

# Highlife

COUNTRY LIFE IN THE SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS OF AUSTRALIA

\$8.80 INCL GST  
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**A view to see**  
The home of a  
**HARRY POTTER STAR**

**GROUPIES**  
When all walks  
of life meet

**THE SADDLER  
OF BERRIMA**  
A true craftsman

**WHO WE ARE**  
PEOPLE PROFILE OF THE SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS







# A HOUSE IN THE treetops



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Award-winning British character actor Miriam Margolyes, who counts Prince Charles, Dames Judi Dench and Maggie Smith, and Australians Clive James, Germaine Greer and Barry Humphries among her friends, has built her dream home in Robertson and says this is where she intends to spend the rest of her life.

**T**HE GRAVELLED DRIVE CLIMBS STEEPLY THROUGH THICK BUSH. SUDDENLY the road sweeps around a bend to reveal a house perched high among the treetops on thick steel poles. Backed by rainforest and built on a precipitous slope atop a towering escarpment, the house, with its double-height windows and broad triangular decks, faces north across the forest canopy to the rolling coastal plains of Illawarra and the lake and sea beyond. Little wonder Miriam Margolyes calls Yarrawa Hill her dream home.

"In my wildest dreams I never thought I'd have a house as wonderful as this," she exclaims as she pads across the wide blackbutt flooring of the house's enormous open plan great room and on to its adjoining deck. "This is where I'm going to settle down. I mean, look at it – it's divine!"

With the face of an impish cherub framed by an exploding halo of hair, Miriam is a fireball of energy. Full of warmth and fun, standing a mere 1.52 metres tall, she's gregarious and hilarious, insisting you try her olive oil – "it's from my very own olive trees in Umbria!" – and while offering to make coffee, refuses to drink any herself. "Coffee makes me too excited and we don't want THAT," she says and, taking orders, shouts in

A HAMMOCK, HILL SCAPE AND  
VIEWS ACROSS THE FOREST  
CANOPY TO LAKE ILLAWARRA  
AND THE OCEAN BEYOND IS  
"HEAVEN", SAYS MIRIAM





"IT WAS ONCE A MIXED DAIRY FARM AND THE OLD BUTTER TRACK DOWN THE ESCARPMENT IS STILL THERE."

THE THREE BLUE LEATHER SOFAS (LEFT) FLANK THE OPEN FIREPLACE AND GIVE A COSY AREA TO RELAX IN YARRAWA'S "GREAT ROOM." MIRIAM (BELOW) IN HER STUDY. ON THE WALL BEHIND HER ARE FRAMED "SONG SHEETS" FROM THE 1920s.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** FINE CORRUGATED IRON LINES THE WALLS AND STAINLESS STEEL BENCHTOPS IN THE KITCHEN. WITH ITS UNUSUAL ANGLES AND WIDE WINDOWS, THE ROOM IS FLOODED WITH LIGHT.

perfect Strine: "Right-oh, three cups coming up!"

The woman of a thousand accents and a thousand faces, Miriam is in constant demand for radio, television, film and theatre in the US, England and Australia and while her name may not be as well-known as those of her many famous co-stars, her face and voice certainly are.

With her short roly-poly shape, dancing brown eyes and electrified frizz of hair, she won the hearts of Harry Potter fans worldwide when she played Professor Sprout opposite Maggie Smith, Kenneth Branagh and Alan Rickman in the smash hit movie *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*.

"More people saw me in Harry Potter than anything else I've ever done," says the veteran of 40 films, countless theatre and, most recently, the 10 part *Dickens in America* series shown on ABC-TV, bemused and delighted that she has become a "hero" to children, who on spotting her, crowd around for autographs and fire her with questions about Hogwarts School, witches and broomsticks and games of Quidditch.

"Yesterday I was in Robertson and even in this small out-of-the-way village, a little boy came up to me and wanted an autograph," she says laughing, amazed at the power of Harry Potter movies and books.

Miriam might be best known for her role as Professor Sprout but is equally admired for her many other portrayals, from the pushy overpowering mother in *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers* to the nurse in Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet*. In the past few years we've seen her play the wealthy patron in *Being Julia*, Maggie Smith and Judi Dench's maid Dorcas in *Ladies in Lavender*, as Flora in *Little Dorrit* – for which she won an LA Critics' Circle best supporting actress award – as well as on television in *Blacksadder*, *Cold Comfort Farm* and *The Life and Loves of the She-Devil*.

But perhaps the role that endeared her most to audiences was one where, although never seen in person, had everyone head over heels in love with her: Miriam was the



voice of Fly, the honey-toned Border Collie who adopted the little pig in *Babe*.

The film has a special place in her heart, not only because she is enormously proud of it, but because while making it she discovered Robertson and decided this was where she wanted to live.

"*Babe* was filmed all around this area and Robertson was our headquarters," she says as she stands on the balcony of her new home and drinks in the view. "That's when I fell in





love with the Highlands and began looking for a house here."

Also looking for a base in Australia were two close friends: Australian-born sisters, Heather Sutherland, Professor of Indonesian Studies at the Free University of Amsterdam in The Netherlands, and Sandra Sutherland, who with her husband, Jack Pallimbo, runs a detective agency in San Francisco.

"We decided to find a place together," says Miriam. "What we wanted was something with ocean views that was far

enough away from people to be private, but near enough to civilisation so we weren't completely cut off."

What they found was 156 acres of bushland and rainforest on top of the Illawarra escarpment. With the spectacular views and privacy it filled the bill. The only problem: There was no house.

"It was once a mixed dairy farm and the old butter track down the escarpment is still there," says Miriam.

Neither Miriam nor her two friends had ever built a house





MIRIAM DESCRIBES THE QUALITY OF LIGHT IN AUSTRALIA AS THRILLING. "IT IS SO CLEAR, SO BRIGHT, SO ILLUMINATING, AND THE HOUSE TAKES FULL ADVANTAGE OF THAT." THE GREAT ROOM (ABOVE). AN INDOONESIAN DAY BED (OPPOSITE PAGE) AND A 17TH CENTURY BED IN ONE OF YARRAWA'S SELF-CONTAINED APARTMENTS.



from scratch but, undeterred, tracked down Mark Jones of the Nowra architectural firm Edmiston Jones and gave him a list of their criteria.

"We wanted independent space linked to a large common area," Miriam explains. "Also, because we're all in our 60s, we wanted everything as far as possible to be on one level."

Miriam also told the architect that she hated noise. "I wanted quiet and kept telling him to keep all those lavatory flushes and pumps as far away from me as possible. I also said I wanted lots of electrical plugs. I am hysterical about electric plugs and in my house in London there are about 30 in every room!"

Their other criteria was to maximise the view and to build a house that was sympathetic to the landscape.

Mark Jones listened and took notes, then turned the tables on the three women and asked them to fill in a questionnaire. "It was full of personal questions such as are you a night or morning person, what side of the bed do you sleep on, do you have a cooked or a continental breakfast," remembers Miriam. "He said that building a house was a very personal thing and he needed to infiltrate our lifestyle in order to give us a house that would suit us."

Mark set to work creating spaces where Miriam and her friends could hunker down, that moved easily to less enclosed spaces, through to the Great Room with its conservatory feel, and out on to roofed areas of the decks to the high point where one could stand as if on the brow of a ship, out in the open, suspended among the trees.

"Building the house on poles created an easy transition of levels and did the least damage to a precipitous site," says Mark.

The result is three apartments, each with its own bedroom, deck, study and bathroom, along with a mini fridge, electric jug and microwave. Linked by a wide gallery at the rear, the apartments have easy access to the Great Room with its kitchen, walk-in pantry, woodburning stove, open-plan living/dining room and big open fireplace.

Miniorb, a fine type of corrugated iron, lines the walls of the Great Room and Rylock windows in the northern corner mean individual windows can be opened and adjusted to create cross breezes. "Everything is double glazed," says Miriam proudly. "And we have an airlock at the front door so that the westerly winds are kept out and another air lock double door system into the Great Room." Which means the house is cosy in winter and cool in summer.

For Mark, though, there were some headaches. "One was finding a space for 90 metres of books," he laughs.

The solution was to create a gallery at the rear rather than a passageway. Now lined with books, and treasures Miriam found in South Africa, it is a striking room with Indonesian-bought tiles creating a "Persian carpet" effect on the floor.

The other difficulty was accommodating three three-seater sofas around the fireplace in the great room.

"Each of the women wanted a sofa where they could lie out full length," he smiles. "That meant extending the size of the Great Room by one metre on all sides. But it worked."

The pale blue butter-soft leather sofas – as with all the furniture in the house – came from Indonesia.



"The leather is imported from Italy and made up in Indonesia," says Miriam who with Heather scoured what she calls "a rat infested warehouse" in Subaya for 18th century Indonesian antique beds, teak armoires and tables along with Dutch Colonial antiques from the 1920s in art nouveau and art deco styles.

"It works wonderfully well with the industrial feel of the house and adds warmth and texture," she says.

While Miriam has homes dotted about the world – a flat in Santa Monica, California, a house in London, the 1913 *Gun Emplacement House* in southern England – "It's the nearest house to France in the British Isles" – and a house with olive groves near Siena in Italy, she insists that Yarrawa Hill is the one she considers "home" and where she'll eventually retire.

"I never thought I'd live in a modern house but this one is magic," she says and with an impish grin, confesses that owning five houses is "a bit greedy".

"My mother owned houses in Oxford when I was growing up and rented to students and I think it was her who gave me the idea that owning more than one house was not only possible, but was okay." Besides, says Miriam succinctly, the property is a good investment, pointing out that several of her homes, including the one in Robertson, are available for rent when she and her friends are not in residence.

"It costs \$500 just to clean the windows at Yarrawa, so we have to do something to make ends meet," she jokes.

Currently starring with Australia's Adam Garcia in *Wicked*, London's hottest new musical, Miriam began the year on stage in New York in *The Importance of Being Ernest* and says as soon as her run in *Wicked* ends in March 2007, she'll begin preparing for the first Australian tour of her one-woman show, *Dickens' Women*.





BACKED BY RAINFOREST, THE HOUSE WAS BUILT ON POLES TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE SPECTACULAR VIEWS AND TO CREATE WHERE POSSIBLE ONE-LEVEL LIVING BETWEEN THE THREE SEPARATE APARTMENTS AND THE GREAT ROOM.

"Theatre is where my heart is," she says. "Film is interesting and challenging and a lucrative exercise, but I still feel quite a novice at it even though I've made many films."

Theatre might be her passion, but she admits that she still suffers from crippling stagefright. "But at least I haven't got to the point Laurence Olivier reached, where he had to literally be pushed on stage. 'Push me, push me,' he'd exhort, numb with fear." Once on stage and in character, the fear disappears. "It's the YOU that's terrified not the character you're playing."

In 2004, Miriam was awarded an OBE for her services to drama. With the Queen in mourning after the death of the Queen Mother, Prince Charles pinned the award to Miriam's bosom.

"To call him a friend would be too personal but I'd met him on a number of occasions and had been a guest at one of his house parties at Sandringham, so having him do the investiture made it extra special."