

BY PENNY HUNTER

## BILLABONG RETREAT, MARAYLYA, NSW

## How's the serenity

NATURE AND NURTURE IN A  
PEACEFUL BUSH SETTING

**T**he sign hanging above a statue of the Buddha reads: "All that we are arises from our thoughts." Having just arrived at Billabong Retreat on Sydney's north-western outskirts, my thoughts are a mixture of relief and curiosity about how the weekend's activities will unfold.

Exploring the grounds, I find a sundrenched hammock overlooking the waterhole at the centre of the retreat. It's the perfect spot to recline and listen to the chiming of bellbirds as ducks dawdle and honk among the lily pads. Perched amid the eucalypts on a rocky ridge nearby are 10 charming timber cabins, and one of them is mine for the night.

Billabong Retreat is a family-run yoga and meditation sanctuary nestled in bushland in Maraylya,



near Windsor, a little over an hour's drive from the CBD. Its philosophy is one of nature and nurture, caring for the environment while nourishing the minds and bodies of its guests.

Paul and Tory von Bergen bought the land in 2008 and the property includes the 10 cabins, twin rooms in the cute Harmony Cottage, ensuite rooms in the main lodge, a wellness centre for spa treatments and, most impressive, an airy yoga pavilion with hardwood beams and floor-to-ceiling windows leading to an expansive deck. The glowing heart of this outdoor zone is a slow-combustion heater. The fire burns constantly, luring guests who wrap themselves in blankets and laze on the comfy lounge, chatting, reading or just watching the flickering flames.

My deluxe cabin is all timber with neutral tones, with a queen bed piled invitingly with pillows and tastefully decked out in Ecodownunder linen. On the balcony stands a claw-foot bathtub that, were it not a chilly afternoon, might be tempting (fortunately there's an indoor alternative). With no television, no wi-fi and only patchy phone





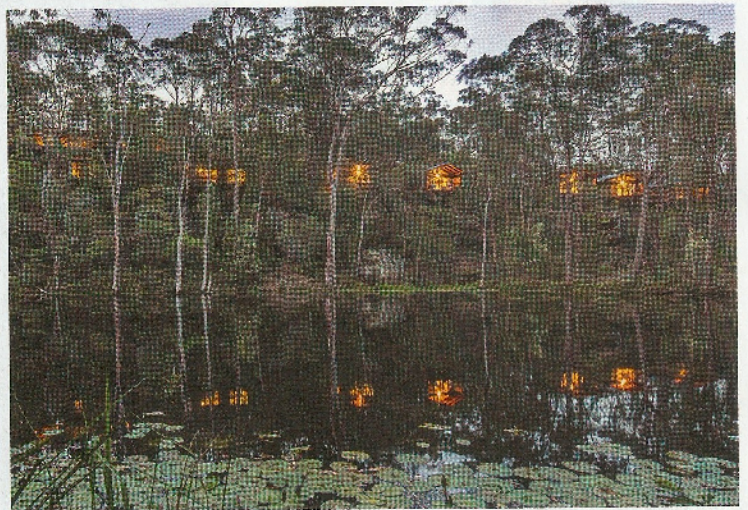


reception, there's little to distract me from the retreat's main purpose.

Yoga is, of course, top of the list. As a complete novice, I'm worried about being bent and stretched to breaking point, but my concerns are unwarranted. In a private yoga and meditation consultation, Canadian instructor Logan takes me through the basics and devises a realistic 15-minute program I can squeeze into my busy schedule when I'm back home juggling kids and work.

The resort timetable runs at a relaxed pace. There are yoga and meditation sessions in the resort centre and the screening of a documentary on mind-body medicine. At one point, a gentleman arrives and, without fanfare, begins plucking concerto movements on his guitar and charango. Every now and then a guest drifts off to a spa treatment. In summer, the pool would be a popular diversion.

Sunday morning dawns and after a 7am "dynamic yoga" session and nutritious breakfast we are invited to join a "soul vibing sound experience". I swallow my scepticism and dutifully lie on a yoga mat, crystal in hand, as



**Haven:** pool; deck; cabins among the trees; yoga pavilion

Matt Omo sends a rich cacophony of sounds, including gong, didgeridoo and what sounds like Tibetan throat singing reverberating around the room. We have been warned this session can produce startling responses in participants, and for some, it does prove a surprisingly emotional affair.

Too soon, it's time to wrench myself away from this leafy haven and head back to civilisation. But even as the bush gives way to the 'burbs, I feel calm and relaxed, nourished inside and out.

◀ Perfect for: Yoga beginners or aficionados, spiritual pilgrims or corporate types. During my visit, the majority of guests are women.

◀ Must do: As much or as little as you want. There is no obligation to take part in activities if you'd prefer to hang out in the reading room or sneak away for a nap. Make time for a treatment from the spa menu.

◀ Dining: Meals are communal. On the weekend of my stay, the kitchen is in the capable hands of Natasha Burbury, a 25-year-old chef whose focus is on fresh, vegetarian, sustainable food, with ingredients sourced from local farms. Breakfast includes frittata with kale salad, bircher muesli, and chia seed and blueberry compote; for lunch there's potato, zucchini and buckwheat fritters and a crunchy waldorf salad. Saturday's dinner guests rave about the dessert – plum puree topped with pear, vanilla and avocado, sprinkled with walnut and buckwheat crumble. No alcohol is served.

◀ Getting there: About one hour's drive from Sydney's CBD

◀ Bottom line: A two-night retreat, Friday to Sunday, starts at \$500 a person for a dorm room and ranges to \$1000 a head/\$1400 for two in a private deluxe cabin. Includes meals, drinks, snacks, twice-daily yoga, meditation plus retreat program. Spa treatments are additional.

◀ [billabongretreat.com.au](http://billabongretreat.com.au) ▶