



Licensed by Copyright Agency. You may only copy or communicate this work with a licence.

THE TRAVEL ISSUE



Ruwenzori, Mudgee, NSW

BY MEGAN LEHMANN

The steam whistle's silent, the steel wheels are still and we're going nowhere, except through the night toward dawn. *Somewhere there is sunshine, somewhere there is day...* I soothed both my daughters to sleep with The Seekers' *Morningtown Ride* when they were babies and here, in the dark, in a converted antique railway carriage on a bushland ridge far from any hint of civilisation, seems as good a time as any to haul that comforting cradlesong out of mothballs. *Somewhere there is Morningtown, many miles away...*

Few settings spark the imagination quite like trains. The cloistered luxury offers untold opportunities for diversion and intrigue; insulated from the rest of the world, they are places where unexpected, and often untoward, things happen. From the absurdist noir of Alfred Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* to Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, locomotives have provided the backdrop for countless mysteries and thrillers. Unfortunately – and this seems uppermost in my two girls' minds as night closes in – most of these stories involve people turning up dead.

A city-slicker query about locks and keys had bemused Philip Goodall, the caretaker, earlier in the day. "No one who's not supposed to be here comes here," he'd said as he showed us around the singular folly that is Ruwenzori, a bush hideaway 30km outside Mudgee, central west NSW. Set on a



Whistle stop: Ruwenzori isn't just for railway buffs





Licensed by Copyright Agency. You may only copy or communicate this work with a licence.



hill rising from 10ha of scrub, it's a trainspotter's wonderland. Piles of sleepers, a double-armed shunting signal, historic signs, pulleys, wheels and signal boxes are strewn across a multi-level yard, which also keeps one foot in the normal realm with features such as agapanthus and rosemary bushes, fountains, bench seats and fish ponds.

The centrepiece is a huddle of vintage railway carriages – two sleeping cars and a dining car plus a single-bed caboose – all extravagantly decorated in what's billed as "Orient Express-style luxury". Ruwenzori sleeps 13 and has a single-hire policy; it's intended to host two families or a large group of friends. The peace and quiet are drawcards, but it's also perfectly suited to raucous outdoor parties centred around the fire pit and barbecue area. No one but the odd wombat to disturb, you see.

With the summer sun riding high over a sea of fragrant eucalypt, a soundtrack of birdsong and spectacular views in every direction, the place is utterly delightful, magical even. Kangaroos drop by the picnic ground, and if you're lucky you'll spot a flock of red-tailed black cockatoos noisily feasting on casuarina nuts in the treetops along one of the boulder-strewn walking tracks.

It's only when your party is winnowed down to just three, night-time imaginations fired by every creak and old-wood groan, that it becomes the ideal setting for an elaborately plotted murder. All aboard the Paranoid Express.

Philip the caretaker must have had an inkling of the night terrors to come. Or else he just really, really likes light switches. "This one here's the switch for the main light, and this one is for the light above the table," he says of the byzantine electrical circuitry in the dining car, an 1890 first-class carriage remodelled into a cosy entertaining area with cedar panelling, polished brass fixtures and a surfeit of antique light fittings.

There is little logic, it turns out, to the location of the switches relative to the lights. "This is why I'm here really, to show you the switches because they're a bit quirky," Philip says, leading us out to the garden, where the word "quirky" really comes home to roost. Here, a model train set loops around a goldfish pond, above which dangles a wind chime made from rusting chains, cogs and wheels. A scrappy lawn is pockmarked with steel rims, old railway signs and signals, a ring of seats constructed from old rail car couplers, a random parking meter and, even more inexplicably, a tyre swing in the shape of a one-eared reindeer.

It all springs from the mind of master upcycler Scott McGregor, an actor, TV presenter and train buff. "Ruwenzori is a canvas; it's my art piece," he tells me later over the phone. "And it's out-there: 120-year-old railway carriages on top of a hill in the middle of the Australian bush." In the 1980s, when State Rail was decommissioning much of its old infrastructure, McGregor snapped up timber-bodied rolling stock before it was shunted off to that great carriage shed in the sky. He bought the first carriage for \$200 and spent roughly the same again craning it into place, many kilometres from any railway line. That carriage became the Dining Car, and it was followed by the 1920s State Car and the 1899 Pullman Car.

I must confess that beyond a regard for the steampunk aesthetic, I don't get the fascination with trains, with the minutiae and mechanics. The kids are entranced, though, by all the levers and pedals and what-do-these-do buttons. Even in our sleeping quarters there are nooks to explore, doors to open and shut, and antique light switches to be expounded upon. "I'm seriously not sure what this one does," Philip mutters as we stare in wonder at the interior of the State Car, with its etched-glass windows, crimson fleur-de-lis carpet, tasseled red-velvet curtains and pressed-tin ceilings. Wooden louvred windows frame magnificent views to a far-off ridge where wedge-tailed eagles nest. There are two master bedrooms, a marble bathroom, and an original sleeping compartment with kid-pleasing double bunks, wire luggage racks and a vintage silver hand basin that pulls down from the wall.

Tomorrow, we'll visit some of the wineries and restaurants for which the region is renowned, returned to reality with disorienting speed. But first we must go rockin', rollin', ridin' through the night in our carriage, sustained and calmed by the nocturnal mythology of Morningtown, a wonderful place in the land of the new day that awaits.

—
BOTTOM LINE:

Fridays and weekends: booking fee \$250 per night (minimum two nights) plus \$70 per adult, \$50 per child. Weeknights: \$150 per night plus \$50 per adult, \$35 per child.

—
CONTACT:
otr.com.au