

# Natural habitat

The captivating Southern Highlands  
in NSW sets the scene for film doyenne  
Miriam Margolyes' eco-friendly home  
STORY JODIE THOMSON STYLING CARLU SEAYER  
PHOTOGRAPHY ROBERT REICHENFELD



**DECK** {opposite} In this bushland house, made from glass and corrugated iron, the angled decks peek out into the lush countryside. On the upper deck, the Basic deckchairs from Ici et Là provide a relaxing vantage point to enjoy the sights and sounds of the bush. Nature abounds inside the home, too. A king protea {above} decorates a table setting, complemented by a Mandala plate from Cambodia House and a Zari table runner from Oxfam Australia. >





we love ...  
**corrugated iron**

English-born owner Miriam loves the way the silvery corrugated iron, used as exterior and interior cladding throughout this house, gives it a distinctly Australian feel. "It looks like a shearing shed," she laughs. Architect Mark Jones chose various types of cladding to suit the building's raw, industrial aesthetic, but also because of their hard-wearing properties. "It was crucial the building be low-maintenance, because we're away so much," Miriam says. The iron (Lysaght Mini Orb and Custom Orb, and Colorbond on the roof) is fully recyclable and manufactured incorporating recycled steel.



**It was love at first sight** when UK-born actress Miriam Margolyes first set eyes on the lush countryside that is the NSW Southern Highlands. She'd spent much time in Australia, but it wasn't until she was involved in the movie *Babe*, shot in the area, that she discovered its beauty. "I was doing the voice of Fly, and [director] George Miller took me to the set," she says. "I thought, 'This is a bit of magic' when I saw it. I suppose it's a little bit English."

Miriam decided she had to own a piece of that magic, so together with her partner Heather and Heather's sister Sandra, they purchased a block of land and built their own house. They settled on a bushy site on the edge of the Illawarra escarpment because of its spectacular views.

The trio wanted a home that embraced the location's beauty and views, with plenty of space to enjoy them, inside and out. It also had to include an airy central living area and a kitchen big enough to cope with extra guests. Their desires are more than catered for; the modern design juts out from the hill, incorporating two pavilions – one for living, the other for sleeping – linked by a book-lined gallery.

The home's modern look comes from the use of corrugated iron and glass, creating a pared-back, industrial feel. Warmth has been added inside with rustic touches and exotic furnishings, which Miriam, Heather and Sandra picked up in Indonesia. "Heather is a professor in Indonesian studies and knows the country well, so we went to Surabaya and bought a container-load of furniture," Miriam says. This included side tables and armchairs, four-poster beds, mirrors and used doors.

The home also boasts fabulous pieces picked up from around the world, such as the selection of terracotta Miriam bought in Mexico, while playing the nurse in Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*.

Despite her glittering globe-trotting career, Miriam knows she'll eventually settle down permanently with Heather in their hillside retreat. "It really is my dream home," she says.

For more details, contact architect Mark Jones on (02) 4226 1387. >



**KITCHEN {opposite}** With its roomy breakfast bench, the kitchen was built for serious entertaining. Stainless-steel benchtops and extra-deep sinks provide practical work surfaces. The cabinetry is made from hardwood frames with perforated metal inserts, reminiscent of old Australian food safes.

**KITCHEN BENCH {top left}** Designed as an extra dining area for guests, the bench is lined in Lysaght Mini Orb steel cladding, which helps the kitchen blend with the rest of the room. The striped Bolga basket from Oxfam Australia adds colour to the earthy-toned room.

**DINING AREA {top right}** The open-plan dining and kitchen area boasts a soaring steel ceiling and glass walls, which invite stunning views of the bush and glimpses of the ocean. Counterbalancing the airy modern look of glass and steel, wooden dining chairs and cabinet from Indonesia add a sense of foundation and warmth.



*eco smart*

Creating comfort in all seasons, this home's design displays an impressive selection of eco-friendly features. The living areas are oriented directly north, harnessing the warming northern sun in winter. The rustic-look corrugated iron is, in fact, superbly insulating – on the walls, ceilings and even under the timber floors. Underfloor heating keeps things toasty in winter, and Miriam insisted on all the windows being double-glazed, which helps keep the home at just the right temperature all year round.



**EXTERIOR {left}** Located on a steep escarpment two hours south of Sydney, the house boasts beautiful views of the bushy landscape and the distant ocean. The exterior is clad entirely in various modern forms of corrugated iron to reflect the Australian bush setting.

**MIRIAM'S BEDROOM {right}** Each bedroom was designed to be a comfortable, private space. "We all like to be solitary," says Miriam. Taking pride of place is the ornate four-poster bed from Indonesia coupled with the colourful bedspread from India. The treasured artworks include a poster by German expressionist, Max Beckmann (left), and framed music sheets Miriam has used in previous film productions (right). "It's a real showplace for us," she says.



**BATHROOM {opposite left}** In the spacious downstairs bathroom, a custom-made vanity was created by topping an elaborate timber table from Indonesia, with a modern square basin.

**PORTRAIT {left}** Movie actress and owner Miriam put a lot of love into creating a home that's in tune with the natural surrounds. In turn, the home's underlying eco-sensibility makes it a place of complete relaxation and rest.

**HALLWAY {far right}** A book-lined gallery links the home's main living pavilion with the separate bedroom wing. The timber chest and urn were among the pieces bought in Indonesia. Other trinkets they've collected from around the world decorate each room, including these pieces in Miriam's bedroom {right}.



INSIDE STORY

**Who lives here?** Miriam Margolyes, 66, star of films such as *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, *Ladies in Lavender* and *Romeo + Juliet*; her partner Heather, 64, and Heather's sister, Sandra, 69.

**What sort of home design do you prefer?** Miriam: "Usually older houses. The first house I bought in Australia was a Federation semi in Bondi. I don't like modern architecture, so this house is an anomaly in that respect."

**What's the secret to the interior style?** "We've got lots of things that come from somewhere else. That gives it warmth."

**What's your favourite time of day in the house?** "I love breakfast and brunch there. It's lovely sitting there, hearing the lyre birds outside."

**What made you fall in love with this block?** "It's got rainforest, paddocks and stunning views of the ocean and escarpment. It's also wonderfully isolated."

**Any favourite features of the house?** "The underfloor heating is fabulous, and the floors downstairs are fantastic. They're poured concrete, but a pigment mixed into the concrete gives it a finish that looks like leather."

**Any decorating rules you like to follow?** "One of my big things is to lay tiles diagonally. If you don't, it looks like a gent's loo. If you do, the angles beckon you into the room."

**What's left to do?** "We have to bring all our books from England. We lined the gallery with bookshelves but haven't filled them yet!"

