

Let's give peace a chance

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Strawberry Patch cottage in Leura.

All talk of children is silenced as Bellinda Kontominas indulges in the grown-up pursuits of massage and magazines.

For the past eight years, most topics of conversation with my sister have battled to compete with nappy changing, helping with homework and the other daily needs of her two children. So when the opportunity arose to spend a weekend with just her and her husband, my better half and I jumped at the chance.

Strawberry Patch, in the Blue Mountains suburb of Leura, proves the perfect spot for our adults-only break. Set back from the street behind dense shrubbery, the tranquil 1912 weatherboard has the soothing tones of Norah Jones playing throughout the house when we arrive.

The property is one of four in the Mountain Whispers portfolio owned and managed by Lorraine Allanson, who has sympathetically restored each to its original character.

Strawberry Patch's deep-green walls and gas fireplace lend a warmth to the cosy lounge room, which is stocked with games, such as draughts, dominoes, cards and Scrabble. There's also a selection of books, magazines, CDs and DVDs that can be enjoyed with the complimentary bottle of red or white wine, chocolates, juicy strawberries and port in a crystal carafe.

The main bedroom has a mahogany four-poster bed with fleur-de-lis curtains and plush bedding, from which you can gaze up at the cloud-like painted ceiling.

The back of the house, decorated in a French-provincial style and with underfloor heating, includes a large, granite kitchen with a slow-combustion fire, and an elevated dining area, which opens through french doors to a courtyard surrounded by greenery.

Off the kitchen, there's a second smaller, and slightly dark, bedroom, and a glorious black-and-white tiled bathroom with a deep spa.

For dinner, we pick up a pizza from the renowned Papa Dino's pizzeria in Katoomba then head back to devour it with wine in front of the fire. We get an early night and wake the next morning feeling fresh and ready to tackle one of the region's many mountain-biking trails. (Lorraine has helpfully provided a list of trails and their difficulty ratings.)

First, though, we prepare a hearty breakfast in the kitchen, which has an electric cooktop, a dishwasher, and all the bits and bobs required to prepare whatever your stomach desires. Lorraine has also provided our preferred bread and milk, along with eggs, tomatoes and bacon, homemade strawberry jam and marmalade, and an assortment of teas, a coffee plunger, hot chocolate, Weet-Bix, cornflakes and biscuits.

We eat so much, we almost roll out of the car when we arrive at our chosen bike trail, which begins in a side street off the Great Western Highway, not far from Blackheath's main street. We madly pedal and skid along the undulating Burrumoko Fire Trail, through the Grose Wilderness, until we reach the Baltzer Lookout, which has expansive views of the steep cliff lines and massive gorges that define the Blue Mountains.

Following the mostly uphill return trip, my sister and I are glad to have each booked an in-house massage, which is performed in front of the fire in the darkened kitchen to calming music. While she is massaged, I read women's magazines and indulge in a hot spa. The men escape to a local pub.

The afternoon is spent meandering through homewares shops, buying candles for the mantelpiece and a colourful print for our dining-room wall.

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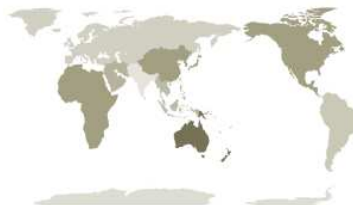
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We return to the cottage for a rest before heading to the regal Carrington Hotel in Katoomba, where we sip pre-dinner cocktails in The Lounge and watch the passing parade of a wedding reception in the nearby Grand Dining Room.

Returning to Leura, we settle on the popular Leura Garage for a filling share-plate dinner that includes garlic king prawns, saltbush lamb, fish tagine and baby pork ribs, accompanied by Dry Ridge Blue Mountains Riesling from the nearby Megalong Valley.

The funky eatery is on the site of a former mechanics' workshop and has retained elements of its heritage with a vintage car-hoist used as a wine rack and plant pots made from stacked tyres. As we revel in uninterrupted adult conversation, thoughts of children and homework couldn't be further from our minds.

Trip notes

Where Strawberry Patch, Mountain Whispers, Leura, 0430 496 755, mountainwhispers.com.au.

Getting there Take the Leura exit off the Great Western Highway; the cottage is a two-minute walk from the town centre.

How much \$360 a night a couple on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Weeknights, \$300 a night a couple. Extra adults/children, \$75 a night. Minimum two-night stay. Massages \$95 an hour. In-house chef is available on request.

Style statement Traditional elegance meets French-provincial style.

Perfect for A romantic getaway or a mini-break for two couples.

Take the kids? The property may be unsuitable for children under 10 because you'll be forever moving them away from all of the expensive trinkets.

A shame about The front garden, which could be tidied to provide another outdoor sitting area.

Kudos The strawberry theme features throughout — in the stained-glass windows of the bathroom, the cookie jar and other knick-knacks — yet it's subtle and classy.

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