



The concept of a luxurious eco-friendly lodge may seem like a paradox, but with a keen focus on sustainability, several properties in Australia are offering guests the chance to connect with nature with all the creature comforts of a regular five-star.

Text Neena Bhandari

Unwind in style

Australia is known for its 'rough around the edges' vibe, often evoking images of rugged landscapes and a host of unique—almost prehistoric—creatures and creepy-crawlies. But tucked amidst unique landscapes—from the World Heritage-listed rainforests and reefs to pristine coastal destinations and the vast, wild outback—are some of the world's premier eco-lodges that allow you to enjoy the country's natural wonders without having to rough it out. Though equipped with plenty of bells and whistles, these luxury eco-lodges adhere to the highest sustainable standards, allowing you to indulge guilt-free. The limit imposed on the number of guests they are willing to accommodate at a time allows one visual and acoustic privacy and a chance to peacefully interact with nature.



▲ Emirates One&Only Wolgan Valley is nestled between the Wollemi National Park and the Gardens of Stone National Park in the Greater Blue Mountains Area (a UNESCO World Heritage Site). Pictured here is the main homestead.



Tropical paradise

At Silky Oaks Lodge, located on the banks of the Mossman river amidst 88 acres of tropical rainforest in Far North Queensland, 45 elegant tree-houses and suites exist in complete harmony with their surroundings. Incorporating custom-designed furniture made from local and sustainable timber, open-plan living areas with daybeds, and hammocks on large balconies, they offer a tranquil escape. Here, guests wake up to the symphony of birdsong and are lulled to sleep by the soothing sounds of the cascading river. The lodge abides by a stringent Integrated Environmental System—ensuring that the long-term impact of tourism on the environment is zero.

A 30-minute drive from Port Douglas or an hour's drive from Cairns' international airport gets you to the Lodge, which is a good base to explore Daintree National Park—a part of the Wet Tropics of Queensland, a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site with some of the world's

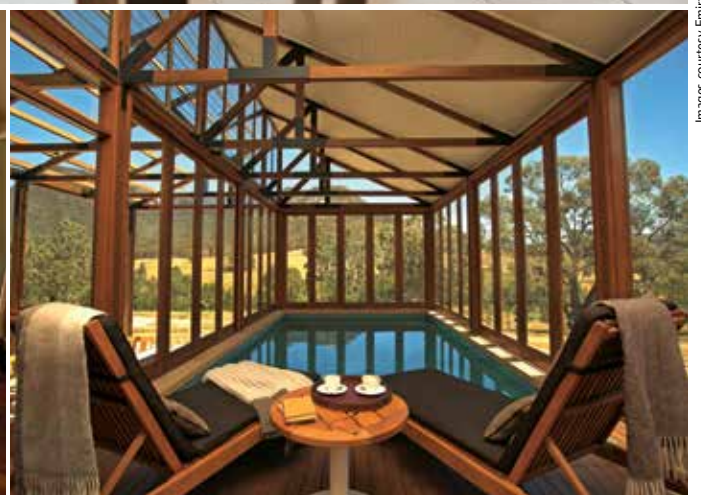
▲ Above: Enconced by a veil of greenery, the Silky Oaks swimming pool is ideal for a relaxing soak to melt away one's cares.

Below: The semi-open Treehouse Restaurant at Silky Oaks overlooks River Mossman and the Daintree rainforest, offering guests a unique dining experience.

oldest rainforests—and the Great Barrier Reef. Guests can go swimming, kayaking and canoeing on the river; take self-guided walks through the rainforest; or go mountain biking up to Mossman Gorge, a significant Aboriginal site that provides insight into the lives, culture and beliefs of the indigenous Kuku Yalanji people. The lodge also has a helipad for guests who prefer a private tour of the Great Barrier Reef and remote coral cays.



Both images by Neena Bhandari



Images courtesy Emirates One&Only Wolgan Valley

▲ Clockwise from above: In a private corner of the resort, the luxurious three-bedroom Wolgan Villa is generously equipped with a living and dining room and a fully functional gourmet kitchen.; The Country Kitchen at One&Only Wolgan Valley offers an array of delicious dishes from fresh, local produce; The two-bedroom Wollemi Villas come with their own private swimming pool.

As Paul Van Min, Managing Director of the Lodge puts it, “Australia is not just an outback barbecue destination. Luxury eco-lodges are raising the bar.” At Silky Oaks’ Healing Waters Spa, guests can indulge in signature treatments with the benefits of natural ingredients such as clays and flower and plant extracts. The main attraction is the semi-open fine-dining Treehouse Restaurant, nestled amidst the rainforest

and overlooking the river, where guests are treated to a lavish spread inspired by local tropical flavours.

A detour to detox

Unwired, these abodes of peace provide guests an opportunity to connect with nature and oneself. A scenic 2.5-hour drive from Sydney, in the Greater Blue Mountains region, is Australia’s first carbon-neutral resort—Emirates One&Only Wolgan Valley. It has 36 Heritage Suites each with their own swimming pool, three Wollemi Suites (that hold up to four guests), and the Wolgan Suite (for up to six guests) with a wrap-around veranda and a swimming pool built into the deck.

The epicentre of the resort’s heritage is the original 1832 heritage homestead, which offers an exclusive dining experience. Gourmet meals are prepared with produce sourced from within a 160 km radius, thereby reducing their carbon footprint.

The resort, formerly a grazing property, sits on 7,000 acres on Australia’s Great Dividing Range, between the Wollemi National Park and the Gardens of Stone National Park, that’s home to over 1,500 species of flora and fauna, including the Spotted Tail Quoll (a carnivorous marsupial), Diamond Firetail Finch, the Powerful Owl and Australia’s iconic wombats. Guests are encouraged to participate in conservation-oriented

experiences such as creating nesting boxes for birds, possums and gliders, planting trees and bird-watching. Set off on nature walks amidst endangered Wollemi pines, one of the world's oldest and rarest trees, or take a guided nocturnal night safari. The resort features a well-equipped stable and there are plenty of mountain biking trails around the property. There's also the Aboriginal interpretive tour on offer which provides insight into the lives and culture of the land's original settlers.

At one with the world

Visitors will discover that The Great Ocean Ecolodge, on one of the most scenic coastal drives, the Great Ocean Road, has taken ecotourism to a new level. Established by the Conservation Ecology Centre (CEC), the Ecolodge, adjoining the Great Otway National Park (about 162 km southwest of Melbourne) in the southern Australian state of Victoria, is an ideal place to immerse in nature against a backdrop of sustainable comfort. It has been designed with materials and technologies tailored to create minimal environmental impact.

While the ecolodge may not offer conventional luxuries such as spa baths or fine-dining restaurants (you won't even find a television in the bedroom!), there is no compromise on comfort. Instead, relish hot showers of pure rainwater warmed by solar energy and fresh organic food from the kitchen gardens. Guests can experience local wildlife up close—watch kangaroos graze on the lawns outside your bedroom window, spy a koala dozing in the trees and encounter the endangered Tiger Quoll. With only five bedrooms to the property, staying here can be a very personal experience.

All profits generated by the Great Ocean Ecolodge support CEC programmes, such as the Endangered Species Surveillance Network and the Great Ocean Road Koala Habitat Rescue programmes. Visitors can also participate in ecological monitoring and habitat restoration projects. "Many of our guests have become long-term supporters of our work and lifetime partners on the conservation journey," affirms Chief Executive of CEC, Lizzie

► Right: A glimpse of the endangered Tiger Quoll at the Great Ocean Ecolodge.
Top: Young kangaroos seen boxing on the grounds of the Great Ocean Ecolodge.



Jordan Mulloy



Lucia Griggi



▲ Clockwise from above: Rawnsley Park's Eco Villa bedrooms have remote-controlled retractable fabric ceilings and a skylight for guests to watch the stars from the comfort of their bed; Rawnsley Park Villas feature a host of sustainable design features, including rendered straw bale walls and polished timber floors over suspended concrete slabs; Spectacular, uninterrupted views of Wilpena Pound and surrounding ranges can be seen from the Rawnsley Park Eco Villa deck.

Corke. The ecolodge makes one realise that it is possible to live in comfort and yet in harmony with nature. Perhaps, that is the ultimate luxury.

The core ethos of Australia's lodges lies in embracing the environment even where nature has been unforgiving. The Rawnsley Park Station in South Australia, 430 km north of the state capital Adelaide, is the place to be if one is seeking indulgence in the outback. Fourth-generation sheep farmer Tony Smith and his wife, Julie, have converted their 19th-century 3,000-hectare property into a sustainable resort.

It offers eight self-contained eco-villas strategically built on a secluded ridgeline amidst native pines, providing sublime vistas of the oxidised sandstone cliffs of Wilpena Pound and the rugged mountains

and gorges of the Flinders Ranges. Each villa has high ceilings and long verandas, concrete-slab floors and straw bale walls, which work as natural air-conditioners. The most innovative and distinct feature is the electronic remote-controlled retractable fabric ceiling and roof skylight in the bedroom that enable guests to enjoy the starlit night sky from the comfort of their bed. Designed to blend in with the natural landscape, they are equipped with their own rainwater tank that stores drinking water and fully functional kitchen and laundry facilities. For dining, the Woolshed Restaurant on the station caters modern country fusion cuisine.

Visitors can enjoy guided bushwalks, sheep shearing demonstrations, horse riding, scenic flights or four-wheel-drive tours to explore the Flinders Ranges National Park, renowned for its geological history. One

can examine Aboriginal rock art and fossil remains and spy native wildlife such as the kangaroos, emu, the Yellow-footed Rock wallaby, and Wedge-tailed eagles.

Australia's eco-lodges provide an opportunity to be one with nature in one of the oldest landscapes—home to over 20,000 plant species and 2,300 animal and bird species, many of which are unique to the region—and also enjoy creature comforts with a clear conscience.



Images by Neena Bhandari

Fact file

Getting there
 Jet Airways flies daily to Singapore from Mumbai, Delhi and Chennai. From Singapore, our codeshare partner Qantas Airways will take you to Sydney, while our interline e-ticketing partners Silk Air will take you to Cairns and Singapore Airlines to Melbourne and Adelaide.

For more information
 Log on to www.silkyoakslodge.com.au; www.oneandonlyresorts.com/oneandonly-wolgan-valley.aspx; www.greatoceanecolodge.com; www.rawnsleypark.com.au/