



19 JAN, 2020
THE AUSTRALIA EDITION

Sun Herald, Sydney

The Sun Herald

GREAT HOLIDAYS

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JANUARY 19, 2020

ON SUNDAY

MAL LEYLAND
ON HOW TO TRAVEL
ALL OVER THE
COUNTRYSIDE
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AND SO TO SLEEP BEDDING DOWN THE NEW COUNTRY STYLE P18

WAXING LYRICAL WHY SURFING'S MAKING WAVES IN THE BURBS P6
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Clockwise from main: Dairy Flat Farm and Lodge in Musk, Victoria; Lon Retreat and Spa in Point Lonsdale, Victoria; Byng St Boutique Hotel, Orange, NSW; Ross Farm, Meenyan, Victoria; Camden Valley Inn, Camden, NSW.



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HOW THE BUSH WENT BOUTIQUE

The country getaway has been undergoing a quiet and deliciously comfortable revolution, writes [Sheriden Rhodes](#).

There was a time when travellers venturing into country Australia could at most hope for a motel room with a car park out front, a cooked breakfast and, if they were really lucky, a TV airing something other than the local TV station.

Today, upscale boutique stays have sprung up to entice cashed-up, well-travelled baby boomers and the increasingly sophisticated millennial market to spend time in bucolic surrounds and charming country towns.

Out are Jacuzzis, instant coffee, plastic-wrapped mini soaps and “hygienically sealed” lavatories. In are in-room espresso machines, mini bars stocked with local artisan products, smart TVs, commissioned art works and carefully curated interiors.

The new breed of boutique country stay (be it hotel, lodge or stylish farm stay)

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follows the well-documented rise of the urban boutique hotel, such as Sydney’s Ovolo Woolloomoolloo, the Old Clare Hotel, Brisbane’s the Calile and Melbourne’s Zagame’s House, as well as the soon-to-open Lancemore Crossley Street, to name but a few.

With travellers of all ages “looking for sophisticated experiences that capitalise on a region’s food, wine and nature-based experiences”, there’s been a sort of mini-boom in luxury boutique hotels in country areas in recent years, says Dean Long, chief executive of Accommodation Australia.

In many ways, the timing couldn’t be better as – once the all-clear is given – lightly packing a large suitcase, clearing out the boot and taking a country road trip will be a great way for travellers to show their support for drought and fire-affected



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regions, and help fellow Australians get back on their feet. The mission, for those who choose to accept it, will be to spend up big in country towns – stop at that roadside stall, visit that cellar door, and eat at cafes, restaurants and pubs – where locals will be more than grateful for your business. And, of course, there are still plenty corners of the country unaffected by fires.

Mark Madigan, who operates the New-York-inspired Houston in Wagga Wagga, says that despite the disastrous summer it's an exciting time for travel in regional Australia. "I've seen things evolve and it just gets better and better," he says.

Madigan would also urge Australians to visit regional areas and help those suffering in the wake of long-term drought and the devastating bushfires.

"Country people really need the business and you'll be richly rewarded by what's on offer."

The 10 boutique stays profiled here – none of which have been affected by the fires aside from smoke haze – are dramatically raising standards in country NSW and Victoria. And the owners and hoteliers behind these game-changing properties are just as inspiring as the places they've created.

THE HOTEL

Dairy Flat Lodge and Farm, Musk, Victoria, exclusive-use luxury lodge with six rooms, opened December 2019.

THE HOTELIERS

Alla and Allan Wolf-Tasker, their daughter Larissa and son-in-law Robin Wilson.

THE BACKSTORY

The Lake House at Daylesford, which Alla and Allan built from scratch 35 years ago, hardly needs an introduction. Now the Wolf-Taskers have expanded their empire with a 15-hectare regenerative farm and luxurious lodge in the hamlet of Musk, seven kilometres from Daylesford.

Having her own farm to supply the award-winning Lake House restaurant is a long-held dream for Alla, the restaurant's



culinary director. "It means that the vast majority of produce we serve now comes entirely from the local area. It's also the next step for us and the Lake House family to close the loop on the immersive food-focused experience for our guests," she says.

COME INSIDE

A driveway lined with sliver birch trees leads to the Russian-inspired country house that sleeps up to 14 in six luxurious ensuite guestrooms. The lodge, with a steeped roof and tower, has its own cellar, bespoke furniture and original art works by Allan and botanical artist Alesandro Ljubicic. A live-in concierge is on call while an underground tunnel leads to an onsite bakery, where guests can take part in sourdough making workshops.

DON'T MISS

Partake in a farm tour, gardening, baking or bee keeping workshop or get your hands dirty in the vegetable garden, orchard, vineyard or olive grove.

ESSENTIALS

From \$3990 a night for up to 12 guests. See dairyflatfarmdaylesford.com.au

THE HOTEL

Byng St Boutique Hotel, Orange, NSW, 22 rooms and suites, opened August 2019.

THE HOTELIERS

Kristen and Tom Nock

THE BACKSTORY

The Nocks are experienced travellers and hospitality professionals and have created exactly the type of place they love to stay. It's in the heart of Orange's heritage precinct and a stroll to boutiques, cafes and hatted restaurants. The couple has been visiting the region for more than 20 years as Tom's family owns a farm there.

"We've seen Orange develop as a tourist destination for people who want to experience world-class local food and wine in a beautiful regional setting. Accommodation is where we felt we could make our mark," says Kristen. "Our vision is





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to offer guests the full experience of interesting architectural design, vibrant and sophisticated interior design, interesting accommodation and personalised and sophisticated service.”

COME INSIDE

At Byng St, old is cleverly interlaced with new. While the traditional facade of the 1896 Yallungah homestead sits proudly out front, to the rear is a striking juxtaposition by Sydney’s Mayoh Architects, which nonetheless melds sympathetically with its historic roots. Inside expect a bold colour palate, artworks by Lara Scolari and the choice of either contemporary rooms in the Modern Wing or historic style and charm in the Heritage Wing.

“We’ve combined elements that we’ve loved from hotels we’ve stayed or worked at to create a bespoke luxury accommodation experience,” says Kristen.

DON’T MISS

A stay in the signature Yallungah suite with fireplace and expansive balcony overlooking the private garden.

ESSENTIALS

Starting from \$280 per night including two course breakfast. See byngstreethotel.com.au

THE HOTEL

The Empyre, Castlemaine, Victoria, six suites, reopened in 2018.

THE HOTELIERS

Steven De Marchi and Justin Golightly

THE BACKSTORY

De Marchi and Golightly stumbled across the Empyre two years ago and fell in love with the idea of both a career and tree change. They are originally from Melbourne and neither has a background in hospitality, but that hasn’t held them back from creating a destination hotel in Victoria’s Goldfields.

In 14 months they’ve rejuvenated the landmark 1860s building, including its carriageway, bar and restaurant, while adding contemporary touches to the suites to complement the old-world feel.

“Our clientele is mostly from Melbourne; travellers who want a place to relax and dine away from the hustle and bustle of city life,” says De Marchi.

“Our staff have helped turn the new kid on the block into a hotel that can now be appreciated not only by guests, but locals too.”



COME INSIDE

An artful blend of historical architecture and whimsical contemporary touches, the European-style hotel offers a stay as grand as its elaborate exterior. Guest suites feature antique carved beds, high ceilings, cosy lounge areas and contemporary marble bathrooms. The two signature suites upstairs are the pick with chandeliers, gas fireplaces and French doors opening to the Empyre’s private wrought-iron balcony.

DON’T MISS

A seasonal four-course dinner in the bar and relaxing with a book beneath the old Crepe Myrtle tree in the courtyard.

ESSENTIALS

From \$275 per night including breakfast. See empyre.com.au

THE HOTEL

Ross Farm, Meenyan, Victoria, opened January 2018. A two-bedroom barn and three-bedroom dairy were added July 2019.

THE HOTELIERS

Andrea Moore and Lindsay Moore

THE BACKSTORY

Interior designer Andrea Moore and her handyman father, Lindsay, have converted a 1960s dairy farm into an industrial-chic retreat in the rolling hills of Gippsland. Using the original footprint, the father-daughter duo first transformed a ramshackle shed, later adding two larger accommodation options in Japanese-Scandi inspired style.

“Ross Farm is a family project and it was Lindsay’s big idea to transform these dilapidated buildings into interesting and unique accommodation, combining my interior-design skills and his interest in solving design problems,” says Andrea. “South Gippsland is perhaps still a little unknown but we’re so happy to be able to offer a unique place to stay and explore our beautiful surrounding landscape, and support the growing number of visitors to our area.”

COME INSIDE

Ross Farm’s aesthetic is both raw and refined, and almost entirely hand-crafted from plywood, blackened steel, concrete, brass and cypress from the surrounding hills. Interiors offer luxurious touches



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FIVE OTHER STYLISH COUNTRY STAYS

TATTERSALLS, ARMIDALE, NSW

A \$24 million facelift has given this art-deco beauty in New England high country of NSW a new lease of life. Sleep in 24 luxurious rooms and suites and dine on a locally inspired menu. See tattersallsarmidale.com.au

NIMBO FORK, TUMUT, NSW

Set in the foothills of the Snowy Mountains, this luxe boutique stay comprises six private timber cottages and six lodge suites overlooking the gurgling Tumut River. Hiking, trout fishing, gin and whisky tasting along with seasonal dining are on the menu. See nimbofork.com.au

THE PROVINCIAL, BALLARAT, VIC

Following a multi-million-dollar makeover, this century-old hotel offers 23 individual styled rooms in crisp blues and whites, and a European-inspired restaurant with banquettes and wicker chairs. See theprovincialballarat.com.au

BOTANICA EDITIONS, YARRA VALLEY VIC

Set within landscaped gardens these two self-contained retreats offer luxurious interiors, crisp linen, gas log fires, Bose sound systems and proximity to the delights of the Yarra Valley. See botanicaeditions.com

CIRCA 1928 ALBURY, NSW

The border town's only five-star retreat is housed in a grand former 1928s bank building and now offers two suites, a chic spa, retail space and Indigenous gallery. It's one of two CIRCA hotels, the other is in Wagga Wagga. See circahotels.com



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including Japanese-style cypress and steel baths, pot belly fires, fully equipped kitchens and vistas over the Tarwin Valley. Step outside for alfresco showers and fire pits.

DON'T MISS

A soak in one of the Japanese-style baths or explore Wilsons Promontory National Park on an amphibious boat with Pennicott Wilderness Journeys (pennicottjourneys.com.au).

ESSENTIALS

From \$210 a night in the Cabin (sleeps two) or book the whole of Ross Farm from \$850 per night (sleeps 12). See rossfarm.com.au

THE HOTEL

The Houston, Wagga
Wagga, NSW, 11 suites,
opened 2015.

THE HOTELIERS

Lisa and Mark Madigan

THE BACKSTORY

This talented duo, who started their hospitality careers in country motels, opened their first boutique hotel venture, de Russie Boutique Hotel Orange, after an inspiring stay at a boutique hotel in Rome. They've since opened and operated the de Russie Mudgee (now the Perry Street Hotel. See entry below) and their latest labour of love, the Houston.

COME INSIDE

The Houston offers 10 luxe apartments in a boutique hotel created from the grand neo-gothic Belmore House. The 1868 home was considered one of the most elegant in the colony. Cleverly converted into a New York-inspired apartment hotel, the Houston offers high ceilings, king size beds, designer kimonos, espresso machines, streamlined walk-in showers and lush gardens.

DON'T MISS



A glass of wine while seated outside in the carefully manicured gardens.

ESSENTIALS

From \$158 per night inclusive of light continental breakfast. See thehoustonwagga.com.au

THE HOTEL

The Mitchelton Hotel and Spa, Nagambie, Victoria, 58 rooms and suites, opened December 2017.

THE HOTELIER

Andrew Ryan

THE BACKSTORY

A personal project of Jayco caravan magnate Gerry Ryan and son Andrew, the \$16 million Mitchelton Hotel and Spa is the most recent addition to the family's winery on the banks of the Goulburn River. The hotel was initially planned upon the property's founding in 1969; a vision not realised until the Ryans acquired the property from Lion Nathan in 2011. Today, the striking Hecker Guthrie-designed hotel melds natural stone and dark timber with vistas of the gum tree-lined river. The design complements the property's existing Robin Boyd structures while paying homage to its rural heritage and wine pedigree. Gerry, who grew up in nearby Bendigo, says the hotel and day spa were the missing piece in the puzzle for Mitchelton.

"Goulburn Valley and Nagambie have so much to offer and we have high hopes the hotel will help attract more visitors and boost local tourism," he says.

COME INSIDE

Floor-to-ceiling windows open onto private terraces with expansive views of the Goulburn River or across the vines from the hotel's 54 rooms and four suites. Breezy linen curtains, timber joinery and Bose sound systems feature throughout, along with Trevor Mein and David Band artwork.

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Regionally inspired treatments and panoramic views are on offer in the spa, while a 20 metre infinity pool sits on a riverside terrace landscaped by Jamie Clapham. Here, guests can embrace the rural setting while sampling winemaker Travis Clydesdale's finest tipples.

DON'T MISS

A tour of the Mitchelton Cellar, Australia's largest operating underground cellar, a visit to the Gallery of Aboriginal Art and sunset from the Aston Tower with its views over the vineyard and surrounding landscape.

ESSENTIALS

From \$329 per night. See mitchelton.com.au

THE HOTEL

Goonoo Goonoo Station, seven cottages, a homestead and 11 shearers' quarters, sleeps 68, opened late 2016.

THE HOTELIERS

Simon and Sarah Haggarty

THE BACKSTORY

Former Sydneysiders, the Haggartys have transformed an historic and derelict 1830s village into a destination getaway in the open plains and rolling hills of the Peel Valley outside Tamworth. Leaving behind corporate jobs, the visionary couple threw themselves into an exhaustive restoration of Goonoo Goonoo Station after the 19th century village was purchased by Simon's parents in 2011. Working with TDK Architects, 19 original buildings have been given a new lease of life, while a striking contemporary eatery, Glasshouse Restaurant, was built between two repurposed heritage buildings.

"We realised there was a market for something refined and current. We've created an experience where guests can park their car and not leave Goonoo Goonoo Station for the duration of their stay, enabling them to totally relax," says Sarah.



COME INSIDE

The impressive main homestead as well as cottages, shearers' quarters and wool shed now offer a contemporary country stay. Rooms feature heritage wall linings, recycled timbers, custom-made bedheads and a palette of blues, creams and burnished natural hues. The walls are adorned with impressionistic paintings of station life by artist Cheryl Cusick, while jute rugs, sheepskin cushions and contrasting textiles provide tactile comfort. Beyond are event spaces (the Woolshed can accommodate events for up to 160 people), a modern Australian restaurant considered Tamworth's finest, tennis court, pool, communal drinking den and impressive outdoor firepit.

DON'T MISS

Watching storms roll in from the glass encased restaurant while dining on chef Philip Pipers' regionally inspired menu.

ESSENTIALS

Shearers quarters start from \$165 a night; cottages from \$300. See goonooگونوونوostation.com

THE HOTEL

Lon Retreat and Spa, Point Lonsdale, Victoria, seven suites, opened October 2018.

THE HOTELIERS

Claire and Rob Gemes

THE BACKSTORY

Perched high on a rugged hilltop bordering the beautiful Bellarine Peninsula, Lon Retreat is a 20-year dream fulfilled for the Gemes family. Their vision: to create a hotel that is an antidote to busy lives, on their 81-hectare farm which has been worked by seven generations of Claire's family.

"We wanted to provide an escape where guests could reconnect with the beautiful experiences that can be found in slowing



down and keeping things simple. At Lon we aim to create space and simplicity to showcase the beauty of our natural surroundings," says Claire.

COME INSIDE

Once a traditional family home, the now sprawling sandstone homestead offers seven stylish guestrooms named after cloud formations, along with a mineral pool and day spa. Expect luxurious textures, innovative local Australian furniture and beautiful interior design. Walls are adorned with Australian artwork and photographs, including a rotating exhibition space in the Lon Hallway.

"Our hotel is your home. Enjoy a glass of wine by the fireplace, read a book in the egg chairs while looking over the garden or soak up the sun on the deck overlooking the lighthouse," says Claire. Beyond the pleasures of the Bellarine Peninsula await, including limestone caves, renowned food and wine, historic townships and some of the world's most pristine beaches along the Great Ocean Road.

DON'T MISS

A visit to Lon Spa for a soak in a stone bath filled water sourced from the limestone caves below. Afterwards enjoy a "graze and bathe platter" as you take in vistas of the ocean and lighthouse.

ESSENTIALS

Suites start from \$380 a night including artisan breakfast hamper and unlimited access to Lon's heated mineral pools, see lonretreat.com.au

THE HOTEL

Camden Valley Inn, Camden NSW, 40 rooms, reborn September 2019.

THE HOTELIER

Alex Thorp

THE BACKSTORY

Alex Thorp's family company Lewis Land Group bought Camden Valley Inn in 2006. While the two-hectare site overlooking a rural valley and the Razorback Mountains





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was impressive, the buildings were tired and in serious need of attention. “We bought the pub because we loved the charm of the area as well as the population growth story. It’s easy to forget that Sydney’s urban sprawl is just down the road,” Thorp says. The pub was closed for 10 months, reopening after a striking \$16 million makeover.

“There are no other pubs in Sydney like it with this really special setting,” he says. “Not a day goes by when we don’t meet someone and hear their memories of this place.”

COME INSIDE

The bucolic vista and enormous 80-year-old poplar trees were the focus for the layout and design of the new buildings. The architectural brief was modern rural with a strong connection to the landscape. An existing heritage building (a milk bar built in an American country inn style by the MacArthur Onslow family in 1935) was refurbished and now sits easily beside the new stretched pavilion-style buildings. Forty luxurious accommodation rooms and suites offer a contemporary rural feel and views over the Camden Valley.

“It’s fantastic to have Macarthur history on the site which really adds to the charm,” Thorp says.

DON’T MISS

The beer garden with green, terracotta and cream bricks juxtaposed against a riot of greenery.

“A Chinese elm looks spectacular at night lit up by fairy lights. And you can’t miss our baby goats Cam and Dan,” Thorp says.

ESSENTIALS

From \$160 per night. See camdenvalleyinn.com.au

THE HOTEL

Peppertree Hill, opened 2010, Perry Street Hotel, acquired April 2017, and Peppertree Terraces opened November 2017, Mudgee, NSW.

THE HOTELIERS

Kersti and Stuart Faulkner

THE BACKSTORY

The Faulknors are tree changers from Sydney’s Northern Beach who, escaping the GFC, arrived in Mudgee during the hot summer of 2009 with three kids



under three in tow. The couple first transformed an existing vineyard into a luxurious, pared-back farm stay in the rolling hills outside Mudgee and also had a fourth child.

Since then the farm stay has grown to include a further six cottages and the original homestead, while the couple has also acquired the beautifully renovated Perry Street Hotel and added Peppertree Terraces, which houses six apartments in Mudgee’s main strip.

“Peppertree Hill Group is an ever-evolving project for us and our growing team,” Kersti says.

COME INSIDE

Peppertree Hill Luxury Farm Cottages offers 10 luxurious and stylish self-contained cottages on 100 hectares of private farmland in the beating heart of the region’s best vineyards.

Perry Street Hotel is a restored 13-suite boutique hotel housed in Mudgee’s former Mechanics Institute, built in 1868. Peppertree Terraces, meanwhile, is another iconic local terrace building in the heart of town which has six one- or two-bedroom apartments.

DON’T MISS

Sunset over the dam at Peppertree Hill Farm, where kangaroos gather for a drink. Sundowners on the vast communal guest veranda of the historic Perry St Hotel is also special.

ESSENTIALS

From \$190 a night at Perry Street Hotel; \$210 for Peppertree Hill and \$200 per night at Peppertree Terraces. See peppertreehillgroup.com.au

COUNTRY STAYS
THEN AND NOW

2000

- Motels, motor inns and B&Bs were still king
- Scant, if any, internet
- Jacuzzis in rooms
- Instant coffee and tea bags
- TV with local station; ABC, if you were lucky
- Blinking digital alarm clocks
- Centralised heating and cooling
- Plastic-wrapped soap wrapped in plastic and toilet seats sealed with hygiene sashes

2020

- Free Wi-Fi
- Espresso machines and gourmet tea in room
- Mini-bars with artisan produce, local wine and beer
- Smart TVs with Netflix
- Reverse cycle air-conditioning
- Quality linen
- Complimentary bottled water



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Clockwise from main: Perry Street Hotel, Mudgee; The Mitchelton Hotel and Spa, Nagambie, Victoria; The Empyre, Castlemaine, Victoria; The Houston, Wagga Wagga, NSW.

