

Chefs need to have serious confidence in their cooking to set tables without salt and pepper. These two essentials are conspicuously absent from the blondewood tables at Bangalay Dining, part of Shoalhaven's new high-end accommodation, Bangalay Luxury Villas. They're adorned with little more than cutlery and a small duck-egg blue vase of gnarly eucalyptus and myrtle twigs.

I put this bold move to the test by ordering the spanner crab entree, which the menu tells me comes with fennel, apple and blackened blood lime. Under-salted crab is dreary and nothing will give me a better idea of whether or not setting tables sans seasoning is a smart idea. The crab arrives, a pretty pile of opaque white meat jumbled with salad garnish. I take a bite. The seasoning is bang-on. The dish, created by the steady hand of the restaurant's executive chef, Brent Strong, is a delight.

Over the rest of my two-day stay at Bangalay, which sits just behind Seven Mile Beach at Shoalhaven Heads, about two hours' drive south of Sydney, it becomes clear this low-key self-assuredness is a hallmark of the property. Each of the one, two and four-bedroom villas is clad in black steel and red ironbark wood; the latter will eventually weather into a dusty worn grey and blend artfully into its sandy bushland setting. Walls are decorated with knobbly wreaths made from native grasses and seedpods designed by Marina Strode, an artist affectionately known as "the Community Pruner" because of her love of using whatever cuttings she can forage from bushland or the backyards of obliging neighbours. Even the adjoining Shoalhaven Heads Golf Course, which can be viewed from eight of the 16 villas, looks less like formal fairways than a neat clearing between banksia bushes. And the property's pool, surrounded by an unvarnished wooden walkway and sitting beneath mature blackbutt eucalypts, has the feel of a natural billabong.

"We don't want it to seem like it's trying too hard; we wanted the whole place to sit very lightly on the land," says co-owner and interior designer Michelle Bishop, who opened Bangalay with her builder husband Tom in September last year.

Bangalay's location was an inspired choice. Although the property doesn't directly face the magnificent Seven Mile Beach, it's a mere 40m away across a cul-de-sac (you can also get there via a slightly longer but infinitely more scenic route along a bushland path). And it's the perfect base to access everywhere else you'd want to be in Shoalhaven, a region that stretches about 130km along the NSW coast from Shoalhaven Heads to Durras, just before Batemans Bay in the south.

The area also includes some of the state's prettiest inland towns, such as Kangaroo Valley and Berry, but the name I tap into my GPS the next morning rarely wins any picturesque points. Nowra, with its unremarkable suburban streets and hulking great shopping centre, isn't considered much of a tourist drawcard, but that's probably because most tourists don't know about Hyper Hyper Coffee, a black-painted hole-in-the-wall in the town's centre. If they did, and if they shared my passion for smooth, toasty, strong coffee, they'd head there too.

Fortified with caffeine, we head another



SLICE OF HAVEN

Exploring a NSW coastal corner from a luxurious new base

ALEX CARLTON



Seven Mile Beach in Shoalhaven, above; Jim Wild's Oyster Co at Greenwell Point, far left; South on Albany in Berry, left

“We rug up against the buffeting South Coast winds and drive inland to Berry, which looks like a Christmas card

60km south to the chocolate-box town of Milton and spend the morning browsing its antique stores and luxe lifestyle boutiques, filled with scented candles and hand-knitted chunky wool throws. The Heritage Bakery provides tasty late-morning snacks in the form of flaky sausage rolls; their pastry is made daily on-site and their savoury fillings sourced from legendary local butchers, Milton District Meats.

In the afternoon we wander unhurriedly back up the coast, making a leisurely detour past the quiet seaside village of Currarong, which sits on a nubbin of a peninsula just southeast of Nowra. We park the car at the entrance to Abrahams Bosom Beach and amble along the 2.5km Wreck Walk loop, past the remaining rusty chunks of the SS Merimbula, which ran aground in turbulent seas in 1928. It's too early for whales during our visit

MORE TO THE STORY

I have a theory about wineries. Many of the best aren't found in traditional wine country. My thinking is that when there's less competition for bums on seats, the owners can relax more into their personal style and worry less about the rivals next door. With only eight wineries, Shoalhaven isn't a well-known wine hotspot but that's why visiting one of its welcoming wineries is such a good idea.

Cupitt's Winery (pictured), just outside Milton, should be top of the list. Each part of the business is managed by a different Cupitt family member; one son, Wally, makes the estate's rotating selection of cool-climate wines using grapes from all over NSW. Another son, Tom, is the general manager.

Matriarch Rosie oversees the fromagerie with help from assistant Angel Williams, who trained at Australia's two churches of cheesemaking: Pyengana in Tasmania and Holy Goat Cheese in Victoria. The family atmosphere makes a visit feel intimate and understated. The property is 95 per cent sustainable — they even make their own charcoal and fertilise the kitchen garden from the on-site worm farm — and chef Russell Chin uses as much local produce as he can.

"The whole thing was built sort of bit by bit, with no real plan," explains Wally. "And that's kind of how we like doing things."

Over at Cambewarra Estate, 8km northwest of Nowra, ex-Sydneysider Amanda Cole took over the family business in 2016 with her husband Brett, and stumbled on to the winery's biggest drawcard almost by

accident. A photography enthusiast, she was busy setting up a photoshoot of a high tea among the property's grapevines when a passing bride-to-be asked if she could book a high tea for her wedding party.

"I told her, 'Oh yes of course', and then panicked. We didn't offer high tea. Where on earth was I going to get everything I needed for one?" Thankfully the universe, and the local classifieds, intervened and Amanda happened upon a woman selling an entire high tea business, from mismatched vintage china to floral tablecloths to cake stands.

"I took the lot," Amanda says. Now platters of dainty macarons, scones and finger sandwiches, served with delicate teas that Amanda blends, are held on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, and are the winery's most popular attraction.

