



Pocket of paradise ... Bells at Killcare. Photo: Marco Del Grande

# Retreat to the belle of Killcare

**Michael Visontay** executes a perfect escape.

As the crow flies, Bells at Killcare is less than 500 metres from the beach, one ridge away from a gentle crescent of sand and surf. But if I were a crow, I wouldn't bother. Not this time. Not when you're already in the promised land.

This boutique hotel is a pocket paradise, invisible from the suburban street and giving no hint of what awaits once you've driven up a bushy driveway towards the reception: stretching out as far as the eye can see are manicured green lawns, with rose gardens on one side, a miniature statue of a discus thrower on the other and a Monet bridge over a tiny lake down the bottom. It feels more like Lake Como than Central Coast.

And that's no accident. Renowned chef Stefano Manfredi, who started up Restaurant Manfredi and Bel Mondo, has taken over the restaurant at the upmarket resort, lending a distinctive Italian accent to the cosy coastal vibe

provided by proprietors Brian and Karina Barry (she worked at the Savoy in London and at Rockpool). Between them they have created a perfect weekend retreat.

The restaurant/reception building houses a cosy library, with books, papers and free art-house DVDs available. There are just 11 cabins, a couple of two-storey "villas" and nine single-level suites. Our single cabin has a king-size bed of exceptional comfort – one of the few times my wife and I have agreed on the subject.

The ensuite oozes luxury, including a large spa and separate shower with two heads. The main cabin has a kitchenette, flat-screen television, comfy chairs, fireplace, air-conditioning and cabana for pampered privacy.

During our two days and nights, we give Bells a thorough road-test. First night, the restaurant. It's a large informal room capable of holding 80 people, with a spacious veranda for alfresco

dining. Signor Manfredi's menu beckons and we are richly rewarded. Our entrees include pan-fried scallops with celeriac and roast garlic salsa. My pasta stracci is served with succulent osso buco; my wife orders roast Flinders Island suckling lamb with roast potatoes. We fall quickly into a "you've got to taste this" competition. The food is matched by crisp, friendly service. What a pleasure it is to dine here.

Breakfast, part of the package, comes in the form of a gourmet hamper delivered to our cabin the night before, for us to cook as we see fit. OK, it isn't done for us. But the offering is abundant, with home-made muesli and bread, designer bacon, sausages, relish and Stefano's own coffee. You could lunch on the leftovers.

It would have been easy to spend the whole day here, lounging on the cabana or reading on the chairs dotted around the main lawn. But the beauty of Bells is that it's five minutes from the



**Address** 107 The Scenic Road, Killcare.

**The verdict** A delightful weekend retreat, oozing informal luxury and boasting delicious food.

**Price** Weekend packages (minimum two nights) from \$350 a night for two. One night midweek from \$250 for two. All packages include a breakfast hamper.

**Bookings** Phone 4360 2411 or see [killcarebells.com.au](http://killcarebells.com.au).

**Getting there** One hundred kilometres north of Sydney. Head to Gosford and follow the Woy Woy turn-off.

**Perfect for** Couples wanting an adults-only escape.

**Wheelchair access** Yes.

Weekends Away are reviewed anonymously and paid for by Traveller.

surf of Killcare Beach, the genteel cafe life of Hardy's Bay, and the relaxed Central Coast culture of McMasters, Umina or Avoca, all within a short drive. There's also a broad array of bushwalks in nearby Bouddi National Park.

After a drive to Ettalong to sample the Saturday markets (ordinary, to be honest), it's back to Hardy's Bay for a walk and some gourmet pies, then an afternoon nap. We toy with the idea of playing croquet but choose more vigorous exercise instead: a stroll around the grounds.

However, the true test of any establishment is how it responds to adversity. First, the DVD player won't work. Brian, our proprietor, arrives and fixes it in a jiffy. Next, we can't get the metallic sink plug out. Down he comes again. "You just need to push it," he tells us gently. Oops.

That night we contrive to lock ourselves out of the bathroom. My need is urgent, so I scoot up to the restaurant, in the middle of dinner. The waitress dispatches Damien, the maitre d', who sums up the situation and climbs in our window. "Best to make sure the door doesn't shut again," he says on his way out. Damien is wasted up here: there are North Shore and eastern suburbs women crying out for handymen like him.

Next morning, before returning to home and children, we have a quick swim at Killcare. The sun is warm, the surf rousing. A perfect farewell. Across the road, an assortment of expensive weekenders glint in the sun. I'll stick with Bells.

**Correction:** The phone number for bookings at Bingie Farm by the Sea, published incorrectly in last weekend's Traveller, is 4473 8252.