

INDULGE

Luxe under the stars

Max Anderson finds organic sheets in his swag at a high-end bush camp in the Blue Mountains.

I've always regarded the Blue Mountains as a contradiction in terms. It's a million-hectare wilderness yet it's on the fringe of a big international city – deep space on the doorstep of Sydney.

While all manner of fascinating relics have remained hidden in its midst (the Jurassic throwback that is the Wollemi pine, Aboriginal rock carvings, the bizarre Scottish village of Joadja) people still think of it in terms of tea and scones at Katoomba.

Mark Tickner of Blue Mountains Private Safaris has given us another contradiction: swagging in style. This makes as much sense as slumming it in Versace but his is a serious proposition. That's made clear by the price: \$755 a person a night.

The chopper flight out of Bankstown is an optional extra favoured by many of the wealthy guests who sign up for one or two nights of being

jolly swagpersons. The 40-minute flight is more convenient than the 90-minute drive and the floor show is compelling, with the hubbub of suburbs fading to yellow fields before cleaving to the valleys of the southern Blue Mountains.

The R44 helicopter drops you on the crest of a bald spur high over the Wollondilly Valley, where you're met by Tickner. He's a rugged little bloke in his 40s, with a broad grin and a tray of champagne. And after the helicopter has shown you its skids and beaten a retreat, he introduces you to the winding Wollondilly.

The river looks as elfin as the name suggests, threading between low pasture and a steep valley wall thick with forest. "I've been guiding through the Blue Mountains for over 20 years," Tickner says, "and I still reckon it's one of the most beautiful valleys. Some of the gorges can be quite dark and claustrophobic but this one somehow has the right mix of space, light and intimacy"



It transpires that Tickner is not only an experienced guide but a landscape architect.

The main part of his camp is neat and functional and has the three essentials: shade, a place to prepare food and a rock-fringed firepit. I like the books arranged around the place. I like the large Esky stocked with boutique beers, including Little Creatures and Fish Rock. And I like the way I'm to help myself whenever I like.

But to be honest, I'm puzzled.

"What sort of guests come here?" I ask. Though I really mean: what sort of guests pay \$755 to swag on a river bank?

"Well, the Australian guests are definitely of the time-poor variety," Tickner says, "but most of our clients are from overseas. We get couples and families and many have never seen or done anything like this." He twists the top off a bottle and hands it to me. "They really don't know what's in store for them."

I confess, even as a former Sydney resident, I'm surprised. We're surrounded by glades of soft she-oaks sliced by mountain light. The chuckling river is lit upon by insects. The swales of river sand are warm. It's almost North American.

I point to an area between the fire and the river. So the swags are rolled out here?

"If you'd like to sleep there, no worries," he says. "But you might prefer over here ..."

I'm led between thick stands of she-oak into a clearing on the river bank. And I'm left staring at what is surely a piece of installation art.

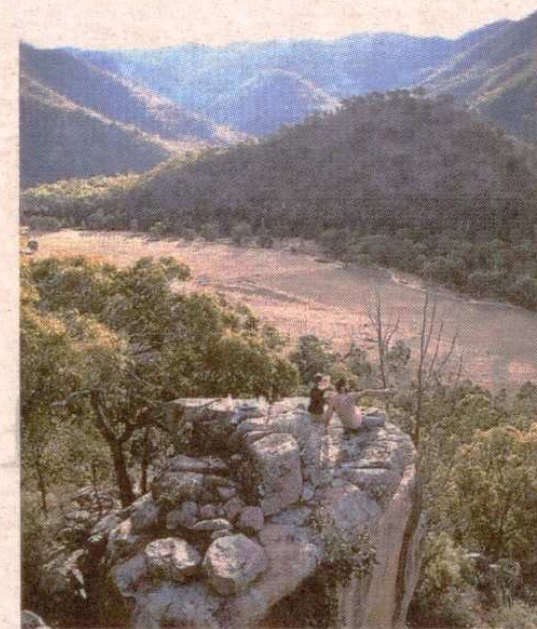
Fixed into the sand is a stage-like structure with a swag recessed into its centre on a plump mattress. Sturdy poles are erected at each corner, giving the arrangement four-poster grandeur. And at the head of the stage is a low screen woven beautifully from branches of casuarina, housing, of all things, a hearth and fire grate.

For all intents – and indeed, for all in tents



Open air ... (from far left) the helipad; clean sheets in the bush; Blue Mountains views.

Photos: Archie Sartracom



it is a boutique hotel room. It even has an ensuite. Behind the screen are similarly woven partitions used to define a basin-vanity area, a shower and a simple bush toilet.

The details, too, are boutique: the organic cotton sheets lining the swag, the thick, white waffle-weave towels, the curios chosen for texture and tone and the cubes of handmade soap — they're straight out of a Herbert Ypma collection.

If it is installation art, you're part of it. When you sit up in bed, you see, smell and hear the river. When you swing your feet off the stage, you plant your bare feet in sand. When you're showering, you're surrounded by leaves and blossoms and birds — and animals, for that matter, like the cow chewing cud just metres from the thunder box.

"Don't be surprised if the cows wander through in the morning," Tickner says.

Given that his clients are more accustomed to

the comforts of the Grand Hyatt than the great outdoors, I ask how well they cope with cows — and the loo and shower.

"It's a bit of a challenge for some overseas guests. But after the initial surprise, they love it. They take a shower under a beautiful morning sky and they're right into it. By the second day, it's not unusual to see people stripped off and enjoying a bushman's bath in the river."

Even rain can't faze them. The poles can accommodate specially made tarps, but some guests want to swag properly and take their chances with the weather.

The day has been full and rich. We've climbed to lofty granite precipices and looked down on wheeling wedge-tails. We've explored the river's course and seen wombats grazing at dusk. We could have taken to the river by canoe and tried to find platypus but instead we've flicked flies at fish that weren't having a bar of us.

Now the campfire blazes and Tickner is lifting the lid on a blackened camp oven. A plume of steam clears to reveal a sizzling leg of locally grown lamb in a nest of honeyed vegetables. "Ten more minutes," he says.

So we sit on a eucalypt log, watching the flames and talking under a silky night sky — a ritual savoured by many Australians, not least of all the ragged men who took their swags on long journeys.

But the stylish touches (like the table dressed with linen, candles and a 2006 Coonawarra shiraz) bring together two quite disparate strands of Australian heritage: the bushman's basic pleasures and the indulgences fostered and enjoyed by a nation that has, for a long time, been fantastically spoilt.

After midnight, when I make my way through the she-oaks, I find my swag lit by a half-dozen hurricane lamps.

And at the centre of the beautiful woven partition, a small fire blazes in the hearth. So once installed in my swag, with the crown of my head gently warmed, it remains only for me to lie and watch. And wait for comets to lay sparkling trails across the Milky Way.

Max Anderson stayed courtesy of Swagging in Style.

Swagging in Style costs \$775 a person a night, based on two people in separate or zipped-together swags. This price includes food, alcohol and tours.

Helicopter flights from Bankstown to Wollondilly cost about \$1250. Self-drivers can be collected from Joadja Winery near Berrima. A three-night heli-swagging package costs \$3281 a person, which includes heli-transfers, heli-tours, one night swagging and two nights at Lilianfels in Katoomba. Phone 9571 6399 or see bluemountainsprivate.com.