



Weekend Australian
Saturday 19/08/2017

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CUT STRAIGHT TO YOUR NEWS

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Take me to the river

ROOM AT THE INN

KATRINA LOBLEY

The first time I hit Warburton, the heat shimmered and my shirt and jeans, better suited to a cooler season, stuck to my skin. The Yarra, not at all a mighty river this far from Melbourne, glittered in the sunshine. Peals of laughter reached my ears. Lo and behold, people were jumping on lilos to drift with the current before scrambling back to the riverbank to do it all again. I vowed to return with a swimsuit next visit.

So a trip to Warburton rolls around again but there's a snag as cold, rainy weather is forecast. I brush aside that news, put a wetsuit in my bag and arrange for a lilo to be at Oscar's on the Yarra (formerly Best Western Yarra Valley), a 22-room hotel just out of town with a glorious stretch of river frontage.

Dating from the 1920s, the place feels like a quaint guesthouse with its communal lounges, four fireplaces, billiard table, covetable art deco geometric mirrors, rambling grounds complete with three cows and guestrooms with direct outdoor access.

A Melbourne friend thinks I'm crazy to jump in the Yarra, given the temperature. "It was snowing on Mt Donna Buang last week," she says as I march down to the riverbank encased in neoprene, edge around the arum lilies and dip a toe in the water.

Ouch, cold as snowmelt. By now, a small crowd has gathered so I can't back out.

I inch into the water wearing flip-flops to protect my feet from rocks and launch on to the lilo, paddling as fast as a hungry duck that's spied breadcrumbs. I cover only the distance of the hotel's boundaries but it's enough to tick that little adventure off my to-do list.

The Yarra Valley is home to another creature that floated down a river — and is lucky to still be alive.

As a juvenile, Yami the platypus was found in the Gippsland Lakes area in 2011 in a critical condition after drinking saltwater. She was nursed back to health at Healesville Sanctuary but couldn't be returned to where she was found.

The little extrovert stars in the zoo's platypus encoun-

ters, where she's been known to clamber on to a visitor's shoulder before swan-diving back into the water.

Senior platypus keeper Jessica Thomas, who's completing a PhD on platypuses, says, "I've been hooked ever since I met my first one — they always challenge me."

Thomas is not the only one enamoured by the egg-laying, duck-billed mammals, which bamboozled Euro-

peans in the late 18th century. "There's one couple from Canberra who love our [Wade with the Platypus] experience and buy it for each other's birthdays and anniversary so they come to do the encounter at least twice a year," Thomas says.

I'm granted a behind-the-scenes peek. After clambering into waders, I pop into a training tank with Alooka the platypus. She zips around at speed and frolics among submerged tree fern trunks but doesn't approach, even though I'm swishing a handful of worms through the water. Yami, in a neighbouring tank, hoovers up the treat, vibrating her rubbery bill against my palm.

Platypuses and people aren't the only things to travel down rivers. Before construction of the Upper Yarra Reservoir, the river carried logs to far-off mills, something I discover after cycling from Warburton to Launching Place where trees bound for Melbourne mills were once dispatched into the water.

With e-bikes from Warburton's Cog Bike Cafe, it's easy to explore a little or a lot of the 38km Lilydale-Warburton Rail Trail (nicknamed the Warby Trail) that winds through the scenic valley.

I cycle past maramma sheepdogs zealously guarding free-range chickens (OK, OK — I'm going now) and leaning timber barns that look as if they could tip over in a light breeze. King parrots settle into eucalypt branches, a red-browed finch flits from a grevillea and I inhale forest-scented air that's as restorative as any quick dip in brisk waters.

Katrina Loblely was a guest of Zoos Victoria.

CHECKLIST

Oscar's on the Yarra

3185 Warburton Highway, Warburton, Victoria;
(03) 5966 9166; oscarsontheyarra.com.au.



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TARIFF: From \$169 a night, including breakfast.

CHECKING IN: Couples and city-slickers enjoying a weekend away; also families.

GETTING THERE: Oscar's on the Yarra is on the outskirts of Warburton, 75km east of Melbourne and 30km southeast of Healesville. With limited public transport, hire a car to explore the valley.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: Yes.

STEPPING OUT: The Yarra Valley boasts almost too many delights to pack into a single weekend. Visit Balgownie Estate at Yarra Glen for wine tastings, lunch and treatments at the Natskin Day Spa (the garden's stunning roses are also a highlight). Killara Estate at Seville East has a cellar door and restaurant with enviable panoramic views. In Healesville, sample gins at Four Pillars Distillery or see indigenous animals at Healesville Sanctuary. In early summer, pick cherries at Cherryhill Orchards, Wandin East. More: balgownieestate.com.au; killaraestate.com.au; fourpillarsgin.com.au; zoo.org.au; cherryhill.com.au.

BEDTIME READING: Eliza Henry-Jones's 2017 novel *Ache* is set in a fictional town and mountain range but the Yarra Valley author says it's based on the landscape of her home.

BRICKBATS: The hotel's excellent eponymous restaurant is open only from Thursday to Sunday; prepare to duck into Warburton on other days.

BOUQUETS: Cosy lounges, roaring fires and multiple nooks and crannies encourage guests to use the hotel's public areas.

ALSO TRY: The Carrington Hotel, Katoomba, NSW; Daintree EcoLodge & Spa, Queensland.

Comfortable lounge at Oscar's on the Yarra, above; an e-bike from Warburton's Cog Bike Cafe, below



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Oscar's on the Yarra at Warburton; Yami the baby platypus at Healesville Sanctuary

