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## Haven on Earth

Weekend Australian, Australia



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Victoria's Mount Macedon is a paradise for garden lovers

CHRISTINE MCCABE

**R**hododendrons can be a lot. English poet and garden writer Vita Sackville-West likened them to “fat stockbrokers” whom she would rather not have to dinner.

On Victoria's Mount Macedon, spring heralds a rush of their saturated colour; reds, orange and magentas so vivid it might be the 1960s.

At the impressive 1872 Duneira Estate, in a more composed scene, sheets of English blue-bells unfurl beneath one of the longest avenues of Dutch elms anywhere; beautiful trees that have just had the stuffing knocked out of them by a weekend of wild weather, so the driveway is carpeted in blossom squishy underfoot.

This lovely 15.4ha estate is straight from the English country house playbook, with not only elms, but an avenue of oak trees dating from the 1870s, epic spruce and fir trees and a grand 19th-century house left untouched since third-generation grocer and collector Stuart Stoneman, who is thought to have introduced the concept of the supermarket to Australia, died in 2002 after creating a trust to protect the house and garden.

“Mount Macedon is home to the largest collection of 19th-century gardens in Australia,” says the property's program curator, Melina Goddard, and Duneira stands as a lucky survivor of the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires that she says wiped out about 60 per cent of the mountain's historic summer houses.

One minute away, Forest Glade Gardens is open daily. Spilling down the mountain across almost 6ha, the garden has paths snaking through vibrant rhododendrons and deep into a fern gully, by a moss-encrusted Japanese garden and under a labour-num walk, in late spring a cascading curtain of gold highly sought after by brides as a backdrop.

A cool mountain climate was ideal for the trees and plants beloved by Melbourne's 19th-century Anglophiles; today, nearby Daylesford, Trentham and the Goldfields have become just as popular garden havens for Melburnians.

I'm on a mini gardening pilgrimage, bound first for Trentham on the edge of the Wombat State Forest. Lined with gold rush-era timber buildings (and including an Annie Smithers restaurant), the high street is so quaint it was recently voted Australia's best tourism tiny town. Our overnight destination, Acre of Roses, is even more beguiling – a former miner's cottage framed by an enormous rhododendron smothered in flowers.

Acre of Roses is Australia's first certified Wellness in Travel & Tourism property, and the cottage's cosy charm could easily be a set from Practical Magic (for those who remember the cult 1998

movie). The WITT seal means delivering on healthy eating, holistic healing and access to nature.

Gardening addresses all these criteria. And this iteration is stuffed with roses (of course), poppies and the pretty blue flowers of Pentaglottis. The little house is filled with more flowers and lots of books. A large outdoor room has a log fire and dropdown movie screen, the little garden a cedar hot tub. Indoors, logs are stacked in the snug where music plays softly; on the bed a selection of essential oils and instructions for their use. In the fridge alongside plenty of goodies are immune-boosting juice, sauerkraut and other ferments. And only hours after arriving and making ourselves at home in slippers and robes with the fire lit, Acre of Roses' wellbeing curator Simone Gilbert arrives to perform some spinal flow therapy. Sounds woo-woo but the pain in my lower back disappears completely.

Everything to make our stay welcoming and comfortable is to hand, including a claw foot tub, steam shower and a proper coffee machine. Bread is delivered fresh before breakfast.

Behind the cottage, alongside owner Sandy McKinley's little rose flower farm, is a new gravel garden by designer Tim Pilgrim and a charming, restored potting shed offering more accommodation. The abundant Apothecary Garden is the domain of author and herbalist Caroline Parker, who weaves her own practical magic amid towering angelica in beds of feverfew, tansy, lemon balm and comfrey. Favourite tip for this gardener: fennel pollen on vanilla ice cream.

It's a wrench to leave our little hygge haven but we have stops to make, including to the lovely Wombat Hill Botanic Gardens set high above the township of Daylesford, and nearby landscaper designer Natasha Morgan's idyllic plot, open to those who join her classes.

There's just time for a late lunch at Bar Merenda, a petite bistro with strong French vibes: jars of poppies, half curtains and a zinc-topped bar. The chalkboard menu is hyper-local, the kitchen deals directly with suppliers, so I know the pork in the tasty terrine is heritage breed and ethically raised on the nearby Jonai Farms. It's washed down with excellent North Wine bubbles made by a young French winemaker in the Macedon Ranges.

From Trentham we're heading west into the Goldfields, bound for one of the smartest holiday rentals in the district. Set on a hilltop overlooking volcanic plains and distant blue hills, Vale Hill House feels remote but is only 40 minutes by road from Daylesford and 10 minutes from pretty Clunes. And the house is easy to spot – just look for a ribbon of pencil pines climbing the slope.

Sleeping up to eight in four suites, Vale Hill House was built



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in the 1850s by a Scottish stonemason turned goldminer but destroyed by fire in the 1970s. The massive blue stone walls survived, empty for decades before the house was transformed into a resort and a contemporary glass-fronted wing added, with interiors by late society designer Stuart Rattle.

The vast upstairs living area links via a glass-sided walkway to the master suite in the old building, complete with study and views to Mount Kooroocheang, and on the other side to a large terrace and pergola. Behind the Aga-equipped kitchen and butler's pantry is a large garden room leading to the heat-

mous orchard and olive grove provide everything from feijoas, almonds and peaches to lemons and chestnuts; guests are welcome to help themselves.

Bay, privet, hawthorn and hornbeam hedges separate areas of a formal garden terraced down the hill, planted with sheets of iris, soft pink crab apples and steel-edged beds of roses.

After wandering the many pathways, pausing to say hi to the resident alpacas, and taking notes for my garden at home, we settle for dinner beneath the pergola at an immense table fashioned from reclaimed timbers. There's not a sound to be heard other than the bees in the vines and the call of magpies and fairy wrens. The view is long, across shimmering canola fields and over the heaped remains of a long-abandoned goldmine, as mysterious as a Viking burial mound.

It's a very Australian vista enjoyed from the embrace of a wonderfully modern garden.

*Christine McCabe was a guest of Visit Victoria.*  
**visitvictoria.com**

ed swimming pool and wisteria-draped pool house as well as a luxury private barn suite.

The house is impressive, tricked out with the latest tech, but the real star here is the 4ha Mediterranean garden so deftly heralded by those slender pines. The front of the house is festooned with acid yellow euphorbia, and across the garden bottle trees add an exotic flavour, with a wonderful specimen sited below the balcony of the master suite. An enor-

### IN THE KNOW

Duneira Estate hosts arts and cultural programs; popular events include the annual Bluebell Festival.

**duneiraestate.com.au**

A two-night mid-week stay at the Acre of Roses Miner's Cottage is \$930; tours of the Apothecary Garden available on request.

In-house day spa treatments can be pre-booked.

**acreofroses.com.au**

Stays at Vale Hill House from \$1100 a night.

**daylesfordcountryretreats.com.au**

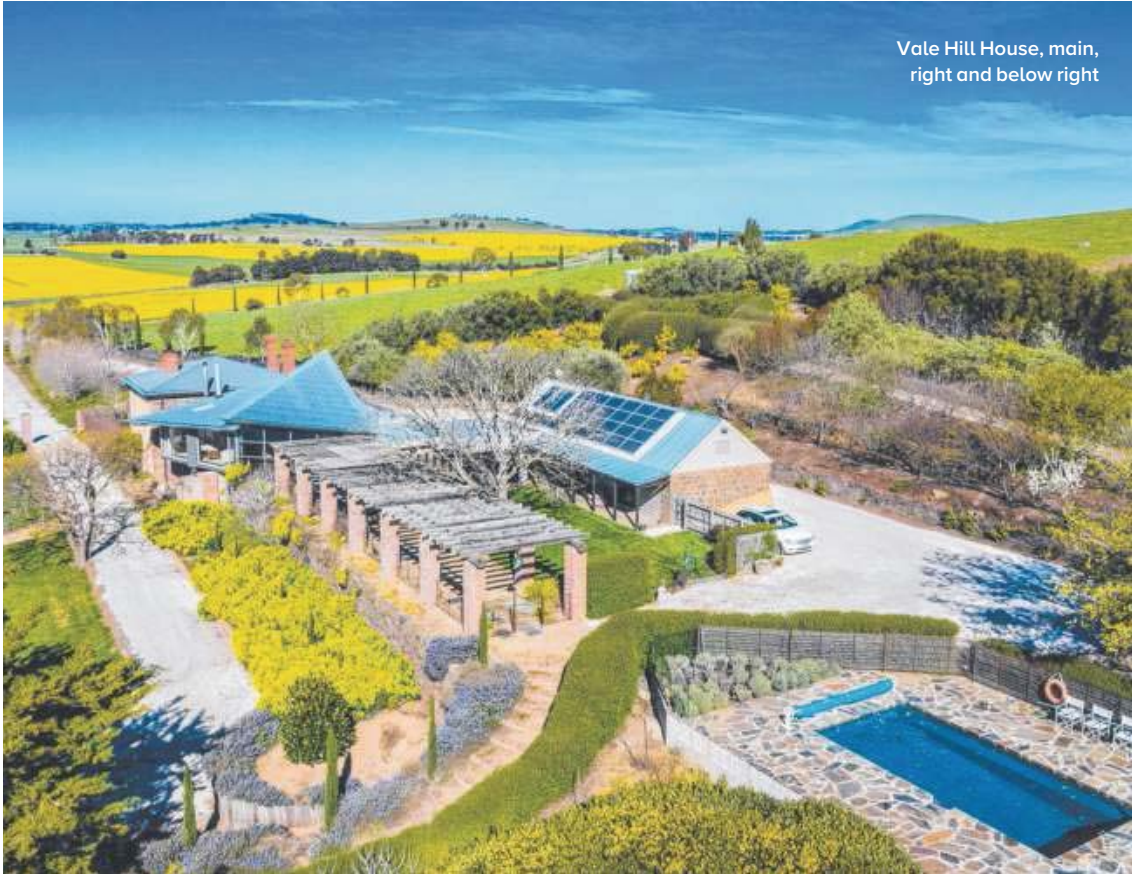


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Vale Hill House, main, right and below right





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Acre of Roses, above and below; gardens at Duneira Estate, opposite

