

# Camped by a billabong

A wellness sanctuary just outside of Sydney provides all the right ingredients to help guests reassess the way they've been hurtling through life.

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It's only on reflection that the irony of speeding heedlessly towards a mindfulness retreat becomes apparent to me. But at the time, I am oblivious. Instead, I derive a perverse satisfaction from honking at the driver who weasels their car in front of mine — despite my best efforts to cut them off — and grit my teeth as they give me a cursory 'thank you' wave. Stuck in traffic, my thoughts turn to mindfulness. While I wholly believe in its benefits — it's hard to argue with neuroscience — I am somehow sceptical of it. Rather, I am sceptical of my ability to do it. Feeling trepidation bubble to the surface, I wonder what on earth I've got myself into.

As I jump out of the car at Billabong Retreat, the gravel crunches beneath my shoes, and I notice for the first time that I'm surrounded by lush greenery:

towering red gums and shrubby banksia. Aside from the chirping of birds, I'm met by silence — a rarity for a city-dweller such as myself — and I feel the sanctity of the place infiltrate me somehow, as though just being here has enabled me to divest a layer of tension.

Located just forty-five minutes from Sydney, Billabong Retreat attracts the whole gamut of clientele, from stressed-out urbanites that need a place to reconnect and refocus, to

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verifiable yogis whose very pores ooze tranquility. In fact, this is one of the things that founder and owner of Billabong, Paul von Bergen, likes best about what he's created; that he can bring people from such different walks of life together. "I love seeing the guests connect with one another," he says. "At the end of the day, we are all just human, and when people are in an environment like this — where all the stress and pressure is taken away — they seem to really embrace that."

The retreat has been consciously designed and constructed with this communal aspect in mind. The central vicinity, in which I meet a vast proportion of my fellow retreaters, is a large wooden veranda that connects the dining room to the library. It features a neutral-coloured couch adorned with pale blue, stone, and brown cushions; a fireplace; books; mandalas and colouring-in pencils; and a gong. Perched at the top of the escarpment and overlooking the abundant bush below, this area is the perfect spot to mindfully sip a cup of herbal tea and take stock of how beautiful a place this is.

Having arrived late — the source of stress that attributed to my frantic driving — I don't have a lot of time to settle before dinner is served. But a night off from cooking is relaxing in itself, particularly when I'm presented with delicious organic food. The intense aromas hit my nose before I can see what has been cooked; I detect cumin and paprika and my mouth starts to salivate. We're given generous servings of brown rice, dhal, vegetable curry, and raita, which tastes even better than it smells. And to top the meal off, dessert is a delectable chocolate mousse served with berries and coconut >>



Left Treehouse room overlooking the billabong. Above Aqua therapy pool.

**Fast fact**

The amygdala – the fight or flight centre of the brain – decreases in brain-cell volume post mindfulness practice.



cream. Feeling slightly guilty about overindulging, I'm pleased and somewhat shocked to learn that one of the dessert's primary ingredients is avocado. Who knew that one of my favourite foods could masquerade so convincingly as a sweet treat? This is the first of many revelations that I have throughout my three-day stay.

Post-dinner, I make my way to the yoga studio, a room with huge glass windows that enable retreaters to survey the vast bush below. At this time of night, the outlook is hauntingly beautiful; I can't see how far the wilderness extends, nor does it matter.



A small group of us is led through a pranayama (breathing) sequence before we're guided through a meditation. I'm surprised to learn the dialogue going on inside my head once I truly tune into it: I wonder how long this goes for; did I set my out-of-office email; I need to organise brunch for Sunday; oops, I'm not doing this properly; I knew I couldn't do this; and so on.

Feeling relaxed, albeit slightly disgruntled, I decide to turn in early. I'm staying in one of the deluxe queen treehouses which, true to their name, are built atop timber posts, enabling the rooms to jut out into the bush

and overlook the retreat's namesake, a billabong. The room itself is luxurious without being showy. It has two baths — one outside on the private balcony — complete with Epsom salts and biodegradable bath products; a separate shower; an iPad music system; a fully stocked fruit bowl; air conditioning; tea-making facilities; a fridge; and a huge, extravagant bed that I flop back and sink into. It is a beautiful space with chic décor, and while the busy schedule occupies much of my time, were you less inclined to attend everything on the timetable, it is a charming place to laze about.

While I'm staying in manifest lavishness, it's one of Paul's main aims to ensure that Billabong is accessible. "I don't want to turn it into a five-star luxury resort that only the extremely wealthy can visit," he explains. "I want for everyone to feel like they can come here." As such, Billabong's accommodation ranges from dorm-style lodgings, right the way up to deluxe treehouses.

Over the course of the next two days, I attend a variety of yoga classes that vary in difficulty and scope. As someone who typically likes to push themselves, I'm surprised to discover how beneficial a gentle flow can be.

However, it's in Paul's 'Science of Mindfulness' seminar that I learn to really let go of my ingrained scepticism towards mindfulness. Apparently, the internal monologue that plays on rotation every time I try to still my mind is not unique to me. "It's not just your mind," says Paul, "It's the human condition." I smile, feeling slightly narcissistic.

**FACT FILE****Get there**

Billabong Retreat is located in Maraylya, Sydney and is a forty-five-minute drive from the Sydney Harbour Bridge. The nearest train station is Vineyard, from which pick-ups can be arranged.

**Packages**

Billabong Retreat's 'Relaxation & Yoga' comes standard with all bookings. Additional programs include Mindfulness One (participated in by the writer), Food for Life, and Mindful Parenting. There is also the option of doing a 'Day Retreat'.

He teaches us that under stress, our fight or flight response is triggered. Every time this happens, adrenaline is pumped into our bloodstreams, our immune system is suppressed, our digestion slows, and non-essential neural circuits are shut down. While this was an evolutionary imperative back when we were fighting off sabretooth tigers as cave dwellers, in today's context, our fight-or-flight response is overstimulated, which is causing so many of us to become unwell and desperately unhappy.

"People, especially in the corporate world, wear their stress like a badge of honour," reflects Paul. "They think, 'If you're not stressed, you're not working hard enough'. But all they're doing is making themselves sick."

Listening to this is enough to make me anxious. Thankfully, meditation offers the solution. "Engaging with mindfulness elicits the parasympathetic nervous system," continues Paul, "which releases oxytocin and vasopressin, restores the digestive and immune systems, and brings your blood pressure back down."

I leave Billabong in a very different state to the one in which I arrived. I consciously notice the tree-lined path as I walk, and the way the sun is streaming through a cloud up ahead as I drive. I gladly stop as a flock of ducks crosses the road in front of me — trying not to entertain the possibility of what could have happened were I not being mindful — and even go so far as to let someone in in front of me when the traffic gets more hectic near Sydney. ■

*The writer stayed as a guest of Billabong Retreat.*

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- Paul von Bergen

**Opposite, clockwise from top** Deluxe twin room with luxurious outdoor bath; yoga and meditation room; relaxing on the veranda overlooking the verdant bush.