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WOLGAN VALLEY - LUXURY, FINE WINE AND THE RAW SPECTACLE OF A BIG COUNTRY

WHAT does \$200,000 worth of wine look like? Thankfully, it's a question easily answered by a visit to the wine cellar at Wolgan Valley Resort & Spa, the \$125 million luxury bolthole near Lithgow owned by Emirates Airlines. My eye was caught by a bottle of Clos du Mesnil, the hugely expensive blanc de blancs champagne from Krug. But Ben the sommelier is quick to point out that a third of the bottlings hail from the geographically closer regions of Orange and Mudgee.

Since opening in 2009, Wolgan Valley has enjoyed blanket publicity but its activities for visiting wine lovers remain a work in progress. Clos du Mesnil isn't alone in reflecting the fact that many of its guests are well-heeled and more familiar with the wines of other countries. As you scan the bottles, rieslings from the Mosel valley and Alsace and premier crus from Bordeaux heave into view.

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Many guests sign up for the day excursion to the wineries of Mudgee, says Ben. "All of the wines offered in our all-inclusive packages are from regions close to the property, as is the majority of the produce used in the kitchen. We really try to stick to a 180-km radius of origin." And it's hardly surprising that food and wine sourcing has become such an act of faith when you consider the kerfuffle that accompanied the resort's early days.

The Lithgow location of the no-expense-spared property raised many eyebrows when Emirates announced that the airline had taken over the lease of a 1618-hectare spread, formerly a pastoral lease, to mimic its lavish Al Maha resort in Dubai. But the hard-scrabble mining town is also the proverbial stone's throw from the spectacular beauty of World Heritage-listed Wollemi and Garden of Stone national parks.

After driving on a network of freeways from downtown Sydney, we had to curb our speed considerably to tackle a steep road full of hairpin turns leading to the 'floor' of Wolgan Valley. A 250 million-year-old landscape filled with Manifest Destiny-style escarpments, its awe-inspiring ruggedness is the result of erosion and land movement on a titanic scale.

For the last 13km of the journey, you have to drive along a gravel road. This only adds to the anticipation of what is to come. You leave your car at the main security gate and a staff member appears in minutes to drive you to the reception area.

Recycled local timbers, vast slabs of sandstone and polished hardwoods have been crafted into the sort of bush luxury lodge perfected in the US and New Zealand. Centre-stage is a club-like public area, eclectically furnished with antiques

and seriously comfortable armchairs and lounges that semaphore old money and/or stealth wealth.

The 36 bungalow suites, each with a private pool, are strung out along widely spaced pathways. If you don't like walking much, roaming staff will pick you up in a buggy and take you anywhere you want to go. More like mini-houses, the suites have a huge lounge with a fireplace, a breezeway verandah, a vast, slate-encrusted bathroom and a walk-in dressing room that could double as another bedroom.

Wolgan Valley Resort is also proud of its claim to being the world's first carbon-neutral resort. It's the first thing you're told on check-in after being handed the key to your suite, which is warmed by heat-exchange technology.

I could have sat on the verandah all day and watched the majesty of the surrounding escarpments change colour every hour. But there's plenty to do at Wolgan. You can set off on a bush walk with a guide, who details the property's biodiversity, Aboriginal history and, of course, the spectacular rediscovery of the prehistoric Wollemi pine in the mid-1990s.

Activities are included in the tariff and range from visiting the on-site stables to wildlife safaris. Australian wildlife is notoriously shy, even deep in the Outback, but we saw several mobs of wallaroos and wallabies, including a rare albino specimen, and large goannas skittering along the pathways.

After a day or two, it's easy to adopt a cruise-type lifestyle, with activities serving to fill the space between the three meals of the day. Visits to the plush Timeless Spa are a popular option, as is lapping or lounging around the huge central pool. And the obsession with the food is justified. Even the muesli and eggs benedict at breakfast are worth a review, let alone the four-course menu degustation served every evening.

One trip that shouldn't be missed - no matter how slothful you become - is a visit to the original homestead on the property, restored to the tune of \$2 million by Ian 'Clean Up Australia' Kiernan. It's a reminder of the Walker family, who arrived here in 1832 to build the first homestead west of the Blue Mountains - Wallerawang Station.

The Walker family's most famous visitor was Charles Darwin, who rode from Sydney to Bathurst in 1836 when HMS Beagle visited Australia as part of its five-year, round-the-world voyage. Originally a geologist, Darwin made astute observations of Australian fauna and flora that helped him to formulate his theories of convergent evolution and natural selection. The luxury aside, such knowledge and a sense of history is one of the most lasting memories of a visit to Wolgan Valley Resort & Spa. Call 9290 9733 or go to reservations@wolganvalley.com. I