



Weekend Australian Saturday 10/12/2011

Page: 1
Section: Travel
Region: Australia, AU
Circulation: 293793
Type: National
Size: 1,456.38 sq.cms.



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The best rest list

The top accommodation discoveries of 2011

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THIS year has seen the travel team on the hop, checking hotels, villas, lodges, tented camps and resorts from Indonesia to Africa, Canada to Fiji. Here's a reprise of our favourites in 2011, all of which offer superlative style and service and a design narrative with a strong sense of place.

Wildman Wilderness Lodge, Top End, Northern Territory:

This adventure-focused lodge in the Mary River Wetlands, 90 minutes from Darwin by road, opened on April 1. Its genesis is the stuff of outback epic: when Wrotham Park station, west of Cairns in far north Queensland, closed down, most of its infrastructure was dismantled and moved cross-country to the Wildman site.

The original 10 freestanding guest habitats from Wrotham Park are in place and, in addition, there are 15 spacious canvas tents standing in two rows like a small garrison. Although the tents are cheaper, they are where you'll want to be; the feel is faux-African safari, with smart bathroom annexes and cosy touches.

A fire-pit on the west-facing deck, just beside a small infinity-edge pool, is the perfect gathering place for cocktails as the sun sets over the floodplains. And you should definitely sign up for excursions, including a billabong cruise and interpretative walk with indigenous guide Neddy Tambling, who knows the animals, the stories and the broader songlines that crisscross the vast expanse of the Top End. More: wildmanwildernesslodge.com.au.

Villa Batavia, Seminyak, Bali:

The look is akin to Singapore's Raffles Hotel, albeit on a much smaller scale. The colonial-style Villa Batavia is down a laneway in Seminyak and is distinctively different from the Indonesian rental-house norm. What you get

here are black and white granite-tiled colonnades and breezeways, pillared verandas, shuttered windows, teak four-posters and all the trademark tropical flourishes.

Villa Batavia sleeps eight in two ensuite doubles (Lombok and Sumba) and two master suites (Java and Flores). It is fully staffed, including a good chef, and there are loads of well-considered extras. The saltwater garden pool meanders past palms, orchids and waterfalls like a tiny river.

Batavia is arranged over three buildings linked by pergolas, and such companionable separation is the key to successful house-party living. And make that a temporary life of leisurely ease in an atmosphere lifted from a Somerset Maugham colonial planter's tale. More: prestigebalivillas.com.

Banyan Tree Macau: The former Portuguese territory of Macau is the only part of China where casinos are legal; it now holds the reputation as the world's largest gambling economy, about four times that of Las Vegas. The \$US1.9 billion (\$1.85bn) Galaxy Macau complex, on the bling-adding Cotai Strip, is very Asia Vegas, with three integrated hotels, of which Banyan Tree Macau is the newest and silkiest.

There are 10 pool villas, a big resort pool and pretty garden terraces, while the 227 marble-

floored guestrooms are all suite-sized, each with a "relaxation pool". Try the large and lovely Banyan Tree Spa (open to a luxuriously late 11pm) for "a sensory pampering and experience steeped in holistic Asian healing traditions", which does just what it says on the label: melts away urban stress. More: banyantree.com.

Mara Explorer Camp, Kenya:

Tent No 4, on a high point above the Talek River, is the pick abode here, if you like the idea of a canvas

chamber with a family of banded mongoose attached and superlative views of hippos cavorting. How David Attenborough is that?

The 10-tent Mara Explorer camp is in southwest Kenya's Masai Mara National Park and what it lacks in fancy falderals is more than compensated for with genuinely kind service and its most fortuitous setting at the confluence of the Masai Mara's four prime game-viewing areas.

The Mara is known for its herds of buffalo, wildebeest, zebra and varieties of antelope. Travelling less than 30 minutes from camp, my group sees a tremendous amount of game on every excursion and my spotter's notebook becomes a mass of excited scribbles. My head swivels like a ten-



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nis umpire's; what on earth can mother nature serve up next? More: wildlifesafari.com.au.

Tadrai Island Resort, Fiji: With just five guest villas, an Australian chef and panoramic ocean views, Tadrai Island Resort is Fiji's latest adults-only hideaway. In the Manuca archipelago, west of the gateway city of Nadi and the resort enclave of Denarau, and south of the Yasawa group, Tadrai is on the northern side of Mana Island.

Each villa has a private dipping pool, indoor-outdoor bathroom, chic plantation interiors and groovy extras such as an iPad. Head chef Chad Arthur, fresh from the Queensland Sunshine Coast, offers daily-changing menus at the open-sided Na Vatu restaurant overlooking the main pool, or in your villa or with sand between the toes by the sea.

Wander the four secluded beaches along the Tadrai estate (reef shoes recommended), go snorkelling or sports fishing, or just hang out, villa castaway style. More: tadrai.com.

Sooke Harbour House, Tofino, Vancouver Island, Canada: On the intriguingly named Sea Lion Coast, a 45-minute drive west from Victoria, capital of British

Columbia, Frederique and Sinclair Philip run the quaint and quirky Sooke Harbour House.

This 28-room white clapboard "little inn by the sea" at Whiffen Spit, Tofino, was built in 1929 and 50 years later was acquired

and upgraded by the Philips. Frederique champions local artists and designers and features their work in the (often odd) decor. Guestrooms, all with fireplaces and steam showers, and some with additional loft beds for kids, rejoice in names such as Sea Song and Raven's Nest.

The food is arguably the best on Vancouver Island, complemented by an award-winning cellar, including top local labels such as Venturi-Schulze. California-born executive chef Robin Jackson dishes up four-course degustation menus, the dishes dressed with herbs and edible flowers from the organic beds you can almost see from the dining room's picture windows. Look, too, for harbour seals draped on rocks and, during

the migration season, orcas passing like a convoy of surfacing submarines.

More: sookeharbourhouse.com.

Matakauri Lodge Queenstown, New Zealand: New owners the Robertson family, who also run

two North Island lodges — the Farm at Cape Kidnappers in Hawkes Bay and Kauri Cliffs in Northland — have ramped up things at this lovely property overlooking the glacial waters of Lake Wakatipu.

There's been a thorough makeover, with refreshed interiors by Virginia Fisher in a subtle palette that echoes the unsullied lake views and surrounding pine forests. The pick of the accommodation is one of the eight deluxe

cottage suites ranged in a row and bordered with native gardens. Food is by Dale Gartland, who uses prime Central Otago produce, and his exquisite meals are served in a light-filled annexe off the kitchen or in the lower level of the fire-warmed lounge. More: matakaurilodge.co.nz.

Four Seasons Hotel Sydney: The four refurbished Signature Suites at the Four Seasons Hotel Sydney, with seagull-eye's harbour views from the 34th floor, are billed as 1930s New York apartment style, and they do indeed have a skyscraper penthouse vibe.

With curtains closed against those vistas, it's easy to imagine a

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Matakauri Lodge, Queenstown, NZ; below, from left, Banyan Tree Macau; Mara Explorer in Kenya's Masai Mara; Aman New Delhi, India; Noddy Tambling of the NT's Wildman Wilderness Lodge

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Madison Avenue advertising guy's pad (sans the smoking).

The hotel's full accommodation inventory was overhauled in 2009 by ace designer Joseph Pang, who also oversaw the lobby's soft refurbishment last year.

Hot tip: Spa at Four Seasons Sydney offers a fab 1¾-hour Sodashi Samadara Age-Defying Facial, which could just be Australia's best instant facelift. More: fourseasons.com/sydney.

The Retreat, The Lake House, Daylesford, Victoria: The Wolf-Tasker family at the 33-room Lake House, routinely considered one of country Victoria's best gourmet getaways since the mid 1980s, has unveiled the freestanding Retreat, linked by pathways to The Lake House proper.

It's a single-storey two-bedroom abode with a hot tub on the deck off the master bedroom, spacious rooms and an enclave sense of privacy. It has cemented The Lake House's reputation as *the* place to bed down in the Macedon Ranges region.

The Daylesford and Hepburn Springs nexus has more day spas than any other region in Australia, 80 per cent of the country's naturally occurring mineral water, and you must head to The Lake House's award-winning Salus Spa for wet treatments, healing massages and superior facials. More: lakehouse.com.au.

Aman New Delhi, India: This daringly contemporary hotel is the first urban resort for the Singapore-headquartered Amanresorts group. Aman New Delhi sits amid a groomed 2.4ha estate, and features 31 guestrooms and eight suites, all with plunge pools set within broad covered

terraces hung with latticed stone *jaali* screens.

This would be no newsworthy claim in, say, Bali or southern Thailand, but the pools here are elevated over nine storeys. It's the oddest feeling to be virtually swimming in the sky, eye-level with circling crows and little parakeets that swirl and swoop in flurries of lime-green.

On site is a groovy tapas and wine bar, a poolside restaurant and the signature Aman dining room, with Indian and Thai dishes and a 16-seat counter serving Japanese-French kaiseki fusion fare. The hotel also includes a serene spa and Delhi's only Turkish hammam. More: amanresorts.com.

The Capital, Knightsbridge, London: It's location, location here, with Harrods as the corner store. The Capital's Basil

Street locale means you are within cooee of Knightsbridge tube station and the parade of big-brand shops on Brompton Road and Sloane Street.

Next door to the 46-room family-owned Capital is its little sibling The Levin, just 12 rooms, more contemporary in decor and design, and named for its proprietor David Levin, whose business card simply states "Hotelier".

These London townhouse-style digs are favourites among Australian travellers in the know and are always busy during Royal Ascot and Wimbledon. At The Levin, one descends to Le Metro at basement level for the morning meal and for a set-price bistro

lunch of £15 (\$23) for two courses, which seems an unlikely London bargain in the heart of Knightsbridge. More: capitalhotel.co.uk; thelevinhotel.co.uk.

Dolphin Island, Fiji: Dawn Simpson and her "ladies" at Dolphin Island, a member of the Huka Retreats group, are welcoming guests after the exclusive resort's extensive upgrade and addition of pool and extra accommodation.

Dolphin Island is not just a resort but your own island, with four double bures available for a one-booking stay. It sits just off the main Fijian isle of Viti Levu, about 2½ hours' west of Nadi airport along the grandly named Kings Highway. This is the Robinson Crusoe idyll, 21st-century style, which means the catch of the day is lobster (and no chancing your own line) and the accommodations are island chic.

Dawn creates homely food from the freshest ingredients she can muster and the days are completely unscripted. If you can't relax here, I really do worry for you. More: thehukaretreats.com; dolphinislandfiji.com.

Otahuna Lodge, Christchurch, New Zealand: Twice closed due to earthquake damage, this noble 1895-built residence, once home to parliamentarian and horticulturalist Heaton Rhodes, is back in business. At the helm are American expats Hall Cannon and Miles

Refo, first-time hoteliers and all-round gentlemen who treat guests with the same care they would long-time friends.

Executive chef Jimmy McIntyre has been at Otahuna since its original conversion to lodge accommodation in 2003 and his food is among the best you'll find across the Canterbury region.

Stroll the 12ha estate (abundant with daffodils in season), swim in the garden pool in summer, play tennis or croquet or snuggle by open fires in the cooler months.



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Otahuna has seven guestrooms, the largest and most regal of which are the four-room Rhodes Suite and the Verandah Suite with french doors opening to a covered

porch. One can imagine Rhodes enjoying this vantage point, ruler of all he surveyed, including his horses in leather overshoes pulling mowers across the Great Lawn, thus shod to protect the grass from their hooves. More: otahuna.co.nz.

John Singleton Beach House, Killcare, NSW: The well-known advertising guru's NSW Central Coast pad is available for luxe stays. This is no coastal shack but a two-storey contemporary house,

designed by Killcare architect Karen Burke, dotted with stylish seaside references and equipped with all imaginable luxuries, including twin televisions in the lounge, two kitchens, multiple sitting areas, a funky bar and (truly) a push-button waterfall.

The house is big enough for a houseparty and is just across from patrolled Killcare Beach, adjoining the Killcare Surf Lifesaving Club, which held its first meeting in 1929.

Singleton's portfolio in this neck of the coast includes Bells at Killcare, with Sydney chef Steve Manfredi masterminding the menu, and the exclusive couples-only Pretty Beach House. More: bellsatkillcare.com.au.

But wait, there's more: And covered in *Travel & Indulgence* in the past few weeks: **Coworth Park**, Berkshire, England; **Mt Kenya Safari Club**, near Nairobi; **Qasr Al-Sarab Desert Resort by Anantara**, Abu Dhabi; **Hilton Surfers Paradise, Gold Coast**. And in *Wish* magazine: **Hayman Great Barrier Reef**, Queensland (December).

Susan Kurosawa is the editor of T&I and the hotel correspondent for The Australian's Wish magazine; a selection of the hotels featured appeared in Wish this year.



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