

South Australia's new luxury lodge is so close
but also worlds away, writes MAX ANDERSON.

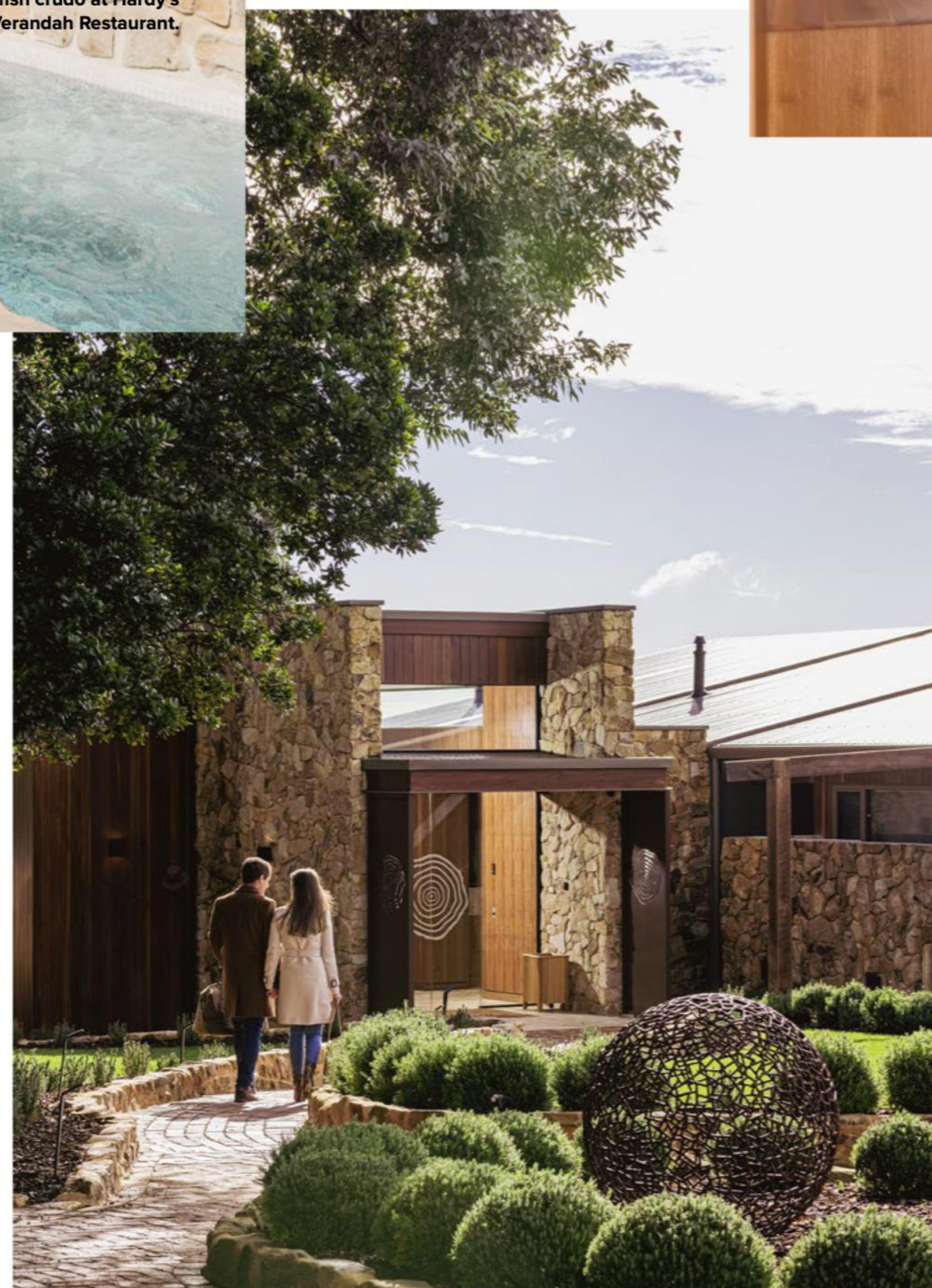
HEAD *for the*

HILLS

PHOTOGRAPHY @MISHANDKIRK



Clockwise: Sequoia's artesian spring-fed hot pools; poolside treats; the calm communal area; Sequoia's leafy entrance; kingfish crudo at Hardy's Verandah Restaurant.



PHOTOGRAPHY JULIAN CERO (POOL), @MISHANDKIRK (TABLE) & DUY DASH (ENTRANCE & FOOD).

Sequoia Lodge is waiting for a delivery of bettongs and potoroos. These might sound like obscure ingredients destined for a dégustation menu, but they're actually small kangaroo-like creatures once common in the Adelaide Hills. They'll be taking up residence in bushland below Sequoia's 14 luxury suites.

"They're supposed to be arriving from a local wildlife reserve," says host, Jessica Bibbo. "Trouble is, they've got to be trapped – and last night, the reserve only managed to catch two possums."

The marsupials have three days to give themselves up in time for the launch of Australia's newest luxury lodge. Bibbo, however, is not worried. For one thing, the fact that Sequoia is launching at all leaves the well-seasoned team truly thankful. And for another, even if the marsupials don't show, guests have plenty to look at.

Sequoia sits on the side of Mount Lofty Summit and enjoys one of Australia's greatest, if under-appreciated, views. Elevated on an escarpment at 727 metres, the lodge looks down into the Piccadilly Valley – a picnic blanket of century-old farms, vineyards and thick forests – and further out past the peaks of Lenswood where the Barossa begins. Magic strikes throughout the day: dawn mists thread like silver ribbons, cockatoos show like diamonds against the canopies, and when the sun retreats, Adelaide's food bowl slowly fills with apricot light.

For the record, I've travelled just 10 minutes from my home to stay here, indeed like all my fellow guests, I'm from Adelaide. At the lodge's reception, I'm greeted with Champagne by hosts in R.M. Williams attire. They hail

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from Mexico, America, the UK, Colombia, Canada and Australia; alumni of top-tier retreats like Qualia, Saffire, The Savoy and the Fairmont Chateau. Perhaps because of the chaos of the last 18 months, it's a little moving to be greeted by an industry that won't lie down. But first, we need to talk history.

Sequoia sits in the grounds of Mount Lofty House, 15 minutes' drive from the Adelaide CBD. The imperious old 1852 mansion has been an Adelaide landmark for decades, destroyed in 1983 by the Ash Wednesday bushfires before being rebuilt as a hotel for weddings.

By early 2020 however, South Australian hotelier David Horbelt and business partner Malcolm Bean had got the old girl's stars to align. The fine diner, Hardy's Verandah Restaurant, had won three hats under chef Jin Choi. Young gun sommelier Liinaa Berry, fresh from curating one of the southern hemisphere's finest wine collections for Crafers Hotel, had travelled two kilometres up the road to do it all again for Mount Lofty. And the hotel's 29 rooms got a \$3-million makeover.

To cap it off, \$15 million had been spent building the luxe new suites. The team were ready to welcome international and interstate guests – but of course, like the potoroos and bettongs, they didn't arrive.

"Covid has been really horrible," says Horbelt, "but we stayed open and kept at it. And in a way it became a positive for us because locals needed somewhere to stay. Mount Lofty House has been here forever, but Adelaide people were suddenly rediscovering it as a high-end experience and reconnecting with the region."

Fortuitously, those locals suggested that the fresh suites would be better with their own communal area. Which brings us to the 2021 launch.

Sequoia's main lodge is a two-tiered space with a bar, lounge and dedicated kitchen and dining area. Immediately beneath the picture windows sits a heated pool, two thermal springs

(furiously being landscaped ahead of the launch) and a firepit so guests can admire constellations undimmed by city light. There's also a helipad.

Assistant manager Hannah McGregor pours the lodge's signature sparkling wine and gives a welcome around a generous table of spotted gum. She relates how people have been meeting on the slopes of Mount Lofty ever since the Kurna and Peramangk people gathered atop "the creator giant" to make law. She shares stories of the settlers through to the winemakers of South Australia's four premier regions, all within 50km of here. And rather gamely, she invites guests to share their story, a gambit that closes the social distance. ►

The lodge has the region in its veins. Turn on a tap and it runs with chilled, fresh spring water piped directly from the aquifer beneath Mount Lofty (the al fresco 40-degree pools will be filled with the same). The Jurlique bathroom commodities are made from botanicals grown at a Mylor farm “just over there”. And the complimentary 2016 sparkling wine – Sequoia – was made by iconoclast Hills winemaker Taras Ochota using the pinot and chardonnay grapes grown on either side of the mansion.

The 14 suites are dressed with earthy tones, but ripened with burgundy throws and richly-coloured native plants splashed across canvases by Hills artist Stephen Trebilcock. Thanks to intuitive control panels, you can create “scenes” with a single touch. Ignite a fire in a native sandstone hearth. Dim the light in artisanal hand-blown glass pendants. Raise a blind on the glass wall and timber balcony.

The bathroom looks onto a small courtyard with a bubbling amphora – the shower is a many-headed hydrant and the bathtub sits beside a glass partition. If you want privacy, press a button and make the glass opaque; alternatively, enjoy uninterrupted views to the valley by pressing a different button and watch as the intervening bedhead sinks out of sight.

Guests are welcome to participate in a range of experiences as part of their tariff. On morning one I do a guided walk with Bibbo through the steep forests of Mount Lofty Summit national park. We’re wreathed in moody mists which manage to conceal the world’s largest

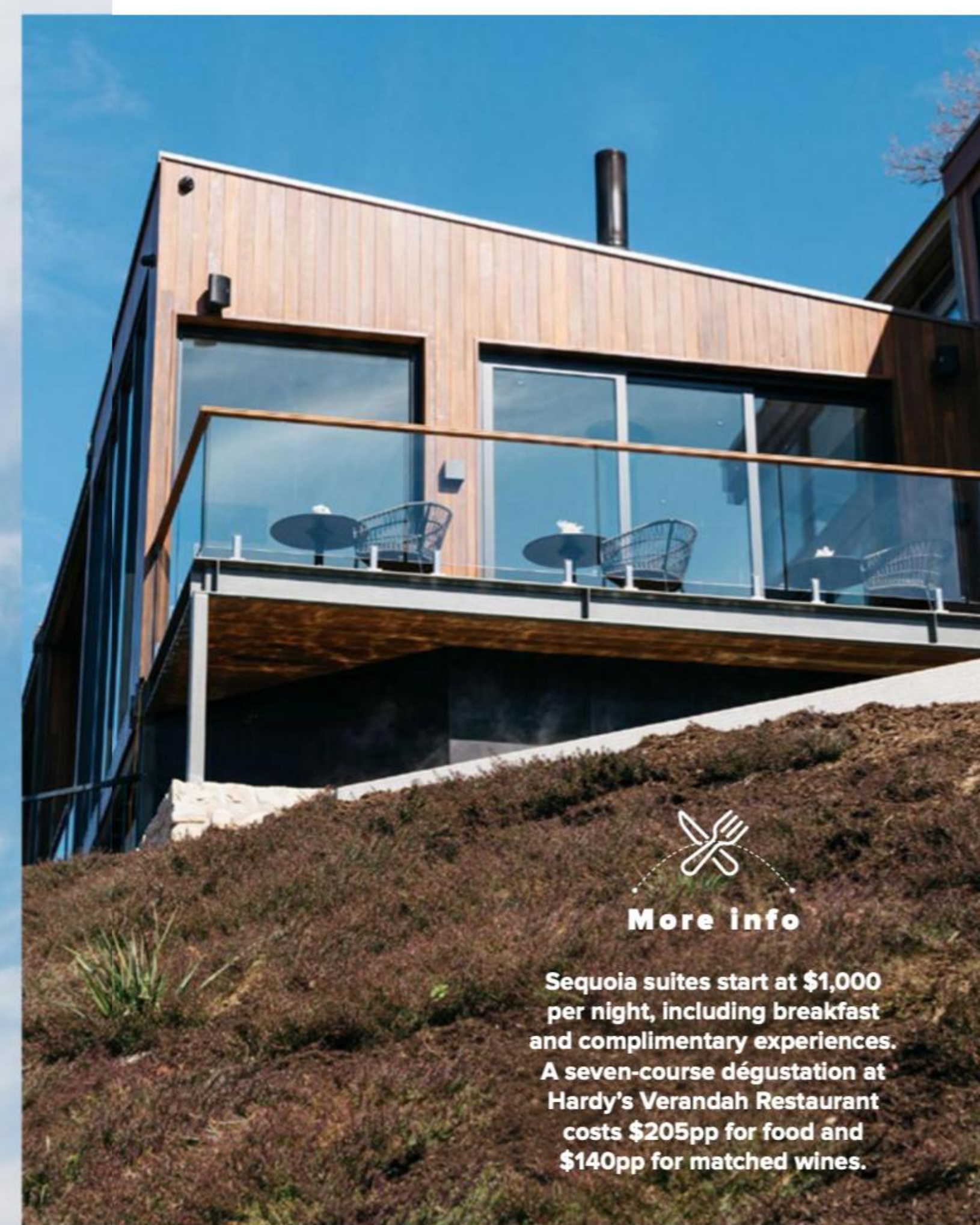
natural population of koalas but surrender banksias, native fennel and the sublime ruin of another grandee’s mansion. On morning two I do a yoga session in the beautiful Gatekeeper’s Day Spa with Sabine Christelli – an ex-immunologist and doctoral researcher who shares exercises and breathing techniques to lower stress.

Both leave me better equipped to tackle Sequoia’s breakfast menu, which features duck waffles with confit duck leg, mixed grain porridge with mandarin jam and cocoa butter, and Harris beetroot smoked salmon with roe.

A tour of the historic mansion is essential. Wealthy pastoralist Sir Arthur Hardy was a Gatsby-ish character as well as a lover of exotic trees. He created a colonial Neverland around the house and into the valley, much of which is now the adjacent Mount Lofty Botanic Gardens. His three 170-year-old redwoods gave the lodge its name, while his pioneer grapevines – the first to be planted in the Adelaide Hills – would give the world names like Petaluma, Ashton Hills and Shaw+Smith.

Exclusive wine country adventures can be purchased if you’re called to further exploration. Disgorge your own bottle with Hamish Laurie at Deviation Road, enjoy a private lunch in the tunnels beneath Penfolds, or do barrel tastings with Xavier Bizot, the Bollinger heir working at Tapanappa. Alternatively, there’s the complimentary Maker and Somm experience, which for my money is pure gold. I’m treated to the unlikely pairing of Berry (her sophistication and energy last seen on SBS’s *Battle of the Vines*) and guest winemaker Christian Canute of Rusden Wines, who looks like he’s fallen off a tractor. Canute’s earthy retelling of how he makes his stellar cab sav is like wine itself, a bit of living culture.

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More Info

Sequoia suites start at \$1,000 per night, including breakfast and complimentary experiences. A seven-course dégustation at Hardy’s Verandah Restaurant costs \$205pp for food and \$140pp for matched wines.

Clockwise from left: a sun deck at Sequoia Lodge; refined dining at nearby Penfolds Magill Estate; a tonal bedroom; and sleek bathroom in one of Sequoia Lodge’s 14 suites. Opposite: an artesian spring-fed pool.



PHOTOGRAPHY JULIAN CERO (POOL & BALCONY), JOHN MONTESI (FOOD) & AARON CITTI (BATHROOM & BEDROOM).

But of all the experiences, one leaves Sequoia truly a cut above. Hardy’s Verandah Restaurant offers a paired seven-course dégustation. Chef Jin Choi and Berry bring you into the Adelaide Hills and then take you out into the world.

A salad of charred beetroot (all earthy smokiness and acidity) is paired with – what else? – a cocktail of mezcal, maraschino liqueur and rhubarb bitters. The apple tones of a Yalumba 2018 Viognier work sweetly with a cube of roasted pork belly brined in coconut milk for 48 hours. A Hungarian Tokaji tangos with La Saracca, a raw milk cheese by Section28, the Hills producer that washes this alpine-style cheese for six months.

Before leaving Sequoia, I sit looking out from my suite and have the overwhelming feeling of being so very close to home and yet so very far away. I’m also caught up in feelings of privilege and safety and gratitude. And while looking into the serried ranges – strangely growing more enthralling the further they get – I find myself taking the long view. People will soon come from far horizons to gather again at Mount Lofty. And the bettongs and potoroos will be here to greet them. •

1 Mawson Dr, Crafers, SA, (08) 7912 8042, sequoialodge.com.au