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THE BRILLIANCE OF THE BLUE MOUNTAINS

Alisha Smith discovers a plethora of physical activity and relaxation options in Sydney's historic Blue Mountains.

In October 2013, more than 118,000 hectares (291,584 acres) of bushland was lost to the worst bushfires in NSW in more than 40 years. The Greater Blue Mountains Area suffered the brunt of the devastation, with more than 200 homes destroyed and 120 damaged as three major fires near Lithgow, Springwood and Mount Victoria tore through the area.

As hundreds of emergency services workers and volunteers from around the country converged to battle the blazes, we sat glued to our TV and computer screens, transfixed by apocalyptic images of angry, vermillion flames roaring towards exhausted fire crews. With reports rolling in of more and more Blue Mountains bushland being devoured by the relentless infernos, it became hard to fathom that there'd be anything left of the once-breathtaking region.

When the authorities stopped issuing advisory messages discouraging all non-essential travel, I took the opportunity to drive 1.5 hours to the northwest of Sydney for a two-night girly getaway in the charming Blue Mountains village of Leura. After all, the Blue Mountains businesses were still relying on tourist

dollars to help them survive...

With quality restaurants, boutique shopping, spectacular views and a huge range of active pursuits all at your doorstep, Leura is the perfect holiday destination.

There's no going past Mountain Whispers for accommodation. Comprised of four historic properties throughout Leura and Katoomba, each has been exquisitely and painstakingly refurbished to its turn-of-the-20th-century glory. Each property combines the grandeur and elegance of the early 1900s with the luxurious comforts of the modern world: hot running water, 1,000-thread-count sheets, and even, should you so desire, an in-house massage! The jewel in the Mountain



Whispers' crown is Varenna, with its 1906 décor, 1,800m² gardens and on-site relaxation boudoir, La Bella Rouge. Book a massage, facial or even a make-up session and simply walk down the garden path to La Bella Rouge in your plush bathrobe for an hour of blissful relaxation.

Although accommodation this deluxe is reason enough to sink into a hot bubble bath with a good book, I decided to earn my R&R by tackling the exhilaratingly horrific Giant Stairway that hugs the side of The Three Sisters at Katoomba. With the rising sun on my face, a deafening cacophony of cicadas in my ears and around 900 steps of metal and hewn rock at my feet, I jauntily galloped down the first few sets of steps, counting them off in groups of 10. The descent is prolonged, steep and, at times, quite narrow and within about 10 minutes, my quads began to protest.

Yet as thigh-burning as the descent is, turning around to come back up is a whole new world of delicious pain. 'Let's see if we can run this, legs,' I said sassily to myself, taking off at a respectable clip. A mere 20 steps in and I was clinging to the hand rail, gasping like a fish out of water, and silently cursing the intruder who must have snuck in to my room and replaced the Ventolin in my asthma inhaler with Deep Heat. By the time I reached the top, one-third crawling, one-third staggering, two-thirds hysterical, I was deliriously ecstatic and full of respect for explorers Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth, who had spent weeks in this unforgiving terrain in the early 1800s. Of course, if bushwalking isn't your thing, there are loads of other activities to keep you on your toes, from abseiling, rock climbing and caving to canyoning, mountain biking and even mountaineering.

All that physical activity deserves a solid refuelling session and there's no better place to do so than at Leura Garage. An inspired conversion of a mechanic's workshop gives Leura Garage an industrial feel, with staff wearing grease-monkey uniforms and

remnants of the auto-trade evident in the artwork and installations that pepper the restaurant's walls. The casual dining menu is nothing short of exceptional and, with share plates encouraged, is matched perfectly by the communal ambience.

The lamb meatballs are generous, tender and flavourful, particularly when demolished with lashings of eggplant caviar, minted greek yoghurt and pickled sumac onions. The 250g Kilcoy scotch fillet melts in your mouth and comes with salsa verde and the ingeniously delicious beetroot crisps. Baby root and heirloom vegetables with toasted honey walnuts and feta, and broccolini and asparagus with toasted almonds and smoked hickory salt provide the perfect accompaniment to the many choices of meat, chicken and seafood. Owner, James Howarth, and head chef, Chevy McGrath, are both understandably proud of the menu. Ingredients are sourced as locally as possible, with Orange and Mudgee featuring frequently on the wine list, honey sourced from nearby Logan Brae and herbs and root vegetables from Kanimbla Valley.

If, like me, you were born blessed with a separate stomach for dessert, then no trip to Leura would be complete without a visit to Josophan's Fine Chocolates on Leura Mall. Featuring mind-blowing combinations such as mango and chilli, basil and lime, and strawberry and balsamic, these handcrafted treats are free from preservatives and artificial flavours so are practically a health food... well, almost!

While the Greater Blue Mountains community begins the monumental clean up and rebuilding efforts to get their post-bushfire lives on track, the tourist drawcards of Leura and Katoomba were untouched by the October blazes and remain as picturesque and welcoming as ever. Be it a week or a weekend, you'll be doing yourself a favour by booking your next getaway in the Blue Mountains. **OH!**

Where to stay

- Mountain Whispers has four beautiful properties to choose from: Varenna, Strawberry Patch, Leura Rose and The Gatsby. www.mountainwhispers.com.au

Where to play

- Everglades Historic House and Gardens is the perfect location for a summer picnic in picturesque surrounds. www.everglades.org.au
- Stop in at the Blue Mountains Visitor Information Centre at Echo Point, Katoomba for walking maps and active adventure info. www.visitbluemountains.com.au

Where to eat

- Leura Garage, open Thursdays to Mondays from 12pm to late. www.leuragarage.com.au