

TRAVEL

Five years on from Black Saturday: The rebuilding of Saladin Lodge, Narbethong, Victoria

SARAH NICHOLSON ESCAPE JANUARY 26, 2014 12:00AM

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The Saladin Lodge land is recovering from the Black Saturday blaze. Picture: Sarah Nicholson
Source: Supplied

KIM Rycroft is a Black Saturday survivor.

The Narbethong resident, and the force behind Saladin Lodge, one of the region's most delightful B&B properties, lost her home in 2009 when one of the February 7 fires burst out of the Black Range State Forest and tore across her bucolic block.

Rycroft lost the historic stone cottage she had spent months renovating, as well as a collection of vintage farm structures and every fence, but the fickle flames spared the shell of the modern

barn she was building to become elegant country-style accommodation in the bush between Healesville and Alexandra.

The grey barn - which is now home to four stylish guest suites - was just at the lockup stage when the bushfire attacked but, by some fluke, the sturdy structure survived and was still standing when the blaze continued east to all but destroy Marysville an hour later.



Saladin Lodge is surrounded by bush still recovering from the Black Saturday fires. Picture: Sarah Nicholson *Source: Supplied*

Rycroft was in Melbourne on that fateful day and received a call that afternoon from mates who were house sitting to say there was a "massive plume of smoke coming across the range" on the other side of the Maroondah Highway and they were about to flee.

"By the time they got 100m away there was a six-storey wall of flame, that's how fast the fire was travelling, and it was two-and-a-half weeks before I could get back and the place was a mess," she said from a seat at the long dining table in the lodge's cosy living area.

"Two months later, stumps were still imploding and all the topsoil was in the lake, so after the first rains there was a flood, but the fire went straight over the lodge, which just had the windows installed and was about six months away from being ready to open."

Rycroft said the first stage of her recovery, and the process of restoring the land so Saladin Lodge was worthy to welcome guests, was covering the scorched landscape.

"I had to take away the black, the fire had altered the appearance of the land and I had to remove that, so I got hay bales and spread hay around the property," she said.

"But the biggest turning point happened when a group of guys came up from Geelong for the weekend, with trucks and bobcats and asked if they could help me.

"It was like fairies had come to help, 20 blokes who were total strangers gave their time to help me, and thanks to them I was able to remove all the fallen trees and rubbish from the property and have a blank canvas to start again.

"Then the green started to reappear, I found the green almost overpowering at first, and now I'm so excited to see the black and the green."

Today, Rycroft's robust structure is surrounded by lawn, the bush is recovering slowly, with the skeletons of seared mountain ash trees disappearing into vibrant sprays of new leaves, the lake is covered by water lilies and the network of walking tracks has been restored so guests can explore the idyllic landscape.

Inside, leather lounges and armchairs are placed around the common living area to catch the sun streaming through a wall of west-facing windows, with outdoor furniture on the terrace perfectly placed for an alfresco meal or afternoon kip.

The smart B&B suites are wheelchair friendly, with each room featuring comfortable beds and a spacious bathroom.

And the wildlife has made a welcome return to the Narbethong forest.

"Because the building survived Black Saturday my vision for Saladin Lodge didn't change, it just got pushed back a couple of years," the owner said.

"After the fire I thought about what I should do, where I wanted to live, but I love this part of the world so much there was nowhere else I wanted to go.

"It's been hard work but every day I wake up here I know it's been worth it, it's been worth the fight, and now Saladin Lodge is exactly what I had in mind for this land."



A nice place to sit on a sunny afternoon at Saladin Lodge. Picture: Sarah NicholsonSource: Supplied



A comfortable place to sit on the Saladin Lodge

The writer was a guest of Tourism Victoria.

GO2 - NARBETHONG

Saladin Lodge is in Narbethong 14km from Marysville, 29km from Healesville, 35km from Lake Mountain Alpine Resort and 93km from Melbourne, with the drive from the CBD taking 90 minutes along the Maroondah Highway.

See saladinlodge.com.au

The estate is perfectly placed for travellers visiting the Yarra Valley or Lake Mountain, those planning a wedding or significant birthday with owner Kim Rycroft ready to cater special events, or just guests looking to escape for the weekend.

See visityarravalley.com.au

The Visit Victoria website has more information for those planning a jaunt to this part of the state.

See visitvictoria.com

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terrace. Picture: Sarah Nicholson Source:Supplied



Local gourmet goodies for Saladin Lodge guests to enjoy. Picture: Sarah Nicholson Source: Supplied



The lake has become the perfect place for a dip on a warm summer's evening. Picture: Sarah Nicholson Source: Supplied