

RESTAURANT GUIDE AWARDS: THE WINNERS

A U S T R A L I A N

# GOURMET

## TRAVELLER

### Chefs' favourites

Ramsay's star Australian pastry cook  
 Sydney hot spot: the new, beaut Beresford  
 Where chefs eat (and what they order)  
 Greek odyssey: Calombaris in Mykonos



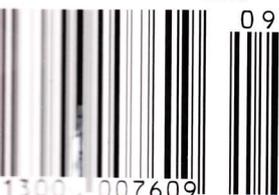
MARCO PIERRE  
 WHITE'S SECRET  
 BY AA GILL



Prune and Armagnac soufflé

SEPTEMBER 2008 AUST \$8.95

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### INTO THE WILD

THE BIG CHILL: JOURNEY TO ANTARCTICA  
 A-Z of new tourism AUSTRALIA'S ECO-CAPITAL  
 Plus HIKING THROUGH PERU

# Sweet valley high

Get the five-star treatment at Emerald Valley Villa, an Ubud-style eco-retreat in the Byron Bay hinterland, replete with waterfall and concierge.

Words **George Epaminondas**

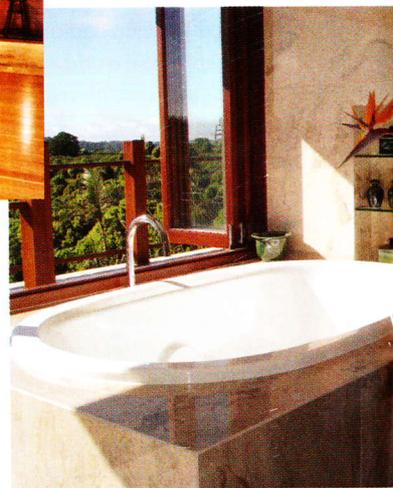
Located in the hinterland of Byron Bay, at the crest of a dramatically twisting road, Emerald Valley Villa resembles a sumptuous retreat in Ubud. Teak furniture, marble floors, thatched cabanas and stone friezes depicting Hindu deities evoke the kind of exotic headiness that typically requires an international flight – and the offer to have your hair braided. The fact that such splendour comes in an eco-sensitive package makes it even more appealing, as judicious travellers search for ways to pamper themselves and preserve the environment at the same time.

The exclusive estate, which has four bedrooms and is available for lease on a weekly basis, is located on 80 acres of verdant landscape. All the building structures and grounds have been conceived with minimum impact on the locale. More climate neutralisation stems from the planting of native vegetation, while delectably fragrant blooms such as gardenias, jasmine and champaka scent the air. Forward-thinking creator Michael J Robison, who unveiled the aerie in late 2007, sought a convergence of high design, technology and ecology, and then embellished it with luxurious additions including your own on-site concierge.

The extremely affable and capable Varney Magill has a seer's ability to identify what you want before you've even thought of it. (She arranged for a deep-tissue massage in the villa's spa room before I'd arrived.) Magill has a database of new-age virtuosos, reiki healers, yoga gurus, acupuncturists and organic chefs among them, accessible at will. Blissed out by day two, I was ready to sample the best of Byron's renowned produce. Magill had already stocked the pantry with local goodies that inspired several transporting meals – and several runs into town for refills (the villa comes with a Range Rover on request).



**Blissed out**  
The villa's panoramic views, chlorine-free swimming pool and Balinese-style décor.



After three days of gustatory highs, and endless rounds of caipirinhas, the kitchen compost was starting to look like a lushly decomposing Gauguin. Beyond recycling, the villa relies entirely on green power. The floors are made from recycled or plantation timber, while almost all of the furniture is fashioned from old teak. No matter whether you're showering in the polished marble bathroom or paddling through the chlorine-free swimming pool, the water all stems from an ancient aquifer. The dwelling is also equipped with solar design and solar hot water.

Guests enter the abode through an alfresco square-shaped courtyard, where iridescent koi dart around a pond. The master bedroom boasts a spacious walk-in wardrobe, a mounted butterfly collection and plush furnishings. The sleek kitchen is equipped with an Ilve duel fuel stove, while a flat-screen television in the living room offers seemingly endless satellite channels. But then outside your door is your very own wildlife documentary: platypuses, wallabies, goannas and a chorus of chattering birds.

The villa hovers above a spectacular rainforest accessed via a Polaris mini-Ranger, a kind of motorised rickshaw. Alongside a picturesque river is a pavilion used by guests for picnics, wedding parties or zazen reflection. In fact, there are countless places for quiet contemplation at Emerald Valley Villa, but, for me at least, curling up in one of the twin Javanese rice barns by the pool trumps them all. That afternoon, I felt like the king of the mountain.\*

## THE FINE PRINT

### Getting there

Emerald Valley Villa is a scenic 25-minute drive west from Byron Bay. Brisbane International Airport is 2 hours to the north, with domestic airports Coolangatta (45 minutes) and Ballina (35 minutes) nearby. Airport transfers can be arranged by the concierge.

### Stay

Villa (8-share) from \$1000 per day (with a minimum 7-night stay). 84 Jarretts Rd, Goonengerry, NSW, (02) 6684 9398, [emeraldvalleyvilla.com](http://emeraldvalleyvilla.com).