



Finding the space within

A Blue Mountains retreat offers the opportunity to embrace a deep reverence for nature and to nourish your inner space.

WORDS / KATE DUNCAN



I feel wonderful. Truly rejuvenated and restored, as though I've been on a month's holiday somewhere tropical and remote. Rather, I've been in the frosty Blue Mountains with my partner Henry, exploring The Inner Space.

The Inner Space is an eco retreat located in Katoomba, just under two hours west of Sydney. Owners Jen Hall and Peter Fry transformed the large shed into a passive-solar-design space two years ago. It's north-facing and captures the sun's beautiful heat during the day. This, along with mud brick walls and straw bale insulation, keeps the place warm at night. The rendered walls are slightly curved, which Peter fondly describes: "They feel like hands, as though the space is being held." After two mornings of yoga and meditation indoors here, I feel the weight of his words: it's a place of deep healing.

There's something special about the Blue Mountains. No matter what the season, weather or mood, the mountains evoke a feeling inside me, a feeling I can only describe as presence: pure, moment-to-moment presence. The kind that fires up your mind and vibrates through your body, drawing you into the now — your surroundings and their sensations. I think it's the air. It's layered with subtle, calming qualities that swallow you entirely. As you breathe in, you inhale spaciousness and softness; as you exhale, a feeling of expansiveness floods your body.

The mountains moved Henry and me into this presence. We'd just survived a tough few months where our lives revolved around reaching a certain date in August. Living in anticipation of a future date isn't living at all. Each day we willed away, and each night we wished for the morning light to arrive. To hit pause and experience

presence was too horrible; to stay open to the moment too stressful. This became our existence: full throttle, eyes glazed over, spinning through time. But, through those months, we had something to look forward to: a weekend away in the mountains, to stop, reconnect, be in nature, be with each other and explore The Inner Space.

We arrived at The Inner Space late Friday night. It was dark and cold as we walked carefully up the garden path to our accommodation. We were greeted by the soothing scent of lavender, a bush standing tall by the front door. I picked a bunch, crushed it in my hands and inhaled its perfume as we walked in. The place was modern, clean and warm from a wood fire blazing in the corner. Excitedly, Henry and I explored the space. We then collapsed onto the couch, sharing smiles and letting the past few months of tension slip softly away.

We spent our weekend enjoying yoga in this nurturing space, dining at delicious restaurants and cafes in Leura, going to the movie theatre, admiring the views of The Three Sisters and Echo Point and chatting with Jen and Peter about their creation.

Jen, a yoga teacher, and Peter, a builder, were inspired by the lack of warm studios in the mountains. In 2013, they decided to design their own space. Their vision was to create a warm, nourishing studio that people could hire out for workshops, performances, recordings and other activities. The space is 70 square metres, so there's plenty of room to move and the beautiful curvature of the walls creates fantastic acoustics.

The couple wanted the space to be energetically effective, so they built it with LED lights, solar panels and mud-rendered walls. For insulation, they used straw bales and Earthwool, a more eco-friendly type of

filling made from recycled plastic bottles. Recycled timber seconds were used for the floorboards and frames and the garden's native plants came from tube stock bought at the local plant rescue centre.

The outdoor garden was designed according to permaculture principles and is a standout feature. With its gentle waterfalls, mossy rocks and gurgling streams, I can see why the native birds and frogs have moved in. There's also a big green oval at the front that can be used for outdoor group work and exercise.

As the space was evolving, Jen and Peter decided to add accommodation for the facilitator hosting the workshop — or, in this case, Henry and me. The cottage was cosy and romantic. Beautiful timber stairs led to the comfiest bed I've ever slept in; the modern kitchen had everything we needed for Sunday pancakes; the bath was luxurious and deep; and then there was our personal favourite: the infrared sauna.

On the horizon are plans to retrofit the front house, where Jen and Peter currently live, to turn it into accommodation for 12 other people. Paired with the main studio space, this will offer a lovely retreat-style stay. Now, The Inner Space accommodation is available for hire, but to include the main studio space means an extra fee. Similarly, just the main studio space can be hired for group bookings or workshops.

Come Sunday morning, it was time to leave our blissful abode. We were sad to go, but deeply grateful for the presence The Inner Space instilled within us. We had arrived on empty but were leaving full; in fact, overflowing, with a deep reverence for the sacred Blue Mountains and this newfound space. 🌿

■ *The writer was a guest of The Inner Space. Visit theinnerspace.com.au to find out more.*