

The bay of no regrets

Marian McGuinness finds the magic is still alive at her quiet childhood haven of Toowoon Bay.

It's low tide and the sickle of sand spreading north is as compressed as a footpath. It's just waiting to be strolled along, feet sliding through the cooling shallows, all the way to The Entrance. I've been staying with friends at the Toowoon Bay Holiday Park on the Central Coast, in a caravan from which we look through the mohawk of Norfolk Island pines and across the endless sea. After a bit of slip, slop, slap, it's time to start the 40-minute walk to breakfast.

A gaggle of children drag their bodyboards across the bindi-eye patch in front of our caravan as they head to the beach, eyed by a few wary rabbits out for their own grassy breakfast.

We follow the young surfers down the sandstone stairs and across the trammelled rocky platform and kick off our thongs when we hit the sand. Some parents are already tucking into bacon and eggs at the Beach Deck Cafe attached to the surf club, while their children huddle over rock pools or zigzag with their vermilion-tipped snorkels in the shallows of Little Bay just in front of them.

There is an isthmus of sand separating this protected swimming nook from the more worldly sweep of Toowoon Bay. We start walking north at a cracking pace. The lifesavers are in their *Baywatch*-style hut. Bronzed youngsters frolic between the flags as a few hardy souls stroke across the expanse of the bay.

It's equal opportunity promenading as we pass Mediterranean matrons, tattooed gen-Yers and beach fishermen. The bungalows of the



exclusive Kims Beach Hideaway peer from the rainforest shadows to our left, while whirls of seagulls target bait fish not far from the breakers. And always in the salty distance is the Norah Head Lighthouse.

After half an hour of beach walking, we come to the ocean baths at The Entrance. Its three pools cater for all ages. While the littlies swim under a shady canopy, berry-brown men in club-emblazoned budgie smugglers compete for the day's trophy in the 50-metre pool. After the final fling of sand, we round the channel



True blue ... (clockwise from top) cabins can sleep five at Toowoon Bay Holiday Park; there's room to move on the beach; low tide reveals treasures.
Photos: Marian McGuinness

that flows into the Tuggerah Lakes. There are alfresco cafes aplenty along the foreshore, including the newly opened Fisherman's Wharf, but a couple of favourites are Mojo's near the children's water garden and Cafe Escape just up the hill, where patient Pam caters to every gastronomic whim of my finicky friends.

It's a walk along memory lane at The Entrance. The housie hall that I went to as a child is now a games parlour, but the carousel that I rode while clutching my kewpie doll on

The carousel I rode while clutching my kewpie doll on a cane is still operating.

a cane is still operating, as is the 1930s cinema that's been renovated since its squelchy-carpet days. And, after 30 years, the mazy emporium of Richard's Old Bookshop is still a haven of hidey-holes for children rummaging the shelves for their holiday reading.

A weekend away at Toowoon Bay, a 90-minute drive north of Sydney, has plenty to offer. When the onshore breeze picks up in the afternoon, you can sit on the sand and watch the acrobatics of the sailboarders and kite-surfers.

And if it's real surf you want, head for Shelly Beach, just around the headland.

Whether it's boules or cricket, you'll see both played on the shaded grass of Swadling Reserve, next to the surf club. And if you're a golfing tragic, the Tuggerah Lakes course is right next door.

Fancy a bit of an afternoon drive? Then check out the nature photography at Ken Duncan Gallery, sample native liqueurs at St Fiacre's Distillery or climb the spiral staircase of Norah Head Lighthouse. For children, there's the nearby Australian Reptile Park, tenpin bowling or kayaks, pedal boats and runabouts for hire a couple of streets away at Long Jetty on Tuggerah Lakes.

The holiday park has plenty of powered, ensuite sites and a range of self-contained cabins, chalets and villas.

Toowoon Bay is not as trendy as its southern cousin, Terrigal. There are no high-rises, although there are more and more million-dollar mansions shouldering the tumbledown weatherboards of my childhood holidays.

Now it's time to stretch out on the whale-watching deck of my caravan, pour a glass of Hunter Valley red and wait for the procession of humpbacks.

See cchp.com.au for rates for Toowoon Bay Holiday Park.