

AUSTRALIA COAST TO COAST

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# COUNTRY STYLE

ESCAPE THE



The guest rooms are decorated in a relaxed coastal palette of blue, white and sand tones. **FACING PAGE** Exotically patterned wallpapers and antique pieces add personality to this deluxe guest suite.

## CLOSE ESCAPE

INDULGE AND UNWIND WHERE EUROPEAN SOPHISTICATION MEETS AUSTRALIAN STYLE ON THE NSW CENTRAL COAST.

VENUE: JODIE THOMSON  
PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRIS COURT  
STYLING: LOUISE BICKLE





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE A guest cottage nestled in the established gardens at Bells; the library in the main manor house where guests can unwind; each guest suite has its own kitchenette and dining area.



THERE ARE ROLLING green lawns, a cottage garden and chooks running free. Across a gravel road is the isolated beauty of the Bouddi Peninsula National Park, with its beautiful beaches and panoramic bush trails. With all this just a 90-kilometre hop from Sydney, there's no doubt the location of the Bells boutique hotel and restaurant at Killcare ticks all the right boxes.

"You have a nice mix of coast and country here," says co-owner Karina Brown. Karina and husband Brian have overseen the transformation of the NSW Central Coast destination, which includes luxurious, cottage-style accommodation and a restaurant directed by famed Sydney chef Stefano Manfredi.

Operating Bells is something of a sea change for Karina and Brian. They were running the Hunter Resort at Pokolbin in NSW's Hunter Valley when they were approached to redevelop and take over the Bells site, which had been a B & B-style guesthouse. They jumped at the chance, quickly moved their family — James, 11, and Emma, 10 — into a house just down the road from the hotel and got to work.

"The original building was very chintzy and floral, and not particularly welcoming," Karina says. "Our brief was, 'Let's open it up as if it's a home and create something unpretentious.'"

In the main building, which houses the restaurant, library and bar, they knocked out walls to create a space that's roomier and filled with light. Designer Chrissie Jeffery was called in to devise a more modern, yet relaxed interior. The result is distinctively Australian but essentially elegant, with its crisp blue and white coastal palette and understated, weathered finishes.

"We wanted that light, fresh airy feel," Karina says.

The 80-seat restaurant has established a solid reputation, and within a year of opening was awarded a chef's hat in the 2009 *Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide*. Despite its big-city antecedents, Manfredi's cuisine also offers down-to-earth





ABOVE A luxurious bathroom in one of the guest suites. RIGHT Karina and one of the hens that lives in the hotel's grounds. BELOW A covered deck that leads off one of the suites is decorated with contemporary wicker furniture.

country charm. Everything, from bread to gelato, is made on the premises, though it's the well-stocked cottage garden that garners most attention. Surrounded by fig and olive trees, the garden is filled with an exotic mix of herbs and vegetables, and is harvested daily to supply the restaurant.

"Stefano loves the fact there's a garden here," says Karina. "That's a special attraction for a chef."

For Karina, the chief attraction is the location — and the fact Bells is just a stone's throw from both the coast and the national park.

"My favourite thing to do is the Maitland Bay Walk," she says. "You follow round the whole cliff face and there are beautiful views out to Palm Beach as well."

The perfect visit to Bells, she says, would be a Friday night arrival, followed by a Saturday spent walking in the national park and exploring the nearby township of Hardys Bay.

"You get a breakfast hamper in the room, which is really quite romantic," she says. "And then on Sunday, you would have a beautiful Sunday lunch in the restaurant."

There are more improvements underway at Bells, with a new day spa almost completed and plans to add extra accommodation cottages to the mix. But for now, Karina and Brian are happy with their results and are enjoying their new community.

"We do a locals' night at the restaurant on Tuesdays, with two courses and a glass of wine for \$35 — and it's packed," Karina says. "People say it's not worth cooking at home and that sort of thing makes us more accessible."

Life running a hotel and restaurant may be a 24-hour a day job, but Karina insists they wouldn't have it any other way.

"You get to love the industry," she says. "Our kids have grown up in it and I grew up in it too. It's in your blood." \*

Bells is at 107 The Scenic Road, Killcare Beach NSW.

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