

Life at Bacchus Marsh

Gliding above Bacchus Marsh and relaxing in Blackwood enchants
Rebecca Tolan

RECENTLY I lost my heart to Blackwood and almost my breakfast in Bacchus Marsh. Not what I had expected from a couple of days exploring Melbourne's fringes.

But you don't have to travel far to have your world turned upside down, which literally happened to me above a Bacchus Marsh airfield.

It is home to three glider clubs. All offer joy flights and all are eager to attract new flyers.

Since watching Pierce Brosnan giving Rene Russo the ride of her life in *The Thomas Crown Affair*, I've thought, that's for me - fancy soaring like a bird, defying gravity in a beautiful, sleek piece of engineering. OK, I won't be gliding above the autumn reds of upstate New York - the rich red soil of The Marsh will have to do.

My pilot, Jeff, is not as pretty as Pierce, but he's lovely, a doctor and a master of aerobatics. Mother would approve.

Gliding is a team sport. You need one pilot to fly the glider, another to fly the tug (a light plane), or if using a winch to pull the glider into flight, a winch man and a tow man to attach the line to the glider. There's camaraderie on the runway and waiting for



Little treasure: The interior and exterior of Let's Talk Retreat in Blackwood.

a flight is an education in flying, thermals and geography.

Eventually, our number's up and a light plane tows us along the grass at a gentle pace and the glider takes off with ease. We circle until we reach 3000ft, when the tow is released and we're flying solo. There's barely a thermal to be felt.

The narrow cockpit seats two - one behind the other and has dual controls for training. Jeff insists I take over the joystick, but, for the life of me, I can't keep the wings horizontal. I drift to the right, oversteer to the

left and then "stall", that is, fly so slowly as to almost stop.

But instead of dropping from the sky tail first as most planes would, the glider's nose simply dips and we begin to accelerate again.

Jeff says it's time for some aerobatics. He points us towards Earth and the wings rattle under the pressure of a high-speed descent.

"Gotta pick up some speed for the loop," Jeff explains.

Holy Mother of God, I think gripping my seat. The speedometer's hand quivers clockwise until it can go



no further. Jeff still reaches for more speed and I wonder how much more the wings (and I) can take. Then he pulls back on the joystick and we're going up, up, up, then upside down and over in a wide, gut-wrenching arc.

"How many G was that?" I ask because that was about my limit and I want to know what that is.

"Oh, about three. Now we'll do a wingover." And Jeff tips the glider on its left wing and we pirouette over it. That really does set my world spinning. My system floods with so much

adrenalin that my foot starts shaking involuntarily.

The rest of the flight is a double comedown as my heart rate slows while Jeff circles to make a perfect landing.

Blackwood, a 30-minute drive from the airfield, is the perfect antidote to such a rush. The township, surrounded by hills, sits at the heart of the Wombat State Forest.

The main street consists of a pub, general store, cafe and a handful of houses. It's not so much sleepy as catatonic. The only signs of life on

just

plane sailing

this wet and windy afternoon are noisy cockies flapping and squawking across the valley.

But there's plenty going on in the general store, a deli-cum-cafe-cum-antique shop. It's lunchtime and the view of the valley from the dining room is instantly calming. There's nothing to see but trees - acres and acres of them.

This place is a little treasure. The food is homemade and hearty and browsing the antiques, I find a Gucci watch for \$40. What a steal! And fascists take note: for sale is an Italian World War II leather cap from a tank battalion. Be quick - it's in the corner to the right.

The antiques are sourced by a pair of passionate collectors called Mike and Margaret, who own the Let's Talk Retreat across the road. They bought the weatherboard, a former bank built in 1861, a few years ago and have been busy furnishing it with some fine restored pieces. Anything that doesn't make the grade ends up at the general store.

The plush retreat sleeps 12, but feels cosy. Guests are welcome to raid the fridge, but are asked to replace wine and leave any goodies that the next guest may appreciate.

There are three aspects that distinguish Let's Talk Retreat: the sculpture garden, which displays local art, the period music room and shed with their pioneer streetscape facade and, most importantly, the view from the first floor living room. It is nothing less than hypnotic.

Flying high: A nervous Rebecca Tolan (below) joins pilot Jeff to take in some spectacular scenery and perform a few gut-churning aerobatics.



boarding pass

VICTORIA



getting there: Bacchus Marsh is a 40-minute drive from Melbourne along the Western Highway.

From there Blackwood is a 30-minute drive north.

stay: Let's Talk Retreat, Blackwood, \$1525 for one night/two days, sleeps 12.

The attached Rose Cottage is \$95 a night for a double, www.letstalkretreats.com.au, 9645 4466.

things to do: In Bacchus Marsh, the Geelong Gliding Club, \$110 for a 2000ft flight, \$130 for a 3000ft flight, 0409 212 527; Lederberg Gorge for walking; Blacksmith's Cottage, open every fourth Sunday of the month.

At Blackwood, St Erth Gardens, www.diggers.com.au, 5368 6514