

THE HILLS *are calling*

Just a 30-minute drive from the South Australian capital, the Adelaide Hills is a beguiling union of innovative dining, distilling and wine-making – all complemented by boutique accommodation, writes Natasha Dragun.



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It's 11am in the Adelaide Hills, and I'm sipping my third gin of the day. This one is infused with strawberries plucked from nearby Beerenberg Farm, along with roses from the biodynamic Jurlique estate (best known for its skincare products) around the corner, and rhubarb grown metres from where I sit. An earlier distillation was flavoured with mandarins, and lemon myrtle and pepperberry star in the Old Tom gin that's still to come. It's a head-swirling introduction to Ambleside Distillers, taking home a parade of awards since it opened in the Adelaide Hills. And while this bucolic pocket of South Australia is best known for cool-climate wines, Ambleside is a welcome sign that makers in the region are just as forward-thinking as they are dedicated to tradition.

Centuries in the making
Tradition, because this patchwork of greens is a story centuries old. The Hills' atmospheric town of Hahndorf was settled by Lutheran migrants in the 19th century, and today remains Australia's oldest German village with much of the original architecture preserved. Englishman Arthur Hardy was also captivated by the region. He visited in the 1830s and snapped up a swathe of countryside, building a manor passed down through generations and eventually transformed into what is now grand Mount Lofty House, a boutique hotel. Back then, Hardy planted three sequoias on the estate – the 170-year-old trees still tower over the entrepreneur's original home, and envelop namesake Sequoia



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Luxury Lodge, a private enclave of 14 suites opened on the grounds in 2021.

Local bounty

It's a good thing my gin flight is over by midday – something I never thought I would admit. Because when I check in to Sequoia, I find all the reasons not to leave. The leafy enclave comes replete with infinity pool and spring-fed hot-tubs offering Piccadilly Valley panoramas; wallabies drunk on the charm of the gardens lie sunning themselves by my balcony. My open-plan suite does a good job at blending in to the natural surrounds: think lashings of wood and stone, a sunken lounge with fireplace, underfloor heating, and a moon window over the bed for late-night stargazing.

I make the 'mistake' of gazing over the very upscale room service menu but show considerable restraint in the lead-up to my epic degustation booked at Hardy's Verandah Restaurant, within the sandstone walls of Mount Lofty House.

This three-hatted dining room delivers an endless parade of dishes that change with the seasons. My feast begins with pillow-like scallops dressed in yuzu, apple and cucumber, before an oh-so-pretty plate of woodland mushrooms



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with sorrel and coriander. Roast Murray cod doused in a subtle lemon myrtle cream follows, before a surprising dessert uniting Jerusalem artichokes with 64 per cent chocolate. Each bite is paired with a local wine: perhaps a Ngeringa rosé, Moorak pinot noir or Rusden grenache blanc. Or all three and more, if you let the sommelier take charge.

A taste of the region

If you are taken by what you taste, the lodge can organise private experiences

with Adelaide Hills growers, vintners and distillers, dropping in on cellar doors such as Ondeen. This new space is an ode to the region, with the bar team deftly pouring the estate's award-winning Full Circle spirits: scorched fig liquor and housemade botanical vodka pair remarkably well with pine needle-marinated olives, and a tartlet of radish and chewy beetroot.

The cellar door at Nepenthe is also new and incredibly striking, replete with blood-red walls and installations using antique wine barrels. Guided tastings take you



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01 Drinking in picture-perfect views at Mount Lofty House 02 The stunning Sequoia lodge 03 Any time is gin time at Ambleside Distillers 04 Enjoy fine drops with a delicious charcuterie board at Nepenthe. All images © Tourism Australia/South Australian Tourism Commission

from chardonnay to shiraz to tempranillo – when you've narrowed down a favourite, take a bottle out to enjoy on the lawn. For true drinking drama, however, it's hard to look past the 'Nido Experience' at Golding Wines' Western Branch Vineyard. Hidden among trees on the highest slopes of the property is a larger-than-life nido (Italian for 'bird's nest'), a whimsical hand-woven cocoon where I'm served a five-course lunch with the estate's wines. It's like being back in the womb, albeit with booze and cheese and oysters – all those good things that mum-to-be was forbidden from consuming.

Birds of a feather

The avian theme continues on Bird in Hand's vineyard, where chef Jacob Davey (ex Adelaide's awarded Restaurant Botanic) recently launched his own dining room, LVN. At Botanic, Davey was enchanted by Australia's unique native flora and he continues his culinary deep dive into the bounty at LVN. Think impossibly pretty plates like grilled oysters with warrigal greens, blood lime, horseradish and herbs from the garden. Bird in Hand's rare museum wines also take a starring role, while a gallery of artworks don the walls.

The only way to justify all the indulgence is with a long stroll through Mount Lofty's Botanic Gardens, seeded by Arthur Hardy himself almost two centuries ago. And yes, those enormous sequoias are still the star of the show. ♦

Travel file

mtloftyhouse.com.au
sequoialodge.com.au