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Gatsby and all that jazz

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The Carrington Hotel in Katoomba has been restored to its original splendour.

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THE Blue Mountains region, two hours by road west of Sydney, was once a popular hill station for city dwellers.

Fleeing the summer heat, families would climb into big upright cars, or hoist suitcases on to the brass luggage racks of steam trains, and head for the heights.

The 1920s and 30s, in particular, were eras of boarding houses, grand balls and honeymoons. A little neglected as the world gathered speed and swept partygoers further afield, the Blue Mountains has retained spectacular relics of past grandeur.

Gleams of bright chrome, lead-framed glass and sleek light fittings, sweeping staircases and timber wall panels are everywhere. Katoomba is both showcase and attic of jazz-age design. Building facades and interiors in every state of decay and restoration are a backdrop to success stories and dearly held hopes.

Visitors come to the mountains in busloads, but overseas tourists sometimes prefer modern amenities before leadlights, winding staircases and creaky floorboards, putting nostalgic treasures at serious risk. Local patronage can save the day.

Baz Luhrmann recently finished filming *The Great Gatsby* in Sydney (and in secret locations on a nearby

mountaintop), and there's a fresh focus on the Blue Mountains' rich jazz-age heritage. Katoomba began blossoming in the 1880s; as it outgrew its coalmining origins, it emerged as a health and holiday resort. By the 1920s the area was holiday heaven, with more than 60 guesthouses.

The Carrington Hotel in Katoomba Street, built in 1882 (as the Great Western Hotel), is again fully functional after years of neglect. Renamed in 1886 for then NSW governor (and hotel patron) Lord Carrington, its front terrace makes a perfect location for Jay Gatsby-style lounging. By day, an airy lightness pervades the terrace, its grand stairway sweeping upwards from beautifully restored gardens to culminate in curving white balustrades.

By night, arched leadlight windows, their jewel colours illuminated from within, turn terrace and hotel into an exotic pleasure palace. Inside, timber staircases, lamp-bearing statues, a trove of bright leadlights (including corridor "Bath" signs spelled out in flowing ruby-red glass) sit beside occasional bits of modernity and some frankly frumpy colours. But everywhere the place is steeped in nostalgia and humming with business. Visit the vast lounge or the grand dining room, or book into a roomy, restored upstairs suite, favourites for wedding couples.

Slip into the past at the Carrington or jazz up a weekend at The Gatsby, a short walk from Echo Point. At this revamped mountains cottage, no decorative jazz-age detail has been forgotten, alongside the best modern comforts -- underfloor heating in the main bathroom, excellent sound system with a stack of moody CDs, plump beds, fully equipped modern kitchen and a lovely garden.

The former Savoy Picture Theatre, across from the Carrington and opened in the 1930s, now houses the eccentric Avalon Cafe in its upstairs dress circle. The old projection room is a tiny kitchen producing excellent food for a menu with retro touches. The earlier Savoy's refreshments lounge is now the Avalon's armchair-furnished cocktail bar and, like the cafe, full of eccentric decor. (On midweek evenings, when this annexe is unstaffed, simply order your cocktail in the restaurant and make yourself at home in the bar.)

Strolling Katoomba Street, I discover art deco shopfronts and ornate vintage facades. Further downhill, Palais Royale is another restored accommodation option with a rich history. But it's the Paragon Cafe, just below the Carrington's imposing driveway, that is the exquisite little sister of its gorgeous neighbour.

The Paragon is on the National Register for its shopfront (leadlight showcase windows and original signs intact) and for three grand interior rooms: the front restaurant (high-class tearooms, sundae parlour), and the behind-the-scenes Blue Room and Banquet Hall.

The wooden booths in the front-of-house cafe, opened in 1916, are flanked by elegant ivory-toned bas-relief nymphs and goddesses reclining at eye level against the dark walls. O. L. Steen's watercolour designs for these classically themed wall cameos -- Grecian ladies, pan-pipe and lyre-playing gods, charioteers and archers -- are preserved in the NSW State Library archives.

A marble-fronted soda fountain with its original taps lines the back wall. And through a side doorway lies a warren of deco-decorated, amber-lit rooms (their styles variously described as gothic-deco, ocean-liner and pre-Columbian). The Blue Room and the Banquet Hall, or ballroom, now operating on select nights as a cocktail bar, are most notable. Sydney architect Henry White (who worked with US theatre-designer John Eberson on Sydney's State and Capitol theatres), designed the Paragon's back rooms in the 1930s.

In the front cafe, there is a gaping space where a timber-and-glass counter-cabinet has gone missing; a reproduction has been commissioned. The chocolate-making room upstairs is operating again, supplying the delicious displays for the downstairs counter (though not all products are made here). And nostalgic green or pink Waratah wrappings and boxes are still in use (designs that are also in the NSW State Library archives).

There are obstacles to overcome, including past neglect, heirlooms lost, sold or strayed, and some bad press about slow service. But new owner Robyn Parker is a woman on a mission and a solid core of this spectacular venue remains, just holding its breath to break forth in all its past glory.

Away from the main street, the Rooster restaurant occupies an elegant old house where I discover more leadlights and deco woodwork, and an excellent kitchen serving classic French dishes. The Rooster is just one place here

where modern expertise flourishes in a period setting.

The Solitary, a classic kiosk edging the Jamison Valley, is another, as is the very stylish Italian-style cafe in the old Leura Garage.

High on the list of exciting new goods in vintage shells is Carrington Cellars, installed in the cavernous old power station behind the namesake hotel. Items found here are sometimes difficult to track down even in Sydney, such as imported and local specialities, wines, beers, even Normandy and Brittany ciders with distinctive champagne stoppers. And for timeless artisanal excellence, don't miss Josophan's Fine Chocolates, at Leura Chocolate Boutique in Katoomba's little sister town (132 Leura Mall).

It's possible, too, to uncover jazz-age finds to take home. This region has made a fine art of heritage shopping. Leura Vintage (147 Leura Mall), Macarthur's Arcade (an antiques and vintage bazaar) and Mr Pickwick's Fine Old Books (84-86 Katoomba St) are key addresses.

This month, Blue Mountains Lithgow and Oberon Tourism is getting out the top hats and dancing pumps to stage The Roaring 20s and All That Jazz, a grand month-long festival with balls, parades, dances, a classic car rally to Jenolan Caves, and heritage railway open day at Oberon.

Waldorf Leura Gardens Resort plans a Gangsters and Molls Ball and (free) Jazz in the Garden.

The Carrington will host an art deco costume ball in its Grand Dining Room, a vintage fashion parade and a speakeasy, and The Paragon will hold an elegant tea dance.

Judith Elen was a guest of Blue Mountains Lithgow and Oberon Tourism.

- visitbluemountains.com.au
 - thecarrington.com.au
 - mountainwhispers.com.au
 - jamisonhouse.com
 - avalonkatoomba.com
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