

THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN Travel + LUXURY

SEPTEMBER 4-5, 2021

- Paradise found on Fraser Island
- Where bushrangers roamed
- High times at a Singapore hotel

IGNITE THE SENSES

A LONG-AWAITED LUXURY
RETREAT REVEALS ALL

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Entrance to Sequoia, main; suite accommodation, below and top right; Gatekeeper's Day Spa, right; lodge lobby, below right; pool, top left

Weather and food are popular topics of conversation at the newly launched Sequoia, seductively poised above the Piccadilly Valley's poetic tapestry of forest and vines in the Adelaide Hills. What to eat next? The food and wine are fantastic, much of it locally grown and made. And what to wear? A crucial question as the weather is incredibly changeable on the eastern slopes of Mount Lofty. Eighteen hours ago, it was positively balmy as we tiptoed through nodding daffodils on the valley floor, with truffle dogs Gus and Ruby ferreting out the last of the season's knobbly treasures. This morning, pink sky and tangerine sun are swiftly replaced by a mountain coddled in fog and a plunging thermometer. But no matter, as guide Jess is equipped with a selection of RM Williams rain jackets and a vacuum flask of hot tea as we set out for Cleland Wildlife Park.

The mist lends a moody magic to the forest as we wander a well-marked trail through towering stringy bark trees and golden bracken past the eerie ruins of Arthur's Seat, kangaroos observing our transit, kookaburras cackling, the thrum-thrum of the tawny frogmouth echoing up from hidden gullies. We're on the lookout for koalas; the Adelaide Hills is home to the country's largest population, and locals are accustomed to seeing these loveable marsupials in their garden. Sequoia has its own resident chap, Charlie. With eyes scanning the treetops we almost miss a passing glimpse of the city on the plain below. It's a brief reminder of Sequoia's unique and slightly counterintuitive locale, lost in a cloud-shrouded forest yet only 20 minutes from downtown Adelaide.

Sequoia officially opened last month but its 14 luxury suites have been receiving guests throughout the pandemic as management put the finishing touches to the \$18m lodge: the lounge and day spa, small infinity pool and spring-fed hot pools perched below the lounge on the valley rim. Located in the grounds of the historic Mount Lofty House hotel but operating as a separate entity (access is by guest key card), the world-class Sequoia represents the apex of a five-year transformation of the property by its local owners.

The original house was built in the 1850s by Arthur Hardy, famous for his extravagant parties. "The Gatsby of the Hills," says general manager Jesse Kornoff. Apres-party traffic jams down the mountain were common in that era and a late-night collision with a travelling circus has gone down in the annals of history.

Hardy also planted the three redwoods that lend the lodge its name. Renowned for living a life of almost feudal splendour, he would be mightily impressed with the level

of luxury on offer in the guest suites, surely the most technologically advanced in the country.

When I head to the bathroom at night after an epic degustation dinner in the main house, the light illuminates automatically, helping me avoid a minor industrial accident. Little idiot-proof control pads by the bed, in the hall and bathroom operate blinds, lights, music, streaming and temperature. Hidden in a credenza, the television rises at the push of a keypad; the slick shower head looks like a NASA invention and offers massaging jets and sprouts as well as gentle rainfall. All this technology is embedded discreetly into rooms showcasing local artists and makers, hand-blown glass light shades, JamFactory ceramics, full-size Jurlique amenities in the bathroom and large-format paintings of local flora and fauna by resident artist Stephen Trebilcock. And there are clever design features such as a "moon window" above the bed to watch the stars and a bathroom window overlooking a little garden with water bubbling out of an urn and tiny fish doing lazy laps in the pond.

The mood is cosy, a palette of stone, wood and leather anchoring the suites to the bush outside. A feature wall of raw, honey-coloured local stone is complemented by timber floors in spotted gum and leather sofas set around a great stone hearth in the sunken lounge. There are views across the valley from bath and bed; the deck is set with a comfy day bed and table and chairs, perfect for room service dinner with a view.

But the Sequoia experience begins even before arrival. A member of the friendly guest relations team makes contact to help craft a personalised itinerary. I'm greeted at the gate by Hannah and, like the entire crew, she's decked top to toe in RM Williams (gilets give



way to smart navy blazers in the evening). I'm ushered to a seat by the fire in the lounge to handle the Covid check-in palaver. This attentive service continues (I lift nothing heavier than a tissue throughout my stay), from an early morning pre-bushwalk coffee to a charming turndown tray of fresh lavender from the garden and little Jurlique samplers.

Attention to detail is first-class, including a complimentary minibar with a bottle of estate sparkling (pinot and chardonnay vineyards bookend the property), luxury loose-leaf teas, a welcome plate of choc-chip biscuits and personal handwritten notes on almost everything. I decide there must be a calligrapher hidden in a cupboard somewhere.

Before dinner on my first evening, guests gather on the ridge by the brazier for a wel-

come to country ceremony and storytelling. We learn about the fallen giant resting on the plains and the later European cultivation of these rich soils.

The Hills is a food (and wine) basket and owner David Horbelt began the transformation of his hotel by focusing on just that. With ace chef Jin Choi at the helm and a slick team of European wait staff, Hardy's Verandah Restaurant in the old house has really hit its stride; the degustation menus are excellent (be sure to try the Hills marron). Mauritian-born sommelier Liinaa Berry is on hand to guide wine selection, beginning with bubbles in the old cellars. Her enthusiasm is contagious and descriptors beguiling; a young wine is "all knees and elbows".

For Sequoia guests, Liinaa hosts regular

HEAD FOR THE H

After a long wait, an elegant new South Australian retreat is

CHRISTINE McCABE



PICTURES: AARON CITTI; MEAGHAN COLES; JULIAN CERO

LLS

revealed

wine and food events, dubbed the Maker & Somm. Tonight, we have the Basket Range boys dropping by the lounge with their charonnays accompanied by rustic garden-to-plate fare from the small team at the Summertown Aristologist. Local cheesemaker Section 28 has sent an entire wheel of delicious, 36-month aged alpine-style Monforte, and we give it a jolly good nudge. Three meals a day are available in the lounge with a Magic Pudding-like plate of dainty pastries doing the rounds, or room service is always an option. And if you're peckish, the breakfast duck waffle with porcini butter is highly recommended.

At the new day spa in the property's old gatekeeper's cottage, which has been transformed into a fragrant and serene retreat, the lovely Skye, who lives in the valley below, massages away any signs of indigestion while we chat about her horses and dogs.

Bespoke touring in the Hills is central to the Sequoia experience, including perhaps a spot of truffle hunting at Quercus Truffles. Or joining the charming Simon Burley of Coast & Co on a Cool Climate Clamber, which is a tour name I can barely pronounce after sampling superior pinot noir at Ashton Hills, gin cocktails at Ambleside in Hahndorf and Australia's best sparkling (as named in the latest Halliday list) at Deviation Road. Winemaker Kate Laurie trained in France, her husband Hamish Laurie claims a stellar pedigree (his great-great-grandmother was South Australia's first female winemaker), and he is on hand to help me disgorge a bottle of bubbles using an ancient instrument that looks sinisterly medical before I add dosage creating an entirely personal bottle of bubbles to take home.

Later, we repair to the pretty tasting room sandwiched between forest and vines to taste



IN THE KNOW

Lodge rooms from \$1000 a night. Packages from \$2200, including three meals a day, sunrise yoga on the ridge, a private session in the spring-fed hot pools, guided nature walk and stargazing. Additional bespoke experiences include exploring the Hills' winding roads in a supercar (Ferraris, Lamborghinis, McLarens), playing winemaker for a day or tasting Grange at Penfolds. Upscale charters are available to the Barossa and McLaren Vale, and there's a behind-the-scenes tour of the RM Williams workshop to have a pair of boots personally fitted.
sequoi lodge.com.au

a flight of bubbles and shoot the breeze. Simon recalls the fun that US actor Sam Rockwell had disgorging his own bottle; it's a very special experience. Deviation Road and the elegant Sequoia may be moments from town, but they exist in a place that feels a world apart.

Christine McCabe was a guest of Sequoia.

THE FAB 4



Botanic House, Royal Botanic Garden, Sydney

Garden dining

Eat your greens amid glorious trees and blooms

BOTANIC HOUSE, ROYAL BOTANIC GARDEN, SYDNEY

Luke Nguyen, one of Australia's best-loved chefs, is in charge of the menus at Botanic House, a conservatory-like restaurant set amid ponds and lush vegetation in the heart of Sydney's harbourside public gardens. Nguyen's fare celebrates his Asian heritage, especially in a lunchtime tasting menu of eight courses brimming with herbs, spices and leafy goodness. The feast winds up with a divine lychee pudding but the option of adding the likes of a basket of crab and

scallop dumplings along the way is irresistible. This glassy, airy restaurant must be one of the city's best-kept dining secrets and instead of dim sum trolley clatter, there's birdsong and blossoms. The exotic experience is extended along meandering pathways, passing pink bananas and sacred lotuses, petals furling as if clasped in prayer. Stay Pullman Quay Grand; allaccor.com
botanichouse.com.au, rbgsyd.nsw.gov.au
SUSAN KUROSAWA

RESTAURANT BOTANIC, ADELAIDE BOTANIC GARDENS

In Adelaide's green heart, US-born chef Justin James and his team are on the hunt for curious ingredients for their garden-to-plate degustation menus. With an alchemic sleight of spoon, bunya bunya needles flavour sorbet; coral mushroom, like some just-landed deep sea creature, is served with a fermented vegetable paste; wasabi leaves wrap Murray cod belly. Relaunched in the garden's historic tearooms, Restaurant Botanic is a sophisticated Miss Marple meets Heston Blumenthal-style gastronomic



restaurantbotanic.com.au
botanicgardens.sa.gov.au
CHRISTINE McCABE

temple. There are leafy views through floor-to-ceiling windows, an open kitchen with wood fire and a curved chef's table around the action. A fermentation room is on the way to preserve seasonal ingredients. Every dish resembles a little garden and there's a "temperance menu" of mocktails and teas to complement the excellent wine list. Stay Mayfair Hotel; mayfairhotel.com.au

GINGER AT THE ARBORETUM, CANBERRA

The panorama from Ginger's hillside perch takes in all of the national capital. In the foreground is the National Arboretum's nearly 100 forests of rare, endangered and ceremonial trees. The 250ha site has been planted in the past 15 years, having been razed by bushfires in 2001 and 2003. The menu, too, is a vision of Canberra's best. Janet Jeffs helms the kitchen and sources produce and wines from a 160km "food shed" around the city. Think organic, heirloom, seasonal and full of flavour. From her winter menu I select chargrilled beef, served with cream mash, coffee-roasted beetroot, pink lady apples and pepper berry jus. A dessert of pressed baked apple with macadamia



cinnamon crumble is a sensation. Stay Ovolo Nishi; ovolohotels.com
gingercatering.com.au
nationalarboretum.act.gov.au
GRAHAM ERBACHER

FRASER'S RESTAURANT, KINGS PARK, PERTH

With vistas to Perth's skyline, photographs taken at Fraser's Restaurant have filled wedding albums since its opening in 1993. Window views are impressive, but the premium seats are outside, amid the aroma of lemon-scented gums within Kings Park and Botanic Garden. Executive chef Chris Taylor produces a locally sourced menu and there's a calendar of special-occasion dinners, including during WA truffle season. The restaurant is named after Malcolm Fraser – not the former PM, but the second surveyor-general of Perth who, with governor Frederick Weld, formally gazetted the land as a public park in 1872. Visit during the annual Kings Park Festival in



September and take a guided stroll amid the flora, including wildflowers in bloom. Stay Como The Treasury; comohotels.com
frasersrestaurant.com.au, bgpa.wa.gov.au
ANDREA BLACK