



This page, clockwise from top: Sally the goat loves munching on blackberries, porridge and gardens; Clydesdales Sampson and Phil recline in the sunshine; learning to cook in the wood-fired stoves; a sign painted by a young visitor; and the annual woodchop. **Opposite page:** an old forge is used to make handles and other useful items for sale at local markets to raise money for Mittagundi.



TEENS GONE WILD

A BUSH HAVEN IN RURAL VICTORIA COMBINES GEOGRAPHIC ISOLATION, WORK IN THE OUTDOORS AND THE SERENITY OF NATURE TO TRANSFORM THE HECTIC LIVES OF CITY TEENS.

WORDS BY Jo Stewart





Imagine living without electricity, clocks, money, schedules, phones, the internet and television. Now imaginè being a teenager and living without these things. While it's hard to imagine wrestling a teen away from their smartphone, this type of problem is what not-for-profit organisation Mittagundi has been doing for 30 years. With a focus on teaching young people about the beauty of going back to basics, Mittagundi takes trailblazing teens aged between 14 and 17 on a personal journey unlike any they've been on before.

On 400 acres of land on the Upper Mitta Mitta River, north of Omeo, the Mittagundi property is all the things the city isn't: peaceful, isolated and free from light pollution, it's a world away (four hours' drive) from the urban hum of Melbourne. The groups live in rustic cabins on the property, and much of their time is spent hiking, camping and abseiling. They also help to run the pioneer-style farm, with chopping wood, gardening and baking the types of tasks the teens are typically involved in. The groups are made up of a mix of teens from different schools and backgrounds, which gives them a chance to forge new friendships outside of their immediate network. No special skills are required as the focus is simply on giving something a go, rather than being competitive with others – or yourself.

While it certainly takes a bit to adjust to living without the conveniences and accoutrements of modern life, the benefits start to creep in once the tech-withdrawal wears off. Mittagundi's Business Manager, Sarah Yeates, comments; "Mittagundi enables young people to be strong in their

own self and to be happy with who they are. They have the opportunity to experience something new and to learn to trust others. They also reap the rich rewards of finding out that commitment and hard work can be fun."

Many teens return home with the ability and desire to live a greener, simpler existence. "Parents often report that their kids come back with more confidence and a greater ability to grow within themselves," Yeates notes. "One mother told us that her daughter threw her phone away and stopped using Facebook for five months [after returning]. She enjoyed being free from social media."

With teenagers now facing more complex challenges than previous generations, it appears that places like Mittagundi are essential to our community. "Today's teens are processing an incredible amount of stimulus. There's an abundance of career choices for teens to take in life, however there's little opportunity for them to develop self-awareness. Mittagundi assists them on this inner journey," says Yeates.

While there is a fee to attend, a number of places are subsidised for teens from low-income families. Mittagundi welcomes donations and holds fundraisers, which are essential to the long-term viability of this organisation. It has high running costs but is of significant value to our rapidly changing world.

Find out more at: www.mittagundi.org.au