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Lyrebird land

WEEKEND AWAY WOOLRICH

Michael Shmith

The Dandenongs are the hill country of Melbourne. India might have Ootacamund or something Simla, but there's always a small corner of Mount Dandenong that's forever Olinda. In the chilly season, it's heartening to realise there's somewhere colder than Bridge Road on a foul, rainy Monday. Thus we head, in said weather, wipers whap-whapping, from the plains of the north-east to the hills – a journey made slightly easier by the recently opened EastLink and a swift descent into and out of the Mullum Mullum Tunnel and left at Canterbury Road - and, just on the other side of Olinda, abutting the Cloudehill Gardens, the contained delights of Woolrich Retreat.

This cottage, originally owned by the two brothers Woolrich, who were in the nursery trade in the early 20th century, has been carefully restored and expanded to the stage where it is neither too grand nor too pretentious but just right: it feels as if you've walked in to someone's home while they're out gathering wood from the forest. There are two small bedrooms, each with a dressing room and en suite bathroom and, between them, a room housing a spa that can easily be ignored, but not if you're into bucolic hedonism. On the other side of the central hallway, behind two art-deco doors, is the rectangular living room, dominated by its splendid fireplace and, at the far end, a bay window hugging a small dining table. Furniture is wicker-based, black and red, with many squashy cushions. To the right is the well-stocked kitchen. Also at the far end is a balcony that runs the width of the house, with a view straight down the two hectares of garden and over to the mountains of far Healesville.

The problem with Woolrich Retreat is that it is so retreatable you don't really want to go out. For those who wish little more than to curl up by the fire reading a novel (perhaps even writing one), or watching something from the supply of first-rate DVDs, the idea of a long walk is a nonsense. We do walk, however, the following morning. Within minutes of entering the neighbouring Cloudehill Gardens, we come across a lyrebird scratching in the bushes. I remember the misfortune of a former colleague of mine who, many years ago, accompanied the French composer Olivier Messiaen into Sherbrooke Forest in search of this most elusive avian. Messiaen, an ornithologist who specialised in notating birdsong, finally got his wish when a lyrebird appeared in a clearing and began to sing. My colleague, anxious for a better view, sneaked round the other side and stood on a branch, the snap of which sent the bird running into the bushes. "Voici, l'oiseau?" Messiaen asked. On this morning, l'oiseau-lyre wasn't singing. But he was certainly, if carefully, in evidence. Lyrebirds are superb mimics and can imitate the sound of chainsaws. Whatever this one's capabilities, he was too busy scratching up a storm of twigs and leaves to bother with mechanical impressions.

That afternoon, we went fishing. Nothing as haphazard as a stream or lake but a trout farm near Emerald – a place also populated by goats, dogs and two emus. My companion, a woman of slight build, hooked a 21/2 kilogram trout whose exit from the pond almost knocked her flat. I made do with a slightly less boisterous 11/2 kilogram salmon: dinner for the next two nights.

Woolrich Retreat leaves nothing to chance. The kitchen has every gadget you could imagine, as well as a Lyrebird land fully stocked store cupboard (even loose-leaf tea) and fridge. The most glorious offering was breakfast on a plate - eggs, bacon, tomatoes, sausages, mushrooms - that we cooked up in no time and served, al fresco, overlooking lyrebird land. Several rosellas darted in and out of the treetops but kept their distance.

The best times at Woolrich were in the evenings. As the fire crackled in the grate and the monster trout sizzled in the oven, we became captive lounge lizards on our own stylish three-dimensional

Cluedo board. We emerged occasionally to bring in extra firewood and gaze up into the cold, intense sky at the field of stars.

We loved it, every moment.

VISITORS' BOOK

Woolrich Retreat

Address 20 Woolrich Road, Olinda.

Bookings Phone 03 9751 0154. See www.woolrichretreat.com.au or email

getaway@woolrichretreat.com.au.

Getting there Olinda (via EastLink) is now less than an hour from central Melbourne.

How much Monday to Thursday, \$255 a night a couple. Additional couple, \$50 a night. Weekends (two nights minimum), \$660 a couple Friday-Saturday or Saturday-Sunday. Additional couple, \$100 a night.

Summary Woolrich Retreat is comfortable, cosy and perfect for two people or two couples. The views, spacious gardens and wildlife are second to none.

Verdict 18.

The score: 19-20 excellent; 17-18 great; 15-16 good; 13-14 comfortable, well run.

All weekends are conducted anonymously and are paid for.