



Strolling the grounds of Margan Wines, Broke, main and below; Spicers Guesthouse, Pokolbin, above; Comyns & Co, below right; Brokenwood Wines, below left

PICTURES: DESTINATION NSW

GIRLS' OWN ADVENTURE

Fun and camaraderie in the Hunter Valley

CLEO GLYDE

This is a smoother expression of a Hunter Valley semillon," purrs the sommelier as chilled glasses of Margan's 2021 Fordwich Hill are served. "It's more floral." We nod reverentially as he invites us to experience the upfront sherbet on the palate. Gathered at Margan cellar door, a homestead overlooking a grassy estate dotted with gigantic spiky natives, claw-like against a blue sky, our tour kicks off with the bonhomie you'd expect from a gathering of 12 Australian women in a black van, wining, dining and bonding for three days.

Boutique tour operator Wings Luxe specialises in signature women's journeys around Australia, and its Asian and European offerings will resume post-pandemic era. Explains our host, owner-founder Vanessa Dorrington, "My clients can be themselves, laugh out loud, share their backstories, and feel comfortable with a female journey director. The barriers come down."

A girls' getaway suits the premise of a wine tour: scenic beauty meets epicurean indulgence, especially amid the cultural richness of the Hunter Region's 180-year wine heritage. On a three-hour drive north of Sydney, suburban landscapes make way for rural tranquillity: lone gums, pastures of inky black cows and granny-apple green farmhouses. Dew drops and early morning light add sparkle; there are explosions of laughter as we zig-zag across the valley. Most of us are in our 40s or 50s, with two family pairs that span three generations. Our driver, David, admits he has only driven hens' party groups of 20-some-things. "After three wines there are no inhibitions. They really let their hair down."

"Challenge accepted!" we cry in unison. Dorrington, with her blonde mane, natural effervescence and playfully glam wardrobe, is our perfect pied piper. Her enthusiasm buoys us for every treat ahead. The tour's "slow travel" mantra begins at Spicers Guesthouse at Pokolbin, a contemporary valley retreat. The library and scattered porch furniture beckon guests to curl up with a good book and gaze over undulating grounds guarded by corten steel kangaroo sculptures.

Sensible late starts each morning help our group feel rested for on-the-go tripping. A little fluffy-robe time, a swim in the oversized pool overlooking bushland, or a stroll through the grounds are all splendid starts to a decadent day savouring wines. Dorrington also arranges an optional 4am ballooning trip



IN THE KNOW

Wings Luxe's three-day Hunter Valley signature women's journey is \$2180 a person, twin-share; solo travellers \$2570. The operator has a five-day Tasmania small-group tour departing May 1, 2022, that includes stays at Hobart's new The Tasman hotel and Saffire Freycinet; from \$7867 a person, twin-share.

wingsluxetravel.com

above the tapestry of vineyards for keen bucket listers.

Each morning, a strip of bright gold blazes around the high line of the omnipresent Broken Back Range as we set off on an itinerary cherry-picked from 150 cellar doors in the valley, boutiques and galleries, all accentuating luxurious, artisanal, rare or new. There are sufficient tutorials and tastings to gladden a wine geek's heart and deepen our knowledge of the reigning varieties of the Hunter: semillon, chardonnay, shiraz and verdelho. Plus the lesser-known crisp whites, vermentino and fiano, and easy drinking reds such as tempranillo and sangiovese.

We learn how contemporary Hunter Valley winemakers are disrupting that oh-so-90s

an 1840s wine press, sampling pickles, relishes and chilli capsicum spread made with recipes handed down by the grandmother of our hostess, who regales us with tales of her pioneer ancestors' pluck and passion for this land as we sample wines from that very soil. "Swirl and smell ... the gewurztraminer jumps out of the glass."

The authentic touch of meeting the wine-makers is a grace-note, the true special sauce of a Wings Luxe trip. Up and comers Comyns & Co is the renegade example, with outrageous labels that set the brand apart. "Yeah, I'm a young blood," laughs Scott Comyns, co-owner with wife Missy. "Our bottles aren't about the white background and classical font". As we sample the vibrant pine-lime spice and sweet nashi pear flavours of the sparkling Gruner Veltliner Popsy, the pair enthuse about life in the valley. "We saw two kangaroo bucks having a box on the road this morning; they stopped and looked up as a [hot air] balloon flew over."

The spectacular paddock-to-plate dining experiences organised by Dorrington add a constant hum of pleasure. Our group's small size of 12 is designed to suit the maximum capacity of the valley's private dining rooms. We swoon over the likes of steamed milk buns stuffed with champagne lobster and spanner crab dumplings in coconut broth. We enjoy old-school pleasures such as coronation chicken croquette and devilled eggs in a country cottage ambience of bleached wood and baskets bursting with periwinkle blue hydrangeas. There is a communal sense of discovery that spills over to retail. We explore a magical emporium bursting with handcrafted slabs of olive oil soap scattered with poppy seed and coffee as piglets trot amid the olive groves beyond. We savour the region's ironically 70s-inspired textiles, jewellery, photographic art, homewares and design treasures, glasses of fizz in hand.

Since the world has shrunk, a distinctive, hand-tailored experience at home has become the new luxury for Australian travellers. And make that one wherein someone else has done all the research and legwork. Dorrington says she "meets the owners to seek out exclusive experiences in places that don't normally take tours". One woman on my tour confides she would feel too excluded to travel as a single woman among couples; another relates how Dorrington "sprinkles Tinkerbell dust".

"Forecast: 99 per cent chance of wine", announces the blackboard at one cellar door, capturing the larrikin spirit of our three-day unmooring from reality. "You bet," laughs one of us, an alpha executive of a certain age. "I'm on detox most of the year, but this week I'm saying yes to it all."

Cleo Glyde was a guest of Wings Luxe.