

Weekender

Even the cattle go for Broke

Peter Bartlett feels right at home with a roaring fire, farm life and a cab sav.

A good mate told me to take the long way to the Hunter, up through the Old Northern Road, via Wisemans Ferry and Bucketty, through Wollombi and to our destination – Broke.

And good advice it was: the trip through Yengo National Park, particularly out of Wisemans Ferry via St Albans and Mogo Creek, was brilliant. Maybe it's my aversion to traffic but give me a dirt road and wilderness reserve any day. The F3 freeway trip to Broke takes a couple of hours but we left on a Friday morning in no hurry and made our first stop at the Wisemans Ferry Inn, near the historic upper Hawkesbury River. The Black Angus porterhouse steak and prawns there were terrific, although I thought the cheeky magpies and kookaburra swooping around the outdoor dining area also had eyes for my choice. A trip to the bar mid-meal might have proved disastrous.

We crossed the mighty river at nearby Webbs Creek on the free public ferry and headed into the wild. I've seen a bit of Australia but nothing like Yengo National Park. You cross a stock grate near St Albans and have about 35 kilometres of fenceless terrain to cover on winding, corrugated dirt road.

A few well-fed cattle roam the flats and wetland basins, there's an occasional sign warning of the protected native flora and fauna amid the dense forest and there's not a human or machine to be seen.

All up, this wee trek probably put three extra hours on our journey but was well worth it. By the time you emerge from the bush around Bucketty, you are in the Hunter Valley and within about 50 kilometres of Broke via Wollombi.

It was surprisingly dry; the spring scenery postcard-perfect, even if it was nippy outside.

Broke (population 400) is west of Pokolbin, which is just north of Cessnock, in the heart of wine country. It's really a rural service outpost with bugger-all tourists. Another bonus. Get your beer at the general store – there's a novel idea.



Rustic wonderland ... (clockwise from top left) the charming Bonn Abbey; the cosy living room with fireplace; and the view from the veranda.

Photos: Peter Bartlett

I already had the code for the front door at Bonn Abbey, so we let ourselves in and – first things first – lit the open fire, which never went out over the three days we stayed. I did enjoy splitting the timber which, apart from walking, was the only exercise I undertook. A local cabernet sauvignon awaited us in the well-appointed kitchen – a nice touch.

While the stone-and-timber cottage can handle up to 11 guests, there were five of us and I thought that was probably about the right number. Bonn Abbey's larger sister cottage, Maranda Country House, is nearby on about a hectare of land. It's more modern, with a pool and bigger spa, but we chose the rustic Bonn Abbey for its outlook.

Reading the morning paper on the porch as the sun streams in from the east, with the gnarly Yellow Rock in the Brokenback Range to the south, the view across the farmland is about as relaxing as it gets.

A couple of weanling cattle wandered out of their paddock to

graze near our boundary fence among the lush grass there. No panic – no point in wasting it. A couple of locals shepherded them back after a few lazy hours passed on the Saturday morning.

We also spotted a small piggery in the distance and though we couldn't smell it, we could see a mob of piglets hurtling around in and out of the duck pond and diving through fences. They were on holiday, too.

Bonn Abbey includes two private, loft-style double bedrooms. The main suite downstairs has a spa. The linen is crisp and the decor finishes are nice without being overdone-country. The main bathroom has a clawfoot tub if you really want to feel like Butch Cassidy.

There are dozens of nearby wineries, big and not so big, to visit and imbibe and dine at, even organised tours if you want. You don't have to leave Broke if you don't want to but one worthwhile trek is to the Small Winemakers Centre on

McDonalds Road, Pokolbin. Next to the tasting room (Thomas Wines, Margan, The Little Wine Company, Talga, Keith Tulloch Wines) is the Australian Regional Food Store and Cafe where terrific local produce (think cheese, chutneys, vinegars, fudges, oils and soap) is on show.

The restaurant food is of good quality and reasonably priced. I'd imagine this place pumps on summer weekends. There are plenty of try-before-you-buy options, too. The Hunter is foodie heaven and the standards remain high. My first trip there was in the early '80s and I was impressed then.

Though there are many more producers and options now, my opinion hasn't changed. People rave about Hawkes Bay, Wairarapa and Marlborough back in my country of birth but the Hunter is right up with the best the Kiwis offer.

As for Broke, go for it.

The writer was a guest of Bonn Abbey/ Maranda Country House.

TRIP NOTES

Address Bonn Abbey, 25 Nelson Street, Broke; Maranda Country House, 68 Wollombi Street, Broke. See huntervalleystays.com.au. **Rates** (for both houses) 6-9 adults \$95 a night each (10 or more, \$85 a night), children under-15, \$50 a night, under-2s free; minimum weekend tariff \$1100. **Bookings** 0408 419 377.

VERDICT

A comfortable cottage in splendid isolation. **Why you'd go** To indulge or relax or both. **Why you wouldn't** The hangover risk can be high.

FIND TIME TO

- Visit wineries, restaurants and local food producers.
- See Yengo National Park.
- Visit Wollombi, a historic village 30 kilometres away.

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12 day tour \$980*

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