

Getaway St Albans



New South Wales

A trip to the sleepy village of St Albans is like taking a step back in time, writes **Briar Jensen**

IT'S dusk by the time we reach the tiny town of St Albans and pull into the driveway, where our colonial cottage beckons with twinkling fairy lights on the veranda and smoke snaking from the chimneys. A personalised message on a blackboard by the weathered front door welcomes us by name.

Like an apparition, Joyce appears on the veranda in period costume, complete with lace bonnet, brandishing a silver tray with crystal glasses and warm fruit pudding. As we eagerly tuck in, Joyce describes how as a young girl living here, it was her job to welcome visitors in this way.

It might sound a little twee, but it's actually quite endearing as Joyce's passion is infectious.

The cottage – a slab, wattle and daub homestead – has remained in the Morris family since it was built by emancipated farmer Price Morris in 1837. When Joyce's parents died, the house fell into disrepair and was little more than a tumbledown shell when she, a sixth-generation Morris, decided to restore it in 2002.

Now heritage-listed, the cottage makes a secluded rural retreat in the



SERENITY NOW: The town of St Albans on the banks of the Macdonald River and Price Morris Cottage (inset), a heritage-listed homestead built in 1837.

Leave the rat race behind

After our traditional welcome, we four girls on a quiet getaway take up Joyce's offer of a personalised tour of the cottage, where she weaves early pioneering history and family anecdotes into restoration details.

Four double bedrooms and a parlour make up the main cottage, which is surrounded on two sides by a veranda. Antiques, period furnishings and family curios create a colonial feel.

Each room has a history window showcasing the original construction method and subsequent wall coverings and in the parlour, part of the calico ceiling is left open, exposing the shingle roof above.

Bedrooms include queen, double and twin options and I choose Beatrice's room (a cousin), with an iron four-poster bed dressed in elegant

burgundy silk; lace curtains hang at the window. Thankfully, Joyce is not too precious about authenticity and each room has a heater, electric blanket and deliciously cosy robes.

Across a breezeway from our rooms is the kitchen, where along with an

open fire there are plenty of modern appliances, including a coffee machine. The large kitchen table groans under the weight of generous breakfast provisions and

bacon, eggs, tomatoes and juice await in the fridge.

Lace doilies, bone-handled cutlery, old biscuit tins and other memorabilia remind me of my own childhood farmhouse kitchen.

Out the back, next to the 200-year-old cedar tree, the original dairy has been lined with shiny corrugated iron

to make a modern bathroom with toilet, shower and washbasin.

A separate outhouse, dubbed "the loo with a view", is positioned so the door can be left ajar for a pastoral vista. Squares of newsprint tied with string hang next to modern loo paper.

I love the cottage's textural character – weathered boards, rough-hewn logs and paint-cracked doors. It's cosy and comfortable, with homely touches such as informal arrangements of red bottlebrush in jam jars and a china cabinet filled with family heirlooms.

St Albans, once a main stopover point for Cobb & Co stagecoaches en route to Newcastle, is now a sleepy little settlement at the navigable end of the Macdonald River.

"It's called the Forgotten Valley for a reason," says Joyce. "There's not much here." But she has put together a comprehensive touring guide for guests wanting to do a round trip of the valley.

We're reluctant to leave the parlour's roaring fire for dinner, but are rewarded with an equally feisty



Wish you were here

Getting there

St Albans is in the Macdonald Valley, northwest of Sydney. It's a two-hour drive from Sydney, the Hunter Valley, Newcastle and the Blue Mountains.

Staying there

Price Morris Cottage, 37 Upper Macdonald Rd, St Albans. Ph 4568 2121.

www.pricemorris.com.au. Rates from \$160 a double a night.

While you're there

Check out the old photos on the walls of the Settlers Arms Inn, 1 Wharf St, www.settlersarms.com.au For quirky gifts visit The Fickle Wombat Cafe, Bulga St. **For more activities in the area see** www.hawkesburyaustralia.com.au

blaze at the nearby Settlers Arms Inn. The Georgian-style pub, built of convict-hewn sandstone, was licensed in 1836 and retains its old-world charm. The menu includes homemade soups, pies and tarts featuring fresh ingredients from the kitchen garden.

Next morning, mist cocoons the cottage and blankets the paddocks,

adding an ethereal feel to our already tranquil locale.

We stoke the kitchen fire and cook up a breakfast more befitting a farmer than four city chicks. We put it down to the invigorating country air. **The writer was a guest of Hills, Hawkesbury & Riverlands Tourism.**

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