



# Beyond the Blue Mountains

*Wolgan Valley Resort & Spa is a true antipodean wonderland with a location to wow, says Nicci Perides*

Travelling out to New South Wales' Blue Mountains is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and Wolgan Valley, just beyond the mountains, has to be one of the most peaceful spots on earth.

My private transfer arrives at our address in Bondi, Sydney, and the chauffeur appears from behind the car in dark sunglasses and a suit – Mr Sophisticated. He takes our bags and opens the car door. My sister and I jump in the back. Mr Sophisticated tells us it is a three-hour drive from Sydney, through the Blue Mountains and out to Wolgan Valley, so we settle in for the ride. As we drive through the suburbs of Sydney, the scenery changes from urban sprawl to hectare upon hectare of forestland.

The Blue Mountains took their name from the region's indigenous eucalyptus trees, which give off a bluish tinge that shines in the sunlight. As I stare at the magnificent, untouched scenery, I can't help but wonder how many spiders and snakes are lurking out there. We reach a petrol station, where our car and another – we had been travelling in a convoy – pull up. Our driver cranes his head back and tells us that this is the last place we will receive mobile phone reception and asks if we would like him to divert our calls to the phone in our room at the resort. After careful consideration, my sister and I agree on a resounding "no". Although we haven't reached the resort, something tells me we won't want any distractions from the outside world.

We drive for another 20 minutes and pull up at a gate welcoming us to Wolgan Valley Resort & Spa. The next part of the journey, which takes us through the resort and into the valley where the lodge and chalets are located, is rather bumpy as you drive through creeks, beyond the stables and up to the clubhouse. The resort is set in a valley with a sprawling panorama of escarpments, rolling forestland, clearings and creeks. The chalets are set in a semi-circle, each one facing out towards the valley and, as we find out later that evening, towards the sunset.

The resort is virtually self-contained and entirely eco-friendly. The main lodge takes its architectural cue from the lovingly restored homestead that sits on the premises, which was built in 1832 by European settlers. The boutique resort caters for around 80 people in 40 bungalow suites. Each suite features a private indoor pool, separate lounge, bedroom, open-plan bathroom with inside/outside rain shower, walk-in wardrobe and veranda.

The style is private and chic. Guests make their way around the resort on bikes (which come with each bungalow) or by walking. The resort is located between three national parks, and as a result offers unrivalled outdoor activities. Choose from a horse trek out into the bush to spend time in the company of the resident kangaroos, wallaroos, possums and wombats with one of the on-site horsemen, or spend an evening star-gazing and searching for the nocturnal wildlife on the evening jeep safari.

Mealtimes here are a splendid affair. Lunch is set on the ground floor of the main lodge and is usually a choice of around 10 different dishes. Australian wine comes as standard here too. Dinner in the romantically lit clubhouse is a five-course

degustation menu followed by a visit to the cheese and port room. The chef is very inventive, gaining inspiration from the surroundings; one evening he cleverly disguises new potatoes as rocks.

The emphasis at the resort is to do as much or as little as you like. Many walking and cycling trails are set out for you, as are activities throughout the day. If you want to find out more about the history of the resort then join one of the tours around the homestead, which Emirates, owner of Wolgan Valley, restored when it took over the property.

The walking and cycling trails will take you across creeks and through the national parks. The highlight of my stay was seeing a mix of native animals and reptiles (including a brown snake) in such close proximity.

I sit on my last evening in Wolgan Valley enjoying a glass of Australian red, while watching a fiery sky turn from bright orange to deep purple. The clubhouse fires are roaring behind me and my fellow guests are regaling each other with stories from their stay. Some are talking about their trip off-site to the glow-worm caves, others are discussing the hike to the creek, and my sister and I are reliving the moment a brown snake slithered away a metre in front of us. The atmosphere is relaxed, sophisticated, and those who are leaving tomorrow have a heavy heart.

I had been told that Wolgan Valley was a special place before arriving, but I couldn't imagine the feeling of complete freedom, relaxation and peace the resort seems to create. This is a once-in-a-lifetime escape that has the right balance of luxury, adventure and total tranquillity. ■



Pool with a view



Suite living room and private pool

## The important bit

**What:** Emirates Wolgan Valley Resort & Spa  
**Where:** NSW, Australia  
**Tel:** +61 2 6350 1800  
**Cost:** from AU\$1,560 (US\$1,643) per night based on stays of three nights or more. Valid until March 31, 2013.  
[www.wolganvalley.com](http://www.wolganvalley.com)