

Diamond in the rough

**break
away**
JULIA WHYTE

Through the trees I could see staff busily preparing for the morning, I could smell a slight hint of French toast and hear the quiet chatter of other guests walking past on their way to breakfast.

It was then that I was pleased I had worked out that the ladder in our bathroom doubled as a towel rack... a perfectly placed towel and bathrobe ensured the other guests did not get any closer to nature than they intended while staying at Paperbark Camp in Jervis Bay.

The outdoor/indoor shower took a little getting used to but after a while you realise the cleverly designed bathrooms are, well, so cleverly designed that you can get the full appreciation of nature while privacy and luxury aren't compromised.

That notion seems a constant throughout the "campsite", which has been created to give guests a chance to immerse themselves in the Australian bush without feeling like they're roughing it.

Paperbark Camp is the realised dream of Irena and Jeremy Hutchings, who came up with the concept while in Africa staying at a friend's private safari camp. The Jervis Bay land was bought 16 years ago, at which time the couple quit their jobs in publishing and engineering and started what became a long and rewarding challenge.

It took four years from the time of submitting the development application to when the building began and, with the help of architect Trevor Hamilton of Nettleton Tribe, the Hutchings took their idea of a small private bushcamp to what it is today, complete with a restaurant and 12 tents, of which four are deluxe with free-standing baths with views.

The development was done with both the guest and environment in mind, meaning there was minimal impact on the bush and no major tree-clearing. Back then, the world was not quite ready for composting toilets but



Paperbark Camp is a fine balancing act, in which you get the full appreciation of nature while privacy and luxury aren't compromised.

every other aspect of eco-friendliness has been taken into account. The result is a place of tranquillity, where you're encouraged to do it all or nothing at all.

Camping usually conjures up images of poorly constructed tents with missing pegs or poles, into which you cram three people and all their luggage. And then once you've rolled out your sleeping bag and you've tried to cook something edible on the camp fire (if you managed to get one alight) the inevitable happens.

It rains. And the fly sticks to the outside of the tent which then sticks to the unlucky people squeezed down the sides of the tent.

Well, it rained on this trip to Paperbark Camp.

But, lying under the 100 per cent Australian wool doona and cotton sheets on a queen-size bed, there were none of those concerns. Instead you could enjoy the pitter-patter of rain on the canvas safari-style tent, which, situated 2m off the ground on a wooden platform, was not only big enough to stand up in but had a free-standing "closet", a chest which doubled as a table, locally-made shelves and bedside tables, complete with solar-powered lighting, a wind-up torch, sunscreen and insect repellent. On our

veranda were two wooden armchairs and a table, forming the perfect place to while away the hours reading a book, having a massage (which the camp will organise for about \$90 an hour) or sipping a late night glass of red by candlelight.

Romantic? Very. Which is why, according to manager and the owners' daughter Tiffany Hutchings, many of their guests are there for special occasions such as an anniversary or to pop the question. Add to the equation a canoe ride complete with a picnic provided by the kitchen (\$20 per person) or a stroll through the surrounding bushland and a dinner at the Gunyah restaurant, and you are on to a real winner. But Paperbark Camp is not just for special occasions. Sure it's a treat, but it's an experience that's well worth the trip and the dollars. And the kids (six and over) are welcome.

We drove there via the Nerriga Road (off the Kings Highway at Braidwood), which will almost halve the time once the \$80 million upgrade is complete, but if navigating pot holes and gravel roads isn't your thing, give it a miss for the moment and go via Sutton Forrester and Kangaroo Valley.

As soon as you turn on to the driveway of Paperbark Camp, just off Jervis Bay Road,

Paperbark Camp, Jervis Bay

Where: Woollamia Road, Jervis Bay, NSW
Driving time from Canberra: About 2½ hours
Website: www.paperbarkcamp.com.au
Email: info@paperbarkcamp.com.au
Phone: 1300 668 167 (toll free) or 4441 6066
Fax: 4441 6066
Cost per night: May special is \$270 per tent (original safari) which includes breakfast; a number of packages at various prices available up to \$1460 for the Jervis Bay Discovery (twin share during peak season), including two nights' accommodation in a deluxe tent, dinner, breakfast, a picnic lunch and a dolphin cruise.

you feel like you're a million miles away from anywhere. To limit disturbance to guests, parking is about a 40m walk from the tents, the restaurant and reception.

Once booked in, we were given a short tour of the camp, shown where we could find the bikes and canoes, which are free for guests to use, and then taken to our tent, named Bandicoot. Penguin and Wombat were down the same path as ours, hidden among the, you guessed it, paperbark trees.

We were warned not to keep any food inside or else we could attract some night guests. Apparently the possums can also get into any toiletries not locked away and have an appetite for lipstick and Chanel perfume.

After a late lunch in Huskisson, which is about a 15-minute drive away, we returned to camp and explored the surrounding wetlands, where during the drier months they host weddings, and then had a pre-dinner champagne on the couches at the Gunyah restaurant. The Gunyah, which is the Aboriginal word for meeting place or place of shelter, is a balance of fine dining and couches, where during the day guests can read the paper in front of an open fire and help themselves to coffee and tea or families can play some of the board games provided.

Nestled among the trees, high up on stilts, the unimposing wooden and corrugated iron frame of Gunyah has also become a popular place for those possums. In fact, our table

was given quite a shock when one of the "locals", who had been peering inside for some time, tried to jump from the veranda rail onto our table - unluckily for him there was a window in the way (no possum was hurt during this incident).

Dinner was amazing. The Gunyah earns a well-deserved mention in the 2008 *Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide*, and while renowned chef Gary Fishwick, who used to call Canberra home, has moved on, the kitchen is still serving up high-quality food (\$70 will get you a three-course dinner) made from fresh and local ingredients.

For entree I had the plump Greenwell Point oysters with a delicious eschalot vinegar, while my companion enjoyed his pumpkin and ricotta ravioli with sage and burnt butter - a perfect start before the grilled sirloin with burgundy butter and shoe string chips, and the local kingfish with parsnip puree and salsa verde which made its way to our table (thanks to some of the most delightful and friendly yet professional staff I've come across). Even the side dish of broccoli with almonds was fantastic. The meal was made complete with a just-right-sized serving of

strawberry, raspberry and frangipani tart with vanilla cream and a chocolate nemesis (a rich and most divine chocolate cake) with creme fraiche.

The next morning we woke to near silence, just the odd bird singing, before digging in to some home-made muesli (while the cooked breakfast and French toast were tempting we were still full from the night before).

A short and peaceful paddle in the canoe on the Currumbene Creek could have been extended if Canberra wasn't beckoning. If you're staying longer, staff suggest discovering some of the local national parks, botanic gardens, marine life on a cruise, the surrounding beaches or some of the historical sites around Jervis Bay.

We managed to fit in a trip to Hyams Beach, which arguably has the world's whitest sand, and a burger each from the highly recommended Hyams Beach Cafe.

All in all, it was an amazing break which would have only been made better if we'd had another couple of nights to appreciate such a special and unique place.

■ Julia Whyte was a guest of Tourism NSW.



The comfortable and spacious tents are nestled in gorgeous bushland.