

Bliss by the Billabong

Make time for yourself with a weekend of yoga and meditation less than an hour from Sydney.

WORDS
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Stuck in peak hour traffic heading out of Sydney, I begin to question my decision to spend the weekend at a yoga retreat. As a runner, my hamstrings are so tight that I'm lucky if I can touch my toes on a good day. Picturing lithe, flexible yoginis who can twist themselves into a human pretzel, I'm ready to turn the car around. Fortunately, Billabong Retreat is only a 50-minute drive from the centre of Sydney and, despite the Friday afternoon traffic, I'm here before I know it.

"Being good at yoga is not about being flexible," says our host Paul von Bergen, to my relief. Paul is giving us a glimpse of what's to come in the next two days at Billabong

Retreat, nestled in bushland at Maraylya, in Sydney's north-west. We start mid-afternoon in the yoga room, one of two timber yurts linked by a large deck, all designed and built by von Bergen in 2010. It's the first yoga class of our retreat and we're gently warming up the body with some flowing movements synchronised with the breath.

"Concentrating on the linking of the body movement to the breath gives the mind

just enough to deal with, so it's not tempted to get distracted," says Paul as we flow between Down Dog, Plank and Cobra. "Incorporating the breath into the practice is really essential, especially if you are trying to get refinement of the mind ... calming of the mind," he adds.

As Paul finishes the class, he suggests we retire to our rooms for a little rest and return to the open-plan dining and lounge room in the other yurt for dinner. And so we fall

into the nurturing rhythm of Billabong Retreat: relaxing yoga classes followed by delicious vegetarian meals.

Sixteen of us sit around two dining tables and we get to know each other a little better over dinner. There's a mother and daughter from Sydney's northern suburbs who are not regular yoga practitioners but CrossFitters looking to add flexibility to their workouts. A stressed workaholic says she is relieved and nervous about a weekend away from mobile and internet reception while a group of young mums say they are thankful for the peace and quiet. There is no sign of anyone resembling a human pretzel.

For dinner Paul's wife, Tory, has prepared a spinach and black sticky rice pie with



● Billabong Retreat has a sustainable philosophy - inside and out.

“While the retreat program is designed to keep us occupied, guests are encouraged to use the afternoons for rest. It's heavenly to have the chance.”

cottage cheese and homemade tomato sauce, and, for dessert, an apple crumble straight from the oven. There's definitely no fasting at this health retreat. After a second serve of Tory's tasty, sugar-free crumble, we move into the yoga room for a session of gentle yogic breathing and a guided yoga nidra practice. It's a perfect wind-down before a good night's sleep.

You're spoiled for choice when it comes to accommodation at Billabong Retreat. There are pavilions with roll-up walls offering all the perks of camping without the

discomfort. Guests who prefer a more solid structure can choose from cabins tucked into an escarpment overlooking the billabong or guestrooms in a Federation cottage.

BUSH ESCAPE

We wake up ready for a 7.30 breakfast. There's hot porridge and stewed fruits on the stove, local bread for toast, homemade muesli and a wide range of teas.

At 9am we reconvene for our morning class. The windows are still fogged with the morning's dew as we practise



COURTESY OF

Fact File

GETTING THERE: Billabong Retreat is an easy 50-minute drive north-west of the centre of Sydney. You can also take the train to Vineyard or the bus to Rouse Hill and arrange for Paul to pick you up for a small cost.

STAYING THERE: Weekend retreats with Paul von Bergen are held regularly. Two-night retreats start from \$450 which includes morning and evening yoga classes, all food and accommodation. Yoga schools, meditation groups and other modalities also hold retreats at Billabong Retreat. Check the website for a calendar of events; www.billabongretreat.com.au.

NEARBY: Massages can be booked for during your visit; make an enquiry when booking your retreat.



● The deck at Billabong Retreat with its stunning view.

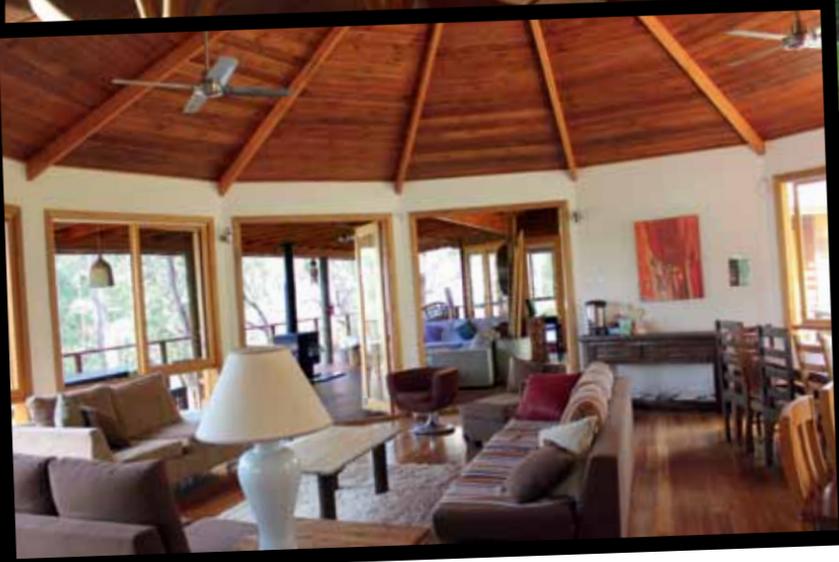


Looking for bliss a little closer to home?

These retreats are all about an hour from capital cities.

- QUEENSLAND**
Gwinganna
gwinganna.com
Nestled in the pristine Tallebudgera Valley and surrounded by ocean and valley views, Gwinganna is a space to breathe, relax and nourish your body and spirit.
- VICTORIA**
Humming Bird Eco Retreat
hummingbirdeco.com.au
This retreat spread across 1.6 hectares adjacent to National Trust bushland and offers classes in yoga, meditation and dance.
- SOUTH AUSTRALIA**
Authenticity Spa Resort
authenticity.com.au
Surrounded by botanic gardens,

- Authenticity in Port Elliot, 80km south of Adelaide, provides a serene environment for guests to relax and rejuvenate.
- WESTERN AUSTRALIA**
Brookleigh
brookleigh.com.au
Near the Swan River, just 25km from the centre of Perth, Brookleigh encourages guests to activate the body and quieten the mind.
- TASMANIA**
Harmony Hill
organicspa-retreat.com
Less than 30 minutes from Hobart, Harmony Hill offers a range of spa and healing therapies with water and mountain views.



some new poses and go over what we learned the day before. "Listen to the gentle sound of the breath, the smoothness," says Paul, raising his arms with an inhale and lowering with the exhale. "I continually reiterate, let the breath lead the movement, because I know I

have to keep reminding myself," he explains. After the class, Paul lets us know that today there'll be a special shiatsu seated massage class taught by a local therapist. Additionally, some of the guests have booked massages with another visiting

therapist for \$80 and will enjoy those during the day when we are in class or on siesta after lunch. While the retreat is designed to keep you occupied, Paul encourages us to rest in the afternoon, to take advantage of the sofas in the lounge room and on the deck, which has a combustion heater for cool weather. While some borrow a book

from the retreat's collection or get some shut-eye in a hammock perched on the escarpment, I take a walk down to the billabong. Sitting in the open-air yurt by the water, I am captivated by the sights and sounds. Ducks glide by, small birds flutter in and out of the native bushes and frogs can be heard in the distance. A couple of us go for a light jog around the beautiful back-lots of Maraylya.

NATURAL CHOICES

Given its setting and purpose, Billabong Retreat is an eco-friendly operation with solar power and conservation methods in place. Guests are encouraged to be mindful of energy and water usage and to put food scraps from meals in a kitchen bin reserved for compost. Tory and Paul grow a wide range of herbs on the five hectare property and have plans for a large vegetable garden to supply the kitchen's needs.

Mindful of sustainability, Tory sources locally grown food such as fruit and vegetables, free-range organic eggs and honey. Inspired by wholefood philosophy, she focuses on providing tempting vegetarian fare to retreaters. "I love for people to feel nourished when they leave here," she says. "I used to see a lot of faces a little wary about what they were going to get to eat. Maybe they're a little scared of what they're going to be given on a yoga retreat, and think it's

going to be light meals, but it's definitely not like that. I make really healthy afternoon tea, fruit is always on offer and I serve up a nice pudding after dinner." Tory avoids using processed sugars and instead uses rice syrup or guava syrup for sweetening treats. "I also use lots of spices and herbs, good oils such as rice bran and sesame, and unusual grains," she explains. "It's definitely about cutting-edge ways of cooking and how you can use food to heal."

HOME PRACTICE

On the last day of the retreat, our morning class is a special one. Paul reveals that during the past few lessons he has been gradually teaching us the poses that make up a seven-minute practice that we can do at home and easily fit into our daily routine. Paul was inspired by US

yoga teacher Mark Whitwell, who developed a seven-minute yoga practice (available as an iPhone app) after asking his students how much time they could realistically devote to yoga each day. For the next hour, we practise Paul's seven-minute sequence eight times, engraining the postures in our muscle memory. Each time Paul gives less instruction so that we learn to become mindful yogis and not what he calls "yoga robots". Saying goodbye to my new yoga buds, it's hard to believe the nerves I felt just two nights ago when I pulled into the retreat. It is said that life begins outside of your comfort zone and this weekend has opened my eyes to the possibility. As I head back to the hustle and bustle of city living, I feel confident that I can find just seven minutes each day for Paul's practice and transport myself back to blissful Billabong Retreat. **E**