



WEEKEND AWAY
BRIGHT

Kiln-fired delight

Matt Martel finds quiet, calm and beauty in the foothills of Mount Buffalo as he and his family shake off the city.

Bright. 6.45am. Saturday. A Bright new day and a pissed-off cow. Apparently, the cattle on the Angus stud farm surrounding the Kiln House don't normally get up so early, and a cow outside our floor-to-ceiling window stomps off after I open the blinds. Probably doesn't have an over-excited three-year-old daughter. Or a three-month-old baby.

We snuggle back into bed, mum, dad, two girls. The bed is big enough. The cow could probably fit in, too. We look out the huge windows to the beauty of frost and Mount Buffalo.

We're staying about 11 kilometres out of Bright at the stylish Kiln House. It's surrounded by cow paddocks and vineyards and is built inside and around two retired tobacco kilns, of the type that litter the region. They're remnants of a tobacco industry that's disappeared, replaced by tourism and other crops.

I'm told by a local a mate of his tried to convert a kiln house into a house but it stank too badly of tobacco, leading us to suspect there may have been more of an element of reconstruction than restoration in the place we're staying (there is no smell at all).

The accommodation is faultless. There are two lounge rooms, each with soaring ceilings, built inside the old kilns, with wood fires, deep, comfy couches and giant bay windows filled with views of the mountains. One lounge has a television, good books, DVDs and games, the other another television, piano and tabletop soccer game. There's a laundry and drying cabinet for skiing clothes and long stays.

A long structure joining the two kilns houses everything else, including two bedrooms with king-sized beds covered with warm, hypo-allergenic continental quilts. Polished concrete floors are kept warm with underfloor heating

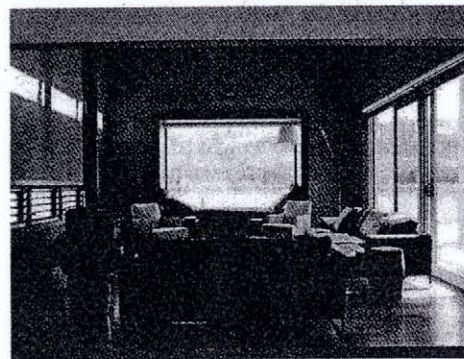
and cowhide rugs. Another room has four bunks. We're here with friends and their three-year-old daughter and there's plenty of room for everyone. They sleep in one wing, we take the other.

At night, we gather around the long dining table next to the wood and stainless-steel open-plan kitchen and cook up feasts using ingredients we've gathered during the day from surrounding vineyards, delicatessens and farm-gate shops. The kitchen has everything we need, from big pots, superb olive oil and rock salt to Arborio rice and enough crockery to host a small wedding. There's a dishwasher for after.

If it wasn't so cold we'd be eating outside at the dining table on the large terrace between the two kilns. On the other side of the house, there's another outdoor dining area for newspapers, coffee, wireless internet and the morning sun.

My wife sinks into the spa bath in one of the two bathrooms. We don't hear from her for an hour.

I take the baby for a walk up the private lane and I'm amazed by the silence. It seems like such a luxury when you're used to the inner city.



Cosy ... inside, it's about luxury and warmth.



Perfect peace ... the Kiln House in its alpine rural setting of vineyards and cattle.

Planes fly overhead leaving jet trails as they whiz between Melbourne and Sydney. I hear the wings of a crow as it flies about 50 metres away.

As the sun sets, it lights up millions of silvery threads strung north to south across the paddocks and lawn. The spiders have been working overtime and it makes me reluctant to wade further around the house and destroy this enchanting display.

At night we go for a walk through the vineyards under the waning moon and hear a thump, thump, thump, which my Kiwi wife is convinced are kangaroos hopping around. The moon isn't bright enough to see and I reckon it's more cows. But the wife goes back next morning and the cows breathe loudly at her and rustle their feet in the leaves. The thumper last night didn't make any other sound.

In autumn, Bright's groves of chestnuts and poplars flare into gold, orange and red. In winter the area is a ski hub.

Later, we go up to Buckland Valley Alpacas and I'm tempted by a \$90 alpaca wool pillow. I'm also charmed by Bugalugs, an alpaca who lets me pat her. The three-year-olds play with alpaca, kick leaves and declare toadstools to be a fairy town. Five minutes up the road is a state park and time for a walk.

We return to Melbourne happy. The three-year-old has patted alpaca. She's also been to the Red Stag Deer and Emu Farm, where I patted a stag and she patted a little goat called Emily, who she wanted to take home. We grown-ups have brought home venison from the stag farm, plus cheese, jam and chutney from Milawa, and wine

VISITORS' BOOK

The Kiln House

Address Cavedon's Lane, Porepunkah. Near Bright.

Getting There 316 kilometres from Melbourne (about three hours' drive). Hume Highway, then Great Alpine Road.

How much Up to four adults \$300 a night (Friday-Sunday, school holidays and public holidays); week nights (Mon-Thurs) \$250 a night. Extra person \$25 a night.

Summary Near-faultless accommodation in a unique environment. Great base for skiing or seeing the beauty of Bright in autumn. Almost everything has been thought of so you don't have to.

The verdict 17.

The score: 19-20 excellent; 17-18 great; 15-16 good; 13-14 comfortable, well-run.

All weekends away are conducted anonymously and paid for.

from Feathertops vineyard next to the Kiln House.

It's a good weekend away but the 330-kilometre drive makes me feel we'd have been better staying longer.