

Drift House

Port Fairy, Victoria

There is something fabulous about the name Port Fairy. It seems imbued with whimsy and wonder and the suggestion of pixies at the bottom of the garden. On Victoria's blustery southwest coast, about 28km past Warrnambool, at the far reaches of the Great Ocean Road, the little port and one-time whaling station was once known as Belfast, as a nod to the Irish settlers of the early 19th century. The name Port Fairy is said to have been bestowed by a certain Captain James Wishart after his cutter, the Fairy, pitched up there in the 1820s.

The coastal settlement has long been a holiday favourite of Melburnians and prosperous farmers down from the Mallee and the Wimmera for the summer. But now, amid wide, slow streets lined with full-skirted Norfolk Island pines, cottagey B&Bs and folksy cafes, is a new breed of accommodation that has been sprinkled liberally with a special kind of designer fairy dust. Drift House, which opened late last year after a 15-month conversion, offers just four apartment-style suites, but the impact of such an architecturally exciting project on a settlement of about 1500 residents is considerable.

Owners John Watkinson and Colleen Guiney hired Melbourne-based architect and design studio Multiplicity to transform the dilapidated two-storey bluestone building, which was built on an imposing corner plot in the 1850s for a sea captain, and progressively added to with layers of Victoriana, including iron lacework in the 1930s. It seems they made an inspired choice because Drift House is a state finalist in the 2014 Australian Institute of Architects Awards. The Victorian winners will be announced on June 20; the national awards take place in November.

There are two veranda apartments (ground-floor One and upper Two) in the footprint of the original building, which is surprisingly shallow in scale given the pomp of the exterior. Original timber floors have been restored and limed, the joinery is simply lovely, there are bold pops of colour (including a Kelly green ceiling in the downstairs accommodation that harks back to those Irish pioneers), and plenty of personalised touches, such as stashes of books, magazines, boxed games and DVDs. In one apartment, a fireplace mantel and mirrored surround has been flipped into a piece of wall art painted in spring green.

Each apartment is the size of a free-flowing studio, with a thorough integration that allows for kitchenettes, groovy showers in tiled pods or elongated modules that almost feel like tunnels, generous bedroom space and versatile sitting areas. There are full-sized pump-pack toiletries by Grown Alchemist, bed throws are by Country Road, linen is crisp, and furniture pieces have a Scandinavian simplicity.

The piece de resistance is Three on the ground floor of the perforated steel extension. Here you have a walled courtyard with a noble old brick fireplace and an interior fit-out that is full of visual drama, from hardwood-battened walls and a clever juxtaposition of window sizes to remote-controlled swivelling sun-blinds. Upstairs, Four is another cleverly conceived and uncluttered apartment, the only one without outside space but with the biggest and brightest views and a pull-down movie screen.

Throughout Drift House, Colleen's abstract artwork and mixed-media murals are on display and there has been abundant use of salvaged and upcycled materials to create an organic feel that seems at once beachy and urban casual. Susan Kurosawa is The Australian's travel editor.



MARTINA GERACOLA



- 01 Drift House is the result of a 15-month conversion of a bluestone house built in the 1850s
- 02 The Kelly green ceiling in suite One harks back to the Irish pioneers of Port Fairy
- 03 The perforated steel extension to the main house
- 04 Suite Two on the upper level of the original house features collage art by Colleen Guiney
- 05 Suite Three has timber-battened walls and a centrepiece bathtub



DINING

Drift House provides plenty of kitchen equipment and Nespresso machine plus a maxi-bar of supplies at reasonable cost; there's an emphasis on local produce and the bottles of plonk are from Basalt Wines on the Great Ocean Road. Be sure to scoff the custard-filled shortbread samples from Sandra Showler, a second prize-winner three years in a row at the Port Fairy Show.

A generous breakfast basket includes a jar of delicious home-stewed rhubarb and takes guests on a virtual farm-gate tour of Victorian boutique producers. There is a supermarket on Sackville Street stocked with all you would require for self-catering.

But Port Fairy is not short on good dining options, from Tanya Connellan's cuisine at Merrijig Kitchen on Campbell Street to garlicky takeaway pizzas at Coffin Sally on Sackville Street (the Pear Blue comes recommended). Don't miss fabulous artisan ice cream from Poco on Cox Street; convivial lunches (home-made soups a specialty) from Jo O'Keefe's cafe The Farmer's Wife, and the best coffee is at Slitti on Bank Street, with a wedge of spiced chai cheesecake on the side.

EVERYONE'S TALKING ABOUT

In 2012, Port Fairy was named the most liveable small community in the world by the UN-endorsed Livcom Awards. John and Colleen tell me a neighbourly spirit is strong here, with residents happily volunteering for civic events, including the annual Port Fairy Folk Festival (March 6-9 next year). Profits are ploughed back into the town and it seems such a model community that perhaps, as I do, you'll check the for sale notices in real estate agency windows before the three- to four-hour drive to Melbourne.

HOT TIP

From Melbourne on the Princes Highway, take the golf club turning to the left before entering Port Fairy proper. This snaking road takes you past a stern-looking and solitary two-storey house that featured in the recent ABC telemovie The Broken Shore and then gently winds beside East Beach and across a bridge over the Moyne River to the junction of Gipps and Regent streets. There stands Drift House, waiting to greet visitors.

STEPPING OUT

John and Colleen have prepared a list of insider tips and a small map, which points out walks, nature reserves, vineyards and swimming spots and suggests venturing to Logans Beach in Warrnambool for the best whale-spotting from May to September.

ESSENTIALS

Drift House, 98 Gipps Street, Port Fairy, Victoria 3284. More: 0439 969 282; drifthouse.com.au. From about \$325 a night for two; book with Mr & Mrs Smith for good rates and extras; mrandmrsmith.com.