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Come! Sit! Stay!

We Can't Stop Wining

It's hard to review places in the winter with the mountains too chilly, beaches too cold and windy and the urge to leave a warm home with the two parrots and dog not exactly thrilling. So that's why last issue we took a break from our normal reviews and had a general article on roughing it.

So when the sun started coming out, days began to warm and the desire to get up and go out again to find pet friendly accommodation, our thoughts turned to a favourite destination, the Hunter Valley region. The added attraction of tastings and new world class restaurants made us choose it over a coastal destination, which we will do for the next edition.

This time though, we had some added technology for the trip. Our Nissan X-Trail SUV is the ideal car for up to four pets to travel, but the somewhat antiquated way of hooking our iPods up to the car stereo system by cassette adaptor or radio transmitter still made for a bit of fuzz around the edges of the tunes. So in the quest to find a way to direct-wire the digital jukeboxes into the factory-installed stereo or get a new one, I discovered the greatest automobile breakthrough since the electric garage door opener.

What we ended up with to break in for this trip is a Kenwood DVD/CD player with dash mount screen (not for the driver to watch movies or music videos) with on-board satellite navigation, iPod connector, Bluetooth wireless mobile phone synchronisation and a reversing video camera. But the only way I could get it past the financial controller, Lisa, was to play the 'Puppy Card' which was to show how the backup camera would prevent accidentally rolling over a dog while reversing. And to cement the argument, the second Puppy Card was that the in-car DVD system would allow Lilly to watch reruns of Lassie, Rin Tin Tin or other dog shows as well as wildlife and bird DVDs to keep the parrots quiet.

So with several manuals to read through to get things working and master the systems before the trip, we first went onto the Internet to find some place new and different to stay in. We first consulted the book *Holidaying with Dogs* which is a favourite and which also has an online site, www.holidayingwithdogs.com.au. We found a few interesting properties that were dog-embracing as opposed to dog friendly or merely dog tolerant—not allowing your pets to stay in the house but outside at night or in a kennel on the property.

We also went to some of the websites that specialise in pet friendly accommodation such as Pet Stays, Take A Break, Stayz, DoggyHoliday and others. But in many cases, the ads online are written by the property owner without any checking or vetting by the site and some of the sites charge fees or are somewhat kludgy in their rental links or availability portrayals. We'd already been stung once when the property's description did not match reality due to cleverly taken photos and over the top descriptions that belied the fact the property was an old lady's home extension.

So what we did was check out properties on the website and then Google them separately and thus dealt direct with the property owners. This way we could call them, discuss options for times and other things that are sometimes not possible by going through pet accommodation brokers. It also means that all the money goes to the property operator and not into the pockets of agents who often know nothing more about the property than what was posted online.

In approaching several places in the Hunter region, we found a couple not fast off the mark in responding, a couple that were already booked, a few that did not allow pets in the house—fair enough if they'd had bad experiences before with damages or other problems. We narrowed it down to three places. One had a series of units together which lacked the privacy we wanted. One was just too expensive and also a bit too far from where we wanted to stay in close proximity to vineyards and restaurants. So we settled on a property which had only two cabins in Broke, surrounded by olive groves. Right price, great hospitality attitude from the owners and fast response.



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The Fordwich Grove is set on 24 acres in a magnificent valley with spectacular views. It's a family run, working olive farm with two self contained cottages that have their own water supply, heating and air conditioning yet it's only minutes from some great restaurants and wineries. Only a two-hour drive from Sydney, the Broke Fordwich area does not have large resorts nor is it in the least bit touristy.

The fun part is the drive which can be up from Sydney easily by freeway and back through Wollombi and scenic back roads that twist through gorgeous forests and even fording over a river by car ferry. And it's even more fun with the satellite navigation system that plots your trip, directs your journey with a friendly voice giving you directions, warning you of speed and red light cameras that are pre-programmed and also storing points of interest including restaurants, pubs, tourist sites, petrol stations and parks. Just type in what you need and the onboard computer does the rest by voice command, right to getting you within six metres of your home door on the way back.



Hunter Valley Wine Country

When you arrive at Fordwich Grove you remember a couple of things—dogs love the country and real pet friendly accommodation is a wonderful thing to find. The two cottages are spaced well enough away from each other, that you'll not be disturbing the neighbours and they'll not be disturbing you. Walking or running up and down the rows of olive trees are a fun way to exercise yourself and the dogs.

The one-bedroom cottages at Fordwich are comfortable with country style furnishings. The bedroom has a queen-sized bed and small bathroom that has the basics—sink, shower and toilet. Fluffy towels are in abundance and the range of aromatherapy soap, shower gel, shampoo and conditioner is a sweet smelling touch.

An L-shaped lounge, dining and kitchen area has all the necessities including two overstuffed couches, TV and DVD player and a thoughtful selection of old and new movie classics. If you forgot to drop into the Hunter information and tourist centre you'll still be well informed on the sights and destinations the Hunter has, as the owners have a selection of all the guides and dining options you'll need.

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The dining area has a welcoming basket of breakfast goodies including cereal, muesli, fresh bread and condiments. A great welcoming touch comes from their own olive farm—a jar of their tasty olives and bottle of the freshest, high quality olive oil.

The little kitchen has everything you'll need including an oven, stovetop and microwave. The small fridge also contains some unexpected surprises with fresh eggs, butter, milk and a large container of orange juice. Both the cottages have front and back decks to maximise the outdoors. The front has an outdoor dining set and the back has a barbeque. But it's not just the big kids that the Fordwich Grove people have thought of. Carefully placed on the linoleum floor are two ceramic bowls—one containing fresh water and the other a container of liver treats. We felt this was a really special touch and one that was truly welcoming.

A short drive is the Margan winery and restaurant at Broke. This family run winery has a tasting room and the Mediterranean style restaurant has both indoor and veranda seating options. Shoosh, we didn't tell you this, but if you have a well behaved dog, ask nicely and book in early, they may just give you the dog friendly table outdoors. Their menu is designed for sharing with platter style dishes and it's a great location to kick back and unwind over a bottle of wine and their Ooh Ahh menu of delights.

Another lovely spot with dog friendly outdoor tables is Bimbadgen Winery's Esca restaurant which has a fantastic menu, wonderful views and an excellent selection of wines for tasting. They even have concerts in the vines of which Lionel Richie was the upcoming star draw.

One of our favourite wineries that serves a small cheese plate with their tastings is Scarborough on a hill overlooking the valleys. Aside from their superb selection of chardonnays and a semillion, they also have one of our fave pinot noirs.

For early morning coffee, the Bliss Coffee Roasters in the Garden Village of Pokolbin has their own roaster and is open from 9 am weekends.

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