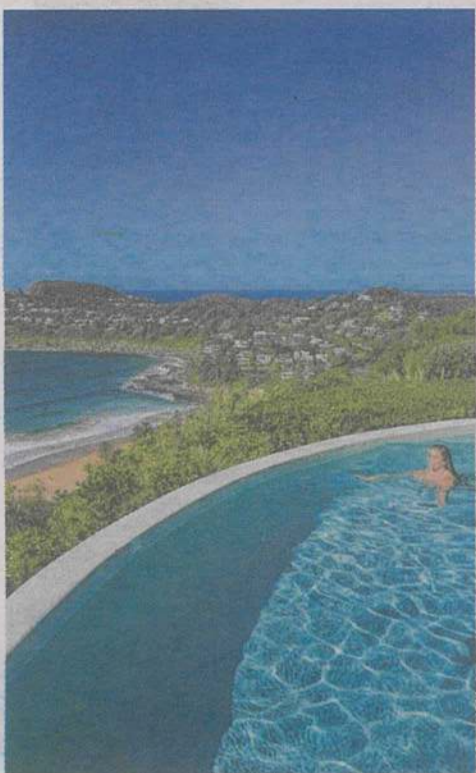


ROOM AT THE INN



Whale of a time

GRAHAM ERBACHER

Here's a declaration of interest: Sydney's northern waterway, embracing Pittwater, the Hawkesbury River and Broken Bay, is a simply splendid spot, which is why I choose to live here. So a short break at historic Jonah's, perched high on the cliff top at Whale Beach and which I can spot on my morning walk a little further north, is no hardship posting.

Jonah's has just celebrated its 90th birthday, but don't take my word for it that this is a classy joint, with ocean views from every guestroom and an award-winning restaurant. Past pleased guests include Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh, Anthony Hopkins, Lauren Bacall, William Holden, Mick Jagger, Bono, Rod Stewart and Michael Caine, some of whose photos line the walls. Did I leave out a generation? Add Justin Bieber and One Direction. Did you hear the yarn about a young fan-of the latter nicking a pair of boxer shorts during their stay? How old-school decadent.

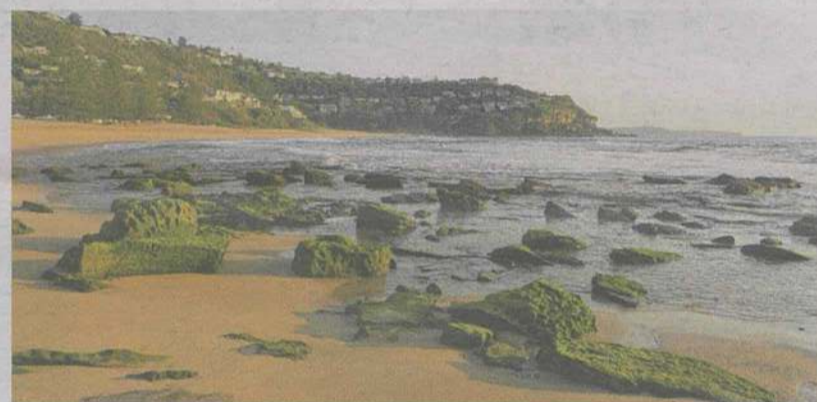
There's no such excitement during my visit, just tranquility, comfort and that view of a snug beach bordered to the south by a distinctly whale-shaped sandstone headland. It'd be the perfect place to spot the marvellous mammals during their migration season from April to November.

I arrive at nearby Palm Beach after a quick ferry ride from Wagstaffe on the Bouddi Peninsula at the southern tip of the Central Coast. As I'm on a stay and play package, I'm met at the jetty by Michael Ireland whose Taylor Made Escapes offers the "play" part — a two-hour cruise on Pittwater aboard a luxury yacht — in partnership with Jonah's.

Aboard the spick Benéteau Oceanis vessel, Michael offers a choice. We can raise the sails and breeze about; head for a secluded beach for a swim and picnic; or motor around the waterway taking in its sights such as Scotland Island and Lovett Bay, lunching onboard on



Jonah's terrace overlooking the southern headland at Whale Beach, main; pool vista, top left; early morning on the beach, below; refurbished guestroom, left; dessert delight, inset



Jonah's-supplied gourmet goodies and a bottle of Bollinger, a taste of things to come. All options sound more than OK, but I choose the latter to maximise sightseeing. Pittwater is so much more relaxed than its southern sister, Sydney Harbour, and the day is sparkling. Skipper Michael is the perfect host. He's been a carpenter and a farmer and now with his wife Lynda is building this charter business, with the occasional time off to indulge his passion for yacht racing.

Back at Palm Beach I'm whisked by Jonah's van to the retreat in nice time for a sundowner on a comfy outdoor lounge terrace with pool nearby, way above the beach. The surfers are out this afternoon and a trusty dog paces the shallows as her master has the time of his life riding the waves.

Jonah's has a rich history. Back in 1928 British widow Constance Vidal purchased three blocks of land for £740 on the lonely road to Barrenjoey Lighthouse. It was a half-day's journey from Manly by horse and carriage, but Constance could see that the private car was a-coming, so established a roadhouse on her land, displaying the "romance of Australian brick and wood".

After World War II, Jonah's started to earn its reputation as an extravagant dining destination, but it was in the 1960s that it hit its stride as a gowns-and-tux nightclub for Sydney's hob-nobbers, with the addition of ac-

CHECKLIST

Jonah's
69 Bynya Road, Whale Beach, NSW; (02) 9974 5599; jonahs.com.au.
Tariff From \$796 with breakfast; stay and play package from \$1796; taylormadeescapes.com.au.

Getting there Jonah's is about an hour's drive from Sydney CBD, or do the trip in star style and arrive in 20 minutes by sea plane from Rose Bay.

Bedtime reading Prepare for the second season of HBO's *Big Little Lies*, starring Nicole Kidman and Reese Witherspoon, with a refresher reading of the 2014 novel by Liane Moriarty. Set in the fictional Pirriwee on Sydney's Northern Beaches, the location was changed to Monterey, California, for the TV version. Or take the high road and read *The Autobiography of Joan Sutherland*; the opera star had a house at Whale Beach from the late 70s to her death in 2010.

Stepping out The Barrenjoey Lighthouse Walk offers unbeatable coastal-Hawkesbury River views; luxuriate in a wide range of in-room beauty and therapy services afterwards.

Brickbats The layout, built around the original roadhouse, is higgledy piggledy, but it could be argued this is part of Jonah's charm.

Bouquets Service is attentive and friendly at all times.

Also try Campbell Point House on the Bellarine Peninsula, Victoria; Spicers Hidden Vale, near Ipswich, Queensland.

commodation. In the 70s, owner Ozzie Fabris struck on a chandeliers, white linen and crystal formula and named the place rather exotically Villa Jonah Al Mare.

Today the Il Ocean Retreat guestrooms have been refurbished in a "Hamptons meets French Riviera" style. Mine is spacious in cool white and grey tones with oak parquet flooring. There is a dreamy AH Beard bed, round table with two chairs, oodles of hanging space and a well-curated minibar. The limestone bathroom has twin basins, shower recess and indulgent Jacuzzi (I'm not so keen on the shutter windows that fold open to the guestroom); Molton Brown bath products add the final luxury touch.

The room is geared toward the deep balcony, bordered by a terrace garden, and magnificent view. Drink it in at all times of the day but, facing due east, you're in the box seat for an unobstructed view of the sunrise.

The other showstopper is the dining room, where Italian-born executive chef Matteo Zamboni holds sway with a menu that highlights the fresh and seasonal. Head sommelier Niels Sluiman tends an 80-page wine list that offers 1600 vintage Australian and international drops. Niels is knowledgeable and genial; I am more than happy to accept his suggestions on food-wine pairings.

For dinner, grilled Mooloolaba king prawns with green tomatoes and parsley, followed by lamb rump with traditional mint jelly prove irresistible, not to forget lemon tart with fresh raspberries and mascarpone. But breakfast of ocean trout, beets and potato hash, pickled radish, horseradish cream and poached eggs served with the perfect cup of coffee, as the sun rises, bodes well for the lazy day ahead. If only this were every morning.

Graham Erbacher was a guest of Jonah's.