

Valley Dogs

BY MELISSA RIMAC



The valleys of Great Dividing Range offer an untrammelled landscape with breathtaking views, rustic heritage and dog friendly getaways where there's no end of places to kick up the paws.

With the ocean still a bit chilly, the longer days and wildflower displays of spring are a perfect time for cosy country cocooning.

Which is how we find ourselves tucked away from the world, lounging on a deep couch and gazing out over a canyon that stretches as far as the eye can see. Our dogs, Onyx and Klink, are playing hide and seek in an artisan garden that wouldn't be out of place in a coffee-table book.

Earlier, we'd spent several glorious hours taking our boys for a romp through their own private, eucalypt-scented gully. Dusted by snow, we traced a path through a paddock scattered with the limbs of trees resembling snow gums back to our abode, Kookawood, a plush, hand-crafted house on the edge of the Megalong Valley.

In the morning, while it's still misty, we'll explore some of the other walks nearby - such as the pine forest and the tundra-like grasslands criss-crossed with creeks. But for now, there's more pressing matters on hand — like dinner.

In the kitchen, we find delightful surprises such as fresh herbs, croissants, every spice imaginable, and even a big jar of yummy cookies, along with frequently-forgotten staples such as olive oil and bread.

Antique cabinets are crammed with treasures, like hand-painted plates made in England and quirky, early 20th Century teapots. There are even big bowls and deep baking trays (very apt, as this is the sort of place where you're almost instinctively drawn to bake); a rarity in holiday homes.

Onyx and Klink plant themselves strategically in front of the massive stone fireplace and con us into delivering their welcome treats.

Forged from reclaimed materials such as huge beams from factories, wharfs and bridges, Kookawood strikes

a fetching balance between style and comfort. Owners Fiona and Michael originally hoped to move an old farmhouse onto the property, however council regulations ruled out the yearned-for weatherboard cottage. Instead, they went one better: a customised house that's spacious, airy and very intriguing, thanks to pre-loved and hand-crafted pieces such as glamorous chandeliers, a claw-foot bath and enviable array of antiques.

While Kookawood's bohemian chic aesthetic references the region's rich history, thoughtful touches such as super-soft robes, polished cotton sheets and quality organic potions sate contemporary desires.

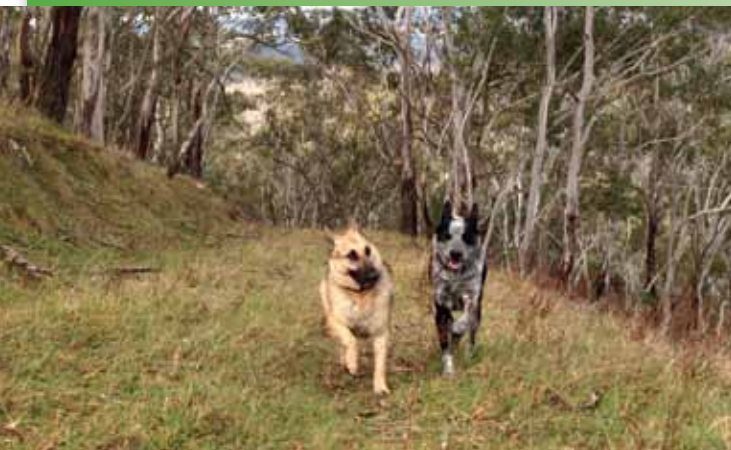
Dogs are catered for in grand style. Behind the house is a large enclosed yard, perfect for evenings (when a veritable orchestra of thumping kangaroo tails surrounds the house), and the bedding and doggie blankets are thick, fluffy and unashamedly luxe.

Sitting up in bed watching sunrise over the canyon is an almost psychedelic experience; blood orange one morning, deep purple the next. Sadly, our dogs don't bring us our coffee to our bed!

When we do finally prise ourselves away from the cosmic canyon to collect eggs, we're greeted warmly by the sociable chooks.

To hide away, hermit-like, at Kookawood is deeply replenishing. However, you're only a short drive from the fine heritage streetscapes of Lithgow and Portland, with their row upon row of unadorned workers' cottages and imposing churches and halls.

As we travel further west, the moody central tablelands skies glower at us and the time-warp cranks up. Laden with heritage but minus olde-world cringe, the former gold-prospecting hotspots between Lithgow and Bathurst bring to mind early Australian oil-paintings.



In gold-rush villages such as Hill End, Sofala and Wattle Flat, the peeling, sometimes leaning, facades still conjure the feverish excitement of starry-eyed prospectors. By the early 1870s Hill End was the largest inland settlement in NSW, with 28 pubs, rows of “fancy goods” stores, opium dens, an oyster bar, palm readers and sobering stone churches where Mass is still sometimes held.

Imaginations piqued in a way that simply can't happen within a museum, we stroll about Hill End's echoey silent streets, bemused by the enduring swagger of official buildings, half expecting a Cobb & Co carriage to charge by. Wallabies graze in empty paddocks, geese cross the road, and coils of smoke rise from slab hut chimneys.

When a sudden shift in light bathes the empty, wind-scoured streets with a fiery glow, I feel like we've stepped into a Russell Drysdale painting. It's not surprising that there's been a recent resurgence of prominent artists making Hill End their home, continuing a tradition of this region inspiring some of Australia's most celebrated landscape paintings.

As the hub of gold-rush action, Bathurst's streetscape takes on a grandeur that's set by the stately courthouse. Church steeples lord it over the town, and at every second block, there seems to be a large, gracious park where Onyx insists on leaving his mark.

Weaving our way back to our roaring fireplace, we drive through photogenic sun-silvered hills dotted with shearing sheds, decaying mining detritus and once raucous coach-houses.

So as to explore as many of the hidden back-roads as possible, we've based ourselves in a deep valley called Palmers Oakey, about 25kms from Sofala.

At our home here – a serene haven called Horse Shoe Bend Farm, the loudest sounds are the babbling creeks,

flocks of parrots, and a bounce of big grey kangaroos. Looking around the 360-degree embrace of high ridges, it's as if we have the entire river valley to ourselves.

The morning lightshow is mesmerising: one ridge-top ignited after another. We hope the dogs will entertain themselves by doing laps about the 180 acres of grounds. However, pushover parents that we are, we give in to their pestering.

We walk for ages along the riverside dirt road, not encountering another human being, still snug in our pyjamas. I can't imagine many other parts of the world where you could do that.

ONYX'S GREAT DIVIDE TRAVEL TIPS

Room With a Mood:

www.secretgarden-cottage.com.au

www.horseshoebend.com.au

Chowing Down:

Hill End B&B has an inimitable atmosphere and great views. Friendly proprietor Suzanne is a wealth of knowledge and will do her best to create a meal that suits, including special requests.

www.hillendbandb.com.au

Urbane Pursuits:

For Hill End art events : www.hillendart.com.au

Gypsy and Cello concerts in Jenolan Caves:
www.georgcello.com

Sensational Walkies:

Both Kookawood and Horseshoe Bend feature several fabulous on-site walks. The Bathurst Heritage walk is the stuff of swoons.

Pet-friendly Valleys in Qld and Victoria which Onyx would love to explore:

www.visitarravalley.com.au

www.bigvolcano.com.au

Further Inspirations:

www.tourism.lithgow.com

www.lithgow-tourism.com

www.visitbathurst.com.au

