

Go off-grid in style in Mudgee

Bliss out in Mudgee, the reigning winner of Australia's Top Tourism Town.

By JANE NICHOLLS



Glenayr Farm Mudgee.

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5 MINUTE READ

I hate being away from water, which is the sole reservation I have about going bush. Yet I am out here in central-west NSW and perfectly content, bobbing about in an outdoor hot tub. It's so cleverly secluded by the undulating folds of the land that my swimsuit is high and dry inside my stylish off-grid villa. Butcherbirds are singing to each other across the gully, a willie wagtail seems to be courting me as it chimmies around the tub and a mob of kangaroos has bounded out from the trees for supper. The sun starts rolling down the other side of the surrounding slopes, lush and green after recent rains.

This majestic vista is all mine, and my daughter's, for the moment. I'm blissing out at Glenayr Farm, 20 minutes outside Mudgee, reigning winner of Australia's Top Tourism Town. I've only got a couple of days here but time enough to get a taste of why.

Mudgee is the kind of classic country town that is writ large in Australian imaginations. There's a neat grid of wide streets and buildings with verandas, cast-iron lacework and sturdy tin roofs, a proud WWII memorial clock tower in the middle of a roundabout and impeccably kept heritage-listed properties, including St Mary's Catholic Church, the post office and the old railway station.

Moochi means "nest in the hills" in the language of the Wiradjuri nation, the "people of the three rivers" and Mowgee was the local clan here in the Cudgegong River Valley. I'm nestling in Villa Merlot on Glenayr Farm, a 130ha sheep property bought by a Sydney family several years ago to create a place where they could "disconnect to reconnect". As well as a hideaway for family and friends, owners Rachel and Michael White offer unhosted accommodation to guests and no expense has been spared to create a luxurious off-grid getaway, with plenty of personal touches.

Two luxury villas sit well apart from each other on one side of the property, so I can shower while watching those 'roos nibbling the grass. The four bell tents on the other side of the farm all have proper queen beds and a communal area with glamping-worthy bathroom facilities, a great kitchen and dining table, barbecue and numerous spots to lounge around outside.

Make your own fun is the name of the game off-grid (there's decent coverage for Telstra customers, but everyone else can kiss connectivity goodbye). A billiards table, darts, board games and hundreds of DVDs are on hand to help, as well as a professional-style XGIMI projector set-up for a movie night under the stars. This is prime dark-sky country and Mudgee Observatory is about 15 minutes down the road. Over many decades, owners John and Patricia Vetter have assembled a collection of telescopes housed in white domes on their property. You must book your visit in advance and, while it sounds awesome, with all these 'roos about I have second thoughts about driving there at night. We've come prepared with our own small telescope, which my daughter patiently sets up in front of our villa. We add a pair of binoculars and the SkyView stargazing app and zoom around the Milky Way, marvelling at crystal-clear craters on the moon.

Our stay is early in the week so many cellar doors are shut. At the Mudgee Visitor Information Centre, housed in the striking Mudgee Arts Precinct, as well as brochures and maps we find wine, cheese, olives, honey and a veritable country fair of homemade jams and pickles for sale. Stocking up, we later realise this is a good workaround for Monday-Tuesday visitors.

One night at the farm, a boho-chic set-up by Mudgee Picnics & Events is next for a cosy outdoors movie night. Next evening we are spoilt with a private cheese and wine tasting. Jane Curley comes out to Glenayr with a grazing board from The Cellar by Gilbert, setting up on the dining table on the jetty at the dam (the glampers' swimming pool). She takes us through a tasting of Gilbert Family Wines, the fruits of six generations of winemaking. The more-ish grazing board inspires further exploring.

The bedroom in one of the villas.

The Cellar by Gilbert leases space from High Valley Cheese Co, which has its factory and tastings out the back. Shaun Barry chuckled in working as a project manager in Sydney 3½ years ago to turn artisan cheesemaker, taking over from his in-laws who founded the company. "They're in their eighties and it was becoming a bit too much for them so I thought I'd give it a crack," he says, offering us a taste of his award-winning marinated fetta, which makes it to selected Sydney supermarkets. "I use about 3000-4000 litres of milk a week from Little Big Dairy Co in Dubbo," he says.

I discover this "single origin" milk when I duck into the local Woolworths. I'm always happy to find regional produce in big supermarkets, and Barry also keeps his sources close, such as using trimmings from nearby cherry orchards for his smoked cheddar. Foodie connections are all around. There's much pride in the provenance of the goods at Althea by Zin, a town cafe branch of the Lowe Family Wine Co that would be equally at home in France or a smart city suburb. The cheese is High Valley, the milk is from Little Big, and the organic flour is from Gummedah's Wholegrain Milling, where they're re-establishing heritage wheat varieties. We take our coffee to a table in the shady courtyard and eavesdrop on the local gossip.

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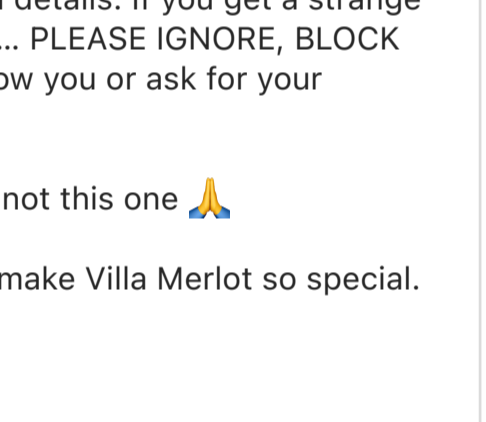


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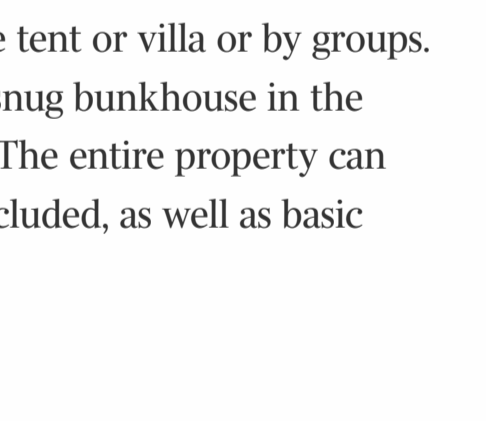


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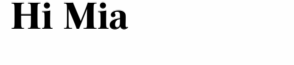
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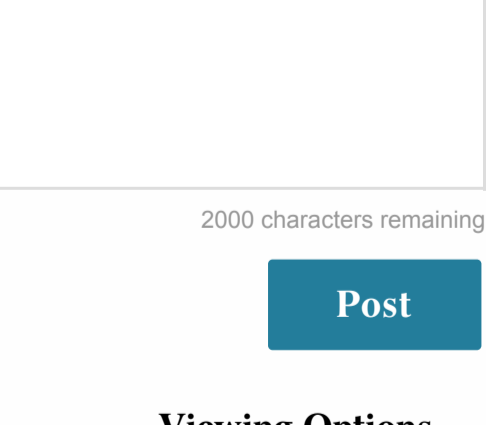


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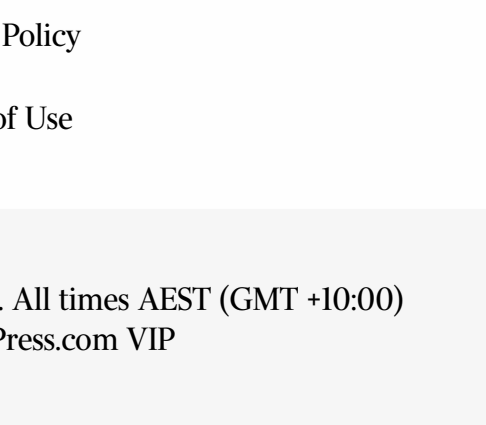


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The 2022 Global Food Forum will present a world-class line up of industry experts to debate the critical issues facing Australia's \$150 billion agribusiness sector as it takes a look forward to the next 10 years of Australian agribusiness.

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