

Immersed in Nature: Guest Experiences and Wellbeing at Qii House Eco-Retreat

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Abstract

This study explores how guests experience and interpret nature during stays at [Qii House](#), a high-end eco-retreat located in the [Great Otways National Park](#), Victoria.

A thematic analysis was conducted on N=410 customer testimonials collected between 2016 and 2025, using NVivo® software and a weighted keyword-based coding approach. Ten core themes were identified, with Weather Experience (71%), Design & Comfort (56%), Scenery & Views (55%), and Rest & Wellbeing (54%) most frequently mentioned. Findings indicate that nature and the broader environment are central to guest experiences, particularly through atmospheric conditions, immersion in forest surroundings, and restorative wellbeing. The analysis also suggests distinct guest motivations, including wellness-seekers, couples, and design-conscious travellers, many of whom were first-time visitors seeking authentic encounters with nature. Practical recommendations for Qii House and similar upmarket eco-retreats in Victoria, Australia but also abroad include emphasising seasonal storytelling, curating wellness and romantic packages – highlighting the balance between comfort and immersion in nature. These insights contribute to ecotourism and health & wellness tourism research while offering actionable strategies for marketing high-end eco-retreats.

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been growing interest in nature-based and health & wellbeing tourism, reflecting broader societal trends toward sustainability, wellbeing, and authentic travel experiences (Bhuyan et al., 2025). Eco-retreats have emerged as a distinctive segment within this market, offering guests opportunities to disconnect from urban stressors and reconnect with natural environments in settings which combine comfort with ecological sensitivity (Coddling, 2025). Understanding how visitors perceive and articulate their experiences in such retreats is essential not only for refining guest offerings but also for developing and optimizing broader marketing strategies within the tourism sector.

Qii House, an eco-retreat located in the Otways National Park in Lorne, Victoria, represents a compelling case study for exploring these dynamics. The property includes the main Qii House Lodge and adjacent *Tiny Houses*, designed to provide a boutique, high-end escape into nature (Qii House, 2025). Its location, nestled in midst dense rainforest creates a sense of seclusion which appeals to travellers seeking immersion in natural landscapes and being away from the hustle and bustle of urban and metropolitan lifestyle. Between December 2016 and April 2025, more than 400 testimonials were collected from guests staying at Qii House, either through digital records or guestbook transcriptions. These testimonials provide valuable qualitative insights into how visitors experience and interpret their time in this unique environment.

This study applies thematic analysis to N=410 customer testimonials in order to identify the key experiential themes that define a stay at Qii House. Particular attention is paid to the role of nature and the natural surroundings of the Otways in shaping guest experiences, as this reflects not only the core identity of Qii House but also the broader appeal of eco-retreat tourism.

Thus, the aim of this study is twofold: first, to **analyse how nature impacts guests** during their stays, and second, to **derive practical recommendations** for Qii House and similar eco-resorts seeking to attract a high-end, nature-connected clientele. As such, this study – to our knowledge the first of its kind in Australia – is qualitative in nature.

By combining weighted keyword-based coding with thematic categorisation, this research provides both quantitative and qualitative insights into guest motivations, preferences, and emotional responses. The findings contribute to the growing number of publications on ecotourism, health & wellbeing travel, and the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Voigt et al., 2011), while offering actionable implications for practitioners in the eco-retreat sector.

2. Methodology

A total of 410 guest testimonials were analysed, covering stays at Qii House and its three Tiny Houses between December 2016 and April 2025. The testimonials were sourced from both digital records and manual guestbook entries, with the latter requiring transcription into digital form as part of the project.

The analysis was conducted in NVivo®, a qualitative data analysis software package widely used for thematic coding and content analysis. A keyword-based coding framework was developed prior to analysis, comprising ten thematic categories:

- i. Weather Experience
- ii. Design & Comfort
- iii. Scenery & Views
- iv. Rest & Wellbeing
- v. Nature & Surroundings
- vi. Romance & Connection
- vii. Peace & Tranquillity
- viii. Activities & Location
- ix. Special Occasion and
- x. Wildlife.

Each theme was defined by an expanded list of keywords to ensure comprehensive coverage (e.g., “trees, forest, greenery” for Nature & Surroundings; “peaceful, serene, calm” for Peace & Tranquillity). See Appendix A for a full list.

The use of pre-defined keyword lists allowed for systematic and replicable coding of all N=410 guest testimonials. However, this approach may have missed less common or unconventional expressions which did not match the selected keywords and could not readily be classified. To address this, testimonials were periodically reviewed for recurring phrases outside the established categories, such as mentions of seasonal ambiance or specific forest sounds, which were incorporated into the interpretation of related themes.

To avoid over-counting, a weighted coding approach was applied: each testimonial could only contribute one count per theme, regardless of how many times related words were repeated. This allowed the results to reflect the proportion of guests who mentioned a theme rather than raw keyword frequencies.

NVivo®'s query tools were used to generate descriptive statistics, including the frequency and percentage of testimonials referencing each theme. This process provided a clear overview of how nature and related experiences shaped guest reflections at Qii House.

3. Results

A thematic analysis of N=410 customer testimonials from Qii House and its adjacent Tiny Houses identified ten core themes (see Table 1). Each testimonial was coded into one or more themes, and frequencies were calculated to show the proportion of guests mentioning each theme. The analysis used a weighted keyword-based coding approach, where each testimonial could contribute only one count per theme, regardless of repeated mentions of related words. This ensured that the results reflected the proportion of unique guests highlighting each theme rather than raw word frequencies.

Table 1: Frequencies of Themes

Theme	N Testimonials	% Testimonials
Weather Experience	292	71.2%
Design & Comfort	229	55.9%
Scenery & Views	226	55.1%
Rest & Wellbeing	223	54.4%
Nature & Surroundings	218	53.2%
Romance & Connection	214	52.2%
Peace & Tranquillity	212	51.7%
Activities & Location	134	32.7%
Special Occasion	119	29.0%
Wildlife	19	4.6%

4. Key Findings

4.1 Weather as a Defining Experience

The most frequently mentioned theme was Weather Experience (71%). Guests consistently reflected on atmospheric conditions such as mist, rain, sunlight, and starry skies. Rather than being framed as obstacles, these weather elements were often described as integral to the retreat's atmosphere, adding character and uniqueness to each stay.

4.2 Comfort, Design, and Aesthetic Appeal

Over half of all testimonials referred to Design & Comfort (56%), underscoring the importance of stylish interiors, architecture, and homely amenities. Guests repeatedly highlighted the balance between luxury and natural setting, suggesting

that Qii House successfully appeals to design-conscious travellers who also value eco-connection.

4.3 Visual and Restorative Qualities of the Setting

Scenery & Views (55%) and Rest & Wellbeing (54%) were nearly equally prominent, demonstrating the central role of the visual landscape (e.g., forest views, panoramic horizons) in shaping restorative, calming experiences. These themes often overlapped, showing that aesthetic appreciation of nature was tied to feelings of relaxation and rejuvenation.

4.4 Immersion in Nature and Relational Benefits

Just over half of guests mentioned Nature & Surroundings (53%) and Romance & Connection (52%). These themes point to the dual impact of nature immersion, supporting both individual restoration and relationship-building. Testimonials often described shared experiences (e.g., couples enjoying misty mornings or evenings by the fire), showing how the natural setting fostered intimacy and connection.

4.5 Secondary Themes

While less frequently cited, Peace & Tranquillity (52%) further reinforced the sense of escape and sanctuary offered by Qii House. Activities & Location (33%) and Special Occasion (29%) appeared as secondary drivers, reflecting practical considerations (e.g., hiking trails, proximity to Lorne – the nearby town at the Great Ocean Road; see also Rosenberg et al., 2021) and event-based visits (e.g., anniversaries, weddings). Finally, Wildlife was mentioned least often (5%), suggesting that guests valued the atmosphere and setting more than encounters with specific fauna – encounters which could also be a bit challenging when you take into consideration the possibility of snakes in the Otways.

5. Discussion

The analysis highlights how nature and the broader environment play a central role in shaping guest experiences at Qii House. Across N=410 testimonials, guests reflected consistently on their interaction with both the natural and built environment, alongside emotional, relational, and atmospheric elements of their stay. The findings point to several clear patterns in how nature is perceived and the types of visitors attracted to this eco-lodge.

5.1 Nature and the Environment as Core Drivers

The most striking result is the high prevalence of Weather Experience (71% of testimonials). Rather than describing weather as a negative or disruptive factor, guests frequently celebrated atmospheric conditions such as mist, rain, sunshine through the canopy, or crisp cool mornings. This suggests that weather was experienced not merely as a backdrop but as an active feature of the retreat, shaping atmosphere and memory. Lashley (2015) argues that in hospitality contexts, environmental conditions are often framed as barriers; however, Qii House demonstrates the potential for reframing weather as a value-adding dimension of the guest experience. This aligns with research on *slow tourism*, during which visitors embrace local rhythms, variability, and unpredictability as part of a deeper immersion (Dickinson et al., 2011).

Similarly, Nature & Surroundings (53%) and Scenery & Views (55%) underscore the importance of the Otways National Park setting per se. Guests often described the lodge as “immersed” in the forest or highlighted views of the canopy and surrounding landscape. These findings echo Weaver's (2001) notion of ecotourism as centred on “authentic” connections with natural landscapes, though in this case the connection is carefully mediated through comfort and design rather than rugged adventure. The lower frequency of Wildlife (5%) references further illustrates this distinction: guests were not primarily motivated by biodiversity or species encounters but by the overall ambience of nature and the impact it had on them. This pattern mirrors national trends showing that Australian nature-based tourism increasingly focuses on atmosphere, health & wellbeing, and sustainability rather than wildlife interaction (Tourism Research Australia, 2024).

5.2 The Role of Design, Comfort, and Atmosphere

Over half of guests mentioned Design & Comfort (56%), highlighting the boutique architecture, stylish interiors, and luxurious amenities. This indicates that Qii House's appeal lies not in a rustic immersion but in a biophilic integration of comfort and nature (Kellert, 2008). Guests appear to value a special design and biophilic architecture which enables them to experience nature while remaining enveloped in warmth, cleanliness, and style. Such findings suggest that Qii House caters not only to traditional eco-tourists but also to a growing market of design-conscious, high-end travellers which are often urban professionals seeking a curated introduction to nature.

The intersection of comfort and natural setting may explain why Qii House attracts many visitors who are new to seeking the "destination nature". Rather than seasoned eco-tourists, these guests approach the retreat as a gateway experience, where exposure to wilderness is tempered by security and aesthetic familiarity. Bell et al. (2007) describe this as a key trend in contemporary nature-based tourism, in which short-term, restorative stays are preferred over long-term or adventurous immersions.

5.3 Restorative and Relational Experiences

Equally significant were themes tied to Rest & Wellbeing (54%), Peace & Tranquillity (52%), and Romance & Connection (52%). These suggest that many guests come to Qii House as a retreat from stress, work, and routine, seeking intimacy, mindfulness, and/or rejuvenation. Current health & wellbeing tourism literature highlights that and how natural settings are increasingly leveraged as sites of therapeutic escape, particularly for urban-based visitors seeking to recharge (Voigt et al., 2011). Recent evidence further reinforces this, showing that health & wellbeing tourism contributes to multidimensional benefits, such as psychological, physical, and environmental effects, through exposure to restorative environments and mindful leisure practices (Liao et al., 2022; Haukeland et al., 2023).

Testimonials described the retreat as restorative, soothing, or nourishing, reflecting a broader cultural trend which positions time in nature as a counterbalance to overstimulation and digital fatigue (Kou et al., 2024). This aligns with global patterns showing rising demand for nature-based, health-oriented escapes and digital detox which make health & wellbeing central to the travel experience sought (Salman Majeed et al., 2022).

The relational dimension of the retreat is similarly prominent. Guests often framed their visit in terms of romantic getaways, anniversaries, or shared escapes, indicating that Qii House functions as a site of meaning-making and intimacy. This supports Pine and Gilmore's (1999) concept of the "experience economy" in which consumers seek emotionally significant and symbolic experiences rather than standardised products and ready-made holiday packages. In this sense, Qii House is not simply a place to stay but an important stage for personal milestones and relationship-building.

6. Market Segments Emerging from the Findings

Taken together, the analysis suggests that Qii House appeals to three overlapping markets. The primary market consists of high-end, experience-driven eco-travellers (couples, wellness seekers, urban professionals, and first-time nature visitors) who are drawn to the blend of immersion, comfort, and design. This finding mirrors national and international trends showing that Australian travellers or those wanting to explore Australia, increasingly prioritise sustainable, nature-rich, and experiential stays over conventional accommodation (Tourism Research Australia, 2024).

The secondary market comprises groups and celebratory visitors who select Qii House for special occasions such as weddings or anniversaries. For these guests, the retreat serves as both a memorable venue and a symbolic backdrop for emotionally meaningful events.

The opportunity market involves "experience collectors," a growing demographic of domestic and international travellers who prioritise uniqueness and atmosphere. For this group, weather and seasonal conditions such as mist, starry skies, or winter

firelight, are central to the appeal. Qii House is well positioned to attract such visitors by framing atmospheric conditions as defining features of the stay (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 2024).

7. Implications for Marketing

These patterns carry several marketing implications for Qii House and comparable eco-retreats. First, seasonal branding and storytelling should be developed to showcase the lodge's atmospheric qualities. Rather than apologising for rain or mist, campaigns could highlight them as signature experiences ("Wake up in the clouds", "Lose yourself in the forest hush"), differentiating Qii House from more weather-dependent resorts.

Second, curated packages targeting couples and wellness travellers such as "Romantic Weekend in the Otways" or "Mindfulness in the Forest", can reinforce the retreat's positioning as a site of intimacy and healing. Research suggests that bundled offerings tied to wellness or romance increase both emotional resonance and visitor loyalty (Smith & Puczkó, 2014).

Third, marketing should continue to emphasise design and comfort in balance with nature, appealing to urban professionals and design-conscious travellers. Highlighting the biophilic principles of the interiors (Kellert, 2008) can reassure first-time nature visitors while elevating the lodge's premium positioning.

Finally, Qii House should strengthen its visibility as a boutique event venue, particularly for small-scale weddings and anniversaries. By leveraging testimonials and imagery tied to special occasions, the retreat can extend its appeal beyond individuals to groups seeking distinctive milestone experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

8. Limitations of the Analysis

It is important to note that the aforementioned findings are based on thematic coding of (online) testimonials, which may be biased towards highly satisfied guests

who are more likely motivated to share experiences publicly (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). The use of weighted keyword-based coding in NVivo® provided a structured overview of themes, but it risks simplifying complex guest narratives and under-representing less frequently mentioned aspects. Moreover, the absence of demographic data limits the ability to segment markets by age, origin, gender, socio-economic status or cultural background. These limitations should be acknowledged in interpreting the results and addressed in future research through complementary methods such as surveys or interviews. Similarly, quantitative data, when collected, should strengthen the findings.

It should also be noted that the findings reflect guest testimonials for a single, unique high-end eco-retreat, namely Qii House. It would be helpful to obtain such testimonials also from other locations and establishments as this would allow cross-comparisons which may then underpin the findings arrived at for Qii House.

9. Conclusion

Analysis of N=410 guest testimonials at Qii House highlights that and how nature, atmospheric conditions as well as scenic surroundings are central to guest experiences, while comfort and design enhance the appeal for first-time and high-end visitors. Guests seek restorative, wellness-oriented, and relational experiences, indicating that its retreat functions are both a sanctuary and a site for meaningful connections with nature. Practical implications include emphasising seasonal storytelling, health & wellbeing and romance-focused packages, and positioning the lodge for special occasions. Despite limitations related to self-selected testimonials and demographic gaps, the study demonstrates how eco-retreats can deliver authentic, emotionally resonant experiences that balance luxury with immersion in nature.

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11. Verification of Research Infrastructure

The research environment centred on “*The Zaborin Walk*”, an INFTA-Accredited Forest Therapy trail located at Qii House Eco-Retreat. This infrastructure is a core component of the Empowerment to Self-Care Program at Qii House, designed to facilitate guest wellbeing through intentional, sensory-based nature immersion.

12. Acknowledgements

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13. Funding

This research and study was commissioned and co-funded by **Heather Kolb**, the proprietor of Qii House Eco-Retreat. Heather Kolb had no role in the final data analysis or the writing of the manuscript.

Appendix A:

Keyword Lists for Thematic Coding

Theme	Keywords
Design & Comfort	design, designed, architecture, build, structure, house, homey, homely, cozy, cosy, comfort, comfortable, comfy, warm, warming, heated, heating, fireplace, fire, firewood, bed, bedding, mattress, pillow, linen, sheets, blanket, doona, quilt, couch, sofa, chair, lounge, seating, furniture, stylish, modern, chic, aesthetic, beautiful inside, interior, layout, neat, tidy, clean, cleanliness, spotless, well-kept, maintained, luxury, luxurious, premium, facilities, amenities, kitchen, cooking, cooktop, oven, appliances, bathroom, shower, bath, toilet, sink, functional, practical, convenient, spacious, roomy
Nature & Surroundings	nature, natural, wilderness, wild, forest, woods, bush, bushland, trees, tree, canopy, tall trees, rainforest, jungle, plants, flora, greenery, leaves, ferns, moss, garden, gardens, flowers, blossoms, native plants, fresh air, clean air, pure air, natural environment, surroundings, setting, backdrop, landscape, park, reserve, habitat, environment, earthy, grounded, outdoor, outdoors
Activities & Location	walk, walking, strolling, wander, wanderlust, hike, hiking, trek, trekking, adventure, exploring, explore, discovery, outing, tour, excursion, journey, trip, climb, climbing, forest therapy, forest bathing, shinrin yoku, meditation walk, trails, trail, path, paths, tracks, bushwalk, bushwalking, sightseeing, lookout, waterfall, waterfalls, nearby, close by, close, location, accessible, easy to get to, convenient, proximity, region, area, around, explore the area
Peace & Tranquillity	peace, peaceful, peace of mind, calm, calming, serene, serenity, tranquil, tranquility, meditative, meditation, reflective, silence, stillness, quiet, hushed, secluded, hidden, private, privacy, escape, retreat, haven,

	sanctuary, refuge, getaway, oasis, slow, gentle, relaxing, restful, chill, switch off, unwind, reset, de-stress, stress free, soothing, healing space
Scenery & Views	view, views, scenery, scene, landscape, outlook, outlooks, vista, vistas, horizon, horizons, backdrop, mountain, mountains, mountain range, valley, valleys, hillside, hills, slope, panorama, panoramic, picturesque, pretty, beautiful, stunning, breathtaking, jaw-dropping, spectacular, magnificent, gorgeous, incredible, amazing, striking, impressive, scenery outside, looking out, look out, window view
Rest & Wellbeing	rest, resting, relaxation, relax, relaxed, relaxing, laid back, unwind, unwinding, rejuvenate, rejuvenation, revive, revitalise, revitalized, restore, restored, healing, therapy, therapeutic, soothing, calming, wellness, wellbeing, well-being, nourish, nourishing, refreshing, refresh, refreshed, restorative, holistic, mindful, mindfulness, balanced, stress relief, de-stress, recharge, energised, energized, sleep, good sleep, nap, comfy rest
Wildlife	wildlife, animals, animal, fauna, creatures, critters, insects, bugs, butterflies, moths, birds, birdlife, kookaburra, kookaburras, lyrebird, lyrebirds, cockatoo, cockatoos, galah, parrots, parrot, rosella, rosellas, owls, owl, bats, possum, possums, kangaroo, kangaroos, wallaby, wallabies, wombat, wombats, echidna, echidnas, koala, koalas, reptiles, lizard, lizards, snakes, frogs, croak, fauna noises, bird song, birdsong
Weather Experience	weather, climate, sunny, sunshine, sun, sunrise, sunset, warm, warmth, hot, heat, cold, chilly, frosty, freezing, cool, breeze, breezy, windy, winds, gust, gusty, storm, stormy, drizzle, rainy, rain, rainfall, downpour, mist, misty, fog, foggy, haze, hazy, cloudy, clouds, thunder, thunderstorm,

	lightning, snow, snowy, snowfall, frost, ice, icy, crisp air, fresh air
Romance & Connection	romance, romantic, couple, couples, partner, partners, love, lovely, together, togetherness, bond, bonded, connection, connected, intimate, intimacy, affectionate, affection, caring, embrace, hugged, cuddled, honeymoon, honeymooners, anniversary, anniversaries, proposal, engagement, marriage, married, newlyweds, special time, special moment, shared experience, relationship
Special Occasion	special, special occasion, occasion, event, milestone, celebration, celebrate, party, reunion, gathering, get together, wedding, weddings, anniversary, anniversaries, birthday, birthdays, proposal, engagement, ceremony, vows, festive, festivities, holiday, honeymoon, retreat, group trip, family trip