



Travel Locals guide

Local's guide: Blue Mountains



"Deep, strong, rich, exquisite; towering and majestic masses of blue—a softly luminous blue, a smouldering blue, as if vaguely lit by fires within." – Mark Twain

If you're after an escape from the city — or a trip that's a little closer to home — look a couple of hour's west of the Sydney CBD and be launched into the very best of the Australian wilderness in the Blue Mountains.



Highlights

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- Scenic World
- Hydro Majestic
- Everglades

The Blue Mountains has been a leafy retreat for Sydneysiders for over a century. The drive from Sydney to Katoomba is 90 minutes – otherwise trains regularly head there from Central Station.

The Blue Mountains comes alive in winter, with its cosy fires, Devonshire Teas, quilts of red and yellow leaves and Yuletide Festivals with that glass of spicy mulled wine. The region has long been a haven for artists, musicians and poets looking inspiration, meaning you're likely to find a funky vintage store in almost every village.

Where to eat

Now, NRMA is a motoring group if you haven't noticed. So we can't drive past Leura Garage without filling up. This former mechanical workshop has a rustic-chic decor and industrial car-themed art, offering exotic homemade pizzas and share plates. As you dine under a mechanic's hoist and below a posy of car tyres, you'll note the petroliana or spanners secreted into the floor below. A great dining experience for any car geek.

Or doff your Stetson at the Bootleg Bar. This funky smokehouse is bang opposite Katoomba Station if training it up the mountain ("as she comes"). You'll love the vintage floorboards and long bar where you can slide a whisky from one cowpoke to another. Enjoy an entree of smoked chicken wings with spicy hot sauces before devouring pulled pork burgers with greasy fingers. All this is underscored by a wicked Tex-Mex soundtrack. Better Call Saul for more sauce! And the local frothy beers on tap match your smoky calorific cuisine, "Partner".

But if it's hatted dining you're after without the Stetson, consider the historic Hydro Majestic's Wintergarden Restaurant. Featuring panoramic views of the Megalong Valley, the Wintergarden is a dining experience that encapsulates the magic of the Blue Mountains. Adjust your pocket hanky and begin with seared scallops, followed by baked red snapper with blush turnip (shy?), and seasonal veggies for your mains. Match these with regional cool climate wines from Orange or Mudgee. For dessert indulge in the strawberry and sheep milk cheesecake with elderflower jelly. Wintergarden ticks the boxes. Romantic lighting, the crackling of an open fire, the tinkling of a grand piano, and the sweeping views, all coalesce for the perfect winter mountains dining experience.

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What to see

The Norman Lindsay Gallery at Falconbridge is a must-see pitstop as it's at the foot of the mountains. Now, whether you're moved by Lindsay's work or not is moot. Lindsay was an utterly fascinating character and a leading figure in the bohemian Sydney of the 1920s. His output was prolific, including the Magic Pudding series of children's books. Your tour guide (included in the admission price) will unpack his work for you, including Norman's etching process, which at the time, was cutting edge (pun intended). Then visit the artist's studio - where they've cleverly left his paints and brushes as if old Norm just popped out to smoke his pipe. In the house, you'll find the main gallery housing his renowned fleshy nudes. Do note the modest painting of a well-dressed lady in jodhpurs on horseback amongst the orgy of oils. Had no one told her that 'dress was optional'?

Now make a beeline for Everglades at Leura. Set amongst 5.2 hectares of heritage gardens, the views over the Jamison Valley to Mount Solitary are sublime. The garden was built by Danish landscape designer, Paul Sorensen, so the Scandwegian was much in demand as a creator of boutique gardens at the time. Then have a cuppa at the Everglades' historic house. This gorgeous Moderne-style 1930s Art Deco home was built by textile king, Henri Van de Velde. Psst! if you're a 'devotee' of the 'Devo Tea', it's the best value scone and cream in the Blue Mountains. Why? Because it's run by National Trust ladies who bake the scones themselves. Yummo! However, if you're looking for something more upmarket, enjoy a silver-service version of the Devo (with champers) at the aforementioned Hydro.

Did you know The Blue Mountains has an excellent Hop-on Hop-off bus service called the Explorer Bus? These bright red busses run every 45-minutes and make it a cinch to wheel it to iconic landmarks such as the Three Sisters, Scenic World and Leura Cascades: a bush trail along Leura Falls Creek, leading to a lookout with majestic views of Jamison Valley.

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Vintage and retro shops are legion in the Blue Mountains. Leura Vintage is worth a visit but the Victory Theatre Antique Centre at Blackheath is the largest antique centre west of Sydney. It houses an eccentric collection of funky antiques, jewellery, and mid-century furniture. Psst! There is a great cafe there, too.

Where to play

For that killer TikTok video, try indoor rock climbing at Camp Street Climbing at Katoomba if you are so inclined (pun intended). How about abseiling? Or do you become seasick? You could go all hardcore with a company called Adrenaline, and experience thrilling abseils from cliff walls in the Blue Mountains ranging from 'Beginner' to 'Are You Kidding Me?'

Now, if you're schlepping the kids up the mountain, you can't beat Scenic World. The Hammon family has been running this biz since 1945 and it's a unique Blue Mountains experience. Enjoy the stunning cable car with its closeup of the Three Sisters and opaque-to-glass floor revealing plunging the valley below. And for more white-knuckled cabling, experience the steepest railway in the world (once used by miners).

When you get to the bottom, you can punish the kids with history. Katoomba was originally a mining town. So as you walk through the canopy of winter rainforest, you'll stop at fascinating exhibits, unpacking the miners' austere lives. Here there's a pram-friendly walk to the funicular train to hoick you back to the summit. Psst! If you want to leave the car behind, shop online for a Lyrebird Pass which combines all the benefits of the Blue Mountains Hop on Hop off Explorer Bus with Scenic World's Unlimited Discovery Pass.

The Blue Mountains are ideal for bushwalking. On your leafy ambles, you'll discover ancient landscapes, waterfalls, caves, canyons and views that will inspire. There's good public transport to most walks and some are simple while others make Kokoda seem easy. If new to bushwalking, your go-to hike is the 'Grand Canyon' (Psst! Not the one in Arizona). This classic walk was established in 1907 and begins at Evans Lookout Rd, Blackheath then follows a path along the canyon. In places, the walk leads you to a track cut halfway up the cliff, making it safe to walk. On warmer days, the cool temps of this walk make it particularly appealing. Ideal for that perfect Insta shot.

Where to stay

The ultimate Blue Mountains stay is the Hydro Majestic. The Hydro started life as two hotels, joined together by the retail baron, Mark Foy in 1901. Its eccentric castellated shape is longer than the Sydney Harbour Bridge (from pylon to pylon). Of course, this makes for the best views.

Moreover, the Hydro is aptly named. When water treatments were all the rage around the turn of the century, Foy imported water from Baden-Baden in Germany (ahem, the best water in the world was right at his doorstep). Indeed, Medlow Bath (nee Brown's Siding) was renamed by Foy to promote his luxury spa. Foy hired Dr George Baur from a health spa on Lake Lucerne in Switzerland to devise and supervise this project. Foy's water could only provide the best experience in NSW as it is used as a conductor. Thankfully, these days the NRMA Group's Choking Resilience to be had at the bar.

If a cottage is more your thing, Mountain Whispers comprises five impeccably-restored historic properties located in Katoomba and Leura. Here the fam can enjoy privacy and comfort – take breakfast in the warmth of the Blue Mountains sun, soak in a sumptuous spa or relax in front of a gas log fire. Or play a game of billiards with a jazz soundtrack, while the kids hand-feed native parrots on the deck.

Finally, if you want to bring out the luxury Neanderthal in you, try Love Cabins at Mt Tomah. There is a treehouse or a cave room built on a natural rock platform that you enter Flintstones style. Ugg. Psst! The earliest known commercial manufacturing of the Ugg Boot was Blue Mountains Ugg Boots in 1933. They are still there in Faulconbridge.

History

The Gundungurra and Darug people are the indigenous people of the Blue Mountains. It's estimated they have been in the area for thousands of years. However, since 1788, the Blue Mountains were an impenetrable barrier to European expansion. But grazing land was urgently needed for the fledgling colony. It wasn't until 1813, when the indefatigable trio of Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson, forged a way over the ridge-tops to discover the rich grazing land of the Bathurst Plains. Ancient aboriginal tracks no doubt assisted the intrepid trio and escaped convicts had mentioned the pastures while fleeing to "China" just on the other side of the mountains.

Did you know the eponymous Blue Mountains are so named for the eucalyptus oil found within the leaves of the trees? As the sun touches them, oil is released from the leaves in a blue mist. This haze is unseen up close but from a distance, the mountains appear blue.

Not everybody owned a car in the 20s and 30s. So post mining, Katoomba became popular with holidaymakers and honeymooners commuting from Sydney by train to stay in the many guesthouses in the area. These cute little guesthouses are still there.

Motoring History

Did you know The Blue Mountains was once known for its motor racing? Garguree (Nee Catalina Park) is now a disused motor racing track, located at Katoomba. In 1946 the park cradled a bobbing flying boat in the middle of its lake, giving the area its name. Children played with the controls, while speedboat rides wheeled around the seaplane. These days it's recognised as an Aboriginal Place. With the expansion of European settlement by 1890, dispossessed Gundungarra and Darug families from the ridges, valleys and surrounding plains made it their home.

Festivals

Despite its name, the Blue Mountains does occasionally see a white Christmas (in July). Yulefest was created by the many venues that offer traditional Christmas-style celebrations. Laze before a crackling open fire with a glass of spicy mulled wine.

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The annual *Winter Magic Festival* lights up the streets of Katoomba in June, bringing the community out in thick coats for a carnival of performers, musicians and marketers. Tourists love the atmos and hearty food supplied from local cafes and eateries.

The Blue Mountains isn't only a winter playground, it's a summer of storytelling 'as you like it' with *Leura Shakespeare Festival 2022* at Everglades Historic House and Gardens at Leura (January 8 – 23).

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