



Get on course for a wonderful weekend

Fancy a country getaway that isn't all about chintz and roses? A jaunt to the Southern Highlands may leave you pleasantly surprised, as **Brian Johnston** discovers

“SWING! Swing your shoulders! You aren't chopping wood, you know, you're playing golf, it's a sport for gentlemen.” Upon which Stuart Denholm, the man in charge of Bowral Country Club, hoots like a hyena.

I take a whack at the ball and it flies into the air. Unfortunately, it falls not on to the fairway but hits a tree and drops into a pile of autumn leaves with a plop.

“Oh excellent, excellent,” says Denholm. “Considering it's the first time you've hit a golf ball, that's a pretty good shot. At least you haven't killed a bird.” He chortles in a most likeable fashion before telling me I'd

better go for a six-iron next.

Fortunately that's the club with the helpful six tattooed on its handle. Soon my ball is out of the leaves, on to the fairway and hobbling towards the green upon a series of inept shots.

“It's all about rhythm,” hints Denholm. “Don't swing down like you're hoeing potatoes.”

When I finally get my ball into the 11th hole – where I've started because there are no water features – I feel mighty pleased. I always thought golf was for old men and networking business people but, now I've succumbed, it seems rather amusing.

For the golf savvy, the course is 5050m, par 69 with a 66 rating and

perhaps isn't the greatest challenge. If you're a beginner, however, the lack of pretension makes it just the place to ease into the game.

Sure, I dig up half the course, hit more trees and nearly decapitate a galah. But the sun is shining and trying something new is always fun.

The Southern Highlands has long been associated with antique shops and chintz-filled B&Bs. But contemporary style has come to Bowral with the opening of the Gibraltar Hotel, which has a 21-year lease on the golf course below its windows.

The hotel has a rather stylish bar, serves impressive steaks in its grill and is about to open a luxurious day spa. You can attend yoga classes, play golf or walk in an adjoining nature reserve.

You won't find any floral cushions here, but plate-glass windows and angular modern architecture. Walls are decorated with Indian copper and striking, textured Dutch wallpaper. The

almost urban chic is utterly refreshing.

You could swing more than a few cats in the gigantic guestrooms and the beds are exceedingly comfortable. Get a room overlooking the golf course and you're rewarded with misty views towards Mt Gibraltar.

It's hard to fault this place as a weekend getaway, except perhaps for its restaurant's surprisingly down-market wine list. Never mind: just up the road is Centennial Vineyards, noted for its rieslings and chardonnays.

You could do worse than stray for lunch at the winery's restaurant, which features an open fire and overlooks neatly pruned vines that dissolve into eucalyptus-clad hills beyond.

Golf, wine and a hotel that makes a bold statement without sacrificing its friendly atmosphere: what more could anyone want for a weekend?

The writer was a guest of the Gibraltar Hotel.



Go2 BOWRAL

Getting there
Take the M5 out of Sydney, then turn off for Bowral. Gibraltar Hotel is on Centennial Rd (follow signs to Centennial Vineyards) just before Bowral, about 1½ hours from Sydney.

Staying three
Gibraltar Hotel has a stay-and-play package for \$152.50 a person, twin share, including breakfast and 18 holes of golf. Visit www.gibraltarbowral.com.au, ph 4862 8600.

Eating there
Centennial Vineyards, visit www.centennial.net.au, ph 4861 8722.
Gibraltar Grill, visit www.gibraltarbowral.com.au, ph 4862 8600.

More: Southern Highlands Tourism, visit www.southern-highlands.com.au, ph 1300 657 559.



SOPHISTICATED PLEASURES: The golf course as seen from Gibraltar Hotel and (left) Centennial Vineyards' restaurant.