



Wolgan Valley Resort and Spa in the Blue Mountains of Australia is a great option for the eco-conscious luxury traveller.

Aussie eco-outposts are sustainable and sexy

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In the mind of the eco-conscious traveller, the phrase “all-inclusive, luxury honeymoon” conjures a worrisome image. But as my new wife and I recently discovered on an uncharacteristically swank, two-week honeymoon through Australia, it is possible (for the well-heeled) to experience the absolute extremes of luxury without sacrificing tightly held beliefs.

Our celebration of the end of wedding planning began in a remote valley in the World Heritage-listed Blue Mountains of New South Wales. After a two-hour drive north from Sydney, we were greeted with warm facecloths and glasses of bubbly at the Wolgan Valley Resort and Spa, owned by the Emirates Group and billed as one of the most ambitious conservation-based luxury resorts in the world.

Nestled into the base of a spectacular sandstone escarpment, Wolgan is equal parts five-star wilderness playground and a balm for the environmentally guilt-ridden. The resort consists of 40 free-standing bungalow suites, or “luxury villas,” each with its own private plunge pool, rain-fed sky-shower and floor-to-ceiling views of misty meadows that made my wife and I feel as if we'd taken up residence inside a diorama of an Australian mountain-scape. We awoke every morning to find troops of kangaroos and wallabies play-fighting just feet from our veranda.

Wolgan's villas adhere to strict green-building principles. Rainwater cisterns and more than 100 solar panels provide at least 75 per cent of the resort's hot water needs are sustainably sourced. No trees were destroyed in the construction of the resort, and more than 175,000 trees have been planted in the valley. Meanwhile, the Wolgan kitchens turn out divine, nine-course degustation dinners every night, sourcing

nearly all food from within 100 miles.

Beyond the small footprint of the resort itself, Wolgan has implemented an experimental “feral-free” zone on the property in partnership with the University of Western Sydney, aimed at protecting indigenous wildlife from the encroachment of feral animals such as dingoes, cats and fallow deer. The resort also maintains a small grove of the delicate Wollemi Pine, a species long considered extinct until it was famously rediscovered in a nearby valley in 1994.

These initiatives, among many others, led Wolgan to become the first hotel in the world to receive carbon-neutral certification from carboNZero, the internationally recognized greenhouse gas accreditation program. Of course, none of this was on our minds as we cantered our horses through the hills, went wallaroo and wombat sighting at sunset and experienced a four-handed massage in Wolgan's Timeless Spa.

From green opulence to rustic luxe

From Wolgan, we travelled to Paradise Bay Eco Escape in the Whitsunday Islands. Winner of major Australian ecotourism awards and a fan favourite on Tripadvisor.com, Paradise Bay in Queensland was a refreshing, though no less beautiful, change from the opulence of Wolgan. This rustic assemblage of 10 open-concept cabins is perched on the shores of South Long Island in the middle of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. The resort is accessible only by helicopter from nearby Hamilton Island.

Upon landing, we sipped champagne once again and joined the other guests in the open-air lounge overlooking a bay of blue ocean. Then we were escorted down a jungle pathway to our secluded cabin, where we noticed the light of the setting sun falling directly onto our bed. A spectacular dinner was served at a communal table, just steps from the sea, and all courses were matched to a fine Australian wine by our in-house sommelier. The only disruptions during mealtime were due to the resident wallaby, which kept sneaking into the kitchen when no one was looking.

Paradise Bay was built to ensure minimal impact on its surroundings, all of which is national parkland. The resort caters to just 20 guests at full capacity, 85 per cent of the electricity is produced by a massive solar array and all wastewater is recycled into the garden irrigation system via a BioCycle aerobic wastewater system. Accommodation fees even include carbon-offset costs for all guests' domestic and international flights.

Guests at Paradise Bay enjoy the services of a personal boat captain, who arrives from the mainland during a gourmet breakfast to outline the day's activities on the water. Most outings involve a few hours of sailing on a private catamaran, a picnic lunch on a far-flung beach and, of course, a snorkel or two.

When we were there, we sailed 15 kilometres to Dugong Beach, and on the way back intercepted a group of humpback whales on their annual southerly migration. The next day, we went kayaking in the bay and enjoyed the surreal experience of watching leatherback turtles surface just a few feet from our paddles.

Nature's lavish next-door neighbour

After Paradise, the last stop on our eco-luxe honeymoon adventure was also in Queensland – the Outrigger Little Hastings Street Resort and Spa in Noosa Heads.

The Outrigger takes its proximity to the wild seriously. The resort was built with the highest principles of sustainable design in mind, including rainwater harvesting, passive solar control and the very latest in energy efficiencies. Conceived as a lavish next-door neighbour to nature, the complex is connected to Noosa National Park by multiple wilderness corridors consisting of 36,000 replanted trees. Sitting on our rain-forest balcony, we felt like we needed a park permit – the sounds of the birdlife were so raucous.

For the next four days, we went koala-spotting through the Noosa Biosphere Reserve, watched sea turtles feed among the crashing waves of Hell's Gate, and wandered the white sands of Main Beach.

Two weeks of eco-luxury in Australia – a five-star holiday in which the real environmental costs are factored into the price – seems an auspicious way to start a marriage. The only trouble is, now that we're home, we've become aware of one sobering truth: Every other vacation we take together, until death do us part, is probably going to pale by comparison.

For more information: wolganvalley.com (from \$1,970 a night); paradisebay.com.au (from \$500); outrigger.com.au/littlehastingsstreet (from \$272).

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