



Photography Simon Thomsen

killcare



Simon Thomsen puts his back into a weekend of fine Italian food on the Central Coast.

This isn't good. I'm keen to leap out of bed to drive 90 minutes north for an Italian meal cooked by one of Sydney's finest and most lauded chefs, Steve Manfredi. He's having a sea change on the Central Coast, running the kitchen at Bells at Killcare. But my back won't let me move – the muscles seized overnight.

Our trip seems impossible until my wife remembers another appealing aspect to Bells: it offers an in-room massage service, ranging from hot stones to Swedish massage, reiki and Hawaiian lomi lomi. My wife books a remedial massage and I hobble to the car – happily able to justify the trip as a mercy mission, with some remedial wine tasting over dinner.

My massage therapist has a lovely aura. Her whoosh of heavy exhalation and deep sighs blow out my tension. It's a beautifully relaxing massage, leaving me a touch improved and slightly dreamy. But my real saviour is a soak in our double spa bath. Or maybe it was the glass of wine.

Bells at Killcare is an 11-cottage boutique resort set on a sprawling rural property above sleepy Hardy's Bay. Adman John Singleton bought it in 2006. An affably upbeat duo, Karina and Brian Barry, formerly of The Hunter Resort, now run it. There are big expansion plans afoot, already partly realised by creating Manfredi's destination restaurant.

Our generously sized cottage is comfy and pleasant. But since my visit, Sydney interior decorator Chrissie Jeffery has given the eight old cottages, now joined by three new ones,

a spruce-up in keeping with the beachy blue and white feel of the restaurant. A stroll leads to Manfredi's kitchen garden, where the chef grows Italian-varietal lettuces, tomatoes, herbs and beans for the restaurant.

Bells at Killcare is the restaurant the Central Coast has been waiting for. The dining room is eye-catchingly attractive: a breezy space with a wide veranda and small details that lift it out of the ordinary, such as the hand-made pottery and glasses by Australian artisans. But this ain't no cheap pasta joint. The chef infuses his northern Italian heritage into a contemporary Australian approach. The pasta is house-made daily. Small squid are filled with prawns and served on cloud-light polenta and the wickedly rich Amedei chocolate truffle ball will have you ambling back to your room sated.

Next day, we set off to walk through Bouddi National Park, just across the road from Bells (reception can supply a bushwalking guide). The views are stunning. To the south across Broken Bay is Barrenjoey and Pittwater (there's a ferry from Palm Beach to Wagstaffe, where Bells staff can pick you up). One of the best walks is a five-kilometre circuit that leads down to Maitland Bay, named after an 1898 shipwreck that claimed 28 lives. The walk continues past two more small and secluded beaches, Bulimbah and Putty.

To the west of the Killcare plateau is a steep, twisting drive down to the tranquil waterfront villages of Hardy's Bay and Pretty Bay, which remain largely unscathed by the wave of affluence sweeping up the coast – although plans for a large redevelopment of the marina are inflaming local passions. Yum Yum Eatery in Hardy's Bay is a pleasing alternative should you tire of Manfredi's polished Italian fare. The Old Killcare Store evokes a gentler pace as you sit outside looking at the water over coffee and the newspapers.

We leave for the drive back to Sydney feeling better and fitter than when we came. I will return. With a better back.



need to know

Bells at Killcare
107 Scenic Road, Killcare,
NSW 2257.
Phone: 4360 2411;
www.killcarebells.com.au.

Cost

From \$250 a night midweek, including a breakfast hamper; \$350-\$450 a night on weekends (with a minimum two-night booking).

Distance from Sydney

91 kilometres.

Where to eat

Yum Yum Eatery

60 Araluen Drive, Hardy's Bay.
Phone: 4360 2999.

It looks like a casual cafe, but the food is smart, modern fine diner fare. Open for lunch and dinner, Wednesday to Sunday. Open for weekend breakfasts.

Old Killcare Store

54 Araluen Drive, Killcare.
Phone: 4360 1667.

This deli-cum-cafe has rustic charm and dishes up crowd-pleasing faves. The owners can also knock up a decent picnic.

Fishermen's Wharf

The Boulevarde, Woy Woy.
Phone: 4341 1171.

Takeaway fish and chips, but expect the pelicans to demand their share, plus a no-frills seafood restaurant.

What to do

Hire a tinny. Killcare Marina (phone 4360-1231) hires out covered 4.2-metre boats by the hour (\$35) or day (\$170). Or hire a kayak and explore under your own power.

Sail away. Hardy's Bay Yacht Charters (www.hbyc.com.au) offers both motorised and yacht charter. A three-hour sail around Pittwater on an 11-metre yacht costs \$75 a person. Phone: 4360 1442.

Bushwalk. Bouddi National Park, just a few hundred metres away from the resort, offers a wide range of trails, from 1.5 kilometres to 16 kilometres.

Where to drive

Bulgandry Aboriginal engravings.

Look for the national park sign three kilometres from the F1 highway on the Woy Woy Road. A raised pathway runs around the carved rock figures of marine life, humans and kangaroos.

Patonga. This serene, isolated fishing village, surrounded by Brisbane Water National Park, hints at earlier, simpler times. Stroll along the beach.

Norah Head Lighthouse. Bush Street, Norah Head. Phone:

4343 4444. Climb to the top of this 105-year-old lighthouse, north of The Entrance, which is open on weekends for guided tours.

Australia Walkabout Wildlife Park, 2375 Peats Ridge Road, Calga. Phone: 4375 1100. This 170-hectare wildlife park is a great place to see native animals in their natural bushland setting.

Any complaints?

The resort's weekend room rate is a bit steep.

Don't miss

Lunch or dinner in the restaurant at Bells at Killcare. Why not both?