A hidden bushland oasis on the banks of Wakiti Creek.

Words & Images: Miriam Blaker

As we drive through the gate and up the long narrow bush track horses can be heard neighing across the creek and there’s smoke and Indian teepees in the distance. I almost expect to see bows and arrows flying past and cowboys galloping over the ridge.

We’re at Wakiti Creek near Nathalia and Barmah about 230 kilometres north of Melbourne. This is big river country offering big adventures and even bigger skis to be enjoyed on nearly two kilometres of Wakiti Creek frontage.

The place is secluded, tucked away down a dusty dirt road surrounded by rolling dairy countryside and is described as a ‘truly hidden oasis’. Understandably, as there is literally nothing around it for miles.

Wakiti Creek Resort is set on 92 acres with the Wakiti Creek as its boundary. As you drive in, the first thing that strikes you is the Indian Reservation complete with authentic 20’ Sioux Indian teepees. On the other side, down along the creek, is a designated section of land for horse owners with safe horse yards, set away from the main camping ground so as not to impinge with safe horse yards, set away from the main camping ground so as not to impinge on other campers.

Owner Jayne Binrell, together with partner Phil and co-owners Richard and Christina Fairweather have managed the property for ten years from when it was little more than a cow paddock.

Friends told them they were crazy setting up in the middle of nowhere but, wanting something different in their ‘secluded oasis’ they came up with the idea of a teepee camp.

Jayne says that through word of mouth the teepees have become so popular regulars keep coming back year after year.

There are five teepees set in a semicircle around the reservation’s own fire pit area on a vast grassy plain. These are separated from the rest of the park making it feel intimate and secluded. Close by is an undercover barbeque and amenities.

The teepees are carpeted inside and have battery powered lighting and a double and four single mattresses, sleeping six people comfortably. The only thing needed is bedding and food, so this would indeed be a unique and fun introduction for first-time campers.

On the other side of the park is the main camping area with large cabins and bungalows, some with an enclosed verandah for dogs. There are plenty of spacious flat sites with some overlooking the creek and this was where we set up our camper trailer. Close by is the entrance to the bush tracks that weave down to the creek and proved to be a great spot for bike riding and walking our dogs.

For horse riders there are trails leading out to the forest and Jayne tells me that each October Wakiti Creek hosts its annual horse riding fundraising event that raises money for the Riding for Disabled group in Echuca. Our daughter was nostalgic for her horse, but we reminded her it would have been difficult towing both the horse float and camper trailer simultaneously!

As well as trail riding Wakiti Creek is the ideal base to enjoy some four-wheel driving and camping exploration to continue.

Bush camping is allowed in much of the forest and we passed a couple of groups of campers. There are many spots to free camp along the Goulburn River, the second longest river in Victoria, although it’s best to avoid camping under river red gum trees, some of which can be massive and prone to falling branches during strong winds.

For those that prefer more challenging territory; the Barmah Forest is only about 22 kilometres away. Here, in the now renamed Barmah National Park, tracks are easily accessible via the small town of Picola with the turn-off just before the pub. The area forms the largest river red gum forest in the world and is home to more than 200 species of birds and a massive amount of wildlife.

There are also wild horses to be found deep in sections of the park, much to my daughter’s delight. The debate about removing the 130-odd brumbies in the forest is one that continues but to us they are a magnificent part of Australian heritage and should be left alone and in their natural environment.

The Barmah Lakes area is a popular spot for day visitors and campers. Enjoy
the tracks, throw in a line for some Murray cod or golden perch, or take a walk on the Yamyabuc Discovery Trail; a self-guided walk that begins at the Dharnya carpark and explains some of the natural and cultural features of the Barmah National Park.

There are also scenic drives suitable for two-wheel-drive vehicles, such as the one from Mathoura along Picnic Point Road to the Murray River and the Barmah Island Forest Drive that starts from the Barmah town gates at the end of Schier Street and heads off along River Road. To make the most of your trip it’s a good idea to pick up a map before you head into the park.

Having worked up an appetite driving about the tracks, our evening meal was a succulent roast lamb on the Cobb cooker before settling in for some stargazing in front of a blazing open fire. If you want a break from the barbeque, there’s a free pick-up and drop-off courtesy bus that transports locals and people staying at Wakiti Creek Resort to the nearby Falcon Hotel.

We were awoken the following morning to a cacophony of birdsong and freezing temperatures. A low fog covered the creek, however blue skies overhead promised a clear day so a trip to historic Echuca, just thirty minutes away, was first on the list.

Echuca was bustling. The wharf area is full of early Australian history from the paddlesteamers to the bordello, small bars and fudge tasting. It had been years since my last visit but the steam-driven paddle steamers and the Clydesdales clip-clopping through the historic village area are still magical.

The town is a living monument to the 1870s when this was Australia’s largest inland port. You can take a step back in time on board paddle steamers such as Pride of the Murray, PS Canberra or the PS Peverney and experience the mighty Murray River.

Although we opted against taking a cruise it was fun to watch the paddle steamers chug past blowing their whistles and day dream about a holiday aboard a deluxe house boat that would cost as much for a weekend as a year of campsites! For chocholics, just around the corner is the Echuca Chocolate Company, old-fashioned sweet shops and quirky gift shops housed in historical buildings.

A worthwhile detour back from Echuca is the Great Aussie Beer Shed; lots of good fun for lovers of beer and those interested in Australian history. Even non-beer drinkers will find it interesting. It’s like a step back in time with good old-fashioned beer history, Australian memorabilia, an amazing display of beer cans and a memorable experience from owner Neil. Make sure you get a tour from him, as the impressive exhibition of beer cans needs his humour, tales and passion to make the experience something special.

Back at Wakiti Creek there’s a perfect blend of serenity and activity with bush mini-golf, archery, tennis and volleyball on offer. Normally content to sit by the fire, this time we were propelled into action and physical exercise. Grabbing our bikes we set off for a ten-kilometre jaunt down Yambuna Road, a tranquil ride through green pastures and along the banks of the scenic creek. Upon our return we swapped our bikes for canoes, which can be hired at the office. The afternoon sun was slowly fading and, although the air was cold, it was a beautiful time to be out on the water.

Wakiti Creek feels a world away from anywhere. It combines that perfect blend of relaxation and exhilaration in a secluded bushland and river oasis. Paddling down the calm waters of the creek with the golden rays of the sun casting glistening reflections was the perfect way to slow down after our energising bike ride. With our two children showing remarkable teamwork in one canoe and us, their totally chilled out parents in another, it was a magical end to the day.

FACT FILE

Getting there
From Melbourne it’s a three-hour drive along the Hume and Goulburn Valley highways. From Echuca, follow the Murray Valley Hwy East approx 22 km, turn left into Curr Road and travel 7 km, then turn right into Yambuna Bridge Road (unsealed) and Wakiti Creek Resort is approximately 5 km on the right-hand side.

Where to camp
Wakiti Creek Resort is at 500 Yambuna Rd, Kotupna. Teepees range from $49 a couple a night in off-peak season. Extra adult $16, extra child $9 per night. Powered sites start from $26 double off-peak, extra adult $12, extra child $8 per night.

Dogs and horses are welcome. Horse yards are provided in a designated unpowered section of the park and beside the creek.

When to go
Any time of the year is good as there are activities and nearby attractions all year round. Fire drums can be hired in the cooler months. There is a pool for the warmer months.

The Riverboats Music Festival will be held on 13-15 February 2015, a laid-back, family-friendly festival under majestic river red gums beside the Murray River. Ph: (03) 5480 7555 for ticket and accommodation bookings or visit www.riverboatsmusic.com.au for more information.

On 6 & 7 June 2015, Echuca will celebrate the 51st anniversary of its Steam Rally during the Queen’s Birthday long weekend featuring more than 550 exhibits of vintage machinery and transport, working horses, old time farming trades and vintage cars.

Further information
For more information on Wakiti Creek Resort Ph: (03) 5867 3237 or visit www.wakiticreekresort.com.au
All activities are free except for a small charge for archery and canoes.

For information on the Barmah region visit www.nathaliabarmah.com.au or Ph: 03 5866 2289.