



STANTHORPE SURPRISES

FINE FOOD AND WINE ACCOMPANY THE LEXUS HYBRID LUXURY OF THE GS 450h ALONG STANTHORPE'S WINE TRAIL.

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Left: The myth-busting GS 450h beside a man-made granite pyramid in Ballandean. This page, from top: Rolling on hybrid technology; fine lines of the GS 450h; and the instrument panel.



YOU CAN'T MAKE GOOD WINE IN Queensland and hybrid vehicles are underpowered. These two myths are quickly dispelled as we arrive in Queensland's border town of Stanthorpe for a weekend away.

Any concerns that a hybrid engine segues into a life in the slow lane are left behind as quickly as the lowlands of the Fassifern Valley as our Lexus GS 450h begins its 700-metre climb up the ancient basalt that forms Queensland's Main Range National Park. Our route across the range is through Cunningham's Gap, which, when discovered in 1827, was at first regarded as too steep

to be of use for a road. The GS 450h seems to mock this assessment as the 3.5-litre V6 effortlessly propels us up the steep and winding Cunningham Highway and over the remnants of the long-extinct volcano.

The revolutionary Lexus Hybrid Drive powering our GS 450h delivers breathtaking performance for extremely rapid linear acceleration, combined with low emissions and low fuel consumption. Even though we spend our days exploring the region and scaling the prehistoric granites on the climbing and tortuous roads of Stanthorpe, our mileage averages a shade over 9 litres per

100 kilometres, outstanding economy for a 6-cylinder vehicle that boasts the power of a 4.0-litre V8. Performance with a conscience.

Astounding too is the silence of the ride. The whisper-quiet electric mode fools me more than once into checking whether I have actually started the vehicle. At higher speeds the quiet of the engine and the lack of road noise entering the cabin make for a serene ride. The silence lets us enjoy the sounds we want to hear in perfect fidelity as the GS 450h provides the perfect environment for the 14-speaker Mark Levinson audio system.

The roads are well maintained and the driving is easy, thanks to the Active Cruise Control that not only maintains a predetermined speed but also a set distance from vehicles in front courtesy of a millimetre wave radar sensor. The sensor detects cars in front and varies the vehicle's speed to maintain a safe distance.

The same technology manages the Pre-Collision Safety System (PCS). If the system calculates a collision is imminent it will activate the Pre-Collision Brake Assist to support the driver with additional braking power, adjust the vehicle's Active

Variable Suspension (AVS) to sharpen handling and reduce nosedive during heavy braking, and tighten seatbelts to restrain occupants in preparation for a collision.

We pass through the 'Rose and Rodeo City' of Warwick and continue climbing as we head south to Stanthorpe. Once a sleepy fruit town best known as one of the very few places in Queensland to regularly receive snow, Stanthorpe's best winemakers are carving out a reputation for the town as a respected wine region. Just like many other wine regions, a gourmet industry has also sprung up on the Stanthorpe wine trail.

As we approach Stanthorpe we stop at Sutton's Juices at Thulimbah. Started in 1994 by former prawn fisherman David Sutton and his wife Ros, Sutton's has grown from just growing apples to producing a diverse range of apple and fruit products.

With more juice varieties than most people would know existed, award-winning apple ciders and real fruit liqueurs – not to mention delectable vinegars and sauces – Sutton's is our first indication that Stanthorpe will more than live up to the word on the gourmet grapevine. Leaving Sutton's Juices, the pleasant voice of the ▶



Main picture: Reflecting nature in the GS 450h. From top: The Mark Levinson audio system; ECT power switch; and the Energy Monitor showing hybrid battery charge.



WEEKEND AWAY
THE WHISPER-QUIET ELECTRIC MOTOR FOOLS ME MORE THAN ONCE INTO CHECKING WHETHER I HAVE ACTUALLY STARTED THE VEHICLE.

DVD-based Satellite Navigation system directs us back to the highway and through Stanthorpe on to our night's accommodation a little farther south at Ballandean.

We arrive at our evening's accommodation, the appropriately named Vineyard Cottages, and are greeted by our hosts Peter and Janine Cumming. We are led to our cottages down an avenue of red oak trees and past fig and apple trees that Peter and Janine have lovingly tended since purchasing the land 20 years ago. The well-appointed cottages are immaculately presented and make for a wonderful stay.

After a walk around the grounds, we wander up to a former church building that has been converted into a restaurant. Host Janine transforms into Chef Janine and an excellent meal incorporating local produce matched with Peter's carefully selected local wine list follows.

The early spring morning brings with it a hint of what over winter is called "Brass Monkey Season". As we slip back into the Lexus I'm thankful for the climate controlled front seats which help ease the chill of the morning as they warm the comfortable leather seats.

Where Queensland's wines were once openly sniggered at, they now garner respect. There are more than 50 wineries and cellar doors in Stanthorpe, including the Queensland College of Wine Tourism, an innovative partnership involving the Queensland Government, University of Southern Queensland, local schools and TAFE, and the local wine industry. The college demonstrates the state's commitment to the industry and boasts its own label, Banca Ridge, bistro and cellar door.

Symphony Hill winery is typical of the new wine approach. Established in 1999, it

has rapidly become a flagship for quality wine in Queensland. Its 2003 Reserve Shiraz was the first Queensland wine to ever win a gold medal at the Sydney Royal Wine Show when it received the award in 2005, also claiming the distinction of being the second-highest-scoring wine of the show. The winery is rated four-and-a-half stars in James Halliday's 2009 Wine Companion.

Reversing out of the winery's crowded cellar door car park, I'm thankful for the Rear View Camera automatically displaying a colour image of what's behind us on the dashboard-mounted EMV screen. The Rear

Guide Assist gives a precise indication of distances and clearances, allowing effortless negotiation of the tight space.

Cruising along the wine trail we savour the driving experience. The apparent power and ride of the Lexus GS 450h is balanced by the hidden features, such as Vehicle Stability Control (VSC) designed to prevent loss of control of the car in situations such as slippery conditions which might lead to a skid. If VSC calculates that the driver may lose control of the vehicle, it will apply various stability and safety systems to assist the driver in gaining control of the car.

More apparent in the ride and handling is the in-built Vehicle Dynamics Integrated Management (VDIM), a Lexus innovation that meshes all the vehicle's stability and control systems. In the GS 450h, VDIM also seamlessly controls Variable Gear Ratio Steering (VGRS) providing seamless gear changes and responsive acceleration.

Back at Vineyard Cottages I admire the sleek, powerful lines of the Lexus in the fading light. Stanthorpe is a place that you can easily lose yourself, but the Lexus GS 450h makes the pain of having to drive home tomorrow much more bearable. ▶

WEEKEND AWAY



FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Stanthorpe is situated in the heart of the Granite Belt, so named because of the granite upon which the area sits, formed about 250 million years ago. Today the granite creates spectacular outcrops, as well as standing and balancing stones that can be admired in Girraween National Park, just out of Ballandean and Bald Rock National Park, which has the largest exposed granite rock formation in the Southern Hemisphere. The stone is also responsible for the decomposed granite soils, credited with the success of the region's wines.

The Kambu Wal aboriginal tribe used the Granite Belt as their summer hunting grounds for thousands of years before Allan Cunningham ventured through the pass that now bears his name and discovered the lands beyond in 1827. Pastoralists arrived in the region during the

1840s, and in 1857 an inn was built that became a staging post for coaches travelling between New England and the Darling Downs.

The discovery of tin in 1872 brought a mining boom and gave Stanthorpe its name: *Stannum* is Latin for tin and *thorp* is English for village. Fruit growing started around the same time and continues today with the Granite Belt synonymous with apples and stone fruit.

Following World War I, soldier settlements were established and townships named after the French battlefields sprang up - Pozieres, Messines, Fleurbaix, Amiens, and Passchendaele - though they exist mainly as names on maps these days. After World War II Italian migrants arrived and Stanthorpe can trace its wine pedigree back to these immigrants who made table wines for their own consumption.



ESSENTIALS

GET MORE OUT OF QUEENSLAND'S WINE TRAIL IN STANTHORPE.

GETTING THERE

WHERE TO STAY

THINGS TO DO

WHERE TO EAT



Pictured clockwise from top: Country character; Vineyard Cottages; sampling reds at Symphony Hill; gravlax of salmon with mustard and dill sauce; Whiskey Gully Wines; kangaroos in the vineyard; cottage comforts; and Stanthorpe in bloom.

Stanthorpe is an easy three-hour drive from Brisbane. Heading west along the Ipswich Motorway, you turn south on to the Cunningham Highway at Riverview.

Following the road for 80 kilometres through Aratula you climb up the Great Dividing Range passing through Cunningham's Gap as you go.

Continuing south through the lush farmland of Maryvale and Freestone, you pass through Warwick and travel south on the New England Highway to Stanthorpe.

To get to Ballandean it is a further 20 kilometres drive south. The roads in the area are well maintained and make for good driving.

Vineyard Cottages and Café in Ballandean provides accommodation in purpose-built individual country cottages set on two acres of picturesque, romantic and lovingly tended gardens.

Peter and Janine Cumming have created the ideal base for a Stanthorpe getaway, whether it's for a romantic weekend for two or a Granite Belt wine tour with a group of friends.

While modestly named, Vineyard Café has been included in *Gourmet Traveller's* top 500 restaurants every year since 2000 and Janine offers an unmissable breakfast. Try the baked egg and local bacon. www.vineyardcottages.com.au

The oenophile (wine lover) will be in heaven with the selection of wineries on offer. For something different, Sutton's offers a 'cider door' and plenty of opportunities to stock the larder. Offering the total berry experience, The Bramble Patch has all manner of delicious berries throughout summer and a tasty range of jams, sauces and chutneys out of season.

For the sweet tooth, Heavenly Chocolate is just that and is famous for its handmade chocolates available only at the store. www.queenslandwine.com.au
www.hivalue.com.au
www.bramblepatch.com.au
www.wisteriacottage.com.au

Beverly Vineyard Restaurant is also the cellar door for the award-winning Whiskey Gully Wines.

Serving à la carte lunch from 11am each day, its specialty is Saturday night's degustation-style Beverly Banquet. Co-owner and Chef John Arlidge prepares a multi-course chef's choice meal, blending seasonal local produce into his favoured French-style food and sauces.

He has also been known to stow the chef's apron and, with daughter Emily on vocals, entertain diners by playing one of the many vintage guitars that decorate the dining room. www.whiskeygullywines.com.au

