

Vacations

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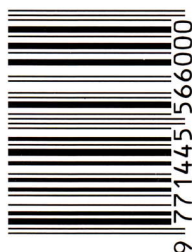
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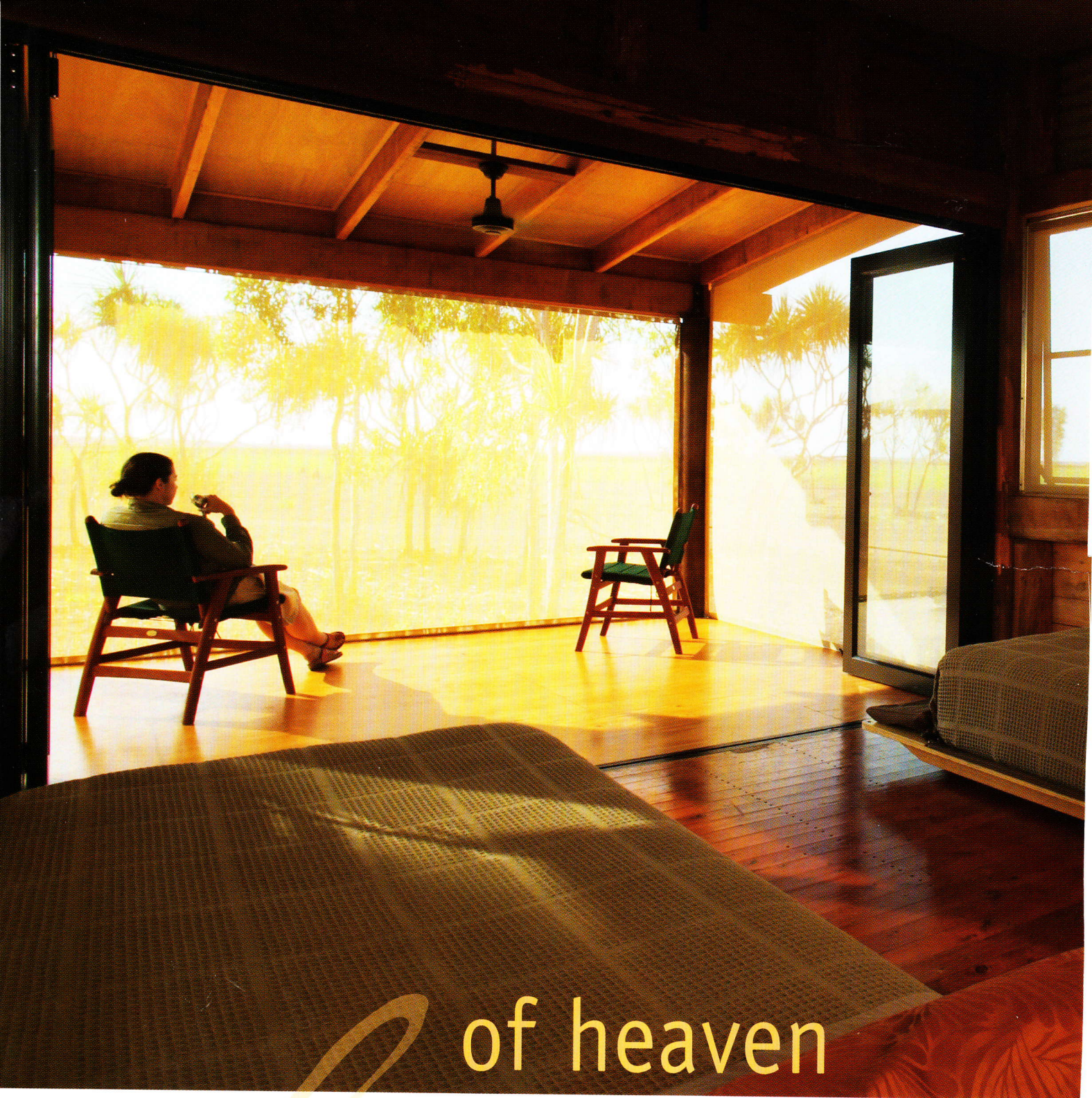
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of heaven

slice

Carrie Hutchinson packs her bag
to investigate 21 Australian
accommodations so fine you
may never want to leave.



Main: Inside a tent at Bamurru Plains

Above: A stunning snow scene at Huski

New South Wales

The toast of Sydney's hotel scene is the Park Hyatt, which stretches along the waterfront in the historic Rocks area. This is a low-slung, elegant affair that provides guests with the ultimate in luxury: 24-hour butler service, some of the city's best views and a stunning rooftop pool.

History and hip combine at the Woolloomooloo wharf conversion known as BLUE Sydney. Rooms ooze designer cool, with vibrant blue and grey interiors, Aveda products in the bathrooms and coffee plungers. The revamped Water Bar is one of the city's coolest cocktail establishments.

Even purists will find it difficult to fault The Observatory Hotel. Its plush rooms are beautifully appointed, service is unparalleled and the house restaurant, Galileo, is one of the city's best-kept culinary secrets. New to The Observatory is the option of cruising Sydney Harbour in style on the *Cambria II*, modelled on the hotel's Globe Bar.

The 17 rooms of Medusa are some of the most artistic in town. Each is individually styled, using vibrant colour and designer furniture to elegant effect. It's located in hip, urban Darlinghurst. For longer stays, the new Medusa Apartment alongside the hotel has just one bedroom but all the facilities an urbane traveller needs, plus the convenience of the hotel's services.

Just 25 minutes into the Byron hinterland lies blissfully private retreat Emerald Valley Villa. Owner Michael Robison has created something of a paradise: a four-bedroom Balinese-style abode is set around an infinity-edge pool, all of it clean and green. The views of the lush Emerald Valley are something else. A concierge is on hand to attend to the details, and best of all, you and up to seven friends won't have to share it with anyone else.

There are views – and then there are the views from Echoes Boutique Hotel perched on a ridge on the edge of the Blue Mountains. The hotel's 14 rooms are stylish and sophisticated, decked out in neutral tones and contemporary furnishings, with balconies that make the most of the sublime location.

Queensland

Accommodation options in Brisbane were a tad staid until Emporium Hotel opened its doors last year. There's a touch of Vegas in the *outré* foyer with its glossy red walls, glass chandelier and zebra-patterned chairs. Guestrooms are darkly chic. Downstairs is the new Emporium development of shops, restaurants and a stunning cocktail bar.

Absolute luxury landed in the Whitsundays last year with the opening of Qualia on the northern tip of Hamilton Island. The resort's 60 massive suites set a new benchmark in island getaways: sleek "tropical" architecture features lavish use of timber and stone, individual plunge pools, open floorplans and a strong connection to the outdoors.

If you like your accommodation a little OTT, Palazzo Versace on the Gold Coast is just the ticket, all decked out in Versace-designed furniture and fabrics. Currently, guestrooms are undergoing an upgrade that will see new, state-of-the-art entertainment systems and bedding installed. Spend an evening at the Palazzo's signature restaurant, Vanita's, which overlooks the pool.

It might not be beachfront, but Peppers Balé Resort could well be the most luxurious accommodation in Port Douglas. Set in lush rainforest



Above: In the red at Emporium

Right: The pool at The Observatory

Below right: The spectacular setting of Southern Ocean Lodge



environs, the villas are furnished in contemporary southeast Asian style, with muted colour schemes accented by clever use of timber. Each is designed for indoor/outdoor living and has its own plunge pool. The resort's Italian restaurant, Sassi at Balé, gets great reviews.

Victoria

At the quieter river end of South Yarra's famed style strip, The Como Melbourne is the perfect option for shoppers seeking a chic and convenient abode. Each of The Como's suites is comfortable and contemporary, equipped with everything a hip urbanite might need, including kitchens, workstations and laundries. The rooftop pool is an excellent place to wind down after a hard day's pounding Chapel Street pavement.

The epitome of luxury in Melbourne has to be Crown Towers, where every opulent suite enjoys an impressive view. It's consistently rated as one of the southern hemisphere's best hotels, it has much to appeal to both business and leisure travellers. Unwind in Crown's luxury day spa where the signature treatment, Volcanic Rebalance therapy – 120 minutes of pure bliss – will have you floating back to your room.

An enduring member of Melbourne's high-end boutique hotel enclave is The Lyall, which has a sophisticated charm. The Lyall's concierge greets returning



guests by name each time they enter the hotel to retreat to their immaculately appointed rooms. Located in a tranquil residential area of South Yarra, it's just a few minutes' stroll from the designer boutiques and cafés.

The Elenberg Fraser architecture at Huski is based on the random shapes of snowflakes, and it's certainly one of Australia's most individual ski-in, ski-out options. Huski has just 14 apartments, ranging from studios to a four-bedroom penthouse, each decked out with cowhide rungs, knitted blankets, artworks and chic fittings.

Sitting on your deck at The Buckland Studio Retreat, the only neighbour you're likely to see is the odd kangaroo passing through an adjacent paddock. Just four freestanding, architect-designed

studios make up this delightful retreat outside of Bright, in Victoria's scenic high country. With polished timber floors, pot-belly stoves, custom-made furniture and gorgeous bathrooms, these utterly private studios make the perfect romantic getaway for couples.

South Australia

There are many good reasons to take the trip to Kangaroo Island; now, there's also Southern Ocean Lodge. Wrapped around a cliff overlooking Hansons Bay, the lodge, designed by local architect Max Pritchard, is contemporary eco-luxury at its best. From the Khai Liew-designed furniture to a menu featuring produce from across the island, every detail has been attended to. Venture out with