

WORDS ELISABETH KING

PRETTY SPECTACULAR

LUXURY beach hideaways are magnets for honeymooners, illicit lovers and those who have just secured a massive divorce pay out such as Paul McCartney's former wife, Heather Mills. Following a \$43.5 million settlement the ex Mrs Macca flew 25 of her closest friends to Necker Island, Richard Branson's Caribbean beach property costing tens of thousands of dollars a night to hire. Ms Mills was insistent she wanted somewhere she couldn't be photographed, one of her gal pals confided to a British tabloid. High-class jaunts that offer the same level of privacy don't have to cost that much. A holiday getaway on the beach has long been a linchpin of the Australian dream but the fantasy has become a lot more expensive to obtain. Building standards are more rigorous, by-laws now regulate the use of coastal properties and the price of waterfront land within a short drive from any state capital, especially Sydney, has sky-rocketed.

There's still a faint echo of the days when fibro fishing shacks dotted Hardy's Bay on the New South Wales Central Coast, and their inhabitants thought nothing of wearing a jumper inside. Even teardowns go for close to \$1 million and are wedged between luxury spreads selling for up to \$2 million. The area's transformation from sparsely populated seasonal vacation spot to a community of year-round, architect-designed homes is complete. Only first-time visitors express surprise at the lack of the old-style suburban houses that once dotted the inlets on the Central Coast.

The pricey enclave surrounding Pretty Beach House, billed as Australia's most intimate and luxurious guesthouse, is almost like NSW's version of the Hamptons. Only a 20-minute ferry ride from chic Palm

Beach and a 90-minute drive from Central Sydney, a two-and-a-half year labour of love after fire gutted the original property has produced the plushness of boltholes oozing charm and class.

News has spread fast about this stunning addition to the Central Coast's luxury travel scene. And I don't employ that over-used adjective lightly. It's really hard to steer clear of superlatives after you have driven up the steep pathway to the main entrance. Sydney designer Michelle Leslie

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has crafted impeccably stylish interiors, peppered with local materials and original artworks by Arthur Boyd, Sidney Nolan and John Olsen.

Located on a 3-ha promontory overlooking Bouddi National Park and Broken Bay, it's nigh on impossible not to enjoy a full night's sleep. Bouddi is an indigenous word for "heart" but "dramatic" best describes the views from the floor-to-ceiling windows of the four evocatively named pavilions - Treetops, Bayview, Hideaway and The Retreat. Only eight guests are permitted at any one time and each pavilion boasts a king-size bedroom, separate dressing room and open-sitting area.

We were lucky enough to stay in The Retreat, a double-storey addition to the

central building. Even more impressive than the huge bathroom are the fabulous views from the plunge pool over the nearby escarpment. There are no rules and regulations at Pretty Beach House; you are treated as a welcome guest in the true sense. Technology is very evident, too - from the on-demand movies to the curated music collection of soul, blues, rock, Italian opera singers, world and surf music.

Hand-crafted 19th century railway timber pylons form the structure of the Main House. Karina and Brian Barry, the proprietors of nationally renowned Bells at Killcare, and famed restaurateurs, Stefano and Julie Manfredi Hughes, also hold sway here. Five-star touches range from the open plan Ambach kitchen to the in-house spa offering treatments by Li'Tya, the internationally recognised Australian skincare brand centred on the restorative power of native ingredients and Aboriginal healing techniques.


A fitting nod to the fact that the property was a meeting place for the local indigenous community, the Darkinjung people. Close to the imposing Porte Cochere entrance, flanked by sandstone pylons, is one of three Aboriginal petroglyphs (rock art), dating back 8000 to 10,000 years. One of the highlights of the immersive Pretty Beach House experience is the welcoming smoking ceremony with a local elder which easily rates as one of the best Aboriginal cultural programs in the country.

The wine list lives up to its promise as "a list of hand-selected premium wines from Australia and some of the world's greatest wine-producing regions". Adam Lambeth, who worked at Tetsuya's, is the sommelier at Bells at Killcare and Pretty Beach House. "Essentially we've compiled a list with

very low mark-ups for the quality on offer," he says. "Because of Stefano's Italian heritage, we have a great selection of Italian vintages. But we also offer biodynamic wines through Australian boutique bottlings and prestige international wines. Our aim is to introduce guests to a world of wines and emphasise the message that it is their house - not ours."

If only most cellars boasted such a collection. Champagnes range from Krug Grande Cuvee to Billecart-Salmon Brut Rose. A 2011 Clos Saint-Denis Grand Cru Domain Dujac sits alongside a 1998 Brokenwood Graveyard Vineyard Shiraz. White wine fans have the choice of 2012 Mount Mary Chardonnay or 2007 Chateau Grillet Viognier. Highlights of the edited spirits list include Normandin Mercier Grands Champagne Cognac XO 20 Years and 1962 Delord Bas Armagnac.

One of the joys of staying at a luxury escape property is breakfast and Pretty Beach House excels in providing fuel for the day ahead from home-made muesli, a lavish bread basket and fresh juices to eggs cooked anyway you prefer. After breakfast we ventured into Bouddi National Park, which possesses the wow factor for rugged coastal scenery, deserted beaches and luxuriant native bush.

Relaxing and dining on gourmet cuisine provides enough enjoyment for many guests. But exploring the surrounding Angophora forests, sailing in the property's private cruiser or setting off on a mountain bike ride, literally and figuratively, pushes a stay at Pretty Beach House to a whole new level. All-inclusive rates from \$1000 per person, per night, www.prettybeachhouse.com.au. 



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