

Inside the chill-out zone

A collection of private treehouses overlooking two billabongs is the ideal set-up for a peaceful holiday, writes **ALYSSON WATSON.**

PEOPLE go on retreat for lots of reasons, and this is acknowledged upfront by the team at Billabong.

There's no tut-tutting if you choose slumber over yoga, wine and chocolate (in your room) over tea and melon on the deck, or head to the pub at night instead of meditation.

And there's no fit young things in Lycra trying for personal bests.

It's as if Billabong is saying: yes, we know you run (on meat, caffeine and alcohol) at a million miles an hour with a furrowed brow while juggling hot potatoes. But look, here is an alternative. Try it, you might like it. You will certainly feel better.

And so we stop, and look and listen. We smile and breathe and chant and colour in.

We talk as little or as much as we want. We chill.

This "alternative" is nestled in the treetops in the Hawkesbury town of Maraylya. Print out the directions on the website – the GPS and phone may not work.

It's a collection of private treehouses overlooking two healthy billabongs, and lavish yurt-style dining and yoga/meditation rooms, wrapped by a large deck, that provide a place to come together.

We're invited to do as little or as much as we like.

But this is not all mung beans and mossies (although the menu is vegetarian, and there are plenty of frogs and cicadas). And Billabong runs on eco principles, with tank water (filtered for drinking) and waste composting.

It strikes me that the place should seem contradictory – a blend of seclusion and togetherness, luxury and simplicity. And yet it's as harmonious as the cicadas.

The creation, quite literally, of Paul von Bergen and his wife Tory (who live on site with their young children), Billabong is a boutique resort welcoming only 30 guests at a time.

After checking in (no key is provided, but you can pay a little more to be able to lock up), I survey my newly built deluxe treehouse, noting unexpected airconditioning and restful views to the billabongs through gums, melaleucas and bottlebrushes.

There's a queen bed and lounge in the studio-style space, a luxurious ensuite bathroom, and a decadent clawfoot bath



ATTRACTIVE ALTERNATIVE: Unlike some retreats, Billabong doesn't preach its clean living. Nor will it break the bank.



COMFORTABLE: The treehouses offer restful views among the gums and melaleucas.

out on the deck. It's open and light and smells of timber.

There's a meet and greet at 3.30pm, and our group, like most, is nearly all female. Someone has dragged their husband along and another two blokes have been sent by their employers – otherwise it's girls' weekends and solo stayers intent on making the most of their time away.

We're invited to do as little or as much as we like, but each day offers three sessions of yoga, two of meditation, one of chanting, and three convivial meal times.

There's a new magnesium aquatherapy pool, walking tracks, bikes to borrow, and a spa offering massages and facials. Ask to have your massage in the open pavilion across the water for a truly communing-

IF YOU GO

- ❑ Billabong Retreat is at 41 McClymonts Road, Maraylya. Ph: 4573 6080, website: billabongretreat.com.au.
- ❑ Travel time from Newcastle is 2 hours 20 minutes.
- ❑ Train pick-up at Vineyard station.
- ❑ Guests limited to 30, specialty retreats offered.
- ❑ Stays are 2, 4 or 6 nights, single, double/twin or quad share.
- ❑ Prices per person for two nights start at \$400.
- ❑ Winner best health and wellness retreat, and most unique accommodation, 2013 NSW Tourism Awards.

with-nature experience. Don't be afraid to ask for "gentle", the masseurs say they have a strong hand, and do take in the roof, lovingly handcrafted by Paul.

In between scheduled classes there is freestyle mandala meditation, best explained as grown-up colouring in. You choose your mandala (printed, patterned circle), choose your pencils, choose your spot, breathe deeply and colour in at will. There's calm in the colour, sound and motion of the pencils, and joy in the finished product. Even the blokes have a go. They worry aloud about staying in the lines.

Food follows the SLOW philosophy (simple, local, organic and whole) and showcases local produce. The menu includes nut roast with gravy, chunky miso soup with brown rice and shredded omelette, veggie curry with dahl, and a colourful spread of salads, vegies and grains. Desserts are poached pears with cinnamon and vanilla (ricotta) cream, and avocado, cocoa and coconut mousse with raspberries. Breakfast includes porridge, granola, boiled eggs, stewed fruits, nuts and yoghurt. There are snacks (try the Bliss Bombs) and tea and coffee all day. You won't be hungry.

After lunch on day three, no one really wants to leave. We have one last swim, one last cup of tea, one last Bliss Bomb, and colour in one last mandala. Then it's in the car and back to life.

I'll be back, and will bring my partner. Unlike some retreats, Billabong doesn't preach its clean living. Nor will it break the bank. But it might just break some bad habits.

Namaste.



RELAX: Do as little or as much as you like, with no pressure to join in group events.



CALMING: Billabong offers a magnesium aquatherapy pool, along with a spa.