



CHRISTINE McCABE

**Rawnsley Park Station, left; heli-camping fire and swag, above and below; sunset tour and villa interior, below left**

PICTURES: SATC



farewell to Sam as he flies back to the station, his little helicopter appearing no larger than a mosquito against the vast plains.

The fire is stoked, dinner heated — a delicious lamb curry pre-prepared by chefs back at the station — and while we lounge lazily drinking in the view, poor Kym is a blur of activity, to-ing and fro-ing with cheese board and decadent chocolate puddings, washing dishes and setting the kettle on the embers for a cuppa.

Darkness brings tales of the Pound tall and true, of lost children and fallen climbers, of wily feral goats and stealthy dingoes. Of drought and abandoned runs. And the light show isn't over yet. Here come the stars and a

full moon rising through the trees, bathing our rocky citadel in an eerie light.

And so to bed, which is a bit of a palaver. My hubby and I are bedecked in multiple layers, beanies, mittens and scarves, and squeezing into the swag is a little like threading a needle with rope. Eventually we settle and are perfectly snug, but there will be no midnight excursions to the loo.

At dawn a shimmering, cardinal red light lightly touches the Elders, just the tip of the jagged hills at first but spreading slowly to light the entire range. All is still, not a bird stirs, although we see evidence of kangaroos and wild goats having passed through camp at some point. The sun plays across red-dirt plains but the Pound has its own weather system, spilling cloud like water over the ramparts.

A “cloud waterfall”, Kym says, as he whips up bacon and egg sarnies (breakfast of champions). Several more cuppas later we spy a little yellow dot skimming across the plains. Here comes Sam to whisk us back to HQ for a spot of duvet and bath-augmented luxury in an eco-villa.

I first visited Rawnsley 14 years ago when Tony and Julie unveiled the first of their eight one and two-bedroom villas, and they still look as new as the day they opened. Perched on a cypress-clad knoll affording fantastic vistas onto Rawnsley Bluff in one direction, the Elder Range in the other, the villas are of a strawbale and rendered construction (offering excellent thermal insulation) with elegant timber detailing.

Our villa, Saltbush, provides a view of the Elder Range from bed; at night we can count the stars through a retractable ceiling. The rooms are toasty warm, spacious and incredibly comfortable and after a night in the swag, that deep bathtub, fluffy towels and robes to hand, looks most inviting. The kitchen comes with very generous “continental breakfast” provisions: bread, croissants, cereals, juice, eggs, fruit. A welcome bottle of Clare Valley wine is just the ticket to accompany a barbie on the veranda, but if you can't be bothered cooking, book dinner in the jazzed-up woolshed. The kangaroo and lamb are really good.

The villas serve as a luxury base for Rawnsley's guided walks (and share a swimming pool with knockout views) but they're just as suitable for a lazy weekend, or as I discover, a spot of armchair twitching. Lying on the sofa reading, I'm constantly distracted by variegated fairy-wrens and red cap robins flitting among the trees, a pair of wedge-tailed eagles soaring above the ridge and finally a pair of muscle-bound Euros (wallaroos) bounding by. Over the years, Rawnsley has mastered the art of going bush and the complementary charms of swag and villa. Even if you've a serious allergy to camping you'd be crazy not to jump aboard Sam's yellow chopper for a seat at a staggering sunset lightshow 600 million years in the planning.

*Christine McCabe was a guest of Rawnsley Park Station.*

ally opposite, on the corner of Iceley Street, Kelly and Paolo Picarazzi run the delightful new Antica Australis restaurant in a cottage-style former haberdashery.

Paolo is from the central Italian region of Ciociaria and bases his cuisine on the relaxed locanda style of authentic home cooking. A crespelle with Gorgonzola, prosciutto and house-made fig and ginger jam starts proceedings on the winter menu and the well-paced four-course meal is a triumph of regional produce and cooking straight from the heart. Kelly also runs, and hosts, Silver Compass Tours; the boutique excursions are designed around food and wine of the central west and there are upcoming day trips plus packages planned for 2021. So, there's another reason to revisit this surprise-package of a place. I'll make my return in cool weather and fossick at Tomolly for a bobble beanie hand-knitted by a local Nonna before joining Kelly on a gastronomic safari. Can't wait.

*Susan Kurosawa was a guest of Destination NSW.*

## FAB FOUR WALLED CITIES

History is tangible in these fortified enclaves

LINDY ALEXANDER



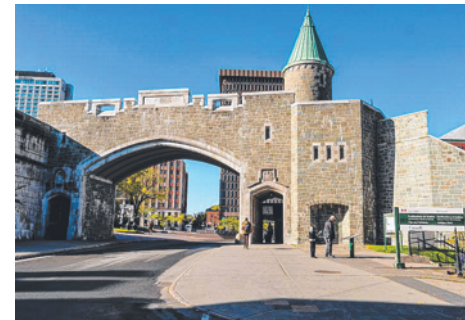
### CARCASSONNE, FRANCE

Among the vineyards and farmland of southern France, the country's second-most-visited tourist site perches on a rocky hilltop. Said to be the inspiration behind Walt Disney's film *The Sleeping Beauty*, Carcassonne features drawbridges, tall turrets, medieval cobbled streets and bustling marketplaces. The jagged peaks of the Pyrenees are visible on a clear day, and it's the location, between the Mediterranean and the Basque Atlantic, that made it such an

important trading place for the Romans, who built a fort here in the 3rd century. The city was variously taken over by the Visigoths, the Saracens and the Franks before the Trencavel dynasty took control in the 11th century. Within the double ramparts are the enormous castle (Chateau Comtal) and the Basilica of St Nazaire, but what would a walled city be without a museum dedicated to inquisition and torture? Be warned; it's not for the faint-hearted; [au.france.fr/en](http://au.france.fr/en).

### QUEBEC CITY, CANADA

As the sky darkens and lights blink on in the magnificent towers and turrets of Fairmont Le Chateau Frontenac, Quebec City takes on a fairytale quality. The grand hotel, which overlooks the Saint Lawrence River, is one of many glorious attractions in the fortified hub. The walls were initially built in the 1690s by the French. The 4.6km walk along the fortifications, either on top or via an adjacent path, takes you past cannons, barracks, a military prison and fortresses. Sitting atop Cape Diamond is the British-built Citadel, which is still an active garrison of the French-speaking Royal 22nd Regiment. Once you've looped the



city, wander down to the lively cobblestone streets where trendy cafes, restaurants, bars and boutiques await; [quebec-cite.com/en](http://quebec-cite.com/en).



### VALLETTA, MALTA

Malta may be the smallest nation in the European Union, but its honey-hued capital city, Valletta, is a knockout. It sits on the Sciberras Peninsula, between two

sparkling harbours in the Mediterranean. The city was built by the Knights of St John in the mid-1500s as a stronghold to defend Christendom and preserve its culture. It seems the strategy succeeded; the majority of Maltese people still identify as Christian and in 2018 Valletta was designated European Capital of Culture. The best way to get around is on foot, starting at the city gate before taking in Renzo Piano's controversial parliament building, boutiques on Republic Street and St John's Cathedral before visiting 16th-century palace Casa Rocca Piccola. There are spectacular views from the Upper Barrakka Gardens, where a rousing salute from the battery of cannons takes place at noon; [visitmalta.com/en/valletta](http://visitmalta.com/en/valletta).

### INTRAMUROS, THE PHILIPPINES

It seems incongruous to find a European-style walled city in the centre of Manila, but from 1571 Intramuros (meaning “within the walls” in Latin) was the heart of Spanish occupation in The Philippines until 1898. Built on the remains of a Malay settlement at the mouth of the Pasig River, Intramuros became Spain's political and military base in Asia. The city was heavily damaged in World War II, but one of the most striking buildings to survive was San Agustin church. Built between 1587 and 1606, the baroque-style landmark is a UNESCO World Heritage site and the stunning trompe l'oeil frescoes on the vaulted ceiling are worth the visit alone. Outside the city's eight gates you'll find brightly coloured



horse-drawn carriages called kalesa, waiting to take travellers to Intramuros's other famous sites such as Fort Santiago, the public square of Plaza de Roma and the restored Ayuntamiento or city hall; [intramuros.gov.ph](http://intramuros.gov.ph).

## IN THE KNOW

Carcoar is 7km from Blayney, off the Mid-Western Highway (A43), and equidistant between Bathurst and Orange. Driving time from Sydney is about 3 ½ hours. Carcoar is the third-oldest settlement, after Bathurst and Wellington, west of the Blue Mountains.

■ [visitnsw.com](http://visitnsw.com)  
■ [tomolly.com.au](http://tomolly.com.au)  
■ [anticacarcoar.com](http://anticacarcoar.com)  
■ [silvercompassstours.com.au](http://silvercompassstours.com.au)

runs Tomolly, an interiors store in a historic terrace on Belubula Street, and lives nearby in a restored flour mill. Across a flow of rooms, including a studio space for regular workshops in crafts such as leather-making and floral art, Tomolly is a haven of homewares, candles, jewellery, local knits, linens and collectables in a soft organic palette. Diagon-