

## **Bush bliss**



Spicers Peak Lodge.

Photo: *Christina Pfeiffer*

May 5, 2007

### **Christina Pfeiffer luxuriates at some of Australia's top pastoral resorts.**

THE whirr of the helicopter's rotor blades is interrupted by the pilot's voice crackling through my headset. "There are wild brumbies down there among the trees," Luke says, pointing to his right as he rolls the chopper on its side for a closer look. We chase the herd through a shallow billabong and out into an open paddock.

Come mustering season at Wrotham Park Station, Luke's deft manoeuvring in his two-seat Robinson helicopter is one of the most valuable assets available to the jackaroos and jillaroos on horseback. It's my first experience mustering in a helicopter and I'm thrilled to bits.

Ever since Prince Harry created a stir four years ago by holing up as a jackaroo on the 16,000-hectare Tooloombilla Station, Australian station holidays have rocketed in popularity.

"Visitor numbers have doubled every year for the last four years," says Drew Kluska, managing director of Outback Encounters, which custom-designs luxury escapes to remote parts of Australia for international visitors. He says that recently the number of domestic visitors to rural Australia has increased a lot.

As Australia is experiencing what some scientists refer to as a "once-in-a-1000-years drought", rural landowners are looking to tourism.

Around Australia, many rural properties already provide luxury accommodation for those of

us who aren't willing to forgo urban comforts. Although the early stockmen pioneers sheltered in rudimentary homesteads knocked together from timber and corrugated iron, and drank billy tea from dented metal cups, today's visitors can enjoy facilities such as air-conditioning, internet connections, flat-screen TVs, pools, sundecks, fine cuisine, champagne and polished designer stainless steel tea mugs.

Here's our whip around to some of the most luxurious stations.

## **Wrotham Park Station**

### **300 kilometres west of Cairns, Queensland**

I step onto the wing of the six-seat Cessna 310, feeling like I'm in the middle of Africa, as my luggage, along with crates of champagne, fresh tropical fruit and Cuban cigars are piled into a late-model four-wheel-drive. At the main homestead, a smartly dressed staff member in R.M. Williams moleskin jeans and an Akubra hat is waiting with a wet face towel infused with lemon myrtle, sandalwood and eucalyptus.

Opened in 2004, the homestead has an airy, open-plan design modelled on a traditional Queensland outback homestead, with a few differences. My eyes are instantly drawn to the chic pool lounges neatly laid out next to a plunge pool. The aqua water stands in stark relief against a craggy rich ochre-coloured escarpment overlooking the Mitchell River.

To escape from the heat, there's a plush air-conditioned lounge with books, a large, flat-screen plasma TV, board games and a well-stocked 24-hour bar with champagne and top-quality Australian wines.

At first glance, my corrugated iron and timber cabin (there are only 10 on the property) could have been a stockman's shack. But a closer look reveals a polished timber deck with a comfortable daybed and squatters' chairs. Large, sliding glass doors lead to a contemporary air-conditioned room with floor-to-ceiling glass panels offering magnificent views of the river and bush.

There's a king-sized bed, telephone and minibar, as well as a plush leather armchair complete with footstool, folded rug and binoculars.

I barely have enough time to unpack before I find myself easing a four-wheel farm bike down a steep rocky path under the watchful eye of station manager Cameron. We reach a shady spot along the river where the station's activities manager, Joni, is preparing our fishing rods. Activities at Wrotham Park are well organised and a staff member is on hand to hook my bait, pour champagne and hand out cold towels.

The half-day tour of this massive 597,000-hectare station, which is about 2 1/2 times the size of the ACT, is an eye-opener. The highlight is the "smoko" break by the picturesque Tin Hut lagoon. Whip-cracking lessons are accompanied by emu sandwiches served with bush relish, lavender vanilla bush tea and scones with lashings of jam and cream.

Back at the homestead, I'm up to my elbows in dough as I dive in to help executive chef Dee

Seward bake the evening's damper, to be placed in the large, traditional camp oven on the veranda. The stove is the centrepiece of the property's luxury "campfire" area, which is furnished with soft cushioned seats for guests to sink into while sipping on champagne and nibbling on canapes of kangaroo carpaccio, pepperberry-dusted emu and hot smoked barramundi.

### **Peppers Hidden Vale**

#### **70 kilometres south-west of Brisbane, Queensland**

Completed in December 2006, Peppers Hidden Vale's Angus suites fall well and truly in the luxury category. My air-conditioned, timber, Queenslander-style cabin is decorated with contemporary furnishings in muted earthy tones, with polished timber floorboards, a huge plasma TV in the living area, a smaller plasma in the bedroom, a spa bath and a DVD player.

The advantage of Hidden Vale is its convenient location, just an hour's drive from Brisbane airport. You could fly to Brisbane after work on

Friday and have the entire weekend to explore the 4000-hectare cattle station.

Horse riding is a popular activity and the horses have the perfect temperament for city slickers like me. At the shooting range, with a shotgun firmly wedged against my shoulder, I miss the target. If you're a poor shot like me, there's also mountain-bike riding, station tours, a golf driving range, massage and yoga.

### **Peppers Spicers Peak Lodge**

#### **160 kilometres south-west of Brisbane, Queensland**

I arrive at Spicers Peak Lodge and am ushered through the dining room to the sun-drenched patio, where I nibble on chargrilled prawns with trussed cherry tomatoes and pesto and soak in the view of green paddocks and hills, capped by three-dimensional white clouds framed against the brilliant blue Queensland sky.

Later in the day, I find myself lying back in the spa sipping on champagne as the sun casts its golden rays over meadows of Scottish Highland cattle. Dinner is a delectable seven-course degustation menu served with a premium Australian wine to match each course.

This contemporary, sophisticated getaway with a focus on fine dining is located in a stunning setting within 3600 hectares of working cattle property, surrounded by World Heritage-listed Main Range National Park. Many of the rooms have spas and fireplaces.

### **Rawnsley Park Station**

#### **430 kilometres north of Adelaide, South Australia**

I'm comfortably snuggled under a crisp white quilt in the bedroom, gazing at the Southern Cross through an electronically controlled glass roof panel. Although it's cold outside, my eco-villa is a constant pleasant temperature as the concrete slab floor and rendered

straw-bale walls provide thermal mass.

Fourth-generation sheep farmer Tony Smith has converted his 3000-hectare sheep property into a successful tourism venture that provides a range of accommodation and activities, such as flights over Wilpena Pound, mountain biking, horse riding, nature walks, four-wheel-drive tours and sheep-shearing demonstrations.

Six new villas have high ceilings and long verandas that are stylishly complemented by polished timber floorboards, white-washed walls and contemporary furnishings in muted, earthy tones. There are plush leather sofas, a flat-screen LCD television and DVD player.

## **Angorichina Station**

### **500 kilometres north of Adelaide, South Australia**

Ian and Di Fargher are one outback farming couple who have taken to welcoming guests to their home like ducks to water. Ian welcomes me by whisking me away in his late-model four-wheel-drive across barren rocky hills to Carey's Peak, one of the highest on Angorichina Station.

It's an amazing experience to sip champagne and nibble brie while gazing at undulating sun-scorched hills.

This remote 65,000-hectare working sheep station near the village of Blinman in South Australia covers harsh, barren country. Four generations of Ian Fargher's family have worked this barren land and there's nowhere Ian would rather be. His conviction helps me appreciate the vast, rugged beauty of his piece of rural Australia. Following Ian around the station while he checks on sheep, musters horses and feeds the working dogs has me returning to the city feeling like I've participated in a genuine slice of station life.

The highlight of my stay is a flying trip to the local pub in Ian's Cessna. After flying from one end of Angorichina Station to the other, the plane touches down at the dusty air strip outside the Prairie Hotel at Parachilna.

At the end of the day, after tucking into Di's delicious home-cooked roast, I don't mind at all that my comfortable, renovated ensuite accommodation in the old family schoolroom is not quite five-star, because the overall experience certainly is.

## **Arkaba Station**

### **430 kilometres north of Adelaide, South Australia**

About 70 kilometres from Angorichina Station, I'm standing in an old woolshed, built in 1856, listening to how Dean Rasheed and his wife Lizzie (who arrived from England 30 years ago) spent years rounding up feral goats, dealing with plagues of rabbits and digging roads to develop their property so that the land could sustain 8000 sheep. Lizzie bundles me into the four-wheel-drive, stopping at picturesque spots and pointing out her favourite walking tracks, many with spectacular views of Wilpena Pound.

The Rasheeds have renovated the original part of their homestead into a private wing with two bedrooms, private bathrooms, separate lounge and reading room.

### **Burrawang West Station**

#### **75 kilometres west of Parkes, Central NSW**

A five-hour drive from Sydney will have you sitting by the campfire lapping up the poetry of Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson at the 4000-hectare Burrawang West Station.

The station is located within the traditional lands of the Calara river people and owners Graham and Jana Pickles have developed a strong relationship with the Aboriginal population and offer corroborees, Aboriginal painting workshops and didgeridoo lessons as optional extras to guests.

The station was designed in the early 1990s as a retreat for frazzled executives of one of Japan's largest construction companies, Kajima Corporation, so its set-up lends itself nicely to executive getaways and up-market escapes. The main building is a quintessential Australian homestead with wrap-around verandas, high ceilings, twin chimneys and a rose garden. Less typical are the 20-metre swimming pool, tennis courts, saunas, conference facilities and four boutique lodges, which resemble woolsheds on the outside but between them accommodate 12 plush guest suites.

### **Bullo River Station**

#### **800 kilometres south of Darwin, Northern Territory**

Bullo River Station is the setting for author Sara Henderson's best-selling books. After the death of her American-born husband Charlie, Sara was left to run the 200,000-hectare Bullo River Station and had a debt of \$750,000. The gutsy outback pastoralist turned around her financial misfortune and put this remote station on the map.

Sara's daughter Marlee and her Austrian-born husband Franz, who have run the station since 2001, are the perfect hosts. Marlee has a wealth of stories about growing up on the property and has since published her own account of Bullo.

Activities are tailor-made to include river cruises up the Bullo River Gorge, fishing, Aboriginal rock art tours, bird watching, cattle mustering and horse riding.

The writer travelled in Queensland and South Australia courtesy of Tourism Queensland and the South Australian Tourism Commission.

### **Fast facts**

**Getting there:** Light aircraft or four-wheel-drive connections are required for many of the properties.

**When to go:** To get the full experience of farm life, the best time to go is during shearing, lambing or cattle-mustering seasons. Check with the properties.

**Stay at:**

Voyages Wrotham Park - \$620 per person per night includes accommodation, meals and drinks, a half-day cattle station tour and most activities. A second couple stays for free with the "Four for two" offer, which ends June 30. See [wrothampark.com.au/special](http://wrothampark.com.au/special) or call 1300 134 044.

Peppers Hidden Vale - \$499 per night for a luxury suite with breakfast. Activities and meals are extra. See [peppers.com.au](http://peppers.com.au) or call (07) 5465 5900.

Peppers Spicers Peak Lodge - \$2180 per room (twin share) for two nights' accommodation with breakfast, morning and afternoon tea, lunch, seven-course degustation dinner and all drinks. See [peppers.com.au](http://peppers.com.au) or call (07) 4666 1083.

Rawnsley Park Station - \$320 per villa per night with breakfast. Activities and meals are extra. See [rawnsleypark.com.au](http://rawnsleypark.com.au) or call (08) 8648 0030.

Angorichina Station - \$675 per person per night twin-share for accommodation, meals, drinks and activities. See [angorichinastation.com](http://angorichinastation.com) or call (08) 8354 4405.

Arkaba Station - \$640 per person per night twin-share for accommodation, meals, drinks and activities. See [wilpenapound.com.au](http://wilpenapound.com.au) or call (08) 8648 0004.

Burrawang West Station - \$770 per person per night for accommodation, meals, drinks, some activities, internet, local phone calls, laundry and road transfers to and from Parkes or Condobolin Airport. See [burrawangwest.com.au](http://burrawangwest.com.au) or call (02) 6897 5277 .

Bullo River Station - \$750 per person per night twin-share for accommodation, meals, drinks and activities. See [bulloriver.com](http://bulloriver.com) or call (08) 8354 2719.

[Did you know you could pay less than \\$1 a day for a subscription to the Herald? Subscribe today.](#)

Copyright © 2007. The Sydney Morning Herald.