

# Traveller Victoria



DESTINATION  
HIGH COUNTRY

## Starlight slumber

**Sue Wallace** bunkers down at a remote hut with a kitchen garden.

The stars are at their brilliant best as I scan the sky from my cosy swag at Payne's Hut, near Shannonnvale in Victoria's high country.

It was a toss-up between snuggling down in the traditional outdoor canvas bedding or nodding off in the rustic hut in a comfortable queen-size bed with crisp white linen.

But the stars won out – for a while, anyway.

Tess and Graham Payne have created a small retreat in the mountains that reflects the heritage and history of the high country while also catering for the needs of discerning travellers.

Just getting there is an adventure as you drive through scenery with rolling hills, tree-covered mountains and deep valleys.

Step through the property's wooden gates and you enter a fabulous garden where pink hollyhocks and purple larkspur sway in the breeze, red roses bloom and climbers creep over rustic farm artefacts. It doesn't take long to unwind and feel at home as the Paynes tell their story of what brought them here.

Graham is a former ballet dancer and carpenter who took his first ballet class as an adult. "I guess I was a bit of a Billy Elliot but I didn't realise my dream until I was 27," he says.

Tess was a costume designer for JC Westend Costumes in Melbourne and was so passionate about her job she would often work so late she would miss the last train home and sleep in her workshop. Graham convinced Tess to move to the high country a decade ago, after discovering the charm of Shannonnvale during a Scout trip with his son.

Together they have created this tiny getaway where there's an emphasis on chilling out, good food and wine and beautiful surrounds.

Payne's Hut is the perfect base for exploring the high country and there are lots of activities nearby. You can borrow fishing rods and head to the nearest stream, where you may be lucky enough to land a trout; swim in the Mitta Mitta River; enjoy a meal at the Blue Duck Inn; or pack a picnic and head to Rocky Valley Dam near Falls Creek.

Guests can also go birdwatching, white-water rafting, kayaking, horse riding, scenic driving and mountain biking and hiking. Tess describes it as a place where you can "celebrate yesterday today", providing guests with the feel of staying in a pioneer hut but with all the comforts.

It hasn't been easy – Tess recalls living in a small shed without electricity and surrounded by snow when the temperatures reached minus 8 degrees. She has also chipped away at ice that covers the garden during the winter months.

Today, however, the sub-alpine garden, a mix of natives and ornamentals, is looking its best.



**Pioneer feel ... Payne's Hut has a rustic feel but offers all the comforts.**

Her first garden here was destroyed by the 2003 fires – an experience that left a scar but made the couple all the more determined to enjoy every minute of their life in the bush.

Designed in a horseshoe shape, the garden is full of surprises with private nooks where guests can enjoy lunch, dinner or a drink, soaking up its beauty and solitude. "We tell people we are in a remote area and there isn't a local coffee shop for miles, so they know what to expect," Tess says.

Graham has built the main house and accommodation in between other jobs and there's still plenty to do with another two huts on the way.

Carpenters from the German League of Travelling Guildsmen, who travel around the world helping out, lent a hand for a few weeks.

Graham also works as the chef at the Blue Duck Inn, a 20-minute drive away. Inspired by his son and daughter who are both chefs, he did his apprenticeship there at the age of 58.

Tonight Tess cooks and we dine on tender beef strips with orange and ginger-flavoured couscous with chilli and cashew nuts and a fresh salad straight from the garden with crisp snow peas, tomatoes and herbs. A bowl of fresh berries and strawberry sauce follows.

By torchlight we return to our hut built from slabs of timber and corrugated iron. A pile of interesting books, including *Stories from the High Country*, proves irresistible and I soon become immersed in the history of the area.

After a great sleep under the stars (and then my comfy bed), we wander to Tess's beloved

### FAST FACTS

**Getting there** Situated near Shannonnvale, Payne's Hut is a 90-minute drive from Mount Beauty, or an hour from Omeo. It is just off the newly sealed Bogong High Plains Road that links Falls Creek to Omeo.

**Staying there** Payne's Hut is \$140 a double a night, including a gourmet breakfast. Other meals can be organised at extra cost. Phone 5159 7255, see [payneshut.com](http://payneshut.com).

**Eating nearby** Enjoy a lunch in a converted barn at Waddington's at Kergunyah. The menu features fresh local produce grown on the farm. Favourites include roulade of saltbush lamb with a spinach, walnut and currant filling on garlic potatoes. Phone (02) 6027 5393.

vegie garden. There's lettuce, bok choy, tomatoes, a big strawberry patch, olive trees, potatoes, asparagus, leeks, rhubarb, red runner beans, black potatoes and herbs.

For breakfast at this perfect getaway there's fresh juice, cereal and fruit and bread baked by Graham.

Sue Wallace was a guest of North East Victoria Tourism.

### SUNDAY LUNCH CAMPASPE COUNTRY HOUSE, WOODEND

SITTING under a market umbrella in the shade of trees in a manicured Edna Walling country garden for lunch has to take some beating. Particularly when it's 30-plus degrees in the city and there's a gentle zephyr that rustles the leaves, whispering that all is well with the world today.

This is how I recall lunching seven years ago at Campaspe House on the outskirts of Woodend; and this is how lunchtime tables can still be set up today.

A sweeping driveway edged with blue and white agapanthus leads to the gracious 1927-built house that dominates 13 hectares, with about three hectares having been landscaped by Walling. Its shady lawns cry out for garden parties or puffed-sleeved-wearing flower girls skipping about wedding tables.

Once the property of the late Richard Pratt and his widow, Jeanne, who used it as a country retreat for company executives, it received a new lease of life in more recent years when Milton and Liz Collins bought it, reopened the old driveway, refurbished the main rooms in the homestead, embellished the garden and shone the silver to offer hospitality straight out of English *Country Life*.

The property changed hands again about two years ago and is now within the Christina Ong stable of Como properties.

The kitchen is ticking along very nicely, with chef Tim Fowler creating contemporary dishes using quality regional produce.

There is usually something from the Tuki Trout Farm and today it's Tuki trout soufflé, which is tempting, but we opt to share a slow-cooked Western Plains pork belly (\$17) with caramelised (almost toffee) apple, seared scallop and calvados sauce – rich but a delicious combination of flavours.

Then a pan-fried fillet of barramundi on soft polenta with sauce vierge (\$32) gets the nod from my husband, while I settle for the oven-roasted lamb rump (\$34) cooked pink and to perfection and served with pommes anna, spinach, truss cherry tomatoes and mint sauce.

Sipping on local house chardonnay from Hanging Rock (\$10 a glass, \$40 a bottle), we forgo a lemon tart, passionfruit soufflé and warm banana and date cake (all \$13) to drink in the surroundings a little more and confirm that really everything does indeed seem right with the world today.

Reviewed by Tricia Welsh, who was hosted by Tourism Victoria.

**Campaspe Country House, Goldies Lane, Woodend, 5427 2273. Open Saturday-Sunday, 8-10am; Saturday-Sunday, 12.30-2pm; Friday-Saturday, 6.30-8pm. See [campaspehouse.com.au](http://campaspehouse.com.au).**

To stay: nearby options include Campaspe Country House ([campaspehouse.com.au](http://campaspehouse.com.au)), Mirkwood Forest ([mirkwoodforest.com.au](http://mirkwoodforest.com.au)), SkyHouse ([skyhouse.com.au](http://skyhouse.com.au)).



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