



# MOUNTAIN HIDEAWAY

## *Braeview Mt Beauty*

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If there was ever a time to visit North East Victoria, it's right now. After some decent autumn rains, the countryside has transformed itself. Touring this wondrous land up through the Ovens Valley towards Bright, the giant twin peaks of Buffalo and Feathertop in the distance now look upon lush, luminous green pastures. It's like driving through a new or perhaps different country – this is not Australia; is it France? Italy? Ireland?

Happier cows seem lazy and satisfied, nut growers are selling chestnuts and hazelnuts by the bucket load and this season's homegrown pumpkins are ready for the taking, calls a roadside blackboard near Porepunkah.

Heading up the Tawonga Gap road, I am startled to see last summer's fire-engulfed eucalypt forest now lime green with new foliage. Everything has come back to life: A flock of galahs pass overhead, squawking at a near deafening volume with wild calls of freedom – it's hilarious – can they really make much that much noise? They seem excited with their 'pack mentality' alpine flight and fly too fast to notice a camouflaged kookaburra swooping down to snag a worm from the ash covered ground near the roadside.

Making my way down the hills and into what looked like the bottomless depths of the Kiewa Valley, it is clearly evident just how fertile this graceful land is. Mile after mile of valley floor green grass stretch as far as the eye can see, it's confirmed now – we're not really in Australia, this is without question Ireland – County Cork, to be precise.

Upon arrival at Braeview B&B a cheery greeting from owner Isla and her now retired offsider (partner in crime) 'Inspector Morse' made for an exceptional beginning to what can only be described as an amazing stay.

Although its name may suggest simple bed and breakfast style accommodation, Braeview is anything but. *Essentials* suggests you make one serious note: Braeview is a glorious property that offers direct views towards snow capped mountains; it is surrounded

*'This is Mt Beauty, Victoria, a very unique and imaginative place indeed'*

by tall alpine gums and blissful gardens to explore and enjoy.

A selection of accommodation options are on offer also, ranging from cosy B&B rooms to a grand studio apartment (complete with a huge open fireplace) and finally the stunning and luxuriously romantic Reflections Cottage.

'I like to visit other B&Bs to see how I can improve on what I offer people,' says Isla.

'In the house I provide what I like to call traditional B&B. There are two ensuite rooms and a large open-plan lounge/living area for people to enjoy. Guests can also choose from ten different cooked breakfast items from our menu – now you don't get that in many B&Bs!'

Gazing across the lounge from the kitchen I instantly fall in love with a pair of antique wooden skis and stocks hanging above the now roaring and very toasty fire. Having previously confirmed my location (as County Cork), I now feel a little closer to Europe – I should get back to reality here – this is Mt Beauty, Victoria, a very unique and imaginative place indeed.

Stepping out the back door and with a twist and a turn through Isla's garden of discovery, the key is turned and the bright orange door to Reflections Cottage is opened.

Created as a couple's retreat, Braeview embodies a world of design creativity, detailed planning and colours, textures and stylistic emotions. Although both B&B rooms and the larger, more private studio apartment are serene and relaxing, it's the layout and positioning of the Reflections Cottage that really steals the show.



Reflections, as the name suggests, mirrors its natural surroundings. Not only does it do this convincingly, it literally brings the outside in.

A polished concrete floor is inlaid with river rocks. Blacks and browns, greys and greener hues – the floor appears as a gleaming alpine stream, floating softly in the bright North East winter sunshine. Formed earth walls surround this open plan cottage, and seem detached from the structure. This illusion presents the natural earth walls as towering cliff faces peering above a quiet forest clearing.

Clever use of sunburnt/sandy paint colours enhance the experience further as one gazes out the north facing windows toward a carpet of native foliage and a cascading water feature.

If it sounds too good to be true, you'd certainly be surprised upon arrival. It's any wonder Isla's cherished Braeview is a multi-award winning business.

To add to its credentials, Braeview has been rated by AAA Tourism as four-and-a-half stars and proudly claims the title of environmentally friendly accommodation with flow-restricted shower heads (not that it slowed the water pressure – shower time was amazing!), recycled water systems and the use of energy efficient building materials such as the formed earth – 'a great insulator, you know' informs Isla.

Single glass bricks are dotted in the kitchen wall within Reflections. They appear as bird's nests, or tree branch openings, allowing light to flow in.

After being dazzled and delighted by this significant display of homegrown architecture and surroundings (all smartly designed and planned by Isla); the little things, the included extras, are now making themselves more apparent.

A self-catering breakfast hamper sits on the huge kitchen island. Vine ripened tomatoes, local free-range eggs, fresh fruit, juices, cereal and nut nibbles – the list goes on. Chocolate topping, pancake mixture, cooking instructions and home baked Anzac biscuits. As soon as I crunch into one of these golden Aussie beauties I notice the corner spa, fluffy white towels and bath salts, sitting at an arms reach from a queen-sized bed painted with rose petals, champagne flutes and a big cuddly bear. Viewing a *very* private garden, guests who stay at Reflections are free to let the spa waters flow, fling open the panoramic windows and sip sparkling wine while gazing towards Victoria's largest mountain, Mt Bogong.

Reflections, like the studio apartment, is heated with a flickering natural flame. An easy to use (read: No wood gathering required), environmentally friendly compressed sawdust pellet heater tickles away in the lounge corner of Reflections. With the TV, DVD player, books and stereo all within reach, it was nice to discover 40 or so pay TV channels to flick through – almost as a pre-dinner game of 'seek and you shall find'.

'Mt Beauty township is a pretty little place, with a headcount of around 3,000,' says Isla.

'We're now unable to separate the town, Tawonga South and surrounding areas from the census. We have no real way of confirming the population now. I think it must be around 2,500, now that the local mill has closed.'

**Above:** Romantic spa/bedroom, Braeview's Reflections Cottage. **Previous page, from left:** Cosy fire, wine and cheese platter in Braeview's studio apartment, Early morning sun sneaks its way through the trees, flowing through nature – a soft water feature at your doorstep.

With this number crunching out of the way, it was time to visit the heart of the town – Mt Beauty was only two minutes away by car and its restaurants and eateries were all buzzing with action.

The recommended modern Australian menu at Recline was a wise selection. A fruity Margaret River pinot noir was a God-given opening to a near perfect meal. Owner and chef Mitch was as good a host as his food was warming. On this chilly alpine night an additional *free* sampling of gnocchi swimming in thick Roquefort Papillon blue cheese confirmed Recline as an impressive establishment.

I could see that Mitch was a fan of great cheeses. The after dinner selection read like an encyclopaedia of famous European and even Californian farmhouse cheeses.

With an espresso affogato and a swipe of the credit card it was a three-minute drive back to Reflections for a port, Lindt Lindor chocolate and a blissfully quite sleep.

With the early morning sun waking just a little before 7am, a plunger coffee, slice of toast topped with homemade forest berry jam and a seat at the breakfast bar was in order. Jutting just half a metre out of the line of the building, this glass walled, café style private viewing area was simply magic. This breakfast bar and window to the world framed Isla's flowing tapestry of greens and greys. Native plants and grasses, sandstone stepping-stones and flowering perennials popping up here and there. Just beyond the pond sat a raised pavilion complete with a chrome 4-burner BBQ, modern table setting, outdoor lounge and exhilarating views of Mt Bogong and Big Hill.

This ideal BBQ – or simply relaxation – deck adjoined a short path that lead to an outdoor wood fired pizza oven.

On a return trip I promised myself to knead some dough and crank this alpine kitchen to impress my loved one with a gourmet pizza to rival any fancy TV chef.

With a belly full of delights and view towards the ski slopes it was again time to hit the road, this time winding through the Happy Valley toward Myrtleford. Stopping at the town's famous Butter Factory, a last stop dining effort, was a fitting ending before taking a zippy freeway drive home.

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