



Blissful luxury: Musavale Lodge has the charm of a Queenslander without the rattles (above left); well-appointed bedrooms have an ensuite (top); the tempting pool area (centre) and garden views from the veranda

Peace in the vale

A secluded retreat in the Sunshine Coast hinterland gives Alison Cotes perfect time out from the rat race

IT WAS one of those days when all seemed right with the world.

The Sunshine Coast hinterland was green and lush after recent rains, the sky was clear, and when we stopped to watch a herd of cows and their calves, one of them flopped to the ground and began to roll over, seemingly just for the joy of it.

This was one of those serendipitous moments that make you realise life is indeed a wondrous thing.

This did not happen on the Bruce Highway of course, but on the road that winds through the Mary Valley, which has just had a reprieve from death by drowning. There's almost no traffic and you can stop at little creeks for a picnic or to listen to the bellbirds.

It wasn't just a Sunday drive. We were on our way home after a stay at Musavale Lodge in Eerwah Vale, a tiny village at the foot of Mt Eerwah, a majestic mountain just west of Eumundi off the Kenilworth Road.

We were staying at a B&B, one of a group of half-a-dozen brought together by shared strong ecological values, as well as an advertising campaign that none of them could afford on its own.

But this doesn't mean they're like peas in a pod. Musavale Lodge has a charm all its own.

It looks like an authentic old Queenslander, with a pitched tin roof and timber walls, but in fact it was built only a few years ago.

As a result, all the doors and windows fit and it doesn't creak and sway in a storm like so many heritage buildings. You never feel as though the roof is about to blow off.

Indeed, so well-built and sheltered is it that we slept soundly through a fierce storm that rocked the valley that night. On the other

hand, the repose could have been a result of the sheer comfort of the big bed with its soft white sheets.

Or it could have been the remarkable dinner embellished with a single malt and good conversation with our hosts, Chris and Joe Russell, long-time boaties who have finally settled down in their own personal paradise.

Dinner isn't compulsory and costs \$80 a head if you decide to have it. As well as Chris' excellent three-course dinner, that price includes a sun-downer with the other guests on the wide veranda and wine with dinner.

The sun-downer goes with the B&B deal anyway, and can include anything from five-star wine to whisky and even Joe's own home brew, which won the Best Beer of Show at the Noosa Country Show. It's an accolade that few can boast.

We didn't taste it, so I can't give an opinion. The rare single malt was good enough for me.

There are only three bedrooms, each with an ensuite.

You're never going to feel crowded, although you may find the others guests so interesting that you're happy to spend time chatting with them.

The others there during our stay were a well-travelled French couple, so after dinner we joined them in the huge lounge area for more chat and a nightcap. One way and another, it was no wonder we didn't hear the storm.

There's no forced conviviality here, though. It's entirely up to you if you want to keep to yourself and eat alone on the veranda, where all the meals are served, and then peel off to visit the Eumundi markets

(Wednesday and Saturday mornings) or drive to Noosa Heads for a swim.

We found the deep saltwater pool at the lodge enough of a temptation. It is temperature-controlled by an intricate solar system, which takes the chill off the water.

Apart from having to find your own lunch, you don't really need to leave the lodge at all. There's a wide range of books, videos and music in your room as well as in the guests' sitting area, and the property is so big that a stroll through the gardens will give all the exercise needed.

It's not the cheapest place in the hinterland, nor is there anything much to do in the immediate area — no night life, no party people — but it's pure unadulterated luxury, ideal for stressed-out people who want to run away and relax.

If you crave the joys of the wider world, it's no more than 20 minutes from the big attractions of the Sunshine Coast. In my book, that makes it perfect.

Renowned naturalist Gail Hill will take you on a nature walk if that's your bag — we were all keyed up to do it, but a sudden family illness meant she had to cancel, but I have done her tours before and can recommend them highly.

And when you drive home, spend an extra hour and take the back road through Kenilworth to extend the peace and to ease yourself gently back into the rat race.

CONTACT: Joe and Christine Russell, Musavale Lodge, 55 Musavale Rd, Eerwah Vale, Queensland 4562. Telephone 5442 8678 or visit www.musavalelodge.com.au.

COST: Bed, full breakfast a couple \$240 to \$260 per night. Twenty-five per cent discount for three-night stay midweek, or four-nights weekend. Three-course dinner with aperitifs, wine and coffee \$80 a head.