



All That Jazz in the Blue Mountains

By Bernard O'Shea Tuesday, February 4, 2014



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More than 300 dancers took to the streets of Leura to perform the Charleston.

February is the time of the year when the people in the Blue Mountains of NSW kick up their heels and go a little crazy.

The women don flapper dresses, feather boas and the finest of hairpieces, or maybe a cloche hat, paint themselves up in their boldest make-up and flaunt it for all its worth. Elaborate art deco jewellery and a pretend puff or two on a snazzy, slender cigarette holder add to the look.

The men go for Top Hats, Fedoras, Panamas or straw boaters, tuxedo suits and stripy blazers, garish ties and colourful braces, and anything else they can to make themselves look like dashing Chicago-style gangsters.

Why? Because it's the month-long Roaring 20s & All That Jazz Festival, and if any era represents having fun and making an exhibition of yourself, the Roaring Twenties is probably it.



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Catherine Martin declared style legend.



Catherine Martin, famous for her sumptuous costumes and designs in husband Baz Luhrmann's films, has...

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Revellers embracing the Roaring 20s theme.

"It's great fun," says festival director Sandy Luxford. "Most women really just enjoy dressing up – there are lots of sequins, the glitz, the glamour...."

But, she adds, "the men are looking pretty spiffy too. We've had some really elegant men taking part this year."

The program starts in energetic, dramatic fashion with the Charleston Challenge, an attempt to break the Guinness world record for the greatest number of costumed people dancing the Charleston, one of the more risqué dances from the 1920s era.

The festival set the record last year with 276 participants and went even better in the Leura Mall on Saturday, taking the tally to 319.



A record-breaking 319 people danced the Charleston on the streets in the Charleston Challenge.

Luxford says the youngest participant this year was a five-year old girl, the eldest dancer a gallant 81-year-old woman. Gallant because to qualify for the record, the dance has to go on for at least five minutes, and the Charleston can be an aerobic challenge – it involves some fancy footwork, knees-up, high kicks, stretching and lunging low – particularly on a hot summer's morning when you are decked out in formal attire. It makes for great entertainment, both for the participants and the onlookers.

Bettering the record is a sign of the growing popularity of the festival, now in its fourth year. "We'll aim for the 400-mark next year, for sure," Luxford says.

After their successful record-breaking performance, the jubilant participants retreated into the shade of a marquee for a formal long lunch, or to the local cafes and bars for a deserved rest and refreshment.



Attendees got into the spirit, donning impressive costumes.

All That Jazz in the Blue Mountains.



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For some, though, this was a mere interlude until another highlight of the festival, the Art Deco Ball at the Carrington Hotel in Katoomba that night, when those lucky enough to have secured a ticket could kick up their heels to the sounds of Greg Poppleton and the Bakelite Broadcasters.

For those that missed it, don't fret: you still have time to fit in another night of glitzy decadence at the Roaring Twenties Glamour and Gowns Ball on February 15 at the Civic Ballroom in Lithgow, a new addition to the festival program.

Jazz, musical soirees, murder mysteries and indulgent high teas also feature prominently on the festival calendar, and the great natural beauty of the World Heritage-listed Blue Mountains region, splendid historic manors and gardens, and generally pleasant climate add to the splendour and sense of occasion.

The social set has a lot to fit in on February 15. Apart from the ball in Lithgow, there is Croquet on the Lawn at the Manor House in Mt Victoria (built in the 1870s as a mountain retreat for Sydney Morning Herald founder John Fairfax) followed by a Murder Mystery Evening. Meanwhile, at another of the region's grand manors, Everglades, in Leura, it's the Retro 2014 Cocktails & Canapes soiree, followed by a dinner dance at the nearby Leura Golf Club.

Anyone with an interest in the Royal family should head to another of the region's top attractions, the Jenolan Caves, on Sunday, February 16. On March 31, 1927, the caves received their first royal visitors, the Duke and Duchess of York (who went on to become King George VI and the late Queen Mother) and who spent the night in Caves House.

To commemorate that royal visit, the Jenolan Caves are putting on a special tour of the 'Left Imperial' cave. Participants can retrace the steps of the royal couple and visit areas of the cave that are not normally shown to the public. As a bonus, the New Empire Ballroom Ragtime Dance Orchestra will provide the musical entertainment at a special high tea, and guided tours of Caves House.

Recently there has been a worldwide revival of interest in the fashion and music of the Roaring Twenties, much of it stirred up by Baz Luhrmann's typically over-the-top remake of the film *The Great Gatsby*, which only last week won 13 Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Awards.

One self-confessed fan of the Roaring Twenties is Lorraine Allanson, owner of the Mountain Whispers chain of luxury art deco homes and cottages. It was an era, she says, that was particularly kind to women and she is thrilled that it is back in vogue.

"It allows women to let themselves loose and be women," she says. "It allows you to be sexy and fun. The sequins, the glitz, the glamour ... women love that sparkle, everyone wants to be wearing the bling. It was a beautiful era, coming after the Victorian and Edwardian ones, because it allowed people to do that, to let their hair down. And it's something we still need because we all lead busy lives."

The showpiece in the Mountain Whispers chain is a property called *Gatsby*. "I loved Robert Redford and the original film," Allanson confesses. The latest film has inspired a new generation, "but it's the costumes and the music that everyone raves about," she says.

Music lovers are in for a treat in the coming month. For starters, there is the Blue Mountains Ukelele Festival at the Carrington Hotel (Feb 9); the Hotel Blue in Katoomba is offering Prohibition Jazz with Passion (Feb 7) and Prohibition Blues (Feb 14) as well as a Murder Mystery High Tea (Feb 8); the Paragon Café in Katoomba is putting on a Tango night (Feb 15); the New Ivanhoe Hotel in Blackheath a Roaring 20s Cabaret (Feb 21); and to round it off there is there is 1920s Jazz in The Garden at the Norman Lindsay Gallery and Museum in Faulconbridge (Feb 22).

The true romantics will be heading for the Valentine's Day Dinner at the Palais Royale in Katoomba (Feb 14, of course) and gourmands will be tempted by the *Gatsby* Soiree at Restaurant Nineteen23 in Wentworth Falls (Feb 15). The restaurant is part of the historic Silvermere Guest House, and the new head chef, Will Cowan-Lunn, formerly the head chef of Rockpool Bar & Grill in Melbourne, is fast making a name for the place (his resume includes stints at Tetsuyas and Rockpool in Sydney).

As well as fabulous costumes, The Roaring Twenties produced much-loved vintage cars, which went on display in the Leura Mall for the festival opening, and will reappear at the Highlands Steam & Vintage Fair in Oberon on February 8.

The Blue Mountains, Lithgow & Oberon Tourism (BMLOT) office can assist with accommodation options, but if you really want to make the most of it, dress up and get into character, particularly if you have tickets to the balls, then you should try to book the '*Gatsby*', one of the boutique cottages run by Mountain Whispers in Katoomba. You will feel like you are on the set of the film.

The Blue Mountains are, of course, world renowned as a tourist and wilderness destination, a must see on an overseas visitor's itinerary. But it is also an area whose overall tourism potential can be greatly underestimated – too often visitors go up on a day trip, take the obligatory photos of The Three Sisters at Echo Point, rush off to Scenic World to do the Scenic Railway, Skyway, Cableway and/or Walkway, maybe browse in a few of the local arts and crafts shops, and then they go home. It becomes a case of 'been there, done that'.

But the region has so much more to offer, and warrants and rewards patient, thorough exploring. The views from Hassans Wall lookout, near Lithgow, for example, are almost as spectacular as those Echo Point in Katoomba and Evans Lookout in Blackheath, but on any weekday and even most weekends, you will probably have them to yourself.

Allanson is often asked by her guests to advise them on itineraries. "Some people just want to come up and relax and be pampered with spas and massages," she says. "Others just want to shop – the area is great for antiques and period costumes and furniture. Leura rivals Sydney and Melbourne in this regard. There are lots of dining options too, such as Darleys and Leura Garage."

Others just want to be in the outdoors, be it horse riding in the Megalong Valley, or by taking one of the numerous treks "where you can see these magnificent waterfalls and swim in crystal pools".

Allanson says she often sends couples up with champagne and a picnic hamper to Lincoln Rock in Wentworth Falls. "A lot of proposals take place there."

For tourist information, the Blue Mountains, Lithgow & Oberon Tourism office can be contacted on 1300 922 492; www.visitbluemountains.com.au. The Roaring 20s & All That Jazz festival program is at www.roaring20s.com.au.

** The writer was a guest of BMLOT and Mountain Whispers for the 2013 festival, and attended this year's event of his own accord. He might even disgrace himself in the Charleston Challenge next year.*