also important because, in addition to filling a demand for new housing, it will also provide a boost to both our local building industry and our local economy."



Bendigo's architectural grandeur (left) is evident everywhere, while Fortuna Villa (centre) is testament to its mining heritage and Bendigo Art Gallery (right) forms part of a lively arts precinct. PICTURES: TOURISM VICTORIA, DARYL PINDER

and has since developed a number of master-planned communities in areas just outside the city, such as Maiden Gully, Epsom and Strathfieldsaye.

Villawood has had a significant increase in local land sales since the introduction of the government's new regional First Home Buyers' Boost in July. The \$26,500 grant is available to buyers building their first home in regional Victoria.

The 53-block Akins Ridge is typical of the new developments. Located in Golden Square, next to a large bushland reserve, house blocks here are priced from \$89,000. Akins Ridge is only a short drive to the Bendigo CBD and close to shops, sports facilities, parkland and schools.

Deemed a child-friendly city by the United Nations, Bendigo offers a full range of health, childcare and educational options for families. There are seven secondary colleges here, including Catholic College Bendigo, Girton Grammar (Prep-Year 12), Victory Christian College and Bendigo Senior Secondary College (Years 11-12), which is the largest provider of VCE, VET, and VCAL courses in Victoria. Bendigo Special Developmental School caters for both primary and secondary students.

For older students, Bendigo TAFE offers more than 400 courses

at its two local campuses and those aiming for a degree no longer need to migrate to Melbourne to attend university. La Trobe University has 4000 students enrolled at its increasingly popular Bendigo campus, on 33 hectares of bushland.

Bendigo health facilities received a major boost this year when the state government allocated \$473 million in its budget to build a new hospital, while in August, Monash University opened a new building as part of the expansion of its Regional Clinical School, established here in 2003.

School director Professor Geoff Solarsh says: "These new facilities are part of a long-term plan to increase the rural health workforce by giving students first-hand experience of the rewards of practice and life outside the big cities."

"The Bendigo Regional Clinical School will eventually form one component of a unique health-training precinct that will also include the Bendigo Primary Health Centre (GP super clinic) and the La Trobe University Rural Health School, co-located with the Bendigo hospital. Medical, nursing and allied health students will learn in a truly inter-professional environment, and Bendigo continues to build its health sciences academic base."

With so much investment in the

future of the area, the property market is strong. The managing director of DCK Real Estate, Robert Ketterer, says the city's population has been boosted by an influx of buyers, including Melburnians, former locals returning home to settle and buyers from outlying rural areas and interstate.

"Bendigo Bank, La Trobe University, the hospital and Bendigo Mining are all big employers. And lots of small businesses are doing very well, putting on an extra staff member or two. It all adds to the employment base," Mr Ketterer says.

"People can walk to work or enjoy the restaurants, parks and cafes. You can drive from one end of Bendigo to the other in minutes. You leave home at 8.30 and you're at work at 8.45 and it's the same going home. People value the time saving."

Mr Ketterer says central Bendigo is the most popular location for home seekers.

"It's only about an hour and a half to Melbourne on the new Calder Highway or on the V/Line early-morning express train to Southern Cross Station," he says. "People feel welcomed here. The city is big enough to provide all modern living requirements but it's not so big as to be impersonal. It's a safe place to live and raise a family."