



Riverside retreat is the ideal getaway

The Hawkesbury has it all, writes **Claire Harvey**.



Indulgence: Clockwise from top, the Boat House lounge; relaxing at sunset; the three-level house at Little Wobby Beach; the indoor pool



WE can handle sipping champagne in the spa and watching the sun set over the water. We're quite comfortable frolicking in the indoor pool, and perfectly happy discussing whether we can muster the energy to take the elevator upstairs for a game of billiards.

But everyone has their limits — and when a little boat arrives at our private jetty and a man leaps ashore holding a platter of fresh seafood for our dinner, things have officially become ridiculous.

We're staying at Boat House on Hawkesbury, a six-bedroom holiday house on the river, across from Dangar Island and Brooklyn.

The house, built in the gloriously heady 1980s, is a throwback to the days when spectacular excess was the norm — and we're soaking up every nostalgic moment of luxury.

It starts on a Sunday morning at the Sydney Seaplanes' jetty at Rose Bay, where my friend Jonathon and I board a beautiful vintage De Havilland Beaver aircraft — another relic of a bygone age — and take off above the city.

"These aircraft were made until the late '60s," pilot Jeff Dunaway says, proudly.

"There are still several hundred of them in the air."

The obvious question — what happened to all the rest? — can wait for another time, when we are on solid ground.

For now, there's no time to



worry: we are zipping north up the coastline, swooping over Manly and Freshwater and Curl Curl before turning left into the Hawkesbury mouth and dropping down to an isolated — and apparently unoccupied — strip of sand, Gunya Beach.

"This is where you're being collected," says Jeff mysteriously, depositing our bags on the sand, before climbing back in his plane and taking off.

So there we are, alone together on our beach, wondering exactly what happens next.

Jonathon, an intrepid type, begins to think of survival, and goes off to locate a source of fresh water.

I've got a more important concern: trying to tie a knot in my skirt to stop it blowing up around my legs. Note to female travellers: do not wear a skirt on or around a seaplane, or on a remote Hawkesbury beach on a windy day. There's a reason they invented shorts.

By the time my skirt is under control, the next part of our adventure begins: a water taxi arrives to whisk us off to the Boat House, a short distance north across the river mouth.

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DESTINATION >>

Hawkesbury River

Getting there: Sydney Seaplanes, 9388 1978, www.seaplanes.com.au; Marine Cabs, 0448 101 010; transfers from Brooklyn from \$30, according to number of passengers and destination; www.marinecabs.com.au

Stay: Boat House on Hawkesbury, 9985 8505, www.boathouseonhawkesbury.com.au
Food, including seafood, breakfast and cold-cuts platters, by arrangement.

Rates: Weekends (two nights) \$600 a room, minimum four couples (four rooms) to maximum six couples (six rooms).
Midweek (Tues/Wed, two nights) \$1200 for one or two couples; midweek three nights \$600 a room, minimum four couples, maximum six couples.

More: visitnswtourism.com.au



Serene: The view over the sparkling Hawkesbury River as seen from the balcony of the Boat House



‘There are hot and cold prawns, an entire baked fish, lobster; we’ve barely room for the chocolates and cheese we found in the fridge’

“A lot of Sydneysiders just don’t seem to know the Hawkesbury’s here,” says Rick Stockley, the owner of Marine Cabs, “so they drive straight past on their way to the Central Coast, when the beaches here are just as nice.”

He’s right — neither of us has been up here before.

For most Sydney residents, the phrase “weekend away” means something much more far-flung than this; the Blue Mountains or the ocean beaches further north.

It’s a shame, for the Hawkesbury is a haven of glittering waters, secluded beaches and romantic restaurants.

And, as we’re about to find out,

the area also boasts some seriously flash accommodation.

We arrive at the Boat House’s little jetty, nestled into the shore of Brisbane Water National Park, unload our bags and try to keep straight faces while the Boat House’s owners, Kevin and Loretta Pearson, reveal their four levels of opulence.

The place was built in the late 1980s by a roof-guttering magnate for whom money, clearly, was no object, and has been a holiday rental for several years.

Once they’ve shown us around, Kevin and Loretta take off and leave us to get on with doing as little as possible.

The house isn’t really suitable for small children — lots of stairs — but ideal for a weekend party of adults or a large extended family.

There are six double bedrooms, each with its own spa-bath and en suite, an enormous living and entertainment area (complete with billiards table), sprawling verandahs with barbecues and a commercial-sized kitchen stocked with a lunch platter, champagne, a bottle of red wine and tomorrow morning’s breakfast goodies.

It would be perfect for an autumn or winter escape; although there are several beaches within hiking distance, it’s not a very beachy place —

more for messing about in boats, or just messing around with champagne, which is much more our style.

Oh, and did I happen to mention the elevator?

As I lounge on the rooftop reading my book, Jonathon delights in going up and down between floors to fetch unnecessary — more champagne, a stack of magazines, strawberries.

It’s not that we actually need anything, more the novelty of a private lift. It occurs to us, however, that if the lift suddenly malfunctioned, we might be in a bit of strife: what would we say after we pressed the emergency button, considering we don’t know the address of this place, beyond the vaguest of locations?

“Ah, we’re stuck in a lift somewhere on the Hawkesbury. Near Little Wobby Beach. Kind of across from Dangar Island. In a very fancy house with a jetty. Next to all the other ones with jetties.”

Surely the neighbours would rescue us. They seem like a friendly lot — when we venture out for a pre-dinner stroll, we wind our way through the front and back gardens of the nearby holiday houses and permanent homes, saying hello to the family groups and couples out enjoying the late-afternoon sunshine.

We befriended an enthusiastic golden retriever (is there any other kind?) who insists on a long game of stick-throwing.

He’s terribly disappointed when we stop the game, but we have a pressing appointment with a seafood platter, which is being delivered at 7pm from the Brooklyn fish shop, just across the water.

There are hot and cold prawns, an entire baked fish, lobster; we’ve barely room for the chocolates and cheese we found in the fridge.

By the following morning, we’re so relaxed and full we can barely drag ourselves down to the jetty to be delivered back to the beach for our flight home.

It’s a beautiful, largely unseen side of Sydney, and if outrageous opulence isn’t your style, there’s plenty of other accommodation options around, from low-key cabins to campsites.

Transport is as easy as catching a train from the city to Hawkesbury River station at Brooklyn, driving up the coast or taking the seaplane, then arranging a transfer by water taxi or catching the regular ferry across to Little Wobby Beach.

Just remember to wear shorts. It’s the only way to travel.

■ The writer was a guest of NSW Tourism.

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