

headfor the hills

Not only are Gold Coasters blessed with some of the best beaches on the planet, there's a whole other world of wonder to explore just west of the city in the region aptly named the Scenic Rim

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Watching the sun set over the Scenic Rim is special. Witnessing the spectacle from the deck of Canungra's Wallaby Ridge Retreat with a nice glass of plonk in hand, however, is priceless.

Tucked away in a bush pocket teeming with wallabies, koalas and possums, John and Robyn Fortescue's labour of love is a very special place indeed.

It's cosy and comfortable, warm and inviting, just a short drive from the tight-knit Canungra township.

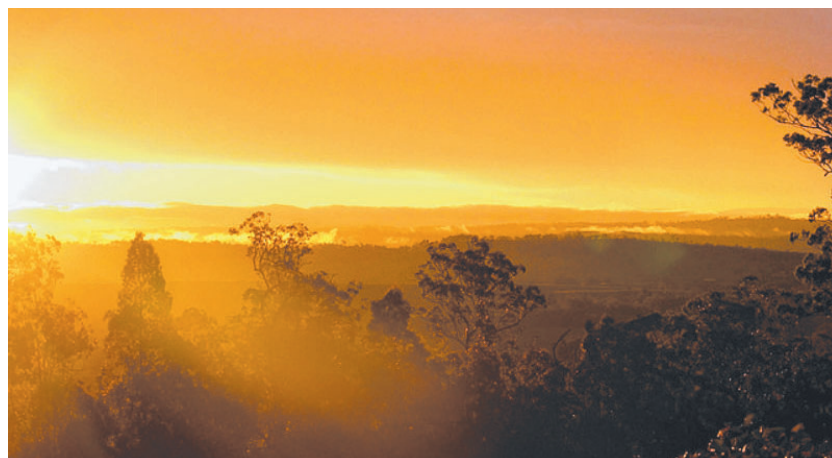
Passion for the Scenic Rim and for putting smiles on people's faces is what makes the retreat radiate and its owners so special. And the Fortescues have good reason to boast about their patch.

At the Scenic Rim you'll see one mountain after another, creating an imposing 'rim' formed 25 million years ago by volcanoes. It's home to some of Australia's most beautiful rainforests and is perfect for farming, with rich volcanic soil.

After finding their land, formerly a sand quarry, the Fortescues built the retreat, which opened eight years ago.

The retreat is filled with treasures from a bygone era and has three gorgeous self-contained suites, a spa and a pool.

"We just love living here so much



Heaven on high: Wallaby Ridge Retreat's John and Robyn Fortescue with some of the other locals (above); just another amazing sunset over the Scenic Rim (left); a local red from Albert River Winery (below).



and want to share the Scenic Rim with everyone. It's such a special place," Robyn says.

"We couldn't imagine being anywhere else. It's so peaceful but still so close to the Gold Coast and Brisbane. One of the best things living here is the amazing produce we have at our doorstep."

In Canungra there are a few spots to have dinner, but staying in for the night and enjoying Robyn's fabulous nosh, which takes full advantage of local fare, is highly recommended.

The Fortescues adhere to the 100-mile diet, which means all the food and wine they serve is sourced from within a 100-mile radius.

We enjoyed Witches Chase cheese from Mt Tamborine, homemade bread, divine spinach and ricotta cannelloni and Robyn's more-ish wattleseed and cardamom ice cream, made with eggs laid by the chooks that roam freely around the retreat.

Washed down with a few glasses of the nearby Albert River Winery's sauvignon blanc, we were off to sleep in our lush bed in no time,

ready to get our heads in the clouds the next morning.

Waking up when it's still dark outside isn't one of my strengths, but the prospect of hot-air ballooning over the Scenic Rim followed by a hearty breakfast at O'Reilly's Canungra Valley Vineyards was enough to get me up with enthusiasm.

As a newbie to ballooning, I was a bit daunted by the thought of being up so high in just a basket.

As soon as we took off with Balloon Hot Air, however, my misgivings fizzled away. The experience was so peaceful.

As the air carried us over the fields, creeks and roads of the Scenic Rim, I was amazed at the silence and serenity the balloon offered.

The landing, which I'd heard horrible stories about, was perfect – as though we'd floated down on to cotton wool – and we even had the chance to get our hands dirty folding the massive balloon at the end.

The champagne brekky at O'Reilly's historic Killawen homestead was a lovely way to

end the ride and warm up for a day of indulgence.

After heading back to Wallaby Ridge to say our goodbyes, it was off to Albert River Wines to try some more of the local tippie.

Set in the stunning Albert Valley, the winery sits high on a hill, taking in panoramic views across to Tamborine Mountain and the surrounding hinterland.

Sitting in the sun and eating our beautiful three-course lunch cooked by executive chef Stephane Guzzante, – with matching wines of course – it was easy to while away the hours on the deck enjoying the view.

Taking a 'stay away' break in the Scenic Rim is the perfect way to relax close to home.

It's stunning, the people are friendly and the food and drink are top notch.

Wallaby Ridge Retreat:
wallabyridge.com.au
Balloon Hot Air: hotair.com.au
Albert River Wines:
albertriverwines.com.au