

feelin' the love in

Mudgee

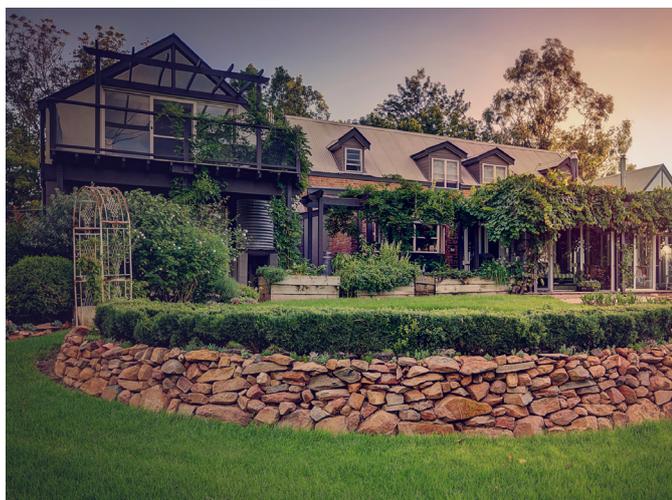
I'm on my daily commute

escaping the squeeze of my fellow passengers with the usual scroll through socials and BAM! A picturesque post of a gorgeous country town stops my busy fingers in their tracks.



Mudgee. I've heard of Mudgee, funny name, but a friend said their wine and food scene is to die for.

I click to find a three-night escape at five-star boutique 'Evanslea'. I'm not usually super spontaneous, but I'm hooked. And before I know it, I'm booked.



I'm all for a romantic escape — between work and workouts, my partner and I never find time to relax and reconnect.

A week later, we're in the car on our 270km road trip heading northwest.

Cruising the Castlereagh Highway beyond Lithgow, we're greeted by wide open spaces and fresh country air as hills roll by and our anticipation heightens.

We swing by the Mudgee Arts Precinct and find an impressive gallery and reimagined stylings of an upmarket Visitor Information Centre. This welcoming space showcases the breadth and depth of the region. A quintessential part of Mudgee is its people. Locals are passionate about their town and love meeting out-of-towners, sharing tips on how to explore their backyard.

By 5pm we've settled into our accommodation, sipping Mudgee wine and overlooking expansive gardens. It feels as though we've been transported to the set of a *Country Style* magazine shoot. Note-to-self: explore the local boutique shopping scene for a country chic wardrobe fix before heading home.



Next, we find ourselves falling love with an insta-worthy eight-course degustation dinner at Pipeclay Pumphouse where chef Andy Crestani pays homage to the surrounds and produce it so abundantly provides. And the wine... the wine! The restaurant is on the grounds of award-winning Robert Stein Winery and there's a reason their trophy cabinet is full.

The following morning, at Mudgee Corner Store, we order a locally famous egg and bacon roll and barista coffee that easily competes with Sydney's finest. After breakfast, we try our creative hand at a Mudgee Art House pottery wheel workshop, and before you ask, of course we re-enacted the classic *Ghost* moment.



Early afternoon we're collected by Country Kombi for a half-day wine tour. You don't need to be a connoisseur; cellar doors want their guests to relax and enjoy wine in their own way (no wine snobs here!).

To wrap the day, we head to Three Tails Brewery and try an impressive range of craft beers, accompanied by a drool-worthy low and slow BBQ dinner cooked with fire, smoke and passion by the crew at Smokin' Bro & Co.

There's really an incredible sense of authenticity here. Local artisans are applauded and showcased at every turn, on every menu.

Time to work off our recent indulgence with a morning horseback ride in the Australian bush. Mudgee Horse Riding Centre make it easy



for beginners. We're super excited to spy a mob of kangaroos and a wombat on our trail.

For a light lunch we venture down a cobblestone alleyway to Alby & Esthers. The circa 1873 stone terrace and vine-drenched courtyard is packed with character and charm, friendly servers and a mouth-watering menu inspired by local fare.

After our afternoon snooze (totally acceptable, we're on wine time) we ready ourselves for the beauty of Australian native foods, botanicals, culture and rituals at Warakirri by Indigiearth, a 5-course bushtucker degustation dining experience. We are in awe of Sharon Winsor, owner and proud Ngemba Weilwan woman. Sharon is passionate about connecting people with Aboriginal culture and heritage through native foods. We learn her greatest pastime as a youngster was to collect bush fruits and catch yabbies, which inspired her journey in creating this incredible experience. Proudly 100% Aboriginal owned and operated, we were humbled by the opportunity. Warakirri means to 'grow with us'. Thank you for sharing culture with us Sharon, we will grow with you.

We don't want the night to end, so drop into NSW's oldest wine bar, Roth's, for a nightcap, live music and chill local vibes.

The next day we have a crack at cooking with local produce at The Little Cooking School. I'm no Heston, but wow did I feel accomplished!

On our final afternoon we discover the charming villages of Rylstone, Kandos and Gulgong. All share a vibrant sense of authenticity, bringing life to their heritage and offerings. It's obvious the community works hard to connect right across the region.

In Mudgee we hit the reset button. We're ready to return to the daily grind with a refreshed perspective.

And guess what? Not a funny name after all, Mudgee is derived from the Wiradjuri term Moothi meaning 'nest in the hills'. And that's exactly where we found ourselves, nestled in the foothills of the stunning Cudgegong Ranges.

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6 WINNING ENTRY MAGAZINE

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8 WINNING ENTRY MAGAZINE