

NATURAL

Tina-Louise Jackson checks in to Emirates One&Only Wolgan Valley in regional New South Wales and discovers a nature-based retreat where style and sustainability really do go hand in hand.

SELECTION

Aside from the early-evening call of birds as the sun begins to set – lighting up the surrounding escarpments in blazing shades of red and gold – the entire valley is silent. While the scars of bushfires are still visible around us, there are also bristling green signs of new growth, demonstrating the resilience of the Australian outback, and its rush to regenerate and (in this case) return the vast setting that Emirates One&Only Wolgan Valley calls home to its floral glory. Set between the Wollemi and Gardens of Stone national

parks in the Greater Blue Mountains, this wild-meets-wonderful retreat occupies 2,800 hectares of pristine bushland – the lodge, villas and facilities are just a tiny one per cent of that, leaving the rest to grow untamed. It's a setting the resort doesn't take for granted, uniting serious style in its offering with a genuinely sustainable approach to overnight stays – so important is this commitment that the property has been crowned Australia's first carbon-neutral resort. Which means that while here, I always feel at one with my beautiful surrounds.



Just the tonic

Wind back the clock a few hours and my family and I are battling weekend traffic along the 200-kilometre route here northwest from Sydney. As we lose phone reception nearing Wolgan Valley, those escarpments begin to loom, and the wildlife begins to make its presence known – not far from our destination, an enormous kangaroo bounds across the road just in front of our car.

Our jittery nerves are soothed upon arrival with the resort's Wolgan Tonic, a concoction featuring the house-distilled 1832 Wolgan Gin made from botanicals sourced on site, then muddled with Cointreau, Jack Rudy tonic, soda and bitters. As we sip in the main homestead, we catch our first breathtaking glimpse of the valley played before us, the only sign of human presence the 40 stand-alone villas guests get to bed down in.

Our one-bedroom Heritage Villa has spacious bedroom and living areas separated by a double-sided fireplace. The four-poster bed comes with silky white linens, while the enormous bathroom features a shower with a glass ceiling, allowing us to marvel at the night sky above, and a large bath next to a picture window, perfect for sharing should you so wish. The amenities are Sodashi – Australian and infused with native botanicals. We make the most of the well-stocked mini-bar in the evenings, which includes complimentary drinks and snacks. And in the morning, a Nespresso machine ensures we start the day, and our morning wildlife show, with a well-brewed coffee in hand.

There are few other places in the world where you're granted the luxury of observing wild animals this close: from the comfort of your bed. Or the rocking chair on your screened terrace. Or your private indoor pool. Or even your bath. No artwork needs to adorn the walls – it's the scenery from your window that will draw your eye.

New beginnings

Wolgan Valley's general manager Tim Stanhope took over the reins in October 2019, and has since – by his own admission – had "everything thrown at him". Throughout the fires that

devastated much of the area, Stanhope and a skeleton team selflessly remained on property, their key goal to protect 1832, the original homestead, which has been converted into a museum telling the site's story.

His greatest achievement to date, Stanhope tells me, was convincing applauded chef James Viles to oversee the resort's kitchens. Ex-owner of three-hatted Biota Dining in Bowral, Viles' approach to cooking has always been focused on produce that is local and sustainable. It's no different here. Most food dished up is created using ingredients sourced within a 40-kilometre radius of where we sit – from speciality regional farmers, if not grown in the property's own kitchen gardens or foraged from the reserve.

Both breakfast and dinner are served in the Wolgan Dining Room in the main homestead, with its high-beamed

ceilings, several large fireplaces and stunning backdrop of the valley and escarpments beyond. Dinner for us starts with oysters, followed by butter-soft steak. Nothing is too much trouble, as we soon discover when our meal runs into the start of the evening's Spotlighting Tour. Not wanting to rush, we concede dessert to join guides on the lookout for nocturnal animals; we return to our villa to find a tray of sweets has been recently delivered, to end our evening on a high. Lunch, meanwhile, is served in the Country Kitchen, next to the infinity pool. Enormous barramundi wings are a firm favourite.

Pursuits of happiness

There is, as you would expect, a fully equipped gym, should you feel inclined to hit the treadmill. But the focus of exercise and activities at Wolgan is firmly

of the outside variety. Bikes are left on our verandah so we can explore the property on two wheels; there are also stables, where horses await for those longing for a riding expedition; and a range of jeep tours are also available, taking you to explore the reserve.

We opt to try all three, enjoying a 90-minute trek on impeccably trained horses, suitable for even the most novice or nervous rider. We then take bikes to explore the golden trails. While my daughter (the resort makes for a fabulous family break) and I meander and enjoy watching the mobs of kangaroos lazing under trees in the warm afternoon, my husband – a keen cyclist – opts for the trail much less travelled: the Outer Track, encircling the property.

The Wildlife and Sundowners jeep tour we join showcases the very best of the region's flora and fauna at its most active, in the early evening. The bonus is a glass of wine and canapes enjoyed while gazing at the sunset. I see my very first wombat; learn more about the kangaroos, wallabies and wallaroos that call Wolgan home; and visit the Wollemi pine, one of the oldest known tree species in Australia, dating back 200 million years. It's this tree that gives the

surrounding national park its name, and is the symbol of the resort. More than 220,000 other native trees have been planted here since Emirates bought the property in 2006, and we join a conservation expedition to do our small part in helping the regeneration.

Despite a devastating year, and with the lands around us still in recovery mode, the heart still beats strong at Wolgan. I leave feeling that maybe I've just left a piece of mine there, too. ♦

Travel file

Accommodation
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02



01 Emirates One&Only Wolgan Valley enjoys a postcard perch in the Greater Blue Mountains 02 Guest villas 03 Private pools 04 Exploring the vast reserve by jeep 05 Getting to know the resident horses. All images © Emirates One&Only Wolgan Valley



05

Conservation
 The team at Wolgan Valley are actively working to restore habitat lost through 2020's fires across the property, with several important areas being monitored to regenerate wildlife and ecosystems. The recovery process also sees conservationists accessing the resort's seed bank: more than one million seeds covering in excess of 25 native species, collected by guests to help re-populate areas of damage and to support wildlife habitat projects. While much of the Wollemi pine grove was damaged by recent bushfires, one tree remains completely untouched. All trees in the grove are attempting to regenerate, and Wolgan Valley naturalists are dedicated to their ongoing care.