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Come! Sit! Stay!



Pet friendly accommodation found throughout the greater Sydney region can vary in level of quality and style. We set out to give our readers an insight and honest opinion of the places we feature and recommend. Some readers noticed that a 'Come! Sit! Stay!' feature did not run last edition. I'll explain the reasons why this was omitted from January's edition.

Many pet friendly, holiday destinations advertise or place paid listings on websites or publications to draw attention to their facilities. This is a great source to find accommodation ranging from campsites, cabins to more boutique choices. A fabulous resource that we have found invaluable over the years is 'Holidaying With Dogs' a 'Life. Be In It' Directory. We've sought out each updated version over the years and every year it grows with the number of listings throughout Australia. For just \$18.95, it's a very economical tool to find the right location for either a short break or extended stay.

We've always set out to feature accommodation that is comfortable, clean with a certain standard and quality. We find locations where other pet friendly attractions can be found—like cafes, restaurants, parks and beaches. We pride our-

selves on our research into holiday destinations within easy reach of Sydney and through this research we thought we had 'fetched' a great place to feature in the past issue. This B&T had featured heavily on websites and a couple of smaller publications and by all appearances seemed to be an idyllic spot to take the dog, rest and relax. However, despite the awards, the write-ups and publicity, it just didn't meet our standards. There were many contributing factors including general appearance, presentation, cleanliness and overall comfort. It was a busy period of year (around Christmas) and finding another destination was out of our reach for our strict publication dates. We elected to not include this B&T or give an unflattering review on a shabby location.

We don't let any potential 'Come! Sit! Stay!' locations know that we're there to review them. We pay for our stay and that way we can deliver to you, our readers, an honest appraisal of the standard of the accommodation. Thankfully we've come up with a pearler of a location for this edition that welcomes pets and people alike and we're happy to report that it exceeded our expectations on many levels.

Riverwood Downs Mountain Valley Lodge

Just a short distance from Newcastle is the beautiful World Heritage listed region of Barrington Tops. The area is home to a diverse range of animal and plant life. The eastern and southern slopes of the plateau lead down to dense and pristine forests to rolling farmland and quaint country towns. It's a destination that caters for outdoor pursuits, has stunning views and picturesque waterfalls.

Our drive from Sydney takes us three comfortable hours bypassing Newcastle then through the little 'tidy' town of Stroud. About 26 kilometres from the town is a secluded area of the Monkerai Valley where the Riverwood Downs Mountain Valley Lodge is situated. The property is 15 acres of manicured parkland and gardens nestled on a 750-acre cattle-breeding farm. The Lodge was the dream Chris and Val Hall. Riverwood Downs started as a campsite and caravan park in the early 1980s. The main Guest House was completed in 1993 and in following years, extensions and cabins were completed. This rural retreat was conceived with the aim that they be 'pet friendly' and practical yet offer guests a level of comfort and tranquillity.

We receive a very friendly and professional greeting from reception staff and are directed to our cabin that is a short drive (or a nice stroll across the lawn) from the main lodge. Inside is a self-contained kitchen with everything you need for a short or extended stay. A stove top, oven, microwave, fridge, tea and coffee making facilities are there for couples wanting to prepare their own meals or snacks. Separate to the living area is the Queen sized bedroom and bathroom with spa. Each cabin has a balcony where you can sit and enjoy the birdsongs and trickle of the river below.

We settle in and the dog makes good use of the warm autumn sun to sunbake, shifting occasionally to move body parts into full sun or shade. There's a TV and video player but the sounds of nature are so enjoyable, it seems a waste to even switch on the TV. The couch is put to use by curling up and reading a good book.

As evening descends, the air gets considerably cooler and birdsongs are replaced by chirping frogs and other nocturnal sounds. The dog sniffs distant kangaroos but has no energy to inspect the smells further. The main lodge at Riverwood Downs has a fully licensed restaurant that serves a wide selection of tempting entrees and mains. There are some interesting choices including local perch, prime scotch fillet, chicken dishes and vegetarians will appreciate the variety of dishes offered.

Our tummies are rumbling so we feed the parrots and put them to bed, grab warm jackets and leash the dog to head over the dewy lawn to dinner. Taking the dog to dinner is not a problem here as they're welcome to dine with you beside your table. There's a special dog friendly dining room away from the main dining area, accommodating doggy diners inside for cooler months. A covered veranda is also available for dog diners and it has a lovely aspect under climbing roses.

We opt for the veranda with other guests and their dogs. The restaurant has a special dog menu that thoughtfully includes 'pup-a-chino's', 'hounds health drink'—a tasty concoction of malt, skim milk and egg-pigs ears and our favourite, 'meat paste fingers'. All dogs and humans receive friendly and warm greetings and the service is fast and

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efficient. Dining dogs (there were four in total) were well behaved and apart from initial obligatory sniffs, settled in for dinner. Through the evening, we were visited by a very sweet and energetic Staffy puppy, called Ella, who was keen to share her pig's ear with any canine customer.

Breakfasts are also served from the main restaurant and again dogs are welcome in the designated areas. Inside the main dining room there is a selection of cereals, juices, fruit, breads and spreads. Orders are taken at your table for cooked breakfast that includes sausages, bacon, hash browns, eggs, mushroom and grilled tomatoes. It's all delicious fare that takes the chilly edge off the morning air, washed down with freshly brewed coffee.

There are plenty of activities to pursue in the region—from visiting historic towns and wineries, scenic walks and extreme sports. The retreat also caters for guests not wanting to stray too far. They have canoes that you navigate through a gentle flowing river that's easily accessed for two and four legged visitors. Platypus spotting at dusk is also a favourite activity and they can also arrange an escorted horse trail ride across the property.

On our second day there, we're keen to get out and do some exploring—in the car—so head off with a plan to go over the historic Monkerai Bridge and onto another little 'tidy town' called Dungog. The only problem with this route is that this historic timber truss bridge is now closed to traffic. The bridge was built in 1877 and is has been deemed too historic—read unsafe—for regular traffic. An alternate route is plotted—albeit a much longer one—and we sit back and enjoy the rolling pastures and rural scenery. From Dungog we meander up Chichester Dam road to another glorious rural resort called The Barringtons Country Retreat. Although they don't accommodate pets, they will serve lunch on their outside dining area to guests with well behaved dogs. The view is stunning and the food won't disappoint either. Service is fast, attentive and their wine list is excellent and moderately priced. Entrees start at \$11.50 and mains range from \$24.00–\$30.00 with limited choice for vegetarians.

Our fabulous view is occasionally disturbed by the antics and noise of native parrots in overhanging trees. Hosts, Steve and Maria Watson's hospitality doesn't just extend to their human guests. They also provide native bird food and pellets to feed visiting kangaroos and wallabies. They're particu-

lar about keeping the wildlife free from harm; therefore ask that dogs be kept on a lead.

For those wanting to pack a picnic lunch you can drive further along Chichester Dam road and you will find some great spots overlooking the Dam. Facilities include barbeques, picnic tables and toilets. Riverwood Downs can arrange a picnic hamper and only require an hour's notice.

The late afternoon drive is just as enjoyable as we look forward to putting our feet up and relaxing back at the cabins. We're too tired (or relaxed) to think about travelling anywhere further for dinner, and our dining experience, the previous night, was so enjoyable, we decide to dine at Riverwood Downs again. The dog is so worn out by the day's activities; she snoozes quietly on her blanket without any thought for a pup-a-chino.

Riverwood Downs offer several 'pet friendly' accommodation options. B&B packages for 4 star Spa Cabins start at \$250.00 per couple per night. Packages, including all meals, are available and they also have special deal packages through the year (some including dinner and champagne picnic lunches) are all detailed on their website.

A more economical (but not less enjoyable) accommodation choice would be their self-contained cabins that start at \$120.00 per night for up to two people, additional adults are \$33.00; children are \$16.50 per night. These cabins sleep up to 5 people and have full kitchen and bathroom, heating/air conditioning and a TV. Pets are also welcome inside these cabins and are charged at \$7.00 per night. You supply your own linen, blankets, towels and food (linen hire service is also available).

On booking and receipt of deposit, you'll receive detailed instructions on how to get to the retreat. Also included is a sample menu for the restaurant for humans and menu for dogs. The area does have ticks and a fact sheet is enclosed for those bringing pets. The store at the retreat also sells tick collars just in case you forgot to pack your own.

As we've experienced 'pet friendly' accommodation explorers, we can honestly say that this is one of the best facilities we've stayed at. But don't just take our word for it here's what owners of German Shepherd, Zac, had to say. "We all had a great time, especially Zac. He took a few days to recover from all the activity (he had really stiff legs from the long walks)."



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House rules:

- Pets are allowed inside the cabins but are not allowed on the furniture.
- Be conscious that there are some areas where pets are not permitted.
- Bring suitable bedding for your pets, water dishes and food. Bring along a towel if your dog is likely to take an icy plunge into the river.
- Don't leave pets inside the cabins unattended.
- Pick up all pet droppings.

Horse riding at Riverwood Downs

Confession: It's been years since I've been horseback riding and it's only when I get away somewhere rural, that I actually think of getting back in the saddle. I grew up with horses but wasn't the most confident of riders—preferring 'quiet' ponies rather than mighty steeds.

The horse riding at Riverwood Downs seemed like a perfect opportunity to take a trail ride, enjoy some fresh air and take in some great scenery to distract me from my limited equestrian skills. Bookings are made directly through reception and should be confirmed by 8:00 pm the night before. Dogs are not permitted to join you on the ride and staff at the retreat will offer to look after them in your absence.

Margaret Martin has been escorting the trail rides for almost ten years and has a wealth of experience in matching the horses to riders. She talks to each client and assesses their experience (or lack thereof) and picks the appropriate mount from her stables of horses. On our trail ride there are several children and adults who've never been on horse before. Margaret gives each rider basic instruction on controlling their horse with an overview of ride and what to expect.

It's a great ride through the property, passing ponds laden with lilies, through pastures with Hereford cattle and two crossings of the river. The first crossing is through a deep part of the river and Margaret explains to us on how to handle the ingress and egress in the safest method. The second crossing, towards the end of the ride, is much easier to navigate. My horse, Honey, anticipates the homeward journey—and probably a feed—so Margaret advises the best way to take control and maintain a comfortable pace.

Cost: \$50.00 per rider. Riders must be over 10 years old. Under 10s are catered for by half hour rides around an enclosed area with parental supervision. Cost is just \$20.00.

Riverwood Downs Mountain Valley Lodge

Monkerai Valley NSW 2415

Ph: (02) 4994 7112

Fax: (02) 4994 7047

E: mail@RiverwoodDowns.com.au

Web: www.CountryRetreat.com

The Barringtons Country Retreat

1941 Chichester Dam Road

Chichester Dam via Dungog NSW 2420

Ph: (02) 4995 9269

Fax: (02) 4995 9279

E: info@thebarringtons.com.au

Web: www.thebarringtons.com.au

Tourist information: www.barringtons.com.au

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