

# DAYS OF PLENTY

Dining and other delights in the Gold Coast hinterland

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It's 2.30am and I wake to the sound of rain on the corrugated-iron roof. I have to be up in an hour. The light flickers on in my father's room through the Japanese shoji screens that divide our sleeping quarters in Songbirds Rainforest Retreat. Listening to the increasingly steady drum of raindrops, I'm not feeling confident about our plans. We are booked on a hot-air balloon ride over the Gold Coast hinterland and although I don't know a lot about these craft, I do know they don't have gutters.

We arrived several days earlier, walking off the plane into a Queensland weather cliché — sapphire skies and a warm breeze. Instead of heading to the popular beachside locales between Surfers Paradise and Coolangatta, we have taken a curvaceous route into the mountains for a gourmet tour of the hinterland. Lemon migrant butterflies flit across the road, their numbers having surged after recent rain. Driving the undulating roads through the subtropical rainforest, past strangler figs, towering palms and sprawling ferns, the famous sparkling strip of the Gold Coast feels a world away.

Horse studs are scattered throughout the district and numerous bridle trails thread through its regional parks. Rivermead Estate in Guanaba is perfectly situated on Caballo Road. The name of this thoroughfare means “horse” in Spanish but that is only one aspect of the property's equine pedigree. In the 19th century, it was on the Cobb & Co route that travelled from the Gold Coast to Beaudesert, a rural town to the west. The estate's long driveway sweeps past a tournament-sized polo field and horses grazing in verdant paddocks before arriving in front of the grand three-storey Queenslander-style homestead.

Inside, a central staircase leads to six bedrooms and light-filled living and entertaining areas. The decor is fresh and bright, with white timber louvres, richly textured rugs and plush furnishings plus the occasional splash of blue in cushions and handpainted ceramics. Black and white photographs of majestic horses hang throughout. A wide balcony wraps around the exterior, with timber rocking chairs and plump sofas positioned so guests can linger over views of the sparkling pool, landscaped gardens and macadamia tree plantation.

I immediately feel at home, kicking off my sandals and putting them on again only for the afternoon helicopter ride that takes us over the terracotta roofs, glinting backyard pools and theme parks of the Gold Coast.

Energetic guests can make use of Rivermead's well-equipped commercial kitchen, but tonight Dustin Sanderson, a charming chef from the Ridgeway hospitality group, is lending us his talents. While he chats with my father, I go to investigate the well-stocked bar fridge in the billiards room and return with glasses of Moët & Chandon.

For dinner we sit on the veranda, watching the rose-tinted sky turn a deep purple. Over five courses, Dustin delights us with cauli-



Clockwise from above: Rivermead Estate, Guanaba; Tamborine Mountain Distillery; Curtis Falls; hot-air balloon preparing for a Gold Coast tour; guestroom at Rivermead Estate



## MORE TO THE STORY

In September last year, the heritage-listed Binna Burra Lodge in Lamington National Park was hit by a fierce bushfire, destroying 11 buildings, some of which had stood since the property opened in 1933. The road leading in has been rebuilt and bookings are open for the one, two and three-bedroom apartments in the Sky Lodges (pictured) for stays from September 1. The Binna Burra Kitchen reopened on Friday and it's anticipated the camping ground and tea house will be ready for visitors by the September school holidays.

■ [binnaburralodge.com.au](http://binnaburralodge.com.au)

flower and parsnip veloute with truffle oil, Moreton Bay bug and prawn tortellini, zucchini flowers with Persian feta and pine nuts, and summer vegetable risotto. The vanilla bean panna cotta with honeycomb, dehydrated raspberries and edible flowers looks too pretty to eat, but we rise to the challenge.

In the morning we take breakfast outside, watching swallows dart over the paddocks, accompanied by the rising pitch of cicadas hidden in the rainforest. We drive further into the hinterland, stopping for lunch at the Fox and Hounds, a replica English pub with a red double-decker bus out the front and soccer scarfs dangling from the ceiling. Our lunch, which includes an enormous beef and Guinness pie, is overseen by a stern portrait of Queen Victoria.

The facade of Tamborine Mountain Distillery's faux Tudor building continues the British theme, although the flavours inside are true-blue. The distillery has been operating for more than 25 years, and owner and general manager Gordon Chalmers creates a kaleidoscopic range of liqueurs and spirits in handmade copper stills. We ask to do five tastings, but Gordon and Dad get talking and I lose count when they hit double digits. We sample the nutty wattle-toffee liqueur made with wattle seeds; a forest plum and strawberry liqueur that showcases Davidson plum, and the throat-numbing “Moulin Rooz” absinthe flavoured with Australian botanicals.

## IN THE KNOW

Rivermead Estate is a 45-minute drive from Gold Coast Airport. The house has six bedrooms for up to 12 guests. Rates are \$4000 a night for the house on weekdays, \$6000 a night on weekends; includes exclusive use of the homestead, champagne on arrival and breakfast.

The Fox and Hounds and the Three Little Pigs Bar and Bistro have reopened to diners. Tamborine Mountain Distillery and Witches Falls Winery are open for tastings; bookings recommended. Hot Air Balloon Gold Coast has taken to the skies again, and Songbirds Rainforest Retreat is welcoming guests.

■ [rivermeadestate.com.au](http://rivermeadestate.com.au)  
■ [foxandhounds.net.au](http://foxandhounds.net.au)  
■ [tamborinemountaindistillery.com](http://tamborinemountaindistillery.com)  
■ [witchesfalls.com.au](http://witchesfalls.com.au)  
■ [hotair.com.au/gold-coast](http://hotair.com.au/gold-coast)  
■ [songbirds.com.au](http://songbirds.com.au)

Over the next few days, we explore more of the hinterland's foodie favourites. We eat well at the welcoming Three Little Pigs Bar and Bistro, get a dose of nature flanked by flooded gums as we walk to the thundering Curtis Falls and finish one afternoon by sipping glasses of verdelho, malbec and muscat under a broad avocado tree at Witches Falls Winery.

At the secluded Songbirds Rainforest Retreat we can barely hear ourselves speak over the raucous crickets, frogs and birds around our villa. But as the rain comes down on the last morning of our stay, I fear our good luck has run out.

Assuming the balloon flight is still on, we drive to Canungra where a monochrome sky threatens to darken further. Before long a bus pulls up, taking us to a launching paddock where warm blasts of propane are slowly inflating the balloon's envelope.

We climb into the 24-person basket and then we're off, gently pulling upwards, gliding over a still life of the Gold Coast. We spy cows waiting to be milked, flocks of birds soaring and diving, the Logan River snaking through the earth, and kangaroos bouncing amid the bush. Other balloons hang against the overcast sky like light bulbs, their gas burners blasting intermittently. Just before we land, the sun finally breaks over the top of Mount Tamborine. For a few minutes, I can see all the way from the rolling green hinterland to the Gold Coast's skyscrapers, awash in the glorious morning light.

Lindy Alexander was a guest of Destination Gold Coast.

■ [destinationgoldcoast.com](http://destinationgoldcoast.com)