



For escapees from the rat race, Europe has Amsterdam, Asia has Bangkok, North America has, well, all of California, and Australia has Nimbin. Kenneth Howe visits the country's first hippie commune to find out if, 30 years on, the dream is still alive. Pictures by Paul Hilton.

Nobody goes to Nimbin without knowing something of its reputation. The town that hippies built has become Australia's capital of "alternative living" and has basically gone to pot. Not only is marijuana smoked openly, heroin and hard drugs are also abused in public. But while outsiders regard the town as divided, its flower-power founders celebrate its diversity. Home to Australia's first hippie commune, Nimbin is a study in sustainability and communal living, and its home-grown inventors and entrepreneurs are on the cutting edge of world developments in "green energy", such as solar and wind power, and permaculture, a system of perennial, organic agriculture emphasising the use of renewable resources and the enrichment of ecosystems.

Once a sleepy, dairy farming village sliding towards economic obsolescence, the Australian Union of Students chose Nimbin as the site of the 1973 Age of Aquarius Festival. Instead of three days, the party of peace, pot and rock 'n' roll lasted two weeks. Or was it 30 years? Like guests who have overstayed their

welcome, many hippies are still living the dream, and some families run three generations deep.

Nimbin's residents are categorised into three groups. There are the "straights", who don't smoke marijuana, such as the town's original inhabitants of farmers and loggers. Another group makes its home in a park in the middle of this one-street town: the junkies, attracted to Nimbin because of the lawless feeling lent by the fact local police largely turn a blind eye to drugs, allowing users to sell pot to support their heroin habit. The third group, the "alternatives", are the hippies who seized control of Nimbin shortly after 1973.

This northern New South Wales town leads the nation in marijuana reform. In Nimbin, everyone inhales. Take the Hemp Bar, where baristas make recommendations on the freshest buds to be had in town at what price. The cafe seeks to show the world by way of a webcam "that responsible marijuana smoking doesn't make one crazy or anything else, unlike that Reefer Madness propaganda crap", says John Bender as he fiddles with the wires behind a