

Secret Valley

Proud plains, perfectly preserved history and a smattering of wildlife add zest to the luxurious Emirates Wolgan Valley Resort and Spa. By Emma Gardiner.

A rough-and-tumble grazing property near Lithgow is an unlikely location for a five-star resort. Despite the incongruity of the concept, the reality is tucked in the corner of 2,000 acres of paddock under staggering Blue Mountains escarpments. The 40 standard villas, the main homestead, family villas and Timeless Spa are in a landscape that belongs in a gilt frame.

Driving in, you hit dirt road before you pass through an artfully rusty gate, cross Carne Creek – the spring-fed water source for the valley – pass wattles and gums, and then your driver pulls up outside the lobby.

This is where the luxury starts. Emily, the guest services manager, greets you at the car door. Joost Heymeijer, the general manager, pumps your hand enthusiastically while your

bags are spirited away in a golf cart. Walking into the main building is like entering a fantasy from *The Man From Snowy River*. The beams in the atrium are recycled train sleepers from Molong and the lampshades, designed by former Australian politician Michael Yabsley, are made from old Driz-a-Bones. An old feed trough is transformed into a lighting fixture and a laundry mangle becomes a lamp base. The bookend fireplaces are made from local sandstone and, like everything else at Wolgan Valley, are generously proportioned.

A verandah wraps around with views over the valley. It's a refreshingly natural vista – just mountains and clouds; stone and sky. The environmental simpatico continues in the villas. Rust-coloured rugs, sturdy armchairs and a rabbit-soft R.M. Williams cable knit blanket invites you to nap, take it easy, read a

magazine. There's a heated private plunge pool at the side of the building, a huge bathroom with a rain shower, an oceanic bathtub (suitable for tall men, so I'm told) and a bed that has been specially designed and tested to be the most comfortable. That's if you can find it under the mountains of pillows.

Timeless spa

Having opted for a half-hour massage, my therapist reviews her clipboard and grills me on everything I've noted down. Based on my responses, she decides to deliver a balancing, energising treatment with specially blended palmarosa, rosemary, ginger and cyprus essential oils.

It's a nurturing experience and what stands out is the attention to detail in everything from the room preparation, to the post-massage cuppa, a passionflower herbal tea.

Wildlife tour

Nicholas, the softly-spoken guide, has a glint in his eye that belies country charm and cheek. A fully qualified archaeologist, geologist and experienced safari guide, he drives me

in a 4WD drive bus through the property, explaining everything from the social life of wallaroos to the reason that male Eastern Grey kangaroos get into fights. He points out an old bachelor 'roo that has been outcast, the original grumpy old man.

The highlight of the tour is the first wombat spotting. Despite the fact that I'm Australian, I have never seen a wombat in the wild. It turns out that Fatso, the wombat on A Country Practice was a joey (baby wombat).

An adult wombat is the size of a squat, well-fed Labrador and has a face not dissimilar to a koala. In short, cuddly, cute and cranky.

Nicholas stops to examine a Wollemi pine, the offspring of one of the three remaining stands of the rare tree from a nearby valley. A dinosaur era transitional species, the Wollemi pine is considered to be living proof of the evolution of ferns into conifers.

This attractive tree is notoriously difficult to cultivate and the pines we look at are more like a scientific trial than landscaping effort. In fact, the entire property is a wildlife sanctuary that plays host to researchers as often as the Arab sheiks you would expect. Having just won Conde Nast's World Saver Award for 2012, Wolgan Valley isn't just making an effort in environmental operations. It's leading the way with solar power, sustainable menus, spring water and wildlife conservation.

Sustainable dining

An all-day, all-you-can-eat dining service? Hello happiness! The Country Kitchen, located below the lobby bar, dishes up casual fare like antipasto, tomato and ginger soup, house made sourdough and wild mushroom risotto. It also serves coffee and muffins, as well as a dessert of the day, for a 3pm sugar hit.

Dinner is a salubrious affair where all the in-house guests make an appearance. The dining room transforms from a peaceful haven into a bustling social hub aided by the attentive bar service and a visit to the enticing cheese and wine room.

The meal is a low-key degustation with dishes that change daily – no menu item has ever been repeated in the two and a half years since the resort opened. I have an amuse bouche of tiny chorizo madeleines with aioli, a delectably simple artichoke, goat curd and French sorrel salad, followed by mushroom

soup, gnocchi, a main (I chose the John Dory with chlorophyll, spinach and nage) and your choice of desserts (I had the black cherry, vanilla bean and biscuit concoction).

The danger of this meal is the free-flowing matching wines. Like many, dessert wine and port prove too tempting too resist. And I give in. It's a wonky walk back to my villa under an inky, twinkly sky.

Breakfast is a civilised experience. A la carte service ensures that you don't have to fight your way through a buffet queue. Coffee is

provides great inspiration to this gifted teacher. A quick look through her portfolio reveals floral still life and landscapes in water-colours and oil, all strikingly skillful and vivid. When Georgia teaches, it's with the laidback tone of a woman used to dealing with beginners. Like a horse whisperer with scared equines, Georgia soothes freaked out amateurs with her, "You can do it. See, it's easy," demonstrations.

Not only is she encouraging, she makes it look possible. It's hard not to fall in love with a woman who says the best way to relax when you're painting is to, "Grab a glass of wine and then just play around." She uses everything from an old credit card, a comb and a sea sponge to create effects that, when combined with other traditional watercolour techniques, result in texture and complexity.

Who knows how many artists she has coaxed out of their corporate suits? All I know is that I want to join their ranks after a few happy hours spent learning about the Fibonacci rule of perspective, washes and colour theory. What's more, I walk away with a bag full of Georgia's own palette of watercolour paints, paper, brushes and equipment.

Historical conservation

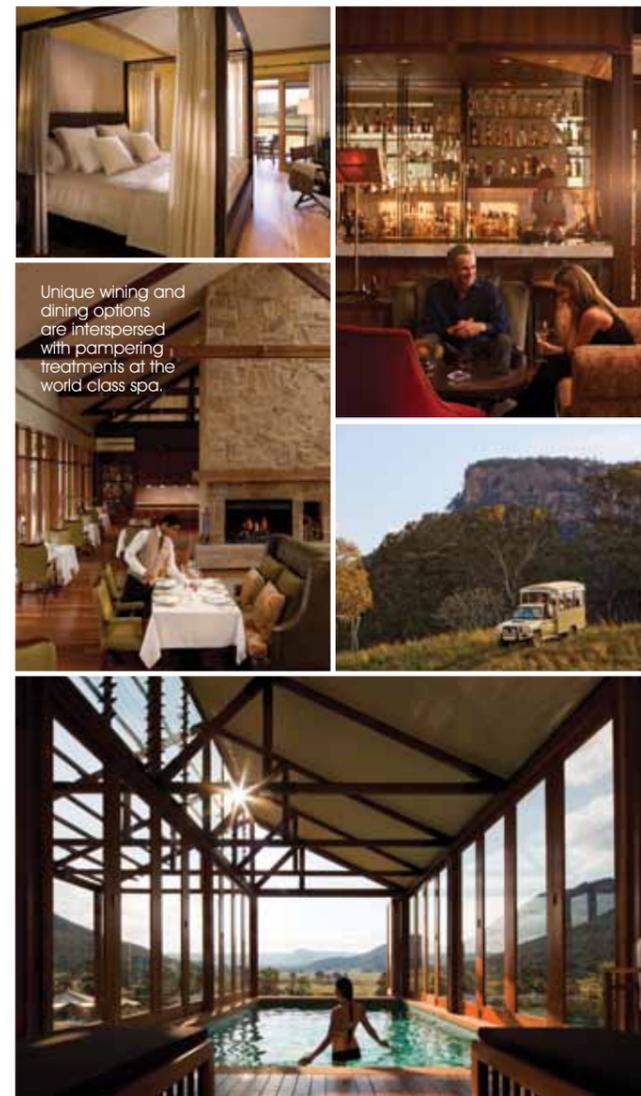
In the 1800s, Wolgan Valley was better known as Newnes, a village with a population of around 1,500 residents. The first owners of the property, the Walker brothers, had 10 convict slaves and an overseer to assist them prepare the land for grazing. The original cottage where they slept still stands and is now home to a sleepy possum.

The Walkers sold the land to the Webbs, who expanded the homestead and exercised their penchant for guns and explosives. The animals in the valley are still afraid of humans, such is the legacy of these redneck heirs. Tours of the painstakingly preserved colonial homestead, convict hut and the resort's heritage kitchen vegetable

patch are available to guests.

Getting there

Many guests drive themselves to the property but there is also a luxury transfer service available at an additional cost from Sydney airport or CBD, and a privileged few fly in by helicopter. For further information or to make a booking, please visit www.wolganvalley.com **Emma Gardiner is a freelance writer and blogger at www.shegoes.com.au**



Unique wining and dining options are interspersed with pampering treatments at the world class spa.