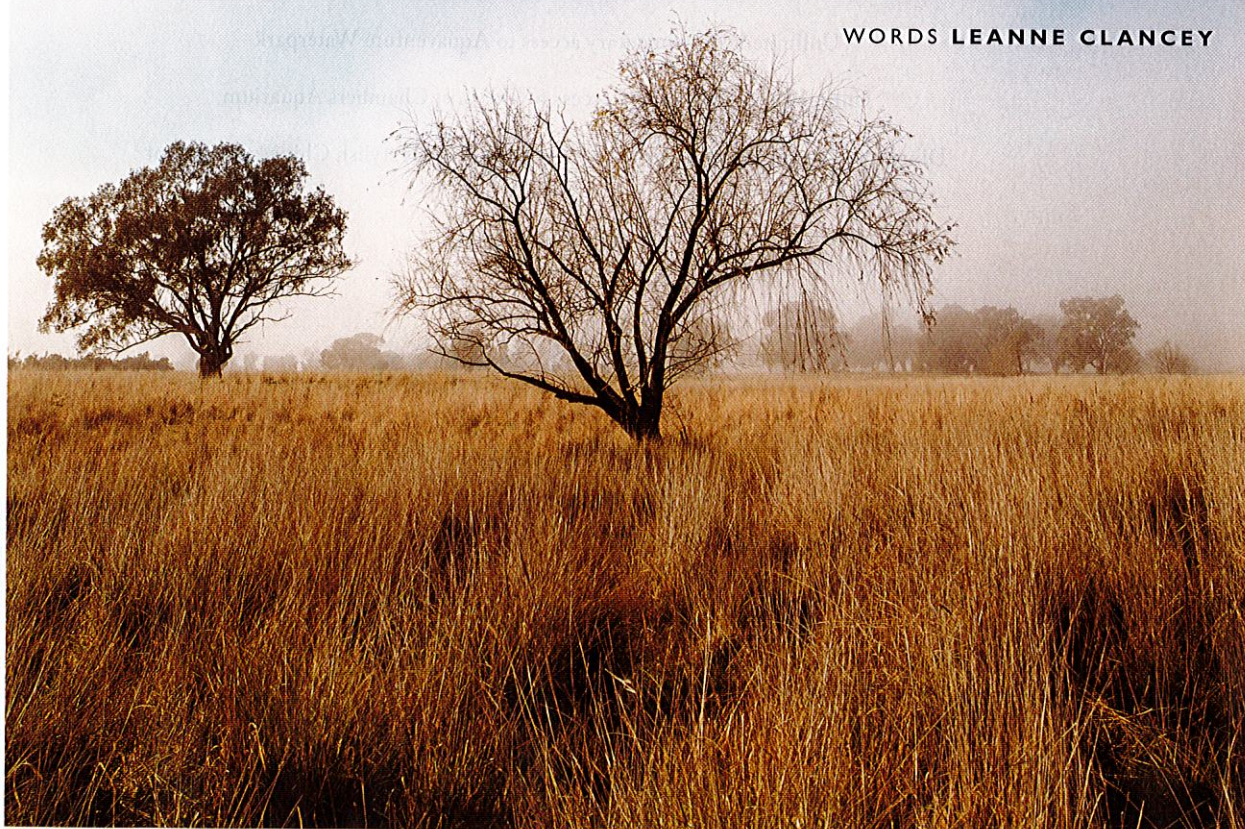


RIVERINA RISING

WORDS LEANNE CLANCEY



NSW's scenic RIVERINA region has long been a *PIT STOP* for weary *TRAVELLERS* needing to break up a long road trip. But a *WAVE* of new *ENERGY* in the area is providing plenty of reasons to *UNPACK* and *STAY* a little longer.

ATLANTIS, THE PALM, DUBAI

Atlantis, The Palm is the first entertainment resort destination in the region, located at the centre of the crescent of The Palm in Dubai. The unique ocean-themed resort is home to the number one waterpark in the Middle East, Aquaventure, one of the largest open-air marine habitats in the world, home to over 65,000 marine animals and The Lost Chambers Aquarium, a maze of underwater corridors and passageways providing a journey through ancient Atlantis. Atlantis, The Palm is also known as the culinary destination in the region with a collection of world-renowned restaurants by Michelin-star chefs including Nobu by Nobu Matsuhisa, Ronda Locatelli by Giorgio Locatelli and Bread Street Kitchen & Bar by Gordon Ramsay. The resort also boasts an award-winning ShuiQi Spa and Fitness Centre, an impressive collection of luxury boutiques and shops as well as extensive meeting and convention facilities.

THE PRIZE

Five-night stay for two in an Imperial Club room at Atlantis, The Palm

Luxury airport transfers

Imperial Club access offering benefits valued at over AED3000 per day including private check-in and check-out, daily breakfast, afternoon tea and cocktails and canapes in the distinguished Imperial Club Lounge and access to the Imperial Club beach

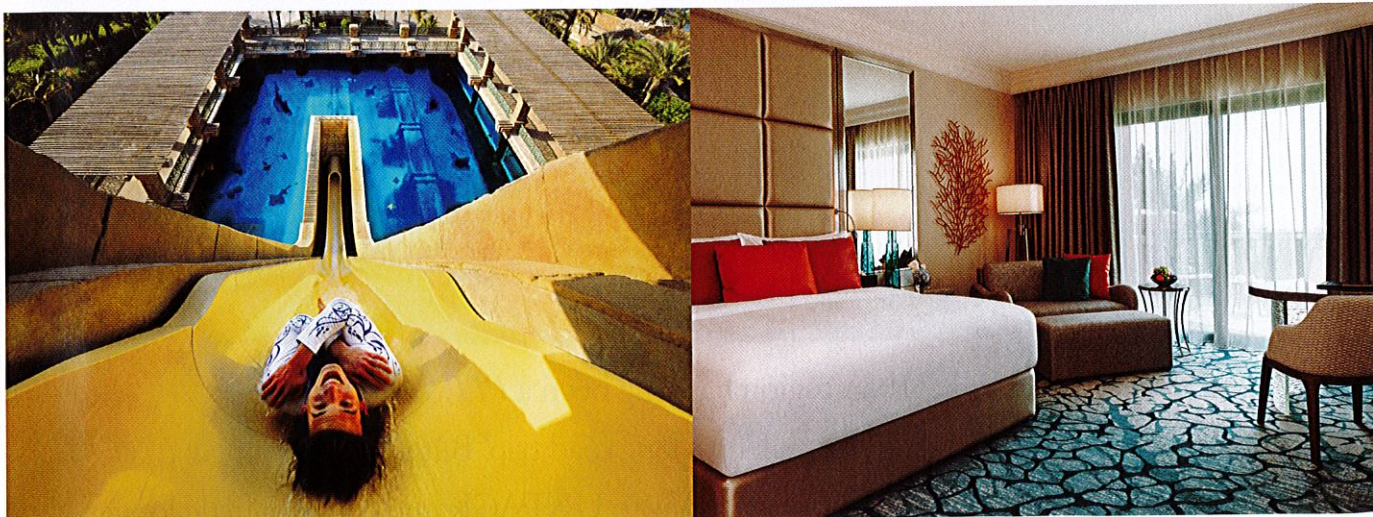
Unlimited complimentary access to Aquaventure Waterpark

Unlimited complimentary access to The Lost Chambers Aquarium

Dinner for two on one evening at YUAN, Dubai's most stylish Chinese restaurant

VALUE: \$12,000

ATLANTIS
THE PALM, DUBAI



For anyone who grew up in Australia, this part of the world is one that is steeped in outback legend.

THIS PAGE: Visitors come from far and wide to stay in JR's Hut, an architecturally designed A-frame cabin at Kimo Estate in Nangus.
OPPOSITE: The landscape of NSW's Riverina region is the stuff Slim Dusty sang about.

WE'VE JUST STEPPED OFF a flight into Wagga Wagga airport and I'm marvelling at the simplicity and ease of transit through a regional air terminal. Our bags are waiting for us all of about 20 seconds' walk from the tarmac and the car park is another 10 paces away. What it lacks in glamour, the journey certainly makes up for in ease. If only all air travel was like this, I think to myself.

Still high on the thrill of stress-free regional aviation, we jump in a hire car and drive our way out of town heading east as the sun sinks closer to the horizon. As we pass the outer limits of Wagga's city bounds, the dusk sky gets bigger and a vast, undulating landscape opens up to greet us. And that's when it hits me: we're travelling along the road to Gundagai.

For anyone who grew up in Australia, this part of the world is one that is steeped in outback legend. From bushranger folklore and the Dog on the Tuckerbox to the famous song that was such a fixture of Aussie life at

a certain time, there's more spirit of pioneer-era Australia here than you can poke a gumnut at. As we wind our way along the road I can see that, indeed, the blue gums are growing, and the Murrumbidgee is flowing. Slim Dusty (among others) was right, it's a tremendously beautiful sight.

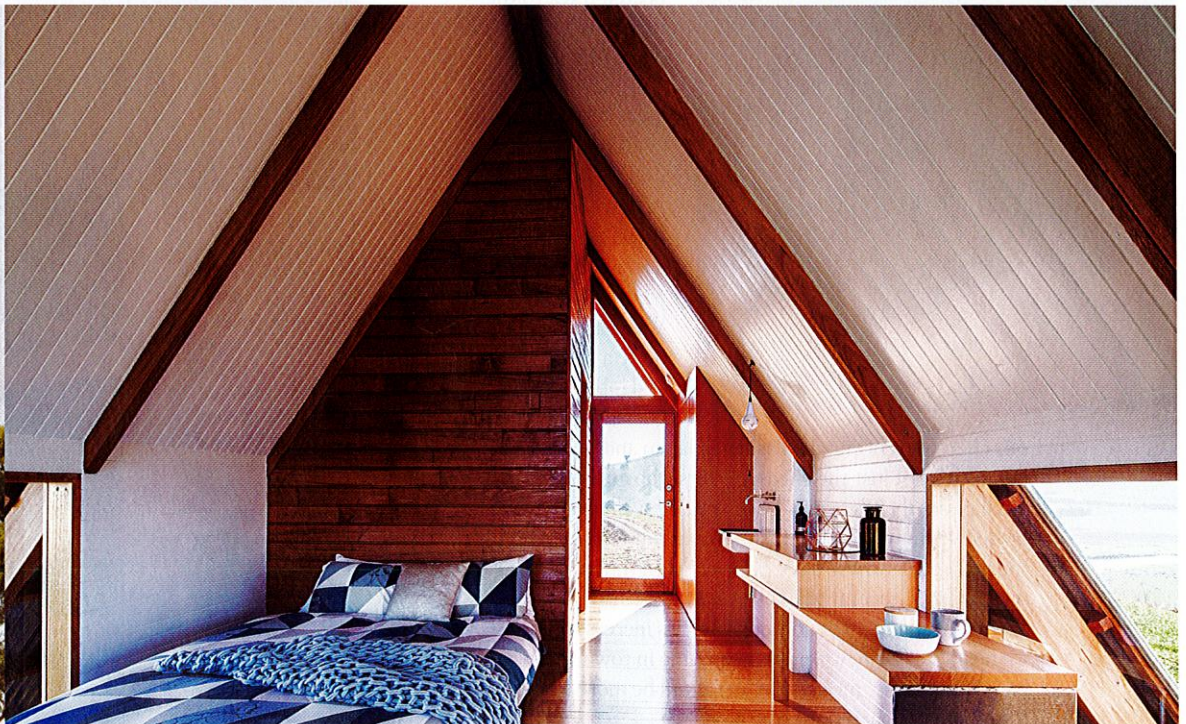
Local resident Emelia Ferguson, one of a new breed of business owners enlivening the region, couldn't agree more. "Taking the drive down the back roads from Wagga to Gundagai is one of my favourite things to do," she says. "It's just beautiful – and so quintessentially Australian."

Along with her husband David, Emelia runs Kimo Estate in Nangus – about 12 kilometres west of Gundagai. As well as being a working sheep and cattle farm, their 2800-hectare property also hosts weddings, farm stays and boutique accommodation.

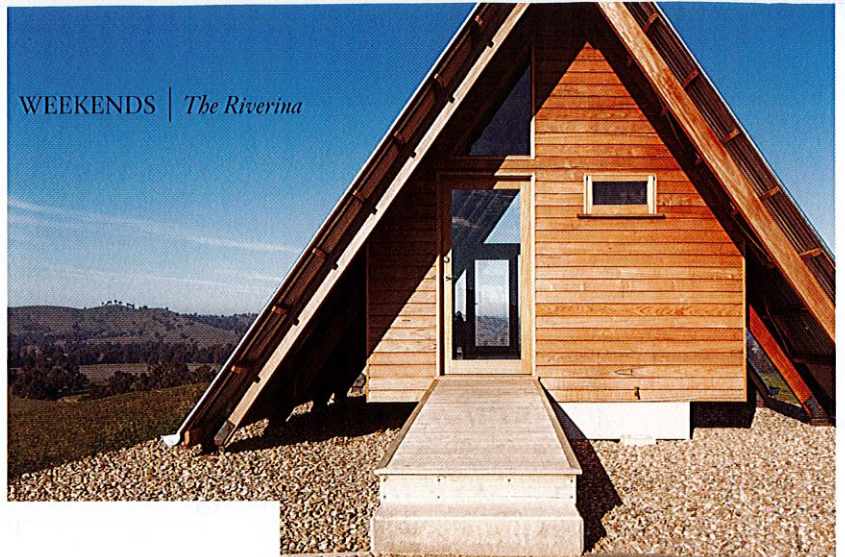
While there is a range of accommodation options on offer, the undoubted jewel in the crown at Kimo Estate is JR's Hut. Sat high on a hilltop overlooking the Murrumbidgee, the architecturally designed A-frame cabin lures nature seekers and architecture buffs from all over the country, with some taking the 500-plus kilometre journey from Melbourne just for a single night's stay.

"The hut draws a lot of people because it's so unique," Emelia explains, adding that the simplicity of the offer (no mains electricity, no wi-fi) is a big part of the appeal. "Staying here allows people to get back to what we used to do as humans: light a fire, look at the stars, sit around and have a chat. It's very peaceful. People come here to switch off – it's very conducive to that."

About an hour's drive north-west in the tiny rural township of Coolamon, another relative newcomer →



*“It’s very peaceful.
People come here to
switch off – it’s very
conducive to that.”*



to the scene is proving that a single business has the power to completely turn around a small town’s fortunes. The brainchild of experienced local cheesemaker Barry Lillywhite and his son Anton Green, a hospitality professional who has worked all over the world, Coolamon Cheese (coolamoncheese.com.au) started as a dream and resulted in a rebirth for the small rural town.

Set in a historic building on the town’s main street, the thriving business doubles as a cafe and an artisan cheese production facility, with a range of handmade cheeses made and aged on site. Five years in the making, Coolamon Cheese was launched by the father-and-son team in 2016, with the help of a progressive local council and a successful crowd-funding campaign that was backed in large part by the local community.

With its artisan cheese tastings and inventive menu that showcases local produce, the business has been

drawing droves of visitors off the beaten track to the little-known town, establishing it as a true destination for great regional dining.

“We have people visit from all over,” Anton says. “Many travel from within the [area] and other parts of New South Wales and we get quite a few interstate and international guests. We’ve heard

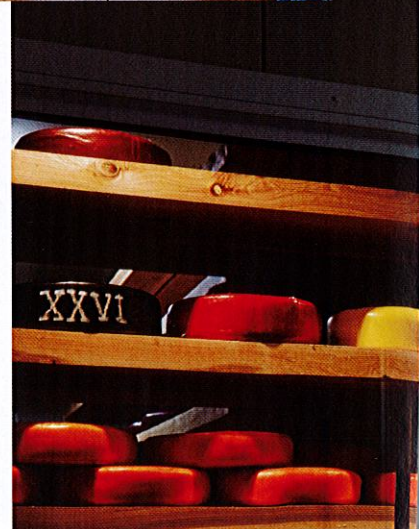
our cheese has been taken as far as Japan and India.”

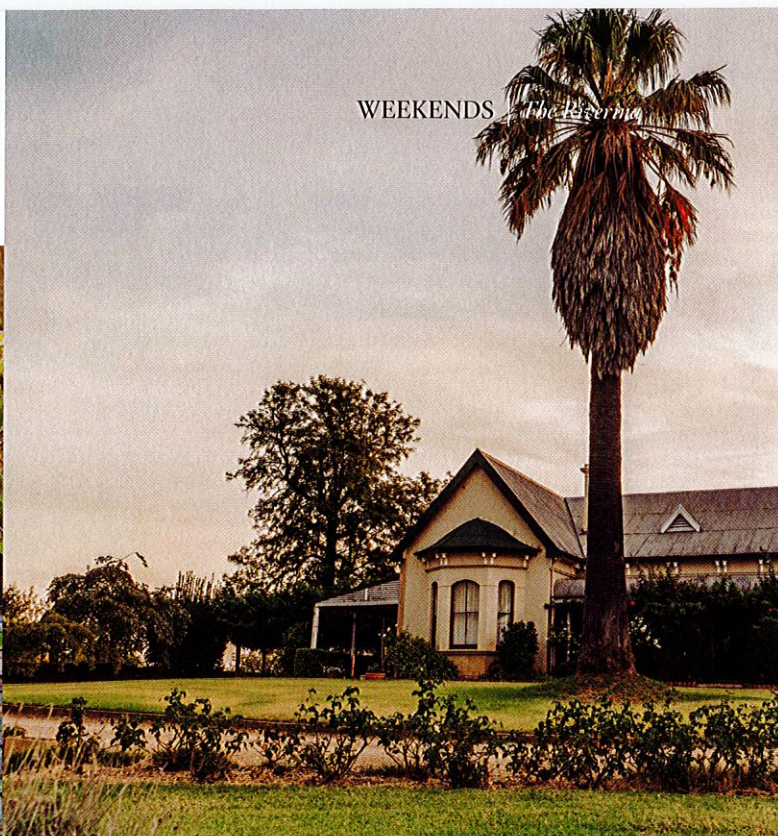
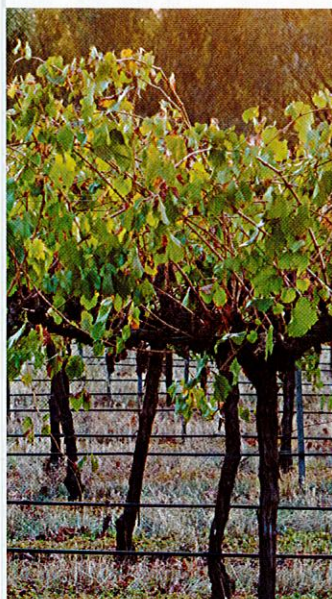
And it’s not just the cheesemakers who are blessed in Coolamon; there’s been a huge knock-on effect for other businesses in town, too. “It’s very difficult to get a park in the main street these days. Especially on the weekends,” says Anton. “Several businesses have told us they have felt the flow-on effect and business has increased. And we hear of a few new things happening in town too, which is exciting. It just means that there will be more for people to see and do when they visit.” →



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Kimo Estate is a fine example of the new breed of businesses enlivening the region; Disconnect from it all on this working property; Coolamon Cheese was launched by a father-and-son team in 2016; From its home in a historic building, it is helping to refresh the small rural town.





DETAILS

Getting there

Wagga Wagga is located at the midway point between Sydney and Melbourne. Its airport is serviced by Rex and QantasLink, with direct flights from both cities.

Staying there

KIMO ESTATE Choose from a range of luxury accommodation options at this working farm.

kimoestate.com

THE HOUSTON WAGGA Stay at this 10-suite boutique hotel in Wagga Wagga's CBD.

thehoustonwagga.com.au

“We’re now seeing new places that are showing the locals what has been growing under their noses all along.”

FROM TOP LEFT: *The first vines were planted at Borambola Wines in 1995. You'll find its cellar door in a historic homestead that's steeped in folklore; The Juneec Licorice and Chocolate Factory is based in the old flour mill of Juneec.*

One of New South Wales' major food bowls, the Riverina seems to be waking up to the fact that its produce doesn't have to be semi-trailer away to wholesale markets – it has the power to draw visitors to the region.

Emelia Ferguson agrees. “We’re now seeing new places in the region that are showing the locals what has been growing under their noses all along,” she says. Around Wagga and further afield in towns like Narrandera, Leeton and Juneec you'll find everything from olive oil and apples to Berkshire pork, licorice and capers. “The Riverina has such unique produce; it's great to see chefs embracing local produce and using native ingredients,” she says.

One such ambassador for the region's produce is Mates Gully (matesgully.com.au), a family-owned organic 'paddock-to-plate' restaurant, farm and boutique lodging in Wagga, where pretty much everything you'll eat is grown or produced on-site. Not far away, fellow Wagga local Tania Sibrey runs cooking school Food I Am (foodiam.com.au), where you might preserve and pickle the summer's harvest one week and learn the secrets of salami-making the next.

As we find on the final day of our trip, the Riverina's winemakers are putting the region on the map, too. At Wagga's Charles Sturt University, the next generation of winemakers and vigneron are learning the ropes, producing some excellent drops from locally sourced

grapes. The bottled results can be tasted on-site at the uni's dedicated cellar door, which has lovely views of the surrounding area.

Meanwhile, about 30 minutes' drive out of Wagga we find a boutique winery with a rich and colourful backstory. Borambola Wines' (borambola.com) cellar door occupies a grand old property that dates back to the 1800s. Owner Tim McMullen planted his first vines here in 1995 and each of his wines has its own name and story that links to the property's folkloric past.

The Borambola Homestead is said to have hosted Edward, Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII) in 1920, and was subsequently home to a famous financier turned horse breeder whose mount, Hiraji, won the Melbourne Cup in 1947. Prior to this, the property's original homestead (a bit further down the hill) was the scene of a shoot-out involving the notorious Irish-born Australian bushranger Captain Moonlite (Andrew George Scott), and Tim says the walls of the old homestead still have the bullet marks to prove it.

Over three days touring the region we've tasted local stout, cheese, capers, beef and wine. We've heard stories of charming gunslinging bushrangers and revisited more than a few country music classics while on the road. We've witnessed archetypal Australian landscapes, awe-inducing sunsets and laid in a bed in a hut on a hill looking out on clear night skies with a million more stars than our city home would ever reveal. As we make our way back through the hassle-free regional airport for the return leg, I can't help but hum along to Slim Dusty's version of that famous tune one last time... before we're back home in the city and the magic is lost. **47**

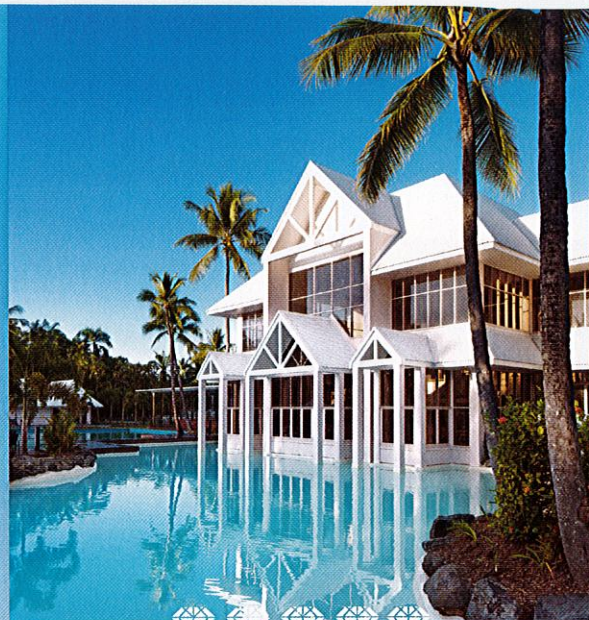
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