

Down the Garden Path



It may not be made of gingerbread but Southdown Cottage is just as sweet, writes Nick Galvin.

It's a wild night outside Southdown Cottage but inside, it couldn't be more peaceful. There's Miles Davis in the air, a bottle of red on the table and a pile of gardening magazines to work away at. Yep, I'm embracing my inner old git and loving every minute of it.

Southdown Cottage in the Southern Highlands encourages this sort of behaviour. It's everything a country cottage ought to be without being overly chintzy or pretentious. The words "snug" and "cute" could have been coined for this place.

We arrive to find someone has kindly turned on the lights, adjusted the temperature and even slipped a Beethoven disc into the CD

player and left a generous selection of breakfast produce in the kitchen.

The cottage is tiny, comprising a downstairs living room-kitchen and children's bedroom and a double bedroom and ensuite above, reached by a steep staircase.

This main bedroom is built into the eaves and is almost unreasonably cute. The small bedroom down stairs has double bunks and another bathroom beyond.

Whatever the opposite of minimalism is, this is it. On virtually every surface there are books, cushions, pictures, magazines, knick-knacks and gewgaws.

It is shabbily chic before that "style" was appropriated by pretentious, overpriced boutiques and it reminds me pleasantly of an aunt's cottage in North Yorkshire.

The princesses, aged seven and nine, are thrilled by the idea of spending the weekend in a real fairytale cottage. Literal-minded as ever, they both lick the walls experimentally when I suggest it could just be made of gingerbread.

In fact, the cottage is the original caretaker's house on the 2.4-hectare Southdown Estate - there are two other homes on the property available for rental.

In the morning, we unleash the princesses to explore their new domain while we finish our coffee, then set off for a leisurely stroll to track them down.

The gardens are quite extraordinary for their size and variety. Topiary and statues abound. There are rose gardens, bridges and ponds and perfect "outdoor rooms". Each time you turn a corner, there is something new to discover and enjoy.

Exploring the place is a delight and we spend a couple of hours doing just that, until I self indulgently drag the family away to see Bowral's Bradman Museum of Cricket, a place of which I never tire.

As ever, the museum doesn't disappoint (me, at least - I think the other members of the family aren't overly thrilled) and I even manage to pick up a ceramic replica of the Ashes with which to goad my Australian-born friends in the time-honoured fashion.

After the museum, there's time for a mooch around the Berkelouw Books barn in Berrima and to check Harper's Mansion in the village.

The mansion, a fine country house built in the 1830s, has been restored by local volunteers. It's still a work in progress and doesn't detain us too long. We're really here

for the maze in the mansion's garden. It was planted about 10 years ago and the hedges have now filled out to make it quite a challenge.

We emerge after 10 minutes of wandering into dead ends and each other. After being told their dad has hidden 50 cents in the centre of the maze, the princesses again plunge in, with squeals of excitement.

It's beginning to get dark so it's back to the fairytale cottage, where more red wine, board games and Miles Davis await.

Sunday dawns and we make our full English breakfast last as long as possible.

We must return to the real world soon, where hedges don't come in geometric shapes and gardens aren't magically weed-free.

Weekends away are reviewed anonymously and paid for by Traveller.

VISITORS™ BOOK

Southdown Cottages

Address Moss Vale Road, Burradoo. The verdict A cosy cottage that belongs in the pages of a children's book.

Price Two-night weekend costs \$695

Bookings Phone 4861 5532 or see www.bowralaccommodation.com.au.

Getting there Burradoo is about two hours' drive from Sydney CBD. The owner of the property provides an excellent local map and directions on booking.

Perfect for Not doing very much at all in a beautiful setting. Wheelchair access No.

While you're there Spend time wandering around Berrima, taking in Harper's Mansion and its maze and Berkelouw Books.

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