



Musings of Mt. Penang

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From Nowra to Gosford is more than a cut lunch and compass job. It's a logical work of navigating. But as Brian and myself have managed to navigate ourselves to Melbourne and back without a scratch, Gosford and the gardens at Mt Penang was a piece of cake. It was our first 'outing' with a study group so we were prepared to meet new faces (as well as some familiar ones). The Mt Penang Gardens is not without its critics. It's new, it's modern, it's been professionally landscaped and it's been given considerable grant money by the state government, \$8.7M to be exact. The latter being a source of envy for many. Located 80kms north of Sydney, it sits in the heart of the sandstone quarrying district; the old Kariong Detention Centre site. The inmates have moved on and there is a show garden evolving instead.

The architects looked for a relationship with the surrounding landscape, with strong vertical and horizontal walls representing the blocky nature of the sandstone and how people traverse it. At the base of these walls are cool nooks with ponds filled with water plants. Flat and raised beds imitate the coolness within by rainforest plantings and the clever camouflage of supports with orchids growing on mesh and moss. These nooks brought relief from the heat of the day. Gravel paths weave and cross to bring one to the sculpture garden with its borrowed landscape of the eucalyptus in the neighbouring property and its spectacular view. Further down the path is the grove of *Brachichiton rupestris* (bottle trees) with their bulbous bottoms. There is the arid garden with ancient stands of cacti and succulents; some cleverly planted in raised 'Rocla' concrete stormwater pipes, mulched with a mix of pebbles and rumbled glass. Follow the path, and nearly always in sight, is the pond. This large rectangular pond, stepped to create a waterfall was a welcome relief from the heat. The pond can be accessed without the need to bend or kneel to feel the refreshing cool water through your fingers. The architects have used mainly Hawkesbury Sandstone species in their plantings, grasses, *Xanthorrhoea* spp., *Telopea* spp and more. Water features are present throughout the garden and represent historical events. Without our wonderful guide, Andy, we would still be scratching our heads as to their meaning. And finally, the bridge! The first and last piece of architecture you see. In fact, you can't miss it; it's bright blue, slightly twisted and has viewing holes on one side and the pond on the other. I found the bridge quite fascinating, quirky, innovative and just plain fun. The camera can view, through the holes, the sculptured gums at the back. It makes for some really interesting photos!

The best bits? The arid garden (loved it), the large pond and of course, the bridge.

The not so good bits? I needed Andy (our guide) to interpret, and more plantings.

It's a wonderful piece of imagination with its nooks and overhanging walls, lookouts to the surrounding countryside and mostly native plantings. I want to go back again in a few year's time when it's out of its infancy to become an adolescent. Definitely worth seeing.