



Living it up in the great indoors

Christine Sams found it somewhat difficult to leave the plush comfort - and bathtub - at Varenna.

In the heart of Leura in the Blue Mountains, a short drive away from breathtaking nature trails and scenery, Varenna, it's obvious from the start, is perfectly placed for an adventurous weekend outdoors. But there's only one problem, we don't want to leave the house.

On our first entry into the three-bedroom property, with its plush and romantic interior, we actually gasp out loud.

Perhaps it is the tinkling of background music, the rose petals scattered on the lounge room table, accompanied with red wine and a crystal decanter of sherry, placed in the vicinity of the glowing fireplace. It sounds like a romantic cliché, but it works beautifully - all tension seems to ease out of my shoulders.

Elsewhere, we are delighted by the four-poster bed and ruby red walls (lined with vintage artworks and photography) of the main bedroom. Surely the grand hallway, which gives the house a beautiful flow with its

gleaming floorboards, is also part of our reaction?

But it is the large, old-fashioned clawfoot bathtub which seals the deal - set on gleaming tiles, which just happen to be heated underfoot. With its genuine Edwardian charm, mixed with the comforts of modern technology, Varenna is a place which is very hard to leave.

Once we explore each room of the house - pointing out things excitedly - it becomes obvious no detail has been ignored.

Important things have been taken care of assiduously - comfort, cleanliness and a real sense of welcome - but what makes Varenna extra special is the attention to tiny details, from the freshly folded cotton robes and slippers, intriguing books neatly placed in each room, not to mention the breakfast supplies - your favourite type of bread is in the kitchen (they ask beforehand), eggs neatly gathered in a basket in the fridge and, in the cupboard, a jar of marshmallows perfectly situated near a tin of hot chocolate powder.

Although the interior of Varenna has relaxed us completely, it is only the next morning that we discover the charms of the garden.

Dotted with little statues, signs and sculptures, and fronted with a flowing fountain, the garden - yet again characterised by its small but charming details - is a delight to

inner-city eyes. Most of the work has been put in around the house itself and we find ourselves unwinding at an outdoor table in the backyard, eating a home-cooked breakfast.

It is only when our relaxing morning begins edging towards lunchtime that we finally admit we'd better leave the house and go exploring in Leura and Katoomba. The location is ideal - it is a short drive to Katoomba, through the back streets of the mountain villages. Leura's main township is about two blocks away on foot.

Even after an energetic afternoon exploring the mountains - our cheeks are flushed from the heady mix of fresh air and eucalyptus - it is a thrill to return to the house, for a deep soak in the bath and a cosy night in.

Throughout our stay there is no downside to Varenna. The only time we feel less than comfortable is when we fail to remember the code for the alarm system, which wails loudly. But no harm done, we punch in numbers correctly, and within a minute or so, peace is restored. By the end of our weekend, it feels as though we have been away longer than two days. The house has given us real affection for Leura - and the Blue Mountains - making us eager to return.

The writer was a guest of Varenna and Tourism NSW.



Cupid was here ... (clockwise from above) Varenna guesthouse; the romantic setting of the dining room; a luxurious bedroom.



> TRIP NOTES

Address Varenna,
 97 Railway Parade, Leura
 Phone 0430 496 755.
www.varenna.net.au.

Rates A two-night weekend rate for one room (1 to 2 people) is \$560, which means staying in the entire house, but using only one bedroom. An additional night is \$280. For larger groups, weekend rates for four people (using two rooms) is \$700, for three rooms (up to six people) \$900. Mid-week rates are also available.

> VERDICT

Why you'd go You want a hidden gem in the Blue Mountains which evokes a sense of comfort and grandeur and to spoil each other with a luxurious, romantic weekend.

Why you wouldn't You're focusing on the outdoors in the Blue Mountains and want more basic accommodation.

> FIND TIME TO

■ Take a leisurely walk to the Three Sisters at Katoomba – there are clearly marked paths – or take a walk down the Grand

Stairway, all 900 steps down to the valley floor.

■ Visit Elizabeth Rosa Fine Stationery (an exquisite shop for stationery lovers, filled with journals and fine paper) and the Moontree candle shop, both in Leura's main street.

■ Visit the Norman Lindsay Gallery And Museum in nearby Faulconbridge (via Springwood).





Jack's pub taps into the past

The Three Sisters are not the only Blue Mountains attraction steeped in myth and legend, writes **Paul Pottinger**

AFTER the obligatory visit to the Three Sisters, there is, in the Blue Mountains tourist town of Katoomba, another imposing work of nature's force to behold.

Take a vigorous and thirsty stroll up the main street, through the railway station to the Gearin Hotel, itself an establishment of long and fond repute.

When the Sunday sun is high and bright, and if his movie-making schedule permits, you might chance to see Gearin part-owner Jack Thompson attached to the ceramic ridge that is the pub's long front bar.

It could be said without too much licence, that this licensee is almost equally steeped in myth and legend as those petrified siblings down the road.

But an afternoon revolving around Thompson is a sight more stimulating, especially here in this oldest local "public house" — as he calls it — that he and his partners both personal and business are in the process of reinvigorating.

As we strolled through the Gearin's old-world portals one recent Sunday, we somehow felt Thompson's impossibly mellifluous voice before we heard it. Over a schooner

of micro-brewed Kilagh stout we tell him with feeling that it's a relief that the joint remains essentially as it was.

"A real pub," my wife observes. "Tiles, taps and timber."

"I love that," Thompson says with a grin.

"There are very few remaining. It's all become long panes of glass, chrome and the odour of espresso. There was a woman in here the other day, standing in the hallway, gazing into the dining room with tears in her eyes.

"There was a convent school over there [the north side of the Great Western Highway], virtually an abandoned building now. She and her sister used to board and once a fortnight their parents would come up here and bring them to the dining room for Sunday dinner.

"She said 'All that's missing is the white damask table clothes. My whole childhood comes back here'."

As it would for many of us whose memories of the world west of Sydney precede the incessant jangling of pokies (the Gearin's occupy a discreet alcove) and the mindless drone of satellite television. Precede, indeed, any form of television.

The front bar in which we sit and sip dates from 1881, when it was built by George Biles, and so is older than those grander bits of Katoomba's built heritage on the south side of the tracks. Bought by a Mrs Gearin in 1910, it's stood much as it now does since about 1927.

Thompson's early working life was spent living in old-world country pubs and for much of his subsequent working life he has been the actor most readily identified with Australia. Fittingly, his vision is to preserve the Gearin's blue collar qualities alongside the gaudier threads of the performing

arts.

He also likes our description of the Gearin as a "saloon-cum-salon".

"Well, that's what pubs have been all my life and that's what this one is coming back to be," Thompson says.

"It's a place for people to come to meet to discuss their business, their aspirations, where the great balladeers found their inspiration. I'm sure the man from Snowy River was found at a bar such as this.

"That was an age when the hotel was a social centre. And that's what we're building here. John Pilger came up and drew a crowd of 180, banging away in his wonderfully erudite and tireless way. We had a wonderful evening screening *The Castle* with Micheal Caton and Tiriel Mora, who lives down the road, going onstage after the movie. It was great, their own comedy routine with audience."

Sundays mean jazz in Jack's Bar and Grill, the Gearin's dining room, a wonderfully atmospheric space that on its day might be seen as a rival to The Basement in Sydney — with hearty pub grub into the bargain.

"No pieces of leek on a vast white plate here," Thompson affirms.

The joint fairly hummed to the five-piece band performing on the day we visited, with its revolving roster of vocalists, including Ms Mercy Young. Thompson moves among the throng meeting and greeting, extending his big meaty paw to all, occasionally tearing up as saxophonist Micky Young unpeels another searing solo.

"Mine host is a very serious role," Thompson says with a smile.

"I've been involved financially in the pub for about 18 months, but the first six months I was away working. I returned to discover that we were in trouble and spent



the next five months working on [the forthcoming Baz Luhrmann film] *Australia* off and on, and finally had to get back here to turn it around."

Publican Sean Glassford, a still youthful veteran of some of Balmain's better pubs, is the linchpin.

"It's a five-year plan. I've been here nine months. Jack's very

passionate about it. His is one of the better names to have attached to a pub."

While another investor is being sought, already the joint's aspect is beguiling. They're painting over the ceiling's yellow nicotine patina — legacy of the not too distant days when all front bars had a permanent plume of cigarette smoke between ceiling and average height

— to becoming the Mountains' foremost entertainment venue.

The Gearin's charms are accessible in every sense. Hard by the station, you can eschew the excruciatingly slow highway, and be there from Central Station, Sydney, in two hours — much as has been done for more than a century.

LOWDOWN

GETTING THERE: Katoomba is about two hours' drive west from the Sydney CBD.

STAY: Gearin Hotel. 273 Great

Western Highway, Katoomba, (02) 4782 4395.

MORE: www.visitbluemountains.com.au



NATURE'S ARTWORK: The Three Sisters near Katoomba in the Blue Mountains. Katoomba also boasts a famous man-made structure in the shape of the Gearin Hotel. Picture: PIP BLACKWOOD



MINE HOST: Actor Jack Thompson in the Gearin Hotel. Thompson is co-owner of the hotel, which dates from 1881.



SWEET MUSIC: Singer Mercy Young performing during the Gearin Hotel's jazz sessions on a Sunday afternoon.



escape

with Mike Smith



Spring on show

The Bulli Show, Bulli Showground, Princes Highway, Bulli; today 9am-8.30pm, tomorrow 9am-4pm, adult \$8, conc \$2, under 12 free, 1800 240 737, tourismwollongong.com.au

HEAD south for a fun-filled spring show with woodchopping contest, arts and crafts, market stalls, petting zoo and carnival rides

Seeing red

Wild About Waratah Festival, Mount Tomah Botanic Garden, Bells Line of Road, via Bilpin; today and tomorrow, 10am-4pm, adult \$5.50, conc \$4.40, child \$3.30, family \$11, 4567 2154, www.rbgsyd.nsw.gov.au

CELEBRATE our state's floral emblem (pictured) at this festival featuring a display of blooms.

Join the circus

Cirquinox, Norman Lindsay Gallery & Museum, 14 Norman Lindsay Cres, Faulconbridge; tomorrow 10am-4pm, adult \$15, conc \$9, 4751 1067, normanlindsay.com.au

THIS interactive circus festival features aerial acts, stage shows and performers. A shuttle bus (gold coin) will run from Springwood station.

Pick of the pics

Southern Highlands Photographic Society Annual Exhibition, Old Bowral Town Hall, Bendooley St, Bowral; today and tomorrow, 10am-4.30pm free, 4861 7565, southern-highlands.com.au

COINCIDING with the delightful Tulip Time festival, this exhibition features 50 images by prize-winning photographers.