

timeless QUALITY

Emirates' landmark new property in the Blue Mountains is a blueprint for the future, combining supreme luxury with an ambitious conservation agenda

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A section of the main homestead's dining room
OPPOSITE The swimming pool



the grant to the land. What might have been destroyed in minutes by a bulldozer has instead been painstakingly rebuilt by chairman of Clean Up Australia Ian Kiernan, a 40-year veteran restorer of endangered and heritage buildings.

“This house is the best example of bush engineering I’ve seen. It really shows the struggle of the pioneers,” he enthuses. “Everything they used had to be carved out of the heart of Wolgan Valley. And there’s evidence that just two years after it was built, Charles Darwin visited here on a shooting expedition – ironic really, for a naturalist!”

The dwelling is now a living museum, where fragments of pastoral life are now framed on its walls, such as a recipe for fruit fly bait: “1 teaspoon ess vanilla, 1 tablespoon household ammonia, 3 breakfast cups of water. Rub on fruit fly trap as often as required.” Or a page torn from a diary, “October 1925, 17th Sunday”, with this rather alarming entry, “Gave Rosie a wash out with baking soda”.

Outside, a fire pit has been built, and two old fireplaces restored for campfire yarns and barbecues. Here, guests can gather for star-gazing sessions, or sit inside by a potbelly stove and dream themselves back to the 19th century. Nearby, a kitchen garden is being planted to supplement executive chef Dwane Goodman’s “regional, seasonal, organic where possible” menus.

and the road starts to descend steeply, hugging the curves all the way down to the valley floor. Take your time here – not just for safety’s sake, but to drink in the sheer scale of your surroundings and savour the anticipation all the way to the property’s gates.

Once you’ve been greeted at the gatehouse and transferred by four-wheel-drive to the resort, a fittingly rustic fording of a creek delivers the first glimpse of the homestead and suites, which curve in two rows towards the escarpment. Arrive at sunset, and the

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sparse beauty of the sandstone-and-timber homestead stands out in sharp relief against its monolithic, russet-tinted backdrop. But whether it’s at dawn, midday or dusk, the first impression of this place brings back old meaning to the word ‘awesome’.

Architects Turner & Associates have paid tribute to Wolgan Valley’s pioneering history by embracing that age-old Australian tradition of fossicking. Ephemera discovered during the restoration has been creatively recycled: rusting fence stakes are reworked into angular screens between suites; gnarled tree trunks become ghostly statues on a lawn in an ‘upside-down Australian garden’, while others form art installations along Timeless Spa’s curving corridor. Boulders, old farm equipment, anything that reflects the heritage of this place, have been re-used. The pièce de résistance, and the heart and soul of the resort, is 1832 Heritage Homestead, named for the year James Walker bought

While unmistakably 21st century, the 36 one-bedroom timber Heritage Suites sit comfortably in their habitat, though their immediate landscaping will take time to bed in, just as the suites will need time to take on the patina of their surrounds. Reflecting classic Australian bush vernacular – broad verandahs (thoughtfully fly-screened for optimum tranquillity while dozing in a rocking chair), corrugated roofs and a low profile – they prove Tardis-like inside. Though their footprint is modest, the suites combine simplicity with opulence, with generous sofas and ottomans, and almost too-comfortable four-poster beds made exclusively for the resort by Australian manufacturer AH Beard. It’s tempting just to throw open the doors and spend a weekend lying in state, charting the change of light on the cliffs.

Each suite has a glass-enclosed plunge pool running its length, which can be opened to the elements. And in another nod to the great outdoors, the shower is set under a glass roof, so you can watch



Heritage Suite bedroom
OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT
The front verandah of a
Heritage Suite; interiors are
furnished with local pieces,
such as this ‘stick’ wall mirror

They say that good things come to those who wait, and Australia’s latest, most ambitious, luxury country resort has been a long time coming. Millennia, you might say. Wolgan Valley Resort and Spa, the new jewel in Emirates Hotels’ crown, is a \$125 million, conservation-based project aiming to honour and preserve its spectacular natural setting as well as its indigenous and colonial heritage. The concept has already worked to great effect with Emirates’ Al Maha Desert Resort in Dubai, and here, the result is stunning.

The property, spanning some 1600 hectares between the Gardens of Stone and Wollemi National Parks in the Blue Mountains World Heritage Area, was previously farmland, cleared to run cattle from the early 1800s until, well, about six years ago. Before that, for thousands of years, the confluence of two waterways, Carne Creek and Wolgan River, was a meeting, trading and ‘business’ place for the Wiradjuri people, the land’s traditional owners. Now, in this same crook of two rivers, cupped by majestic sandstone escarpments, a new meeting place is evolving.

While you could helicopter in spectacularly from Sydney, the three-hour drive seems more fitting to this intrinsically Australian experience. Once you’ve wound up Bells Line of Road, turned off at the Big Miner’s Safety Lamp at Lithgow and left behind the collieries that puncture the landscape, the tarmac turns to dirt and weatherboards are replaced by the grey-green and silver of the bush and a cloud of dust in the rear-view mirror.

Then, the road opens up ahead to reveal a view that stops you in your tracks. Breathtakingly beautiful cliffs plunge into a broad, winding gorge,

Swim in the dress circle - the view from the swimming pool takes in the whole valley





The pristine, drinkable waters of Carne Creek OPPOSITE, FROM TOP Field guides Andrew Davidson (left) and Terry Claydon; 1832 Heritage Homestead; Country Kitchen, with a painting by Sydney artist Ann Cape

The field guides provide the experiences that add extra dimension to a stay at Wolgan Valley – from Aboriginal heritage walks to horse riding

the sky as you pamper yourself with your Timeless Spa products. A flick-of-the-switch open fire, set between living and bedroom in a floor-to-ceiling stone fireplace, adds warmth and welcome on a crisp evening, while a capacious walk-in dressing room will accommodate a fashion shoot's worth of clothes. The DéLonghi espresso machine and plethora of goodies ensure you won't waste away between meals – though a call to the Homestead will bring a buggy to your door with home delivery at a moment's notice. There are also three two-bedroom Wollemi Suites and the paparazzi-proof Wolgan Suite, with two bedrooms and kitchen, plus extra accommodation for the entourage.

While the main homestead's proportions may seem imposing, its interior is divided into human-scaled sitting and dining spaces, and furnished with enveloping sofas and *Alice in Wonderland*-scale high-back chairs and banquettes. The vaulted ceiling, with its bank of skylights, is punctuated by stark wooden beams and two massive sandstone fireplaces. At one end are a bar and walk-in wine cellar, at the other, a private dining room. Much of the furniture has been designed especially for the property and can be made to order for guests. Interior designer Juliet Ashworth, of Chhada Siembieda, has called on local furniture makers, blacksmiths and potters, as well as Villeroy & Boch, Sambonet and Schott Zweisel, to create a fit-out that's both sumptuous and witty without overdoing the quirk factor. Original pieces, such as 'remade' crystal candleholders from Sydney store Edit, and an upside-down feeding trough 'chandelier' by Michael Yabsley's Wombat Hollow studio, adorn the private dining room, while in the bar, a lamp made from an old railway car axle and patched Drizabone fabric casts a soft light over a sofa by the fire.

The whole is wrapped by a broad verandah, which takes in the entire sweep of the valley, as well as the equally eye-catching pool, where ranks of lounges beckon. Beyond this lies the spa, with its own beautiful lounge and six double treatment rooms, should couples wish to get pummelled *à deux*.

Casual daytime dining takes place 'below stairs' at the rather twee-ly named Country Kitchen. It is, in fact, far from twee in its bright, contemporary look and culinary approach. The open kitchen in this deli/café/bakery serves up great house-roasted coffee and honest fare,

from a ploughman's platter of local cheeses and charcuterie to a wild mushroom pie or an excellent BLT.

Upstairs, Dwane Goodman's menus take on another dimension. While the emphasis is on relaxed fine dining, he generally avoids over-gilding the lily, allowing the ingredients to shine. His philosophy is simple: "To source from suppliers within 180 kilometres, where possible, and, if not, from no further than Australia's shores. Well, apart from the caviar and foie gras..." he laughs.

The wine list is also a testament to the resort's commitment to its locality. With nearby Orange resident, Peter Bourne, consulting, the result is a selection of some 80 local drops – from Orange, Mudgee and the Hunter – out of a 300-strong cellar of Australian and international wines. "Guests can wander into the cellar and taste a few wines before they make their choices," explains general manager, Joost Heymeijer. His vision – "I'm a food and beverage man first and foremost" – dovetails neatly with Goodman's, as does his tireless attention to detail throughout.

This is apparent, too, in Heymeijer's choice of field guides, headed up by the affable and knowledgeable Andrew Davidson. He and his team provide the experiences that add extra dimension to a stay at Wolgan Valley, whether it's through Aboriginal heritage walks, wildlife spotting, horse riding, off-road drives, astronomy, mountain-biking, or putting together an impromptu picnic or barbecue in a secret nook.

Andrew accompanies me on a ride around the property one morning. An accomplished horseman, he's building a quality stable of horse-flesh – not for Wolgan Valley a string of clapped-out trekking nags. He points out the feral-proof fence that marks a 50 hectare-piece of land where he and his colleagues, alongside students from the University of Western Sydney, plan to reintroduce endangered indigenous species such as the eastern quoll. The aim is to return the entire property – with its red-necked wallabies and wallaroos, wombats, eastern grey kangaroos and 90-odd species of birds – to its pristine state. I ask Andrew how long he thinks it will take. "Ten, maybe 20 years," he smiles. "A project like this doesn't happen overnight, which is why it's exciting." Indeed, what's a few decades to this place? At Wolgan Valley, it feels like you have all the time in the world.

Details, emirateshotelsresorts.com. **VE+T**



HER COUNTRY BY ANN CAPE. OIL ON CANVAS. 2008. COURTESY NG GALLERY, SYDNEY