

REVIEW

Qii HOUSE

THE GATEWAY TO THE OTWAYS
AND STUNNING ECO-RETREAT
ALONG THE GREAT OCEAN ROAD



My journey to Qii House started in Melbourne as I had been residing in the city for several months whilst putting together this edition of Australia Prestige. I was excited about the prospect of visiting this award-winning property as its location appeared to be the perfect base from which to explore the surrounding nature within the Great Otway National Park, provide an overnight respite during a road trip along the iconic Great Ocean Road, as well as being a tranquil space to get away from the hustle and bustle of city life. The great thing about this home from home is that it can be whatever you want it to be – and for me, I was ready to make it all of the above!

I picked up a coffee from Code Black (*the best coffee in Melbourne*) and set off early, knowing that the 150km drive from Southern Cross Station to Qii House includes plenty of incredible stops along the way. Like most drives out of big urban cities, the first hour didn't offer much to look at but it wasn't too long before we arrived in Geelong. With a population of just 276,000 people, this once sleepy port city has in recent years repositioned itself as the gateway to the Great Ocean Road.

Here, the waterfront provides an ideal place to stop for a toilet break and to stretch the legs. With its golden sand beach, art deco pavilion, 19th century wooden carousel, various theme park rides and droves of seagulls stalking restaurants serving up generous helpings of fish and chips, Geelong evoked the nostalgia of childhood holidays to British seaside resorts. However, the biggest difference between the two – aside from the weather – is the artistic addition of more than 100 painted bollards.

Launched in 1999, the Geelong Baywalk Bollard Trails stretches two miles from Rippleside Park to



Geelong bollards

Limeburners Point and depict various characters ranging from 1930s bathing beauties and RLSS lifeguards to a marching band. Over the years it has become a popular feature for visitors passing through the city to stop and take pictures. I particularly enjoyed the smaller details on each bollard, such as the sad clown who is seen holding a ticket behind his back to "admit one" dated 14 February (Valentine's Day).

Geelong offers plenty of other attractions such as the Geelong Gallery for art lovers, Gaol Museum for history buffs, and the Vintage Market for a treasure trove of shopping. Those with more time on their hands may wish to book an overnight stay at Holiday Inn & Suites – Geelong's newest hotel, having opened in 2023 – to explore the city further, but for us it was time to get back on the road.

Just 22km south of Geelong, you will arrive at the coastal town of Torquay. For surfing enthusiasts, this holiday resort offers the perfect opportunity to catch some waves. Its high concentration of quality surfing spots – from Southside to Steps Reef – provide consistent waves year-round making it a popular choice for world class surfers and international events such as the annual Rip Curl Pro competition which takes place at Bells Beach at Easter. Torquay's not just for elite surfers though. With numerous surf schools dotted around the town, this is an exceptional location for beginners to learn the basics and for seasoned surfers to brush up on their skills. On land, visitors can also learn more about the country's rich surfing heritage at the Australia National Surfing Museum.

The start of the Great Ocean Road

19th century American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote "it's not the destination, it's the journey," and this sentiment certainly resonates with the next stretch as Torquay marks the starting point of the Great Ocean Road – widely regarded as one of Australia's most scenic drives. From this point onwards, the remainder of the journey is filled with picture-postcard views from clifftops and pristine beaches to lush rainforest. If you time the journey right, there's also a strong chance you'll see plenty of wildlife along the way such as kangaroos and koalas, as well as marine life with dolphins and whales often spotted off the coast.

The first stop on the Great Ocean Road itself is about 30km south of Torquay. Aireys Inlet is a quaint little coastal hamlet where the Great Ocean Road meets the Great Otway National Park. Here you can enjoy spectacular views from the top of the 34-metre-tall Splitpoint Lighthouse and learn more about how it continues to serve a vital purpose for coastal maritime navigation to this day. If this lighthouse looks familiar to you then chances are you were a child of the 1990s, as Splitpoint Lighthouse featured in the opening credits for popular children's television series *Round The Twist*.

Below the lighthouse is Eagle Rock Marine Sanctuary where you'll get great coastal views of Eagle Rock – a 20-metre-high volcanic stack capped by

limestone. Airey's Inlet is also home to Sandy Gully Beach. Although it may not be the prettiest or most swimmable beach found along the Great Ocean Road, it is however the starting point for great cliff top walks taking in yet more stunning views at Fitzpatrick Seat and the Reef Lookout.

After Airey's Inlet, you will then pass The Pole House. Designed and built as an experimental beach house in 1978, this futuristic looking stilted property is suspended 40 metres above Fairhaven Beach and is dubbed as one of the most photographed properties in all of Australia. Continuing a little further down the road, you will then reach another popular photo spot – the iconic Great Ocean Road Memorial Arch. The Arch honours the returning soldiers from World War I who built the 243km Great Ocean Road between 1919 and 1932, while the Great Ocean Road itself is dedicated to the soldiers killed in action – making it the world's largest war memorial.

A further 15km of stunning coastal views will pass before you reach Lorne. This quaint little seaside town is the last built-up area before arriving into the wilderness of the Great Otway National Park and Qii House, so we used this opportunity to grab a bite to eat. A rule of thumb that I tend to use in Australia is that you cannot generally go wrong with fish and chips whenever you are at the seaside, so we got a table at Captain Hooked. For British visitors, you'll note that the haddock and cod commonly served at chippies back home are nowhere to be found and instead most menus will list options like flathead, flake and whiting. However, the most option most closely resembling the British staple is a flaky, mild white fish called barramundi.



Great Ocean Road

If you held off from taking a dip in the sea earlier in the road trip, the golden sand beach of Lorne is as good as any for a spot of sunbathing or swimming. A running theme on this drive, the beachfront also offers a lovely coastal trail featuring dozens of largescale artworks from the Lorne Sculpture Biennale. Previous years have included world renowned works such as Fridgehenge, along with submissions from celebrated international artists such as U.S. painter and sculptor Stevens Vaughn and Polish stone carver Ashika Marek Ostapkowicz. Curated by Simon Lawrie, the theme for 2025 is set to focus on the iconic geology of Gadubanud Country.

Whilst in Lorne, be sure to stop off at Lorne Pier where dolphin and whale sightings are common between June and October. Lorne Pier is also one of the best fishing spots along the Great Ocean Road with common catches including squid, snapper, salmon, trevally, and even some shark species.

Before continuing your journey towards Qii House, those looking for any last-minute inspiration for other activities to partake in during your stay should drop into the Lorne Visitor's Centre where the friendly staff will be more than happy to help. Also, remember that this is the last chance you'll get to pick up any groceries or essentials. Situated over the road from the Visitor's Centre, Foodworks supermarket is well stocked for everything you could possibly need – including pizza bases and topped pizzas for anyone looking to take put the outdoor pizza oven at Qii House to good use. However, those on a budget may want to consider doing their shopping back in Melbourne and bringing a cooler bag with them as Foodworks isn't the cheapest and there aren't a lot of other options around town.



Arriving at Qii House

Turning off from Lorne, the final 15km stretch of road to Qii House navigates away from the Great Ocean Road – swapping coastal landscapes for the forested surrounds of the Great Otway National Park. The view here is as equally impressive, as the roads are lined with tree ferns and towering redwoods which grow to more than 60 metres tall. You will however need to lower your speed for this section of the drive as the gravel road can churn up and risk causing damage to your rental car if you're driving too fast. You'll also want to be mindful that you're sharing the road with wallabies and kangaroos who might appear on the road unexpectedly at any given moment.

Passing very few houses along the way and with a phone and internet reception that would be on minus bars if such a thing existed (*perhaps it's just a Vodafone thing?*), you're sure to get a sense of how remote and tranquil Qii House is long before you pull up on the driveway, step out of your car, and take in that first deep breath of fresh air. It is truly remarkable the way nature works. As soon as we arrived, it really did feel like a weight was lifted off our shoulders with the stresses of modern city life far behind us.

My first impression of Qii House was that its design is so quirky and unusual that it could quite easily clash with its natural surroundings and yet it blends in so effortlessly. Originally build in 1977, this four-bedroom property features a contemporary Brutalist design with vertical timber boardings arranged in simple yet striking geometric forms. The quirkiness of the design continues inside the property too with its vibrant furnishings, artwork, cushions and rugs all adding dashes of colour.

However, the reason it works so incredibly well is that great effort was made not to disrupt the surrounding wildlife. As a result, Qii House is encapsulated by tree ferns against a backdrop of blue gumtrees. It is also obvious that the choice of natural building materials was carefully considered too. The interiors further retain that connection with nature through the wood-panelled walls, natural stone floors and large airy windows which offer the dual purpose of letting in plenty of natural light whilst simultaneously offering beautiful views to the outside world.

After a long day of travel, I was ready to unwind – and I soon discovered that Qii House is perfectly set up for a relaxing respite. Since taking over the property in 2007, current owner Heather Kolb has gone to great lengths to make the guest experience as comfortable as possible. Not only has she renovated the interior spaces with plush furnishings and modern amenities, but she has also added a number of other luxurious touches to the property such as fitting an outdoor shower and bath, as well as building a generous decking and alfresco dining space where guests can meditate, practice yoga, or simply unwind and bask in the spectacular views.

Guests are also provided a lovely welcome hamper featuring premium products such as Byron Bay Cookies, Irrewarra granola and Pukka tea. There were however two items I was particularly eager to use, and they were the complimentary aromatic candles and bottle of wine which are both best enjoyed whilst soaking in the outdoor bath before choosing a bedroom and enjoying a comfortable night's slumber.

The therapeutic benefits of forest bathing

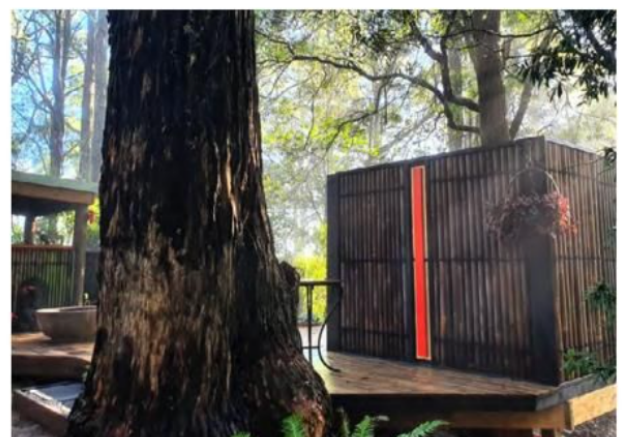
Qii House is home to the first internationally accredited forest therapy destination on private land and during my stay, Heather had organised for Prof Dr Dieter Kotte and Susan Joachim from the International Nature and Forest Therapy Alliance (INFTA) and Institute of Forest Therapy (IFT) to visit Qii House and take us on a guided forest therapy walk through the property's grounds.

The concept of forest therapy derives from the traditional Japanese practice of *shinrin yoku* or forest bathing – but there's no need to pack your swimming

cap and goggles for this one. Rather, the bathing itself is a therapeutic practice of letting nature wash over you and immersing yourself in the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touch of the forest.

Prof Dr Kotte is an academic professor at the Deakin University and co-author of the first comprehensive *International Handbook of Forest Therapy*. He explained: "Evidence shows that forest bathing can have substantial benefits to your mental and physical wellbeing. In Japan, hospitals that were built around green spaces for patients to use and explore found that patients were recovering much quicker."

While Dr Kotte is the expert on the scientific side of forest bathing, INFTA President Susan Joachim specialises in forest therapy guiding. Susan led us through the Zaborin Walk – a one-kilometre-long trail that Heather has curated on the property at Qii House. During this walk, Susan encouraged us to slow down and take in the natural medicine offered by the forest. She guided our focus towards smelling the different scents, closing our eyes and listening to the different sounds, and really seeing how ever-changing the forest landscapes are by picking out the many different shades of green spotted along the way.



I had never done forest bathing before, but I am an outdoors enthusiast and find myself spending a lot of my free time up in the mountains so in theory I had done my own version of sorts but nothing quite as focused as this. Whether you embark upon a forest therapy walk here with experts such as Susan and Dr Kotte, or take a self-guided approach, you will emerge from the other side feeling refreshed and rejuvenated while other benefits include improved mood, sleep, creativity and immune system.

The most beautiful waterfall in the Otways

While Qii House offers plenty of opportunities to immerse in nature on the premises, it also affords guests the chance to explore the wider natural playground of the surrounding Great Otway National Park. After a morning of forest bathing, we decided to spend the afternoon at the nearby Erskine Falls.

Situated just eight kilometres from Qii House, Erskine Falls is the most popular waterfall within the vast 1,032km² sprawl of the Otways. Surrounded by dense forest and thick tree canopies, this impressive waterfall plunges 30 metres down into the lush tree-fern gully of the Erskine River.

There are two viewing platforms offering exceptional views of this natural spectacle. Starting from the car park adjacent to the top of the waterfall, take the stairs down 150m for an eye-level view. With a total of 240 stairs from top to bottom, those who continue all the way down will be rewarded with an even more impressive base level view where you can even feel the refreshing mist of the cascading water against your skin.

This short hike is easily accessible, suitable for most fitness levels and doesn't take up too much of your day. This means walking enthusiasts will have plenty of time to tackle part of the 7.5km Erskine River Track to Straw Falls and Splitter Falls. Alternatively, if you're satisfied with your step count for the day, you could take a short drive over to Qdos Arts & Sculpture Park for coffee and cake.

Qdos Arts & Sculpture Park is an art gallery and café opened by Lorne Sculpture Biennale co-founder and artistic director Graeme Wilkie. The grounds feature

numerous works from past Lorne Sculpture Biennale events such as Clayton Blake's *Bathing Box* and Jamie Willis' *Crash Test Dummies*. There's also an indoor arts space featuring an ever-changing line-up of artists and themed exhibitions. Graeme is passionate about supporting the international arts community and even offers opportunities for artists from around the world to take up residency at Qdos. During my visit, Qdos was hosting a young Japanese artist who had flown over to spend time working on her art here.

Going native at Lake Elizabeth

The following day, Heather had arranged for us to meet another individual who was instrumental in helping shape Qii House. When Heather first took over Qii House in 2007, she understood and appreciated that the Otways are a sacred ground for the Gadubanud indigenous people and that any development in the area needs to be mindful of its unique setting. Her quest to find out more about what she could do to honour and respect this sacred land led her path to cross with Richard Collopy – one of the traditional owners of Gadubanud Country.

The Gadubanud people have occupied the rainforest plateau and rugged coastline of Cape Otway for more than a thousand years and as a direct descendant of one of the original custodian families, Richard continues to keep their tradition alive today. Richard



Lake Elizabeth



Erskine Falls

was more than happy to share a glimpse into the life of the Gadubanud people and started by giving us a traditional welcome to country courtesy of a smoking ceremony. A smoking ceremony is an ancient tradition that involves burning native plants to create smoke that is believed to have cleansing and spiritual properties – warding off bad spirits and promoting healing. It was certainly a powerful and meaningful experience.

Richard believes that the flora and fauna found across the Otways provides everything that we as humans need to survive. “Nearly all of the plants you see around you have been used for centuries as a source of food, seasoning, tea or as medicine,” he said. To prove this, we took a 30-minute drive to Lake Elizabeth where he would take us on a scenic bush walk and introduce the various plant species along the way. I was amazed by Richard’s encyclopaedic knowledge of the local flora and fauna. He introduced the likes of bushmans knife which is a type of blade grass that is so sharp it can cut through flesh, eucalyptus leaves which are used to treat sore throats, kangaroo grass which is used to make flour, lemon grass bush which is consumed as a tea to treat diarrhoea, and a wide range of edible berries and root plants.

The Otways are not just an important place for flora but also fauna too. “Most native animal species in

Australia originate here,” Richard tells us. Walking in Lake Elizabeth alone you could quite easily spot kangaroos, wallabies, echidnas, koalas, snakes, lizards, ducks, eels and more than 150 species of birds. Lake Elizabeth is also one of the best places in Australia to sight the elusive platypus in its natural habitat. “The best time of day to see platypus here is early in the morning or at dusk,” Richard says. “However, you have to stay still, be really quiet and be patient.” Unfortunately for us there were a group of teenagers talking loudly and playing music on their phones, so it wasn’t to be our lucky day. Despite not seeing platypus though, Lake Elizabeth was a lovely walk with beautiful views and offered a great opportunity to learn more about why this land is so important to the Gadubanud people.

