

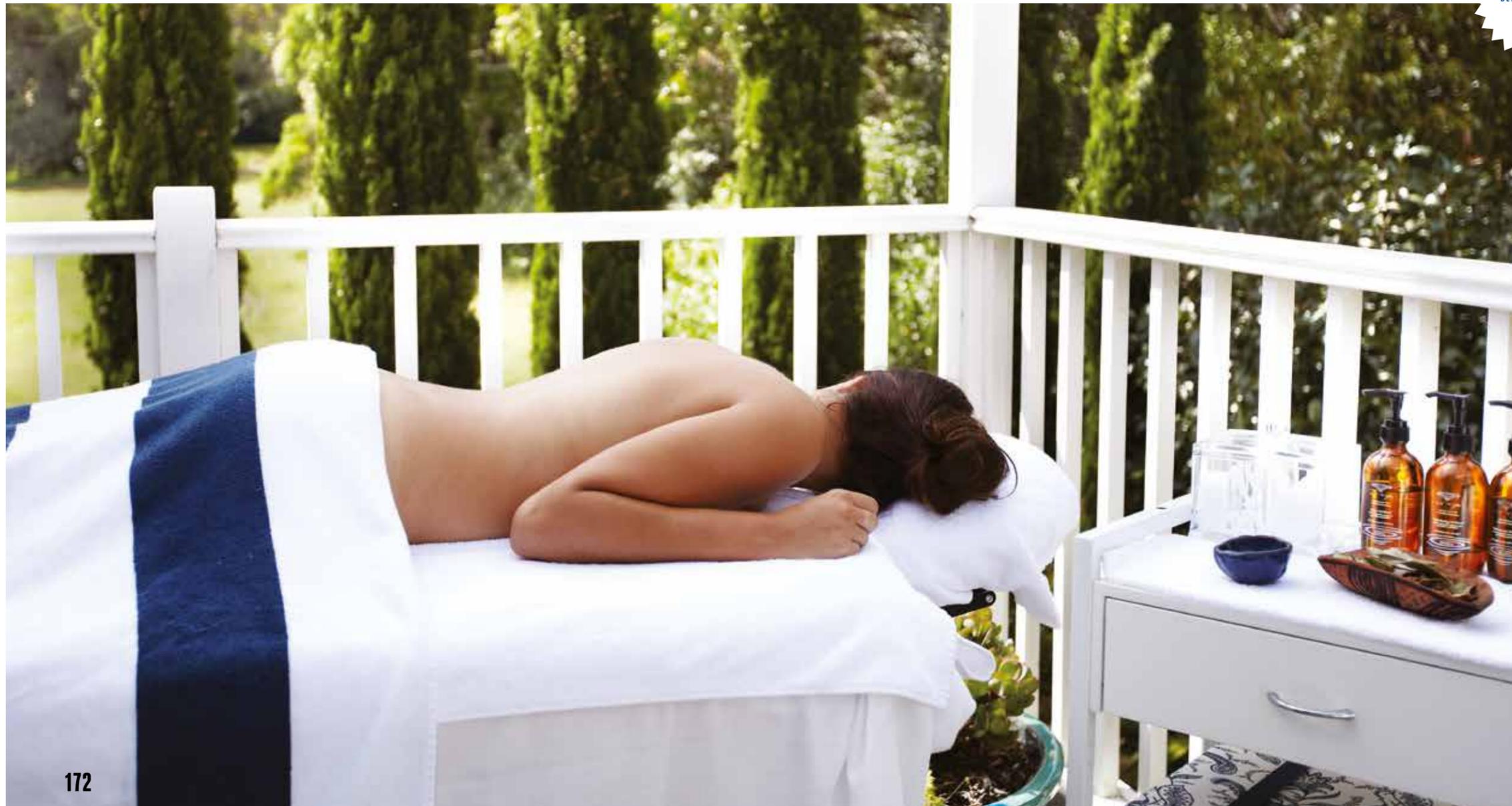


SAVED BY THE BELLS

IT'S JUST A QUICK TRIP FROM THE BRIGHT LIGHTS OF SYDNEY BUT, AS Katrina Holden DISCOVERS,

BELLS AT KILLCARE FEELS LIKE A WORLD AWAY.

STAY HERE
BELLS AT KILLCARE



THE BEATING SOUNDS OF CICADAS ALMOST drum a song as I make my way along the path to the country-estate style pool. A large Eastern Water Dragon brings me to a temporary halt – his long striped tail, mohawk tuft and rounded black eyes have drawn the attention of guests in surrounding villas who look on from the comfort of their private deck daybeds. The dragon, not perturbed by the attention, darts his tongue with leaves crushing beneath his belly. This is the Bouddi National Park on the New South Wales Central Coast and a stay at Bells at Killcare without an appearance from the local wildlife would have left me feeling most unwelcomed. →

The quaint coastal township of Killcare is just a short zip up the highway out of Sydney. From the moment you arrive at the loosely pebble-stoned path, the coastal-meets-country aesthetic begins to soothe. Enormous Grecian stone urns flank either side of the entrance steps to the original manor house. Inside, the reception area's walls are papered in bold, nautical navy blue-and-white thick stripes. The words, 'Relax, Unwind, Enjoy' hover on the wall above the reception desk, a theme carried throughout the property on scatter cushions – though one barely needs a reminder in this stylish yet serene boutique hotel.

The accommodation is a mix of studios, cottages and villas. Inside, the rooms are bright and airy with large, soft and inviting couches, a bed reminding us to "unwind"; and a bathroom with a freestanding egg-shaped tub and generous-sized shampoo, conditioner and body wash of beautifully



fragrant Bouddi product, made on site. Privacy on the decks has been thoughtfully considered, with rattan chairs and a dining table with candleholders and an over-sized daybed. During our stay we savour a reclusive moment with a bottle of champagne on the deck,

Above: Chef Stefano Manfredi tends to the property's vegetable garden. **Left:** English-style country gardens blend with nautical accents.

listening to the symphony of sounds from the Australian bush.

The current owners have run the property since 2006, securing the contribution of hatted-chef Stefano Manfredi and restaurateur Julie Manfredi Hughes to turn this into a culinary dine-and-stay destination, best suited to those seeking a sophisticated yet simple getaway. With the hotel's kitchen garden and a strong vision to create a high-quality regional restaurant, the dining experience is undoubtedly one of Bells' highlights. Breakfast was so delectable, I'd recommend settling in for a long and leisurely morning with the newspaper, espresso coffee and the à la carte breakfast overlooking the lawns – and save snooze time for later by the pool on your Adirondack chair and striped towel.

The kitchen staff source eggs from hens on the property and make honey in-house from on-site beehives. The chefs under the direction of Manfredi

strive to create as much on site as possible; so the pastries, breads, granola, bircher muesli, banana bread, jams, relishes and fruit compotes are all courtesy of the kitchen chefs. I can't go past a freshly baked pain au chocolate, oozing warm chocolate from its buttery dough; followed by a plated breakfast of eggs, smoked bacon, roasted tomato, roast mushroom, wilted spinach and the best gluten-free bread I've ever tasted.

During the day, we could opt to explore any of the seven beaches in the Bouddi National Park using the Bouddi Walks map in our room but my activities consist of afternoon reading, a refreshing Negroni served to me by the pool and a dip in the rectangular pool surrounded by grass and a towering hedge wall of pine trees. A group plays petanque on the lawn as the curve-shaped window awnings flap in the gentle breeze (striped blue-and-white, of course).

I don't leave without a visit to Bells



KATRINA HOLDEN

Day Spa for a little pampering. Arriving earlier than scheduled, I'm handed a glass of prosecco to enjoy while I wait – now thankful for my lost sense of time in my state of Bells bliss. I'm having the one-hour Signature Kodo massage that incorporates traditional Aboriginal techniques. After choosing from a selection of native aromatic oils, I lie back in the darkened room. "It's going to smell like a bushfire in here, but you're perfectly safe," my therapist whispers, beginning the indigenous flora-smoking ritual. Before long I drift into an otherworldly state of relaxation so deep there could well have been a small fire and I wouldn't have noticed. I'm gently woken from my light slumber at session's end – and I'm saved by the Bell.

"Breakfast was so delectable, I'd recommend settling in for a long and leisurely morning with the newspaper, espresso coffee and the à la carte breakfast overlooking the lawns."

Rates at Bells at Killcare start from A\$370 per room. bellsatkillcare.com.au



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