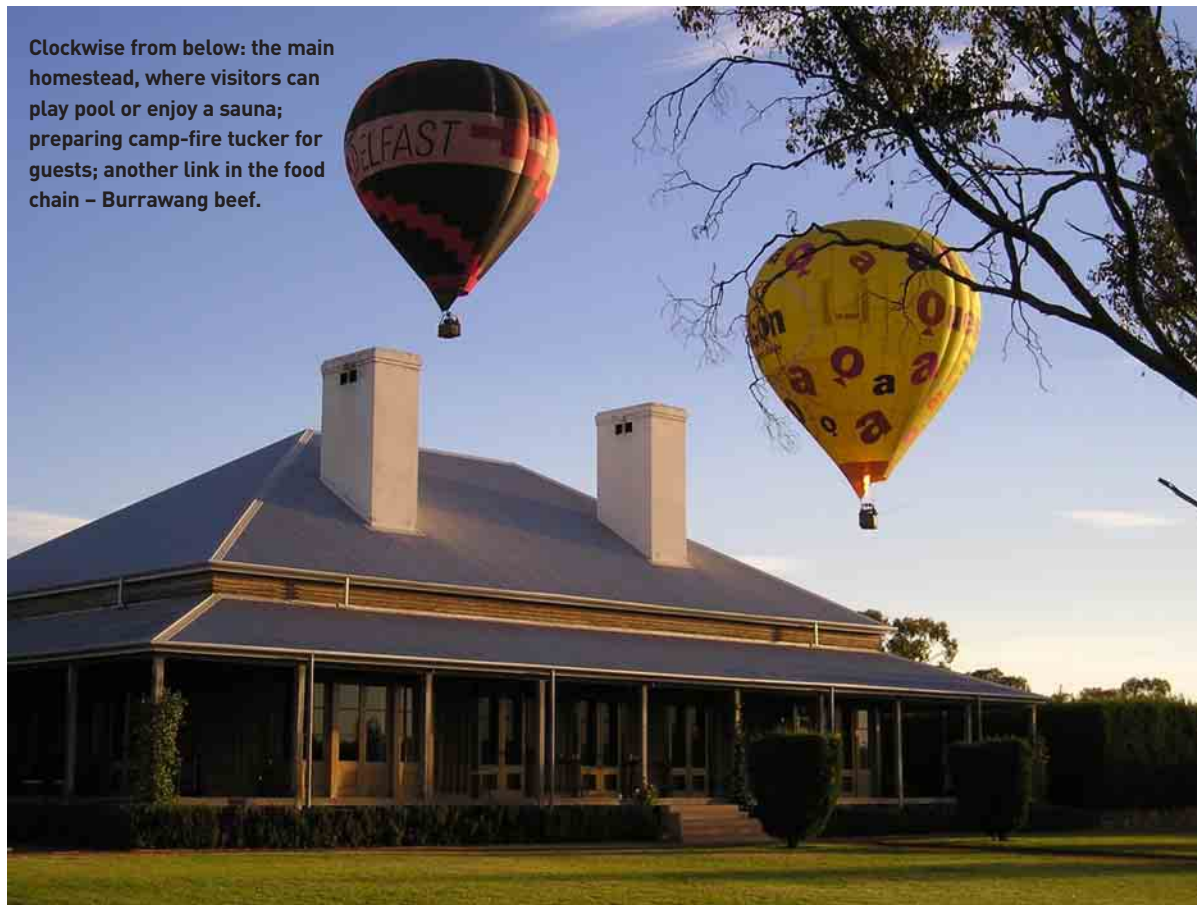


Clockwise from below: the main homestead, where visitors can play pool or enjoy a sauna; preparing camp-fire tucker for guests; another link in the food chain – Burrawang beef.



Beat about the bush

A stay at Burrawang West cattle station is not for the faint of heart, finds Rachael Oakes-Ash, as she tries her hand at Outback life.

No one goes by their real name in Australia's Outback. They may have been christened Robert Miles Smith but they'll be called Smitty or Smiles or something left field like T. Bags, with no explanation. Big Willy, Dr D and Tractor sound more like the cast of *Play School* than my hosts at Burrawang West cattle station, 435km west of Sydney.

This is cattle and sheep – and now working-holiday – country, where red dust is in the blood of the hardy locals. They can spot city prey, like me, a mile away, despite all attempts to blend in and pass myself off as a real jillaroo (female station worker) with an Akubra hat and R.M. Williams boots. It's in the way we walk. A lifetime in stilettos gives me a gait more red light than red dust.

Big Willy manages the 4,046 hectares that make up Burrawang West and its 1,000 head of breeding cattle, known for tender beef, which is served in expensive city restaurants. In his quarter of a century running the station, Big Willy has lived through drought and floods, and while once his legs were shaped by the girth of a horse, he now roams the landscape on a quad bike.

Recent rain means green pastures and loads of mud, which explains Big Willy's decision to drive a pick-up truck rather than ride shotgun with me on the quad bike when touring the property. A lack of mudguards means I'm soon ready to be fired in a kiln.

It's lambing season and the Dorper ewes are trying to protect their flock in a paddock. With no working dogs about, I assume the position and start rounding them up, backing them into a corner before launching myself into their midst. Grabbing the first lamb I can reach, I hold it down until the flock has fled, standing tall with my prize above my head. It seems I have caught my dinner. Big Willy just smiles.

Originally encompassing more than half a million acres, Burrawang West was founded in 1836 and became known for its record wool production. Down the years, portions of the station have been sold off to rural settlers and in 2000, the existing property was purchased by

Graham Pickles, a city-bred Australian with a commitment to keeping both the station's Aboriginal heritage and its diverse ecology alive.

Burrawang the man was a renowned member of the Wiradjuri tribe of New South Wales. His history is celebrated by the indigenous artists that frequent Burrawang station.

Landowner Mark Powell is a Wiradjuri tribesman with close ties to the place. He spends his days teaching the young Aboriginal boys of the area the secret dance steps of the *corroboree* (tribal gathering) and presenting his paintings and the youth dance troupe to guests at the station before dinner.

After a hard day among the wild kangaroos and emus, catching lambs and herding cattle, this is one jillaroo who is ready to eat. Thankfully for me and the guests around me, I have scrubbed up for grub, discarding my mud-caked clothes in the tub.

Kangaroo stew cooks on the camp-fire in heavy iron pots. It is followed by a white-chocolate dessert worthy of the world's finest kitchens. But the real dessert is Tractor: six feet of swarthy country stock who spins after-dinner yarns by the light of the camp-fire. Bush poetry is the story of legends, told in rhymes with dramatic hand gestures and usually by the most dry-humoured of bush men. Tractor frightens us with tales of gun-wielding ghosts, tickles our funny bones with risqué stories of men and sheep and has us begging for more outback hilarity before bed time.

Burrawang West can sleep up to 24 guests, with private cabins featuring two bedrooms, en suite bathrooms, lofty

ceilings and open fires, all within strolling distance of the main homestead and its bar, billiard room, tennis courts and spa-sauna.

Situated on the Goobang Creek, off the Lachlan River, the homestead overlooks natural wetlands and the year-long water source that saves the property during droughts thanks to weirs built in the 1930s.

It is here that we meet Dr D, on the edge of the river next to the fishing shed. Dr D can tell a yellow-tailed thorn bird from a diamond sparrow finch and make it sound interesting. Who knew that the male cormorant incubates eggs alongside his partner? Not me. But Dr D knows, and he takes us on a nature walk like no other, picking up sodden bark and showing us the critters and their communities that live underneath.

Bird-watching is not considered a glamour sport, but Dr D, with his broad shoulders, blue eyes and laid-back style, is changing that. It helps that he has an extensive knowledge of the food chain and all that goes with it.

All too soon we are on our flight home, Big Willy's Akubra stetson fading to a speck. From the air, we can see the winding river, water holes and other features of the Aboriginal paintings of Mark Powell. It is said that Old Man Burrawang's spirit still guards the land – and it is true that no one dare cross Old Man Burrawang and his big mate, Willy.

Getting there: Cathay Pacific (www.cathaypacific.com), Qantas (www.qantas.com) and Virgin Atlantic (www.virginatlantic.com) fly from Hong Kong to Sydney. Burrawang West is a five-hour drive from Sydney and lies between Condobolin and Parkes. Rex Airlines flies to Parkes from Sydney and transfers are available to the property; see www.rex.com.au. Single suites start at \$A550 (\$3,000), which includes all meals, drinks and most activities. Under-16s are not catered for. See www.selecthotels.com/burrawang or call 800 7755 3311 or 61 2 8968 2777.