

THE NEW BLUE YONDER

A recently opened walking trail seamlessly weaves wilderness panoramas with Blue Mountains villages and hospitality

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Wentworth Falls Lookout
along the Grand Cliff Top Walk.

"**AND TO THINK**, they are not mountains at all, but an eroded sandstone plateau," says the English couple at Gordon Falls Lookout in the Blue Mountains. They had clearly paid attention on their tour the previous day.

We're chatting as we overlook cliffs plummeting into the Jamison Valley. Spur upon spur descends from ridgelines like ribs, interlocking in the valley, clothed in forest as dense as woven tweed. Sulphur-crested cockatoos wheel down to the treetops, see-sawing below like tickertape as their ratcheting screeches fade away from us. That's the beauty of this escarpment. You're already at the top, so there's no puffing uphill for views - they fall away from road-height lookouts.

The Blue Mountains, on Gundungurra country, have long attracted people to take in the fresh air and enjoy bushwalks. Historic photos show ladies in full-skirted long dresses and gents in three-piece suits posing on rock ledges. Now the

one-million-hectare Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area is lined with tracks, which can be confusing when looking for a not-too-challenging day-walk or two.

Not anymore, though, thanks to the launch of the Grand Cliff Top Walk (GCTW) - a 19km self-guided, two-day, village to village trail, from Wentworth Falls to Leura and Katoomba. Like a mini-Cinque Terre or Camino-style walk, it's accessible by public transport, only requires a day pack, and presents myriad accommodation and dining options.

"The GCTW brings together a maze of shorter tracks into one cohesive two-day experience," says friend and mountain local, Caro Ryan, an experienced bushwalker, SES Search and Rescue commander and producer of lotsafreshair.com. She says multi-day walks have traditionally involved going deep down into the valleys, requiring a high level of fitness and self-sufficiency, but "the GCTW is achievable for a broad range of people".

Constructed by NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS) in partnership with Blue Mountains City Council, it has been four years in the making, involving over 4000 helicopter lifts, building 4000 sandstone steps, and constructing missing links between existing tracks. It follows the edge of the escarpment, offering panoramic valley and waterfall views.

Caro and I are tackling the walk just prior to its official opening. I arrive at Wentworth Falls the night before, staying at Falls Mountain Retreat. Set within leafy gardens, my modern suite is self-contained and cosy with a kitchenette and fireplace. The back terrace leads straight into the bush, and I sit and watch the wildlife before heading for a pub-style dinner at the Grand View Hotel.

I meet Caro next morning at Wentworth Falls station where a bust of William Charles Wentworth, who crossed the Blue Mountains with Lawson and Blaxland in 1813, presides over greenery opposite the village shops. An expert hiker, Caro is

carrying everything she needs for the next two days in her backpack. Embarrassingly, I have an additional overnight bag (call me a 'just-in-case' packer) that requires shuttling between accommodation, a service some operators are planning to offer. We grab coffee at Fed Blue Mountains Café & Bistro and lunch for later from its selection of healthy homemade options.

Across the Great Western Highway in Wilson Park, Darwins Walk marks the start of the GCTW. It's named after naturalist Charles Darwin, who aged 26, walked this way in 1936 during his round-the-world voyage on the HMS *Beagle*. Closed for four years due to flood damage, the new bush track and boardwalk trace Jamison Creek as it meanders through open forest and hanging swamps. Red wattle birds and honeyeaters dart between banksia blooms.

The last section is still under repair, requiring a street detour. Passing Mulheran Lane, Caro explains it's named after Peter Mulheran, an Irish immigrant who was the area's first ranger.



Stocking up on lunch supplies at Fed Blue Mountains.



Water cascades into the Pool of Siloam.



From left to right: the Grand Cliff Top Walk lives up to its name with views at almost every turn; Gundungurra man, Uncle David King, leads Scenic World's Buunyal Tour; Bridal Veil View Lookout gives us a drone perspective; century-old charm on full display in our accommodations at Varena by Mountain Whispers (top) and 14 Level Street.



He hand-built nearly 10km of walking tracks and lookouts from local sandstone, much of which remains today, and NPWS has ensured new tracks are in keeping with the historic ambience.

I was expecting my friend to lead the way, but the GCTW signage is already in situ at track junctions. The wayfaring markers feature a flying Wumbarrung or yellow-tailed black cockatoo, designed by Gundungurra artist Kelsie King.

We arrive at the edge of the escarpment and find the vista Darwin exclaimed as "exceedingly well worth visiting" is theatrically obscured. At Fletchers Lookout, Wentworth Falls mysteriously disappear into the whiteout below. Ethereal cloud seeps through the trees, cooling our faces like a misting fan and heightening our sense of hearing for drips from overhanging cliffs, a rippling stream and roaring waterfall.

Drizzle silvers she oaks and sequins cobwebs, infusing the air with an earthy petrichor smell as we navigate stepping stones. There are around 100 eucalypt varieties here and post-hike, on Scenic World's Buunyal Indigenous Tour, Uncle David King, (Kelsie's dad) explains he orientates himself in the bush by the locale of dominant species, be it stringybark or peppermint gum.

Rated Grade 3, the track is easy going, undulating through a diversity of topography and vegetation. Rock overhangs sprout a living wallpaper of ferns and grasses, one protecting a historic freshwater drinking trough, like a sandstone pizza oven, built by Mulheran. Caro's tip is to allow a little extra time to take some of the short side tracks and at Den Fenella we spiral down (and back up) beside a tumbling waterfall into a fairyland of ferns and fungi.

We stop at the Conservation Hut Café for morning tea. 'Hut' is a misnomer, as the Nigel Bell-designed structure is considerable. Closed for several years, locals are thrilled to see it operating again. Above Empress Falls in the Valley of the Waters, canyons holler below in a reminder there's more than one way to enjoy the

We join a multi-sensory sauna with music and aromatic ice infusions that hiss on the hot coals

mountains. The track skirts Leura Golf Course and Fairmont Resort before diverting to the streets for about a kilometre due to residents objecting to the track in front of their cliff-edge homes.

Mist and drizzle morph into rain as we eat a late lunch at the Pool of Siloam, a fern-fringed grotto that makes a stunning swimming hole on a hot day. Precipitation is the primary landscaper here, so we can't complain.

Gordon Falls Reserve marks the end of today's trail, but not our walk, as we've missed the last bus. It's an easy stroll into Leura along leafy streets and gardens, though we're soaked when we reach the European-style Blue Mountains Sauna. Stripping off to shower is like a scene from a horror movie. We're covered in blood. Caro finds a culprit leech but mine has gorged itself and dropped off. They are painless but leave a bloody mess.

Clean and wearing swimsuits, we join a multi-sensory sauna with music and aromatic ice infusions that hiss on the hot coals. They fill the room with pine-scented steam that's whirled around by owner Nikita swirling a towel. It feels like a blast furnace in my face. The following cold shower is shocking and the ice bath scream-worthy, except it has sucked my breath away. We repeat the process after a reviving herbal tea and leave invigorated for the walk to our accommodation.

Varena by Mountain Whispers is a gorgeous 1906 Edwardian time warp. Music tinkles as we explore the home's period-furnished rooms, choose our luxurious canopied beds and check out the breakfast provisions in the fridge.

Dinner is at authentic Korean BBQ restaurant, Jiggle, which is Korean for sizzle, says owner Hannah, whose South Korean husband Jay does the cooking. Hannah grew up in the Blue Mountains and the couple are among a posse of young folk returning to their roots and revving up mountain dining.

It's also great to see businesses embracing opportunities the GCTW presents. The rain has cleared by morning and we collect today's 'hiker's lunchbox' ordered from The Bunker. Crimson rosellas welcome us back to the track. With clouds up where they belong, the Jamison Valley views to Mount Solitary wow the English couple at Gordon Falls Lookout. Ongoing track work sends us street-side, past the white two-storey mansion Leuralla, home to the Toy & Railway Museum from the 1980s until 2022. The museum's contents were sold at a two-day auction at The Hydro Majestic Hotel and now Leuralla is for sale.

My notebook fills up with 'best' lookouts: Elysian Rock, Olympian Rock and Tarpeian Rock. Caro's excited to show me Bridal Veil View Lookout (not to be confused with Bridal Veil Lookout). "It offers visitors a unique view that is often only available to people with a drone," she says. From this vantage point, we see water spout from the bush, fanning out over the rocks in a frothy imitation of a bride's veil, its scale brought home when I spot Lego-sized hikers at the lookout beside it.

After lunch we investigate a rustle in the bushes - a lyrebird that launches into song, running through its lyrical repertoire like an opera diva. We close in on Katoomba's iconic Three Sisters, viewing them from several vantage points, Spooners Lookout being the least visited and we have it to ourselves.

After a quick circuit of Echo Point and coffee from Milkbar at the Lookout, real-life Wumbarrung fly overhead and urge us on. Now we're looking over the Kedumba Valley and Narrow Neck Plateau. Stepping stones cross Katoomba Cascades,

above where they drop into Katoomba Falls.

Arriving at Scenic World, the end of the GCTW, Caro points out an old section of roller coaster track called Orphan Rocker. Building started in 1983 and the track curved out over the cliffs, but it was plagued by changing safety regulations and never opened to the public.

A cheery mustard and maroon facade welcomes us at 14 Level Street, Katoomba. Owner of the 110-year-old guesthouse, Annette Blake, assures us it's not a party hostel, saying guests are mostly outdoorsy types or groups that book the whole house. Double rooms have shared bathrooms, but I've scored the ensuite room.

We freshen up and head to The Gin Parlour, in the lobby of the historic Savoy Theatre, now the Avalon. Within its speakeasy vibe, Blue Mountains Gin Company owners Jann and Harry Dillon take us through a tasting flight of their Mountain Devil range, of which the slightly spicy Black Label is my favourite. We cross the road for dinner at The Old City Bank Bar & Brasserie and finish off with a nightcap at Champagne Charlie's in The Carrington Hotel.

Before we go our separate ways in the morning, Caro takes me for a scrumptious breakfast bruschetta at Tempus Up Early, another community-focused venue set up by young locals with a sustainability bent. Unable to resist Katoomba's vintage stores and Leura's providores, I'm heading home laden with retro trinkets, Josophan's Fine Chocolates, and a bottle of Mountain Devil Black Label gin. Bringing my overnight bag is vindicated. ☺

MORE INFORMATION

Falls Mountain Retreat | fallsmountainretreat.com.au
 Varena by Mountain Whispers | mountainwhispers.com.au
 14 Level St | 14levelst.com
 Blue Mountains Sauna | bmsauna.com.au
 Buunyal Tour | scenicworld.com.au

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