

The world of OORALBA

Ooralba Estate in Kangaroo Valley, available for rent through Luxe Houses, is a corporate retreat like no other, and a peaceful world of endless wonders.

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The vast floor-to-ceiling windows rising from a daybed piled high with cushions frame the gently sloping valley below Ooralba Estate, which is filled with a thick, pure-white mist. It's a magical sight, made all the more beautiful thanks to the bright-blue winter sky above Kangaroo Valley and the rising sun's rays piercing through a thicket of gumtrees. Once the sun has risen, the mist dissipates and the valley below is revealed — fertile folds of land spliced by fences and winding country roads.

A tall, muscular man with an armful of bright pink and blue yoga mats strolls across the estate's hilltop towards the house's sprawling veranda. There's a purposeful, athletic spring in his step, and I know what he's here for, so I reluctantly climb out of the windowed daybed, take a final sip of lemon myrtle tea, and slip on my running shoes.

Our group of ten, away for the weekend on a corporate retreat, are gradually coming together in the heart of the house — an enormous open-plan kitchen with an island bench the size of a Sydney bedsit. The equally enormous dining table is an ever-changing showcase of Ooralba Estate's countless natural bounty and the many talents of the estate's concierge and chef Monique.



Monique's condiments, jams, and chutneys are renowned in the Valley, and there's no wondering why. The lemon curd butter, jalapeno jam, pickled vegetables, chilli sauce, and raspberry jam are standouts, but pretty much whatever is in season is turned into something for guests to spread across the homebaked bagels.

The eggs are straight from the estate's plump 'ladies' (aka hens); the honey from the beehives in the paddocks; and the Black Angus and Murray Grey cattle raised on the land provide some of the region's finest beef and pork. The muesli packed with the property's pecans and macadamias, and muffins, cookies, friands and scones are all whipped up by Monique's deft hands.

By the time we all finish breakfast and straggle out of the house in various states of morning disarray, Michael Hole of Holistic

Training has laid out the yoga mats, and a few wistful faces are eyeing them off as though they are beds. The winter air is crisp, and before we can say 'yogi bear', he has us beating our backs and chests with our arms swinging in rapid pendulum motions, and then heading off at a brisk trot into the paddocks where the morning mist once sat. The fresh country air is an elixir, and the power walk around Ooralba's dam not only wakes everyone up but also gets us excited about the day ahead. It's an ideal start to some colleague bonding as everyone laughs at one another's efforts.

Looking back up from the paddock, the house is resplendent beneath the rising sun, framed by the wild bush-covered mountains. Surrounded by the award-winning gardens created by Hugh Main — an award-winning landscape design artist from Spirit Level — it's an architectural sight to behold.

Ooralba was formerly a more Santa Fe/Mexican style ranch, and although a vast amount of the main house was, in its essence, retained, the current owners have turned it into a contemporary castle — a sprawling split-level home with church-high ceilings supported by massive beams salvaged from the old Sydney Wharf. Wide, polished-concrete-heated floors flow through the place like a river, and the art, décor, and furniture have been expertly knitted together to create an artistic, luxurious abode that is all about warmth and hospitality, despite its massive 2,438 square-metre footprint.

The north wing of the house has three bedrooms, two offices, and three bathrooms. The master bedroom is graced with his-and-hers freestanding baths and sinks, sauna and a walk-through robe, and a double-queen bed. The other two rooms are adjoining rooms with a bathroom between them. There's also a large family room packed with books, beanbags, and a TV — ideal for some casual brainstorming.

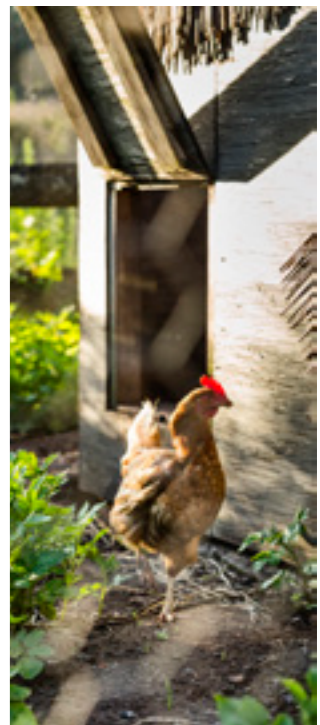
The kitchen and dining room are in the centre of the home, surrounded by windows



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overlooking the plentiful gardens, a yard with pool, and an extensive spread of balconies. They sit alongside an incredibly spacious lounge room with a fireplace recessed into an impressively appropriate stone wall that gives a nod to classic French ski chalet design. There's a bar with a ceiling-high antique mirror backdrop, complete with beer and wine fridges, all next to an open entertaining space with a baby grand piano.

Wonderful, gourmet food and (non-alcoholic) beverages are all a part of the package at Ooralba Estate, and nothing is done by >>



Clockwise from top Ooralba Estate's main balcony overlooking the property's paddocks and dam; The luxurious lounge room, complete with a baby grand piano; One of Ooralba's clucky 'ladies'; The heart of the home: the enormous kitchen and dining area.



halves. Even the signature cocktails — Strawberry Jalapeno Cooler and the Basil-Smash — were created by a Hong Kong-based cocktail alchemist mixologist, and all ingredients are picked from the garden.

Back out on the gently sloping lawn, Michael has us competing in a tug-of-war, and balancing along a thick rope that he's stretched across the lawn, and playing with wooden swords in duels that encourage balance, core strength, and team bonding. We're taken through some Pilates and yoga moves, and then, energised, head off on another trot around the paddock, with Monique's dog Mango excitedly running circles around us all. It's an ideal way to kick off a corporate retreat as by the end of it, we're buzzing.

Morning exercise complete, Michael salutes our efforts and heads back into the valley. Feeling like we've burned some calories and earned enough brownie points to convert into some hearty culinary endeavours, everyone is looking forward to lunch in the award-winning walled garden reminiscent of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Secret Garden*. It's an edible paradise — guests can pick herbs to flavour their pizzas and pluck anything from the garden to add to the salads and tapas plates delivered to the stunning location that could be a film set. A maze of tall hedges surrounds the enclave, and the pièce de résistance is the terracotta pizza oven at its centre, facing a wrought-iron table setting to seat ten. Monique, whose love of food and décor is evident in everything she creates, has laid out a table of antipasto delights fit for royalty, and wine is poured into crystal glasses that sparkle in the midday sun.

While pizza-base dough balls are expertly rolled, and an assortment of gourmet toppings are assembled — Ooralba olives, a selection of cheeses, tomatoes, smoked ham, prosciutto, jalapeno jam — we embark on an exploration of the award-winning gardens. The property has a team of landscape artists from Spirit Level who continually work their magic on the grounds, and there is a full-time 'lawn doctor' who spends his entire week on a ride-on lawn mower, ensuring that the property is immaculate all year round.

We head into a maze of perfectly rotund sculptural hedges that range from the size of a beach ball to ones higher than six feet. They are cobbled and bobbed triumphantly together, creating a textural, artistic field of fairytale fabulousness that has everyone in awe — walking among it all makes me feel as though I've stepped into a Tim Burton-inspired pop-up gardening book. And at the end of it all, we're spilt out into an open field of grass that sports the property's beloved vegetable garden with hen-house.

Back in the secret garden, crispy-based gourmet pizzas are removed from the oven

on a well-used pizza shovel and delivered to the table. Wine glasses are refilled, and midday slips gently into the afternoon.

Monique and her husband, Jonathan, who takes care of the agricultural aspects of the estate including the vegetable garden, came from working on superyachts in Europe, so they bring with them not only a great understanding of luxury, but also service at the level that Ooralba guests are accustomed to. However, it's the understated, relaxed approach that their staff have adopted that makes Ooralba so special. It's not a hotel, but just like the best five-star corporate retreats, guests want for nothing once they've stepped through those grand front doors.

When dinner rolls around, there is another special culinary experience before us — pasta-making. Another of Monique's many culinary talents is her ability to whip up pasta that an Italian nonna would sing about. As we all take turns kneading and flattening the dough and then passing it through the pasta machine, Monique adds final touches to the slow-cooked lamb ragout that has the house filled with an intoxicating smell.

The lamb has been cooking in the pizza oven all afternoon, and the sauce, loaded with tomatoes, red wine, carrots, garlic, local jumbo green olives and herbs — oregano, parsley, thyme, and rosemary from the garden — is nothing short of sensational. Add to that a giant platter of baked baby squash, green beans, and brussels sprouts, and some local artisan sourdough, and the result is a continual chorus of oohs and aahs as we relish the lamb that falls off the bone with the slightest prod of a fork. We also congratulate ourselves on our brilliant pasta-making, fully aware that we'd have a ragout sans fettuccini without Monique taking care of us.

There's no real reason to leave Ooralba. If it's summer, there's the pool to enjoy; and if it's winter, the fireplace is continuously roaring and there's the sauna to indulge in. However if guests do want to venture out, there's an endless array of activities nearby,



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such as horse-riding, mountain-biking, and all manner of water sports at nearby beautiful Jervis Bay. There are culinary and winery tours, guided walks, and in Kangaroo Valley streets are filled with cafés, restaurants, gift stores, and enough to keep anyone busy for days on end.

All of us avoid the inevitable — packing our bags. We spend another glorious night being spoiled by Monique in the kitchen, and after dinner we gather around the baby grand for a singalong, the roaring fire keeping us toasty. We're all facing the windows as a full moon rises above Kangaroo Valley and the stars come out — a million bright lights suspended in the night. It's breathtaking — like a painting capturing some of the magic that is Ooralba. ■

Ooralba's corporate retreats are bespoke. No matter what industry corporates are from, and what their needs are, Luxe Houses can assist with all details, large and small. If companies do not have a corporate retreat program in place, a Luxe Houses' concierge will assist in designing programs and also recommending a trusted network of personal development coaches, bootcamp professionals, personal trainers, relaxation spa experiences, and masterchef classes.

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Clockwise from top left One of Ooralba Estate's award-winning gardens with pool; The maze-like hedged garden leading to the vegetable patch and hen-house; The master suite, which has his and hers free-standing baths and a sauna.