

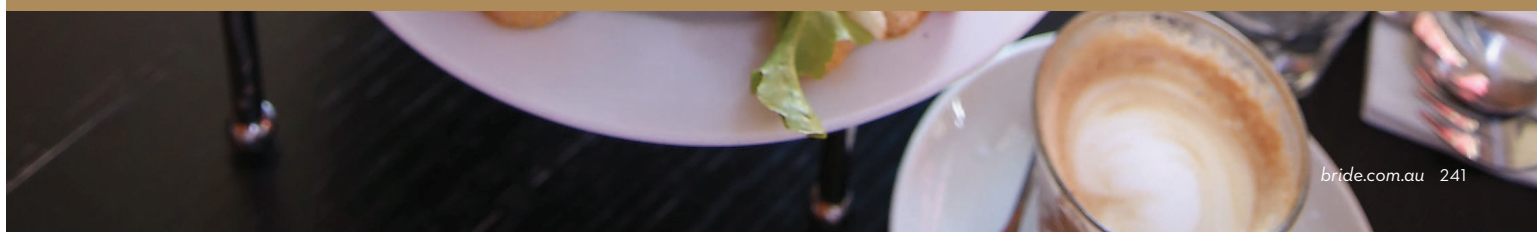
HEN'S GETAWAY



HEN'S WEEKEND

Gather your girlfriends for an indulgent hen's getaway in the Blue Mountains, with pampering, chocolate and shopping on tap.

Words and photography CATHERINE MARSHALL



HEN'S GETAWAY

There are three things the quintessential girls' getaway simply cannot do without: chocolate, pampering sessions and a boudoir so lavish one almost has to be dragged from it to enjoy the sunshine and flowers flourishing outside.

The boudoir is the first requirement to be ticked off the list when we arrive in Leura in the upper Blue Mountains. We're staying at Mountain Whispers (mountainwhispers.com.au), a boutique selection of period houses that feel at once like private homes and luxury hotels. There's milk, eggs and bacon in the fridge, sherry in a crystal decanter and a gas log fire warming the hearth. But clues to the fact that these perfectly-appointed houses are more than just simple B&Bs are scattered liberally about: complimentary bottles of regional wine, fluffy bathrobes, 1000-count Egyptian cotton sheets and chocolate kisses scattered atop them.

It's a battle deciding which room to choose, for each one is more impressive than the last. Our party is split between two abodes, Varenna and Leura Rose, which are located a short walk from one another. I'm staying at Leura Rose, a cottage built in 1914 as a mountain retreat for a wealthy Sydney merchant. The crisp air and cushioning English foliage give no hint of the eucalypt-encrusted, sandstone valley that plunges away from the escarpment just to the south of here. It's a location that mixes the competing elements of Edwardian infrastructure with rugged Australian bushland, yet when I step into Leura Rose's Blue Room I feel the vast outdoors - with all its beauty, mystery and danger - retreat, and the deep blue walls of this oil-scented capsule envelop me.

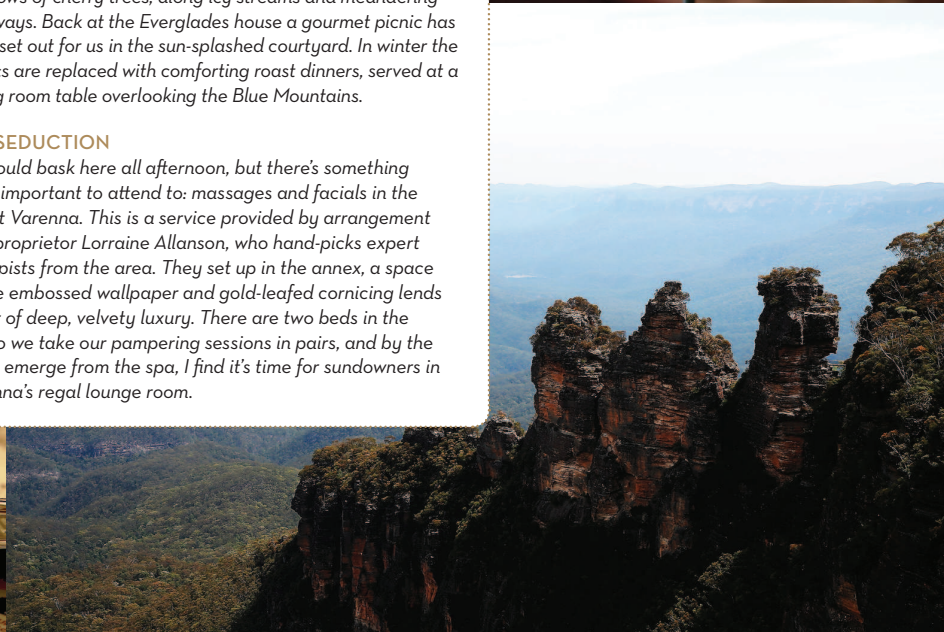
GARDEN GRACE

Inviting as the cottage is, by day there are too many enticements waiting to lure us into this magnificent UNESCO World Heritage landscape. But we needn't depart from the ladylike, relaxed agenda we've set ourselves: we head off first to the genteel Everglades (37 Everglades Ave, Leura), a historic house and garden that dates back to 1930 and teeters on the brink of the Leura plateau above the Blue Mountains National Park. Now a member of the National Trust of Australia, the once privately-owned Everglades fell into a state of disrepair before being lovingly revived according to its original art deco design.

We ramble across five enchanting hectares, through woodlands and flowering terraces, past an outdoor theatre and rows of cherry trees, along icy streams and meandering pathways. Back at the Everglades house a gourmet picnic has been set out for us in the sun-splashed courtyard. In winter the picnics are replaced with comforting roast dinners, served at a dining room table overlooking the Blue Mountains.

SPA SEDUCTION

We could bask here all afternoon, but there's something more important to attend to: massages and facials in the spa at Varenna. This is a service provided by arrangement with proprietor Lorraine Allanson, who hand-picks expert therapists from the area. They set up in the annex, a space where embossed wallpaper and gold-leafed cornicing lends an air of deep, velvety luxury. There are two beds in the spa so we take our pampering sessions in pairs, and by the time I emerge from the spa, I find it's time for sundowners in Varenna's regal lounge room.





PRIVATE CHEF

The benign efforts of the day have left us feeling so relaxed we're positively sleepy, but we don't have far to go for dinner: we've booked in-house chef Martin Wrighton to cook us a three-course meal right here at Varenna. While Martin sets to work in the kitchen, Peter Welling – a butler-for-hire who runs a company called Peter's Party Helpers – serves canapes and champagne. We feast on caramelised onion tartlets, salmon and crab lasagne, roast lamb, the brightest seasonable vegetables, and strawberries Romanoff for dessert. Stomachs groaning, we file off to our respective bedrooms, some at Varenna, the rest of us a short walk away at Leura Rose.

SWEET SENSATION

Morning brings with it bright skies and spectacular views of the famous Three Sisters from the lookout in nearby Katoomba. Back on the main street of Leura, we eagerly enter the hallowed doorway of Josophan's (132 Leura Mall, Leura), a fine chocolate boutique that carries jewel-like chocolates made from Mayan chilli and Tahitian vanilla, and little buttercups filled with peanut butter. In a back room, chocolatier Nick Hardwidge fills moulds with rich ganache and dusts chocolate fishes with edible gold leaf.

Despite sampling the offerings at Josophan's, we are still game for high tea at Café Madeleine (187a Leura Mall, Leura), where platters overflow with sandwiches, cranberry scones and tiny caramel-filled pastry cups. We assuage our gluttonous guilt by taking a brisk walk along the street, popping in and out of shops that sell vintage clothing, homewares, leather goods and – perfect for the bride-to-be – frilly, pastel-coloured cotton undies.

That afternoon we return to the annex at Varenna, which has been transformed now into a beauty parlour. Following instructions from Arbonne consultant Helen Sweeney, we transform ourselves – false eyelashes included – into far better versions of our original selves. "It brings out the diva in us all," says Lorraine of this specially-arranged activity.

FINE DINING

And so it is that a fabulous-looking group of women sits down to dinner that night at Leura Garage (84 Railway Pale, Leura). The old garage has been re-imagined into a hip, first-class eatery, but wall trusses and hoists and tools embedded in the concrete floor belie its early beginnings. The food – sticky glazed pork ribs; an ocean board of oysters, scallops, prawns and calamari; potato and anchovy pizza; mini heirloom vegetables – is superb. The herbs and vegetables are grown in the nearby Kanimbla Valley, and wines come from Orange.

It's a short trundle down the road to the cottages. Replete with the joys of indulgence and friendship, we walk through the flower-scented night air and a veil of the softest mist. 🍷

