

The Blue Mountains:

from craft stores to chic cafés

The Blue Mountains and its greater region has become more than just a place to bushwalk and peruse shops stocking antiques. In fact, it's quite the contemporary hub, as Kate Hutchinson finds out.

Northern Beaches locals frequent the Blue Mountains for short getaways. And why not? It's just an hour and a half drive away, there are beautiful bushwalks, the recently refurbished Scenic Railway, and antique stores to wander around in. While many stick close to the main drag of Katoomba, Michelle Grima, a Blackheath local, says there is so much more to the area.

"The Blue Mountains and the greater region is changing. It's very contemporary, but also has what everyone knows and loves. It has its homely feel and caters for obviously the tourists, but definitely still the locals as well," Ms Grima explains as we dig into our dinner at the cool Leura Garage - a bar and restaurant that's been revamped from a 130 year old garage.

While the Blue Mountains has always been known by foodies for its slow food movement, the general public is now catching on.

"Nearly every café and restaurant is locally owned, and we all support each other as much as possible. We are lucky as we have such an abundance of delicious, seasonal food and wine on our doorstep. Megalong Valley has great suppliers of fresh vegetables, there's beautiful wine from Mudgee and Orange, and premium meats in Penrith and Lithgow, honey from Blackheath and locally roasted coffee," explains Leura Garage owner James Howarth.

"Plus, there are a lot more sustainable food events happening up here that

are attracting Sydneysiders. There's the Blackheath Grower's Market and the Leura Harvest Festival to name two."

And now to the shopping. While Northern Beaches locals usually frequent the Blue Mountains' local charity shops and many antique stores (our favourite is the well-known Victory Theatre Antique), Ms Grima says there are contemporary, thriving boutiques throughout the area.

The Blue Mountains is also becoming known as a vintage clothing mecca - Ms Grima reels off several store names, including Mrs Peel, which has "quality vintage clothing at really good prices", and Leura Vintage, which has "a fab range of vintage clothing, including work suits and evening wear," Ms Grima explains.

There are also some fantastic bushwalks apart from the many around the Three Sisters, that people should try, says Ms Grima. "There are great walks and hikes around Wentworth Falls - there are even running tracks - all being safely bordered," she says.

"I think the Charles Darwin Walk at Wentworth Falls is utopia."

Mr Howarth suggests the Ruined Castle Walk that takes you to the centre of the Jamison Valley, overlooking the Three Sisters and Mount Solitary, Katoomba. "It's a four to five hour walk at a steady pace. It's very flat and easy," he says.

"There's also Sublime Point in Leura. Go there with a bottle of white from Orange and watch the sunset."

Sounds perfect.



STEPPING OUT



Where I stayed:

Leura Rose

It was absolutely stunning. The three-bedroom cottage was immaculate, with so much attention to detail and a warm ambience. It went above and beyond my expectations - from the complimentary wine, port, chocolate and breakfast to the master bathroom - complete with heated tile flooring, log fireplace and the biggest spa bath I've ever seen. I literally cannot wait to stay there again.

Phone Lorraine Allanson on 0430 496 755 or visit mountainwhispers.com.au.

Where I ate:

Leura Garage

A warm atmosphere in a modern setting. Delicious food. I recommend the smoked trout pizza.

Info: 4784 3391 or leuragarage.com.au.

Where I went:

Blue Mountains Botanic Garden, Mount Tomah

This 252-hectare garden is magical. Rainforest walks, hundreds of different species of flora - I could have spent all day there.

Info: 4567 3999 or mounttomahbotanicgarden.com.au.