



## Animal attraction

Kate Duthie gets close to nature at a bush hideaway in the Hunter.

**“W**hat does the cow say?” “Moo.” “And the puppy dog?” “Woof, woof.”

“What about the kangaroo?” Silence. We are entertaining our toddler during the 2½-hour drive from Sydney to the Hunter Valley. And although she is an expert on the sounds made by a zoo load of domestic and farm animals, and even the odd creature from deepest and darkest Africa and India, she is at a loss to identify the speech pattern of the native species.

We are heading to Banjos Bushland Retreat, a property high on the Moonabung Ranges on eight hectares of native bush within a 400-hectare reserve. The Banjos brochure promises a host of flora and fauna. We are hoping to spot a kangaroo or wallaby or two.

The directions posted to us at home are comprehensive and include information about when to use a blue plastic pass key to open one set of boom gates and when to use a four-digit keypad code to open another.

With keys picked up from the nearest village, Vacy, we are soon climbing up a steep, winding dirt track to the top of a high ridge. The first boom gate gives us access to Eaglereach, a resort community of holiday homes available for rent. We

continue down another track to the second boom gate and Banjos, a rather secret hideaway and home to just three rental properties: the two-bedroom Swagman's Rest, which we have rented, a three-bedder, Clancy's, and the four-bedroom Brumby's Run, all named after Banjo Paterson poems.

All are glass-and-wood structures of simple, stylish design set among gum trees with expansive decks and sweeping views. Each is far enough apart from the other to be private, but close enough to walk between if you had hired all three with friends. For our three-day stay, however, we have the place to ourselves.

We are the sort of people who, on arrival, leave everything in the car and run about the place in an overexcited manner checking it out, jumping on beds, opening cupboards and pushing buttons. We are delighted with what we find.

Glass front doors open into a large, tiled entrance hall lined with framed tourism awards. A fully equipped laundry comes off here. Next to that is the first huge bedroom with large shower ensuite. Two walls of the bedroom comprise floor-to-ceiling sliding doors allowing views into the bush. Next door is a second large bedroom with bath ensuite and more sliding doors leading to the deck. Both are practically and comfortably

furnished, albeit in the style of a standard business hotel room.

The main attraction is the kitchen-living-dining room, a large, high-ceilinged space with two walls of sliding doors, one leading to the rear deck and the other to the front veranda. The centrepiece is a brick fireplace that must be glorious in winter, high season at Banjos.

There are two leather couches, a coffee table housing board games and – my idea of heaven – piles of old gossip magazines. There's a second seating area of bamboo furniture next to the TV. A dining table for six is next to the well-designed kitchen, equipped with everything you would have at home. On the deck is a six-seater dining table, a gas barbecue and a bird feeding table.

It is extremely comfortable and we waste little time settling in. It is very hot, so it's on with the fans and air-conditioning. If we had been inclined we could have taken a 15-minute walk or an even shorter drive back up the track to Eaglereach to use the resort's small saltwater pool. But we don't feel like moving far. Besides, our daughter couldn't be happier just sitting on the floor looking at the three kangaroos (or are they wallabies?) that have hopped noisily onto the veranda and are observing her with just as much interest.

The next day we drive for 20 minutes back down the hill track to the small riverside village of Paterson. There's not much to it – a museum, a couple of pubs and a B&B – but it also has a fantastic butcher and a well-stocked supermarket. We have a short walk around but head back just as it starts to rain.

Normally a wet day and a toddler without her toy box would spell disaster, but here we're laughing. In the middle of the three lodges at Banjos sits a recreation centre. There's a nine-hole mini golf course and children's climbing frame out the front and a tennis court to one side, while the rec centre has a swing set, oversized chess set and dartboard out

### Banjos Bushland Retreat

Moonabung Road, Vacy

**BOOKINGS** Phone 9403 3388 or see [www.banjoretreat.com.au](http://www.banjoretreat.com.au).

**PRICES** Three nights midweek, \$560 for a couple, toddler free of charge; weekend, \$98 a night each for first two adults.

**HOW FAR IS IT** About 200 kilometres north of Sydney via the New England Highway.

**AVAILABLE NEXT WEEKEND** Clancy's only.

**CHILDREN** Yes.

**WHEELCHAIR ACCESS** Yes.

**SMOKING** Outside only.

**PLUSES** The setting, the facilities for families or groups.

**MINUSES** The generic bedroom furnishing – a very small quibble.

**rating 18/20**

**NEXT WEEK**  
Fishy tales from Bowral

on the covered deck, and inside a full-size pool table, table tennis table, plus a bathroom with shower, sauna and spa pool. The owners have also provided useful fact sheets on the animals and birds you're likely to see and maps of the area.

By day three we have taken short bush walks, played every game at the rec centre and enjoyed all the wildlife – parrots, possums at night and, of course, the kangaroos (or wallabies). We pack up reluctantly but start hatching plans to rent all three lodges and fill them with friends.

During the drive back we try again with our animal question. “What does the kangaroo say?” “Hop hop,” she replies. Genius.

Establishments featured in Weekends Away are visited anonymously by Herald writers, who pay their own way.

Poetic touch ... clockwise from top, Banjos has simple, stylish lodges set among the gums; a neighbour pops in; a comfortable living area. Photos: Banjos Retreat and Kate Duthie

Weekends away

