

The Mountain Whisperer

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Recently a senior confessed to us that she and her husband were “over travelling” since the lockdown. “That’s it for us,” she added.

So if you need to put the ‘bug’ back into your ‘travel’, go west, young man!

Hooray For Hollywood

When we arrive at our accommodation at Katoomba, our heads are spinning. Why? We’ve tripped the alarm at our luxury B&B and have to drag (owner) Lorraine out of bed. Alarm sorted, we’re in. But our head is still spinning because Lorraine Allanson’s Chatelaine at Mountain Whispers is dizzying. And right in our wheelhouse. Why? You may have gleaned from this travel column over the years that Mrs Pictures and I are Artdeco tragics. (Indeed, our house looks like the set of Miss Fisher’s Murder Mysteries.) So imagine our excitement upon stepping into the Artdeco Hollywood Glamour of

Lorraine’s, Chatelaine. Here everything is done to a very high spec: calf-hide leather settees, cream suede dining chairs, expensive rugs – not the sort of thing you’d expect to find in a B&B for drunks like us. Moreover, in 20 years of writing travel, Chatelaine is the most glamorous B&B we’ve ever stayed in. There’s even a full-size billiard table (do people play billiards anymore? Pool.). There’s a cavernous kitchen, glam bedrooms, three deco themed bathrooms and gleaming over the wind-tickled eucalypts, sweeping views of the Jamison Valley. Moreover, Chatelaine sits perched on Monet-worthy expanding lawns and manicured gardens. It’s just the tonic we needed after a long hiatus of writing about travel for you gorgeous people. Indeed, it’s so luxurious we don’t want to leave the accommodation – and that’s a first for itchy feet writers like us! We also love the wine and port on arrival and jazz on the stereo but most of all we’ll never forget the ornithological aesthetic of Chatelaine. Red-headed king parrots, cockies, maggies and kingfishers

all coming to visit us, chirping us to the balcony with their whistling madrigals to greet them and feed them by hand. What a treat!

After Chatelaine’s generous breakfast – that would feed a family of five from Samoa – we take a 3 minute drive to a Blue Mountains secret. Are you old enough to remember the speedway in Katoomba?

Racing to our first destination

Today Garguree (The Gully) nee Catalina Park is recognised as an Aboriginal Place due to the long association of the local Gundungarra and Darug clans. But mid-century this leafy gully echoed with the scream of engines. Indeed, walking the old racetrack we find ghosts of this motoring past: rusty signs, guard rails and faded track markings. Here we meet a walking group of spritely seniors calling themselves, Jacktrackers (nee The Gentle Ramblers). These lovely seniors meet once a month at Lawson Station to enjoy local hikes. One lovely lady, Liz Benson, says her husband Glen was a flag marshal at the speedway in his teens but, in the end, the track was unsuitable for motor racing due to the notorious Katoomba fog. Eventually, this circuitous folly was handed back to the people who were ultimately displaced by it (the last traditional owners were forcibly removed by 1959). It’s now a place of tranquillity and spiritual significance. A somewhat apt metaphor for aboriginal Australia, don’t you think?

Leura by David Raksin & Johnny Mercer

I love Leura but always feel underdressed walking down this upmarket version of



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Leura, is the face in the misty light...
Footsteps that you hear down the hall

Katoomba in my op-shop clothes and cheap shoes. Suddenly I burst into song, down on one knee and throwing my arms open: “Leura, is the face in the misty light...Footsteps that you hear down the hall...” Mrs Pictures shrugs. (You have to be a jazz muso or over fifty-five to get that reference. She’s 53.) Here we find some funky vintage shops but a new shop called Geekdom, where they flog all things ‘nerd’ – from Dr Who to Harry Potter. Ahem, very Blue Mountains.

Back to Katoomba for some excellent antique shopping. I’m shopping for an anniversary pressie. It’s our thirty second wedding anniversary. What’s the gift? Asbestos?

That anniversary evening we dine at the Bootleg Bar. This funky smokehouse is, again, opposite Katoomba Station for the train folk with a seniors card. We love the old floorboards and long John Wayne-style bar where you can slide a whisky from one cowboy

to another. Seniors, I know most funky places expect us to sit on a milk crate and eat off a skateboard but Bootleg have plates and real chairs with backs on them (remember those?) for people like us with bad backs and bad hips. We were comfortable bootleggers. We split an entree of smoked chicken wings with hot sauces before devouring pulled pork burgers. My wife calls it “young people’s food”. This means you can only eat it on your anniversary to allow the one remaining artery some much-needed flow. I do love the atmosphere here, though. And the local frothy beers on tap are divine. But before I can ask for the dessert menu my wife signals for the tab: “No dessert for you,” she scowls. (These were my wedding vows.)

After dinner, we enjoy the Katoomba Falls Reserve Night-lit Walk. This 1.3km walk allows visitors access to a unique, night time viewing experience of outstanding natural features such as Orphan Rock, Witches Leap, Katoomba Falls and Katoomba Cascades. Sometimes you’ll see the Three Sisters lit up like happy siblings at Christmas. But to be frank, we are busting to get back to our accommodation at Mountain Whispers to celebrate our anniversary with a glass of complimentary port before playing a game of billiards (i.e. pool).



The High-Tea Crowd

The following morning we book into Archer & Hobb for high-tea. It’s a curious place: an upmarket shoe store with a flanking cafe. As we arrive we hear the tinkling of a jazz piano trio on CD (gets my tick!) and our nostrils are piqued by the smell of freshly baked (on the premises no less) scones. Archer & Hobb has to be the best value high-tea in NSW. Silver service, white table cloths, staff wearing ties (remember those?) with teetering tiers of hot savouries, crustless sangers, cakes and scones, all for \$45 pp. I choose the Valentine breakfast tea while Mrs Pictures opted for the 1837 Black Tea (still fresh!), all sans milk, which like yum cha works better style with the savouries. But we agree that the scones are divine ambrosia – worthy of many conversations over tea. We also like how they top up your tea with hot water, too. Nice touch for the thrifty senior. Moreover, I take a squiz at the lunch menu. Here you can have a ham and cheese croissant for \$12 or banana bread for \$8, all with silver service? It’s kinda bonkers.

Post scones, next door at Archer & Hobb I poke a size-11 into the upmarket shoe store only to find it’s as thrifty as the cafe. Fun store. Where but in Katoomba can you try on a pair of shoes before a fireplace? Here I buy a pair of Dunlop Volleys (do you remember painting them with white paint for tennis? Can you believe they still make them?) All the shoes at Archer & Hobb are at bargain prices. Go figure? You could even wear them in Leura.

Queue the song...

Fact!

Chatelaine, Katoomba, pays homage to the Art Deco era with a touch of Hollywood Regency décor. Everything is done to a very high spec. There’s a billiard table, which takes pride of place, or you can sit by the fire with your glass of complimentary port or wine or perhaps champagne on the deck to enjoy sweeping views over the wind tickled eucalypts to the Jamison Valley. Starting from \$597 a night including full breakfast for 2 for the first day. 3 King bedrooms for 3 couples OR the beds separate into 6 x Single King beds, for 6 single friends. See website for details:
<https://mountainwhispers.com.au/properties/chatelaine-katoomba-2/>