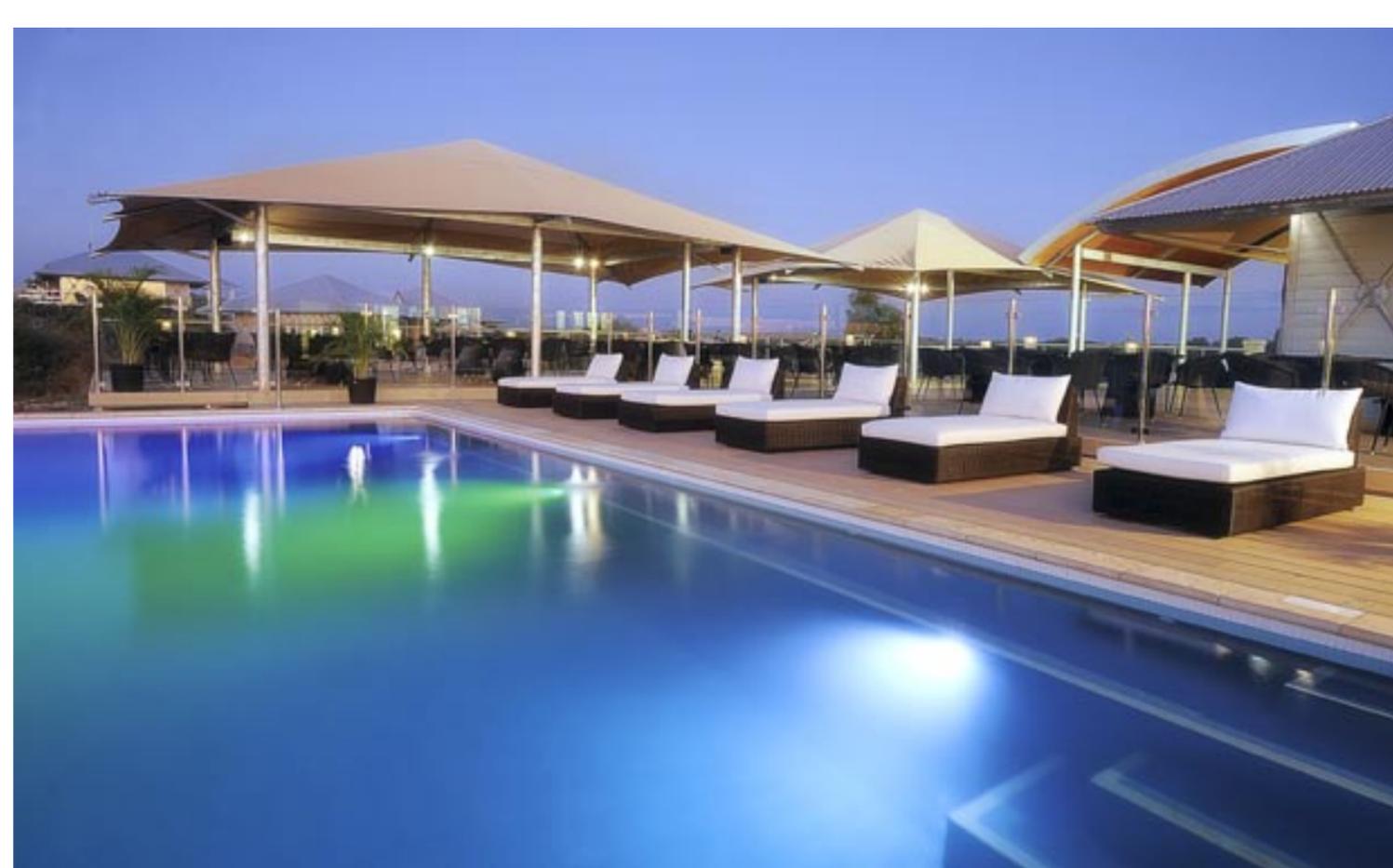


short stays, 12 WAYS

Staycation, holiday at home, mini-break – call it what you will, there's never been a better time to explore our own shores, and all that lies between them. Pack an overnight bag and take your pick from a dozen of our favourite Australian getaways.



Broome, WA ECO BEACH WILDERNESS RETREAT

Eco Beach reopened in May after a contretemps with Cyclone Rosita pretty much flattened the place in 2000. Nine years on, this most ethical of holiday hideaways, on a beautiful stretch of Kimberley coast 90 minutes south of Broome, offers way more than its previous incarnation.

Think early morning yoga overlooking the beach and an array of alternative therapies that includes shanti and rebirthing, along with panoramic views from Jack's Creek in the north to Cape Villaret in the south. The resort's hub is home to a restaurant and roomy bar, linked to a series of breezy eco-tents and airconditioned villas via more than a kilometre of raised walkways that protect the Kimberley's pristine environment from modern-day Robinson Crusoes.

A stay at Eco Beach is all about re-connecting with the environment, preferably over the rim of a cold wine glass. Optional activities include mud-crabbing, kayaking and fishing for barramundi in the region's abundant waters, as well as bushwalks with indigenous elders and, from July to October, whale watching.

In keeping with owner Karl Plunkett's vision for an environmentally sustainable holiday haven, all the tents and villas are solar-powered and virtually self-sustaining, generating their own power which is fed back to the resort power grid for use when needed. Without televisions and telephones, there's no excuse for ignoring nature at her most majestic, although cyber desperados will find limited WiFi access near the bar.

Without a hint of pretension, the resort offers isolation, pristine beaches and star-filled nights along with

a commitment to eco-sustainable tourism and rather good food. Alert the papers: we might not be coming home any time soon. JANE CORNES

Garden view eco-tents from \$150. Ocean view eco-tents from \$220. Mention Gourmet Traveller when booking and receive 10 per cent off rack rates and a free guided bush walk. Eco Beach Resort, (08) 9193 8015, ecobeach.com.au

Falls Creek, Vic QUAY WEST RESORT & SPA

Snow is a serious business at Falls Creek. Here you'll find more than 90 ski runs but also Quay West Resort & Spa, the newest kid on the piste. Framed in striking steel and timber, on a scale that caters to snow fiends and spa enthusiasts alike, Quay West is Australia's first drive-in, drive-out, ski-in, ski-out resort.

Each of the 63 generously sized apartments, with one to three bedrooms, has heated floors, a fully equipped kitchen, ensuite bathrooms, wireless internet access, flat-screen TV and – best of all – a balcony hot tub. Mii Spa offers the chance to seriously chill out with an impressive menu of beauty and massage treatments. The plunge pool, sauna and steam room also help soothe away a hard day's work on the slopes.

Tomdickandharrys bar, with its buzzy vibe, is the perfect place to down a cocktail or graze on bar snacks before moving on to the Argentine-inspired Alta restaurant, where paella and empanadas are the order of the evening.

In spring, when wildflowers blanket the landscape, hiking, mountain biking and fly fishing are part of the >

Chilling out
Relax poolside at Eco Beach Wilderness Retreat (above) or ski in, ski out at Quay West Resort & Spa (opposite).



action. Then again, with views like this you might just want to sit back and absorb the scenery. **LOU FAY** Rooms from \$621 per night. Mention Gourmet Traveller when booking and receive a bottle of Christmont wine. Offer available until 30 November 2009. Book at mirvachotels.com and enter code GOURMET, or call 13 15 15. Quay West Resort & Spa, (03) 5732 8000, stfalls.com.au

Blue Mountains, NSW LILIANFELS

Thwack! Spare a thought for the scores of cushions adorning the sofas in the lounge at Lilianfels. Late at night, staff trained in the art of cushion-plumping beat them into shape, working the room in synchronised efficiency. For many guests, sinking into cushions is the most strenuous activity they'll undertake here. Never mind the stunning World Heritage escarpment views virtually on the doorstep: the best vantage point is a squishy armchair in front of the fire, with a high tea menu within reach.

After high tea, a retreat to the spa is in order. The volcanic stone therapy treatment entails being massaged with hot rocks and is said to restore physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. It also aids in the digestion of scones and lamingtons.

A stroll down the gravel drive brings you to the hotel's two-starred restaurant, Darley's, housed in the property's original 1889 homestead. This time of year, the menu features partridge, pheasant, and the butteriest potato purée this side of Paris.

This is not a "design hotel", bless it. Bedrooms are enormous, natural light is abundant, walls are thick, furnishings are soft, and artworks feature Australian birds and flowers. Allow time to enjoy the indoor and outdoor heated pools, sauna, spa, gym, billiards room and English-style gardens. And lots of lounging. **KERRYN BURGESS**

Rooms from \$366, full breakfast included. Mention Gourmet Traveller when booking for the special rate of \$350 in a deluxe room, including full breakfast for two people. Book two nights or more and receive a spa voucher valued at \$100. Offer available until 30 October 2009. To book this offer, phone (02) 8248 5230. Lilianfels, (02) 4780 1200, lilianfels.com.au

Beechworth, Vic PROVENANCE

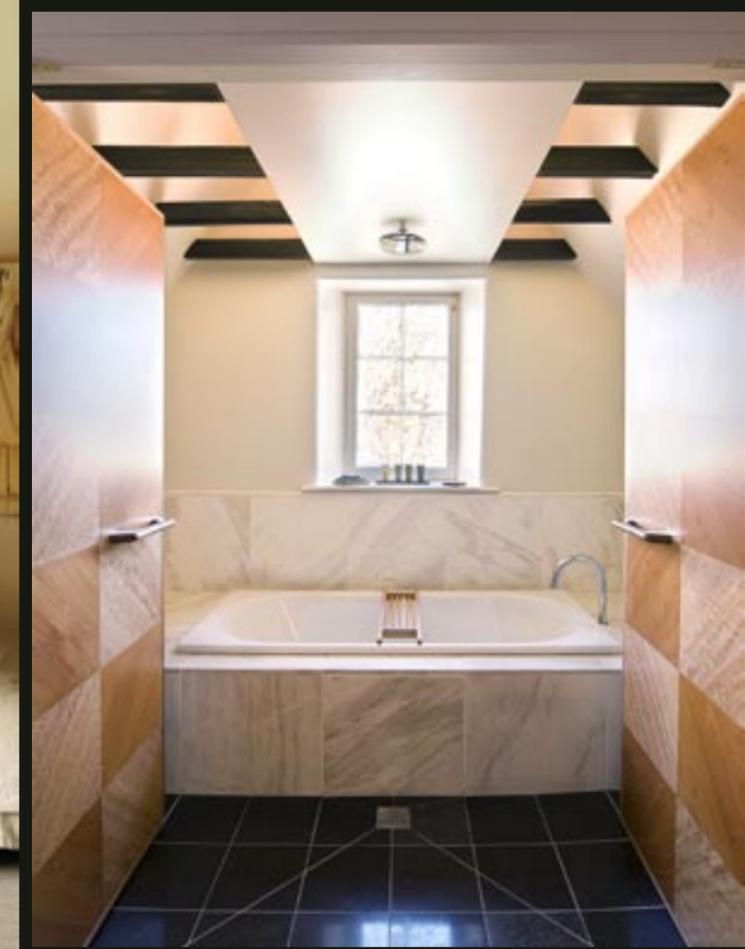
It's hard to imagine a better place for a romantic getaway than this restaurant and country hotel owned by chef Michael Ryan and his partner, winemaker Jeanette Henderson. With its massive bathroom and stylishly low-key charm, the room inspires you to open a bottle of bubbly (there's a welcome bottle of Dal Zotto from the King Valley waiting), dress for dinner, wander across the cobblestoned courtyard and settle in at the restaurant located in an 1850s bank building. Ryan drew plaudits for his cooking at Range and Wardens, and the à la carte menu is rich in eat-me dishes such as roast local trout with fennel and bread stuffing and a grain salad, and braised rabbit on a toasted orzo pilaf. Better still, there are not one but two degustations on offer, one entirely vegetarian.

Provenance opened last December as a restaurant with four luxury suites, all facing onto the serene courtyard. Serviced with large-screen TV and CD/DVD player, the seductive mood, with the room's earthy tones, is the point here. There's too much to see and do around Beechworth to stay in too long; indeed, the suites are perfect for a relaxing post-prandial meditation on how therapeutic even a short time in the country can be. On day two, at our request, breakfast is cheerfully delivered on a tray to the door. If you are with the right person, with the wide streets of historic Beechworth and its beautiful surrounds to explore next day, it's easy to feel passionate about the world. **PETER WILMOTH** Suites \$295 Friday or Saturday, \$275 Sunday to Thursday, including breakfast. Mention Gourmet Traveller when booking and receive three nights for the price of two between Sunday and Thursday. Provenance, (03) 5728 1786, theprovenance.com.au

Tasmania THE PRIORY COUNTRY LODGE

If you're captivated by the prospect of country life – more along the lines of *To the Manor Born* than Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall – then The Priory Country Lodge, just south of Tasmania's Central Highlands, will appeal. Built in 1848, it had a glorious makeover in 2008 and its deer antlers and cedar panels now sit easily alongside sumptuous Jim Thompson silk and marble bathrooms.

A small party could have exclusive use of the property, which has several generously proportioned, beautifully decorated and comfortable living rooms as well as its four bedrooms. There's a big country kitchen from >



LILIANFELS PHOTOGRAPHY JASON LOUCAS PROVENANCE PHOTOGRAPHY JACQUIE KOOLEN



Celebrity magnet Palazzo Versace brings a note of baroque extravagance to Queensland's Gold Coast.

which delicious aromas emanate throughout the day and a formal dining room where guests dine at night.

The Priory can arrange guided hunting trips and trout fishing in some of Australia's best angling country. You can play a round of golf at Ratho, Australia's oldest golf course, or tour The Nant whisky distillery, where an early 19th-century water-driven flour mill has been restored and now grinds malted barley for the whisky. (There's another mill at nearby Thorpe Farm, where John Bignell makes his renowned goat's cheeses.) A stroll through historic Bothwell, where many Georgian cottages are largely intact, is also enjoyable.

SUE DYSON & ROGER MCSHANE
Rooms \$350-\$550 including breakfast and dinner. Mention Gourmet Traveller when booking and receive a complimentary round of golf. The Priory Country Lodge, (03) 6259 4012, thepriorycountrylodge.com.au

Gold Coast, Qld PALAZZO VERSACE

It's almost a decade since Palazzo Versace introduced a note of baroque extravagance to Queensland's Gold Coast, attracting such celebrity guests as Paris Hilton and the Sultan of Brunei. The \$300 million hotel's 204 rooms and 72 condominiums are still sumptuous – though in these cash-strapped times the welcome mat has been extended to guests of more modest means. Affordable luxury is the hotel's new catchphrase. While it's not exactly cheap to stay here, discounted mid-week rates make it more accessible than ever.

The rich and famous can still feel at home amid the vast marbled lobby with its gilt-edged cornices, whimsical dados and slightly sepulchral floral arrangements. At the

same time, the vibe is relaxed. Balconies of many rooms overlook an artificial beach where guests drink exotic cocktails while children splash in the pool. The spa is suitably decadent, and the rooms are luxurious, some with balcony views to the Broadwater. Really, there's no need to leave the hotel at all. Vanitas looks after fine dining, Vie is good and casual, and a third restaurant, Il Barocco, covers the bases in between. **DAVID BENTLEY**
Rooms from \$270 (select weeknights only), increasing to \$313-\$408 Thursday to Saturday. Condominium suites from \$1400. Mention Gourmet Traveller when booking and receive a complimentary bottle of Ninth Island wine. Palazzo Versace, (07) 5509 8000, palazzoversace.com

Sydney Harbour, NSW COCKATOO ISLAND

The largest island in Sydney Harbour, at various times a convict prison, reformatory school and ship-building yard, Cockatoo Island now offers accommodation in the form of two restored Federation homes that once housed the island's medical officer and engineering manager.

The houses sleep up to 10 people and have a lovely air of relaxed luxury. Original timber floors and period features mingle with fully equipped modern kitchens and bathrooms, quality beds and furnishings and excellent outdoor spaces complete with outdoor furniture and barbecues. All very nice in any setting, but what makes Cockatoo Island stand apart are the stupendous views, particularly at night when you are completely surrounded by city lights with the Harbour Bridge in the distance, beyond the lawn tennis court. The sense of peace and tranquility only a short ferry ride from Sydney's CBD is almost surreal. That you have to bring all your own supplies (there's a little café on the island but otherwise you're on your own) adds to the impression of reassuring isolation. Cockatoo Island is a truly special place, and getting away from it all has never been so convenient. **MICHAEL HARDEN**
Winter rates \$900 per weekend (Fri-Sun), autumn/spring \$1200, summer \$1350. Mention Gourmet Traveller when booking for midweek outside school holidays and stay four nights for the price of three. Offer available to first 20 callers. Cockatoo Island, (02) 8898 9774, cockatooisland.gov.au

Nelson Bay, NSW AMARNA RESORT

Nelson Bay, about two hours' drive north of Sydney, offers more water-based activities than you can shake a beach towel at, but in wintertime there's absolutely no reason to get your feet wet. In fact, if you're staying at Amarna Resort, the area's only five-star self-contained accommodation, you may find it difficult to leave your room at all. All 11 beachfront suites overlook a heated outdoor pool and have private balconies with panoramic water views. You can laze around by the fireplace, enjoy sunset drinks and nibbles from your complimentary gourmet hamper or book a chef for a meal prepared in your room.



If you do venture outdoors, you'll be well rewarded for the effort. The area's bird-filled forests bristle with native wildlife and its waters are home to bottlenose dolphins and humpback whales that churn up and down the coast from June to October. Catch all the action aboard the *Moonshadow*; multiple cruises leave every day from the nearby marina. And afterwards, head to Glenn Thompson's restaurant, Zest, for a robust menu of soothing slow-cooked winter fare. Bliss. **TRACEY LAITY**
One-bedroom suites \$395. Mention Gourmet Traveller when booking and stay four nights for the price of three. Offer available until 15 December 2009. Amarna Resort, (02) 4981 1644, amarnaresort.com.au

Port Douglas, Qld THE (W)RIGHT HOUSE

No jokes, please, about searching for Mr (W)right. We've got his address and he's well worth a visit. Well, his house certainly is. Bold and theatrical, with soaring ceilings reminiscent of a cathedral or miniature Sydney Opera House, this award-winning four bedder is a monument to environmental design and available most of the year.

Tucked away in the gated Beachfront Mirage precinct, The (W)right House is a persuasive alternative to hotel accommodation, perfect for an extended family or group of friends who could use its schmick open-plan kitchen to get up close and personal with local produce.

If you're feeling energetic, Port Douglas is a 15-minute walk down coconut palm-fringed Four Mile Beach (just a

few minutes by car) or, closer to home, a partially shaded 15-metre lap pool beckons. There are cream upholstered day beds for lounging and a separate shady pavilion with plenty of cushions and speakers for kicking back.

Underfoot you'll find cool polished concrete which merges seamlessly with the outdoor decking. Bi-fold doors open up the vast living space on two sides so you can enjoy tropical breezes cooled by water features. It's been described as a modern and very up-market take on the beach shack. Kiss goodbye to air-conditioning and experience the tropics in the style they deserve. **FIONA DONNELLY**

Rates \$1200 per night (minimum stay five nights). Mention Gourmet Traveller when booking and stay six nights for the price of five (book between 29 July and 29 August 2009). Executive Retreats, (07) 4098 1418, executive-retreats.com.au

Mornington Peninsula, Vic WOODMAN ESTATE

Set on more than 20 hectares that include landscaped gardens, wetland walks and a private lake stocked with trout, the Mornington Peninsula's Woodman Estate makes all the right luxury country-house moves. The main "manor house" (formerly a private residence) is opulent without being stuffy. Its lounge areas, with open fireplaces and billiard room, are perfect places to relax before or after dinner in Woodman's small but impressive restaurant. In balmy weather the restaurant's >



outdoor terrace overlooking the lake is a wonderful setting for a leisurely meal.

There are large hotel-style rooms and suites in the main house but the best Woodman experience is in one of the secluded Lakeside Chalets with their spacious marble bathrooms, four-poster beds, lounge rooms and verandas. The estate also has its own spa with an extensive array of treatments and indoor and outdoor relaxation areas a short stroll from the main house. Fly-fishing, tennis and a spa pool add to its attractions but it's the personable, exact service and attention to detail that really charm. MICHAEL HARDEN
Dinner, bed and breakfast packages from \$495. Woodman Estate, (03) 5978 8455, woodmanestate.com

Flinders Ranges, SA RAWNSLEY PARK STATION ECO-VILLAS

"They've turned out a bit arty, haven't they?" Second-generation sheep station owner Tony Smith seems bemused at the aesthetics of the eco-villas he and his wife, Julie, have created on their property in the Flinders Ranges. When Smith's father purchased 3000 of the property's 12,000 hectares in 1953, Australia was riding on the sheep's back. Since then tourism has overtaken wool in economic importance in the Flinders, but the area's heritage is reflected in the eco-villas' design. The Smiths chose straw bales as the main building material not only for their thermal efficiency but also because their thickness, soft lines and natural colours are reminiscent of the original stone-built station homesteads of the area.

Each villa is carefully sited to offer spectacular views of the landscape, and for privacy – despite the large double-glazed windows on three sides of each villa, no one will see you pore over the birdwatching books, indulge in a glass of the complimentary bottle of wine, or toast a croissant from the generous breakfast provisions.

The seclusion is part of the draw for the movie celebs who've stayed at Rawnsley, especially since Rachel Ward's *Beautiful Kate* was filmed in the area (see page 173).

The station's Woolshed restaurant heads off any preconceptions you might have of outback food ("We do not use a deep-fryer"), and serves meals such as goat curry, South Australian fish, and pizza.

Bushwalking, mountain-biking, 4WD tours, scenic flights over Wilpena Pound and star-gazing are among the activities on offer, the last from the comfort of your bed, thanks to the dramatic skylights featured in the bedrooms. KERRY BURGESS

Eco-villas from \$340, breakfast included. Mention Gourmet Traveller when booking to receive a two-night package for \$860 for two people including two nights of accommodation, breakfasts, guided sunset tour, three-course dinner and a glass of wine in the Woolshed Restaurant. Rawnsley Park, (08) 8648 0030, rawnsleypark.com

Gold Coast hinterland, Qld GWINGANNA LIFESTYLE RETREAT

You're wallowing in a gently fizzing pool, its infinity edge plunging towards tumbling bush and a distant strip of deep-blue Pacific. Between the four-course lunch behind you and the afternoon of massage and facial treatments ahead, this feels like a five-star holiday, and not, perhaps, what you'd expect from a detox lifestyle retreat.

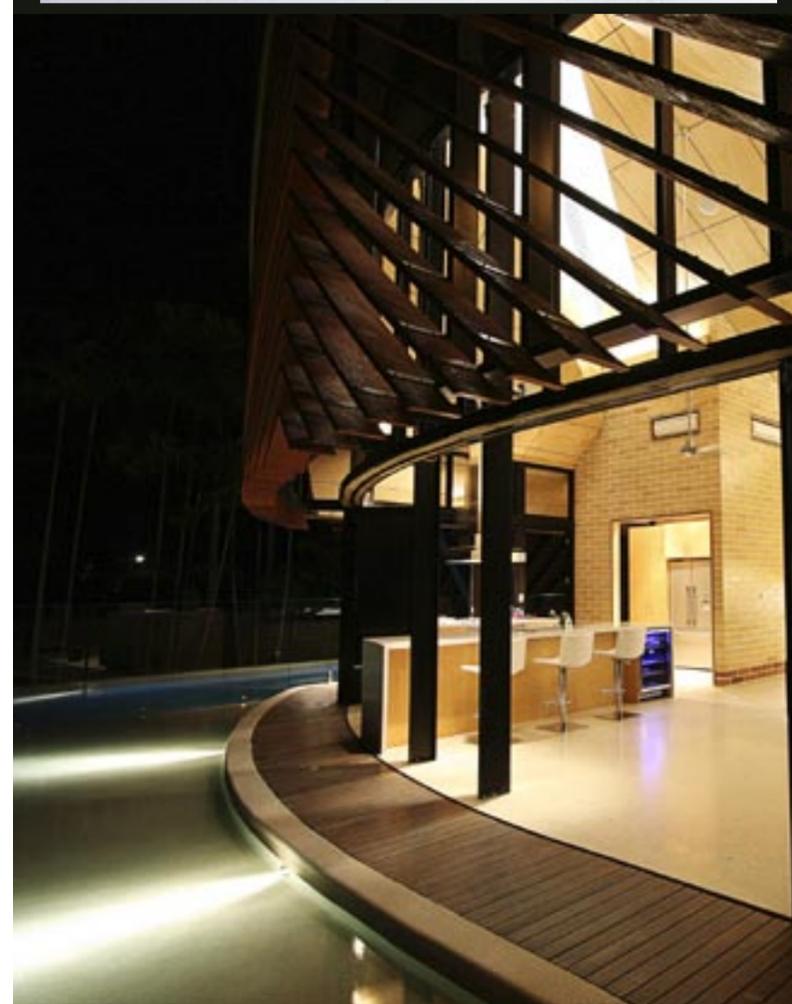
Set amid 200 hectares of bush high above the Gold Coast, Gwinganna is tuned into the fact that those most in need of a healthy change are often those who can't spare the time to do so. Hence, as well as its seven-day programs, Gwinganna offers weekend escapes designed to clear both mind and body but in moderation – escapes which allow, for instance, such substances as caffeine and wine (organic, of course, and strictly in RDA doses).

The retreat is laid out like a village replete with a communal dining room and relaxation area warmed by a massive fireplace, tranquil swimming pools, gym, sauna and steam rooms, plus pavilions built for yoga and meditation. Days start with Tai Chi and are filled with as many or as few activities as you wish, from step classes, to guided nature walks, to cooking demonstrations.

Three luxurious villas are the pick of the accommodation, boasting the aforementioned pools cut into private decks, Bose sound systems with iPod docks, recycled timber frames and finishes and extensive bathrooms.

But the highlight of any Gwinganna stay has to be the Spa Sanctuary, designed on seven levels in concentric circles around three gum trees and specialising in all kinds of massage including Rockupuncture (hot rocks and acupuncture). If an afternoon here doesn't slow you down, nothing will. EMMA VENTURA

*Two-night all-inclusive two-bedroom villa weekend packages from \$1400 per person. Mention Gourmet Traveller when booking to save 10 per cent on a retreat and receive a copy of the recipe book Gwinganna: From Garden to Gourmet. Offer available until 4 October 2009. Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat, 1800 219 272, gwinganna.com**



Stylish seclusion
Rediscover nature in a Rawnsley Park Station eco-villa, nestled in the Flinders Ranges (above), or get back in touch with yourself at Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat in Queensland (opposite, bottom right). Stay in comfort at Sydney's Cockatoo Island (opposite, top right) or Port Douglas's The (W)right House (opposite, top and bottom left).