

THE JEWEL OF THE VALLEY

Story: Melissa Ellis & Daniel Cole
Photos: Bob Weeks and supplied

With its dramatic panoramas and quiet sophistication, surveying this Byron hinterland property is almost a sensory experience, in the same way that great cinematography keeps you enchanted with a movie. There's been a dual partnership between nature and nurture here, the environment has been framed rather than stifled by the house and surrounding landscaping, and the home's tactile timbers and soft lines pay due homage to a breathtaking natural setting.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The house has a tranquil internal view thanks to a central courtyard, the enormous day bed is from Indonesia, the Koi pond. OPPOSITE: The expansive living room has beautifully detailed ceilings and custom made furniture.





Inside this home and in the gardens there's evidence of beauty for beauty's sake, from the meandering paths and colourful plantings to the placement of artworks and Asian antiques selected personally by the owner.

Extensive recycled teak and a variety of stone finishes add to the textured feel, from the unusually-soft hue of the Indonesian marble in the bathrooms, to the over-sized scale of the custom-made timber furniture. Inspired by Bali but not overwhelmed by it, the property has Asian spa touches with personal nuances. There's enough repetition to provide unity of design, without the property feeling like an anonymous resort.

Michael J Robison is proud of Emerald Valley Villa's soft and feminine feel, and the thoughtfulness with which its creation unfolded.

Initially designed as his Australian home, the house provides the requisite yin to the yang of the fast-paced business world, and time largely spent in minimalist city apartments around the world.

It was during the construction phase that Michael's plans to reside at the Villa were

placed on hold, due to the fact that during buying trips to Bali he became involved in forest preservation in Indonesia. Thankfully the property was equally-suited to luxury holiday accommodation, with the home's attention-to-detail now providing the wow factor for guests. (Visit: www.emeraldvalleyvilla.com)

Along with the level of detail which affords that visual smorgasbord, Michael has invested a great deal in features that aren't as visible, but that he feels just as passionately about.

Thanks to his background in environmental protection, the property's green elements span way beyond its name – from the regeneration of native rainforest to a commitment to green energy, from sourcing and using natural spring water to a commitment to purchasing carbon credits, it's a dynamic that extends way past the aesthetic. But more on that later.

Looking at the scale of the property, it's hard to believe Michael has owned the acreage for just five years. Gardens sculpted by landscape designer Tim Hays have flourished in the rich volcanic soil and the original colonial farmhouse has been renovated to become the manager's home.

A perfectly-clipped lawn leads the eye

forward to two rounded stone water features which appear to perch lightly on the edge of the dramatic ridge line. With the Villa offset to one side of the lawn, its exterior complements the views of valley and sky, and the remnant rainforest below.

While the valley views are indeed "magnificent" Michael said they couldn't be seen when he bought the former dairy farm, with a line of invasive Camphor Laurel trees blocking the stunning vistas.

Now the perfect place to get a feel for the property's expanse, Michael has recaptured some of his youth with the front lawn area.

"I'm English originally and I wanted to have this front lawn to just have a different feel to the sub-tropical areas, so we've got roses, wisteria and this is about to be planted with annuals," he said of the garden.

"Again the concept was to civilise part of the property so that it feels like it's enhancing nature as much as possible, but then to leave the balance of the property and just enhance it by regeneration."

While the Villa enjoys the same valley panoramas as this stunning lawn, the house has equally-tranquil internal views, thanks to a



ABOVE: The verandah looks down over the pool and the valley views. BELOW: The full sized catering kitchen. OPPOSITE: There are numerous Asian antiques throughout the home, Michael has a library featuring a collection of interiors and home books from around the world.





central square courtyard complete with detailed paving and a beautiful Koi pond, 'inspired' by Balinese architecture.

"The essence for me of Balinese style is the use of timbers and landscaping and the merging of inside and outside," Michael explained. "And that's why the house was originally conceived around an inner courtyard."

"And to ensure the effect I went to Bali nine times and brought back nine container loads... from furniture through to stone and a huge amount of beautiful recycled teak. Ninety per cent of the timber in the house is recycled or plantation timber and probably 95 per cent of the imported furniture is recycled old teak," Michael said.

"It's beautiful timber and of course, I just couldn't stand to be part of the problem," he added, in terms of sourcing recycled timber rather than adding to pressures on old growth forests.

The courtyard's focal point is the large Koi pond with a lotus blossom water feature, as well as an enormous carved stone artwork in four adjoining segments - a different yet appealing view to the grounds and valley. A work of incredible dimension, the carved stone looks even more dramatic when illuminated at night, as do other carved pieces lining the walkway walls.

And while the open-air courtyard is a great spot to star-gaze, covered verandahs protect

guests from the elements as they move comfortably around the Villa.

Those walkways are also home to Asian antiques and recycled timber furniture, such as the enormous day bed outside the living area. Aside from their beauty and practical appeal, the pieces again visually connect inside and out, with more antiques located indoors.

The Villa's living room offers the kind of scale you might expect, from soaring ceilings to enormous custom-made lounges with recycled teak frames, and expansive timber-framed glass doors which pushed the boundaries in terms of maximum joinery size.

Michael's love of food and cooking has ensured a full-sized catering kitchen, with an Ilve cooker, granite bench tops and glass-fronted pantry. Designed so that he could entertain and cook up a storm in comfort, it's now mostly used by guest chefs at visitors' behest.

Back-lit wall niches offer organic, curved lines above the living room fireplace, providing Michael with a continued purpose to source yet more artworks on his travels, while the double-sided fire dually heats the master bedroom as well as the lounge.

While the Villa has all the expected luxuries, like the fire and air conditioning, as well as some you might not - like underfloor heating in the marble bathrooms as well as heating under the bath and even the shower seat - Michael has ensured the property runs totally on green power.



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ABOVE: The pool has oxygenated spring water instead of chlorine or salt. BELOW: The master suite with its enormous recycled teak mantelpiece and part of Michael's childhood butterfly collection. OPPOSITE: the marble ensuite has underfloor heating as well as heating under the bath and even the shower seat.





"Green power means that you get the power 100 per cent from renewable resources. I am a founder of Climate Friendly and I also buy the carbon credits to offset the carbon footprint," he said.

Coupled with passive solar design principles with the home's architecture and a continued commitment to extensive rainforest regeneration on the property, Michael said that the property is truly carbon negative.

Other environmental elements of the property include a solar hot water service as well as the use of mostly non-toxic paints, and an organic vegetable garden has also been planted.

"This is one of the things I hope that the guests who stay here actually see, how you can live in luxury but in balance with the earth," Michael said.

While the bathrooms and bedrooms are all luxurious, the master suite is a stand-out.

A dramatic upholstered bed head was inspired by four poster beds at The Oberoi Bali at Seminyak, while delicate paintings from Ubud have a distinctly feminine feel.

"The property I think is actually very feminine...women love it here," Michael said

Even the marble in the Villa's bathrooms and spa-treatment rooms has a soft feel to it, thanks to a natural-coloured hue, which Michael preferred over more "flashy" styles.

While two of the bedrooms have gorgeous views over the pool and valley, the other two enjoy a garden outlook. Louvres ensure the flowing water from the courtyard koi pond can easily be heard, while the bedroom flooring is recycled Australian teak (from an old church).

An expansive verandah on the upper terrace

provides an alfresco dining spot adjacent to the barbecue, while the placement of Indonesian antiques continues down by the pool, with 200-year-old Rice Barns from Java now serving as shaded day-beds.

A lovely feature of this area is the use of oxygenated spring water in the pool. Michael said he couldn't abide the thought of salt or chlorine accidentally leaching into the environment, and it means the swimming water is actually potable.

Michael's love of the Australian bush is even more evident following a thrilling down-hill ride in the all-terrain 'Polaris,' a golf-buggy sized vehicle used to reach hidden picnic spots on the Wilson River.

The river runs through the acreage, and it's here that Michael feels the heart of the property truly lies.

A timber pavilion complete with a day bed and mozzie net overlooks one section of the river, the area even has an adjacent fire circle (one of two on the property).

There's a timber jetty over the river that a blue Kingfisher calls home and platypus can regularly be seen. Michael said one side of the river has been stripped of weeds like lantana and regenerated, while the other is actually pristine remnant rainforest.

For someone who continues to spend part of his business life involved with environmental preservation, both here and overseas, it's understandable that the rainforest area at Emerald Valley Villa is one of Michael's favourite places.

"The rainforest and waterfall are truly exquisite and it is here that I feel the power and soul of the property," Michael said.



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A TROPICAL OASIS

Story: Daniel Cole
Photos: Bob Weeks



During his visit to Emerald Valley Villa, with Landscape Designer, Tim Hays, Coast Living's 'Garden Guru' Daniel Cole discovered the landscape and plant choices at the property are just as detailed as its overall design.

Byron and surrounds have become a destination for lifestyle change, gaining a diverse group of people contributing to rural and coastal design.

Emerald Valley Villa is a tribute to the Byron identity and signifies exemplary environmental and subtropical design. Sensitive and responsible approaches to Villa construction, developed gardens and the natural landscape yield a minimal ecological imprint.

In terms of the existing natural environment, it's a rewarding and rare experience to view uncompromised rainforest, like the pristine remnant rainforest on the property.

The bending river and frontage is bunkered by dense tree corridors that have thick understorey vegetation, and the existing natural open space has afforded the opportunity to access and enjoy this rainforest enclave while retaining its ecological integrity through minimal disturbance.

The sounds of the rainforest meeting the river forms a natural amphitheatre of flowing water and wildlife converging within this eco cul-de-sac.

Closer to the built environment, Landscape Designer Tim Hays, in close association with Michael Robison, created a landscape which co-exists with the residence.

But some areas necessitated a considered approach, particularly the open, sloping ridge. The same area that provides those magnificent valley views also proposed challenges to the establishment of the sustainable development. Tim and Michael nominated vehicle routes, parking and pedestrian access throughout the site to link the landscape with the Villa and amenities. Circulation has been important for this project to achieve privacy, and a sense of

separation without interruption, while allowing maintenance access.

The level routes for both pedestrian and vehicles were made possible through a series of retained terraces. Stonewalls, intricate paved pathways and stairs through the

Typical and traditional perceptions of plant combinations have been abandoned in favour of a distinctive union of colour, form and texture. Most vegetation types are incorporated, forming a green scaffold of groundcovers, perennial colour, climbers, strap foliage, flowering – fragrant shrubs, ornamental grasses, Heliconias – Gingers, Bamboo and palms.

terracing create stunning although informal features, complementing the Balinese-inspired architecture.

The internal and central stone courtyard as a water feature mediates use between the weather and seasons. The water increases the auditory pleasure, adding a sense of calm and a further dimension to Villa use. Lush and contained aquatic plantings of Colocasia, Cyperus and Thalia, the red-stemmed water Canna, break the water surface and vegetate the edges for accommodation privacy.

The shades of green and arching stems

contrast to the white walling of the courtyard. Dwarf Mondo borders inlaid paving with its sunken level, further announcing the element of water.

The landscape layout is expansive and has a botanical parkland quality that works to support the Villa from an exposed ridge setting. Broad, deep beds and comprehensive plantings balanced with open space evoke the park experience.

Planting design is one of Tim's strengths in managing broad area landscapes in the subtropics. Plant placement is for long-term maturity while the species' selection achieves immediate impact and vital ground coverage to suppress weed growth.

Mass planting is as important as the individual specimens placed as accents. Common plants are offset with rare, unique and difficult to find varieties.

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Evergreen and deciduous trees are mixed through the grounds, enabling seasonal changes in canopy coverage and flowering. Existing Mango trees now merge with fragrant evergreen Magnolias and Michelias.

Unlike cool climates, there are very few options for deciduous flowering trees in the subtropics. Tim has used some of the finest in Cassia, Tabebuia and Frangipani. The pink forms of Tabebuia are some of the most beautiful flowering trees occurring in spring.





Cassia fistula, Indian Laburnum, and Cassia javanica, Pink Shower, defoliate in the cool months and have stunning flower displays in the warm months.

Fan palms such as Bismarckia nobilis, Silver Bismarck, and Pritchardia hillebrandii the Hawaiian Fan Palm are large architectural foliage specimens that punctuate the gardens. The fan palms are under planted with bursts

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of perennial colour, flowering shrubs and drifts of groundcover. Flowering ornamentals in low areas of garden build onto the next layer of Gingers and Heliconias. Russellia, Coral Fountain, is such a planting, bridging the layers as a graceful, weeping shrub with vivid orange to scarlet flowers cascading amongst the understory.

Extensive mounded ground, landform, has been densely planted in detail, yielding bold vegetation buffers that ensure property privacy. Relaxed boundaries consist of native species combined with exotic sub-tropicals. The thick, luxuriant screen offers flowering periods throughout the year while serving as a visual barrier.

Clumping Bamboo and canopy palms of Bangalow are the taller screening plants allowing seclusion through greenery. The bamboo-like Tiger Grass with its upward and arching profile has been used as an entry statement planting.

When asked how he manages large garden space, planting densities and building layers of vegetation Tim said: "I approach it as if I was painting a picture. The whole space is blocked in and then you add detail to the different areas.

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As subtropical design is only now gaining recognition, Tim Hays remains at the forefront of experimenting and exploring the boundaries that are shaping the evolving landscape character.

The exuberant landscape of Emerald Valley Villa with its eclectic mix of plant material provides an envelope of privacy while framing the distant pastoral scenes. The practical and captivating gardens and grounds beautifully support this luxury private estate.



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