

Hotel

Peace on Earth, just quietly

A home away from home minus the everyday grind... **Claire Scobie** is there.



FEDERAL is only a 20-minute drive from Byron Bay, but as the roads narrow and the views



expand across the North Coast hinterland, life's daily stresses recede to a background hum.

By the time I've crossed the wooden bridge over a small creek marking the entrance to the Tin Dog, I've arrived at a subtropical oasis with palm trees studding perfect lawns. Ahead is a sweeping Federation house and, outside the front door, a rusting model of a tin dog with an upturned snout: the origin of this rural retreat's quirky name.

Some six years ago, ex-Sydneysiders Mark and Sue Kelly decided on a sea - or tree - change and, after renovations, the Tin Dog opened with four high-ceilinged rooms, each with access to a private deck or veranda.

Swing in a hammock and listen to the deep silence

About 40 per cent of the Kellys' guests return, another 20 per cent are referrals. It's somewhere that begs a second visit. Or in my case, an annual pilgrimage.

It's a place to go to feel nurtured, restored and somewhat indulged, without spending a fortune. It's child free and the mobile phone barely works (or not at all).

"The fact that there's no reception freaks people out initially," Sue says. "Then they start to relax."

Each room is decorated in simple lines with a sharp eye for detail. Homemade macadamia cookies and local coffee stock the cupboard. There's a bar fridge and stereo system

(and a huge selection of CDs on offer), but no television.

In the main house is the King Room, all crimson and white, boasting a sunken bath and double shower; and the more old-fashioned Cedar Room with wine-red cedar walls. In a new annex, built to blend with the turn-of-the-century style, are the Garden and Palm rooms with polished timber floors, the latter overlooking a 12-metre pool.

The combination of the wraparound deck and hideaways in the grounds - a gazebo in the rainforest dell and a wooden pergola with barbecue - means that even when the Tin Dog is full you never

seem to see anyone else. In the warmer months, a bottle of chilled white wine can be shared in the summerhouse or you can swing in a hammock and listen to the deep silence, broken only by the cooing of a wonga pigeon. In winter, when the Byron hinterland becomes surprisingly fresh, the fires are lit in the two sitting rooms providing an ideal excuse to curl up with a good book on the sofa.

The Kellys are on hand when needed (they live on the property) with advice on local attractions - tennis, horse riding, national parks, alternative therapies - while remaining obligingly discreet. The

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SOLITUDE: Whether you're snuggling up in the glow of a crackling fire or taking a dip in the pool, the Tin Dog, with its relaxing verandas, cosy bedrooms (the King Room, pictured) and peaceful gardens is perfect for all seasons.

> TRIP NOTES

- The Tin Dog, Macadamia Lane, Federal, phone (02) 6688 4465, see www.thetindog.com.au.
- Rates from \$180 per night, including breakfast. NRMA 4½ star rated.
- Closest regional airports are Lismore (25-minute drive), Ballina (40 minutes) and Coolangatta (55 minutes).

atmosphere they've created is a genuine "home away from home". It is neither formal, nor intrusive.

The Tin Dog's signature is genteel sophistication. A typical day begins with a four-course breakfast, starting with a platter of fruit bought fresh from the farmers' market, porridge or local muesli and

homemade compote. Next is Sue's daily cooked breakfast. It could be Italian baked eggs – a sort of fluffy bread and butter pudding – or delicious potatoes and feta cakes with caramelised tomato. If you can fit it in, there's banana bread and toast,

all washed down with cafe-style coffees and freshly squeezed juice. This treat is served with the papers and will keep you going until lunchtime.

Breakfast is an ideal time to look

through the zany *Byron Echo* and decide which massage, day spa or market to aim for.

The nearby Bangalow markets are held on the fourth Sunday of every month, with stalls selling fairy dresses and local crafts, a chai tent and performance artists. It's an ideal place to lose yourself, before settling under a large fig tree with an icy sugar cane juice.

For the more active, day trips can be made to Minyon Falls and to Crystal Castle for lunch, home to Australia's largest stone Buddha. Byron itself offers endless beach pursuits, kayaking trips and the

obligatory walk up to the iconic lighthouse for dolphin and whale spotting.

As I've made the mistake of rushing around trying to fit too much in, I now aim to do as little as possible at the Tin Dog, which demands to be savoured. Although there's a wide choice of restaurants in Bangalow (Fresca at the Bangalow Hotel, Utopia Cafe and Siate are all excellent) and Poge's Wood in Federal is open a few nights a week, it can even be a wrench leaving at night for dinner.

One night my partner and I brought takeaway home and ate in the gazebo under the stars.

It's memories such as these that draw me back. I recognise the feeling now when it comes . . . It's Tin Dog time, when I want to cross that bridge and feel a million miles away.

