

OVERVIEW OF THE BLUE MOUNTAINS

The Blue Mountains of New South Wales are a unique combination of human habitation and extreme wilderness areas – remarkably, situated barely an hour's travel from one of the world's great cosmopolitan cities, Sydney. Yet so dense is the wilderness that the 'Dinosaur Tree' – the Wollemi Pine – lived here for aeons, unknown to science until its discovery in 1994.

The Mountains area offers visitors and residents an outstanding variety of attractions and activities, including breathtaking vistas from sandstone clifftops across vast, thickly-wooded valleys; bush walks through lush rainforest and along heathland ridges; a world-renowned network of caves at Jenolan; a profusion of native flora and fauna; beautiful English-style gardens; high quality local arts and craft.

The spectacular gorge areas of Colorado are perhaps the best known in the world, but the Blue Mountains were already around 40 million years old when the Colorado River was just beginning to cut its gorge six million years ago. The Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage area consists of 1.03 million hectares of sandstone plateaus, escarpments and gorges dominated by temperate eucalypt forest – 91 different types of eucalypt are found here. Finely dispersed droplets of eucalyptus oil combine with dust particles and water vapour to emit small rays of predominantly blue light, giving the Mountains their name.

UNESCO recognised the unique qualities of the Blue Mountains in 2000 when it added the area to its World Heritage list along with natural wonders like the Great Barrier Reef, Fraser Island, and Kakadu and Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Parks.

Strung across the ridge tops of the Mountains and weaving through adjoining National Park areas are 26 townships, ranging from small villages to larger towns like Springwood and Katoomba, in a local government area of 1433 square kilometres, known as The City of the Blue Mountains – uniquely, the only 'city' where residents live in the midst of a World Heritage Area.

The Darug and Gundungurra Aboriginal people occupied and passed through the Mountains for many thousands of years, leaving rock paintings, middens and other signs. Yet the 18th century English colonists were unable to find a way across the, what seemed to them, impenetrable barrier of the Mountains until nearly 40 years after the first settlement in 1778.

In the latter part of the 19th century wealthy Sydney dwellers built large summer residences to take advantage of the cooler temperatures and lack of humidity. After the railway opened up in the 1860s, and later still when cars became more common, the Mountains became popular as a holiday destination. Many a honeymoon was had at a grand hotel like the Carrington or the Hydro Majestic, or at one of the many smart guesthouses. These days, people coming to stay in the area can choose from five-star resort accommodation, traditional pubs and guesthouses, and bed-and breakfast in restored weatherboard cottages.

While tourism has always been a mainstay of the Mountains economy, there were mining activities at various times. The popular Scenic Railway still operates in a cutting made to serve the Katoomba Coal Mine, opened in 1879. These days, local business is more likely to be involved in environmentally sensitive areas such as water treatment or solar power.

Food choice in the Mountains ranges from gourmet restaurants to simple, tasty café fare, with growing availability of produce and wines from the surrounding region, and regular markets, as well as Katoomba's famous Food Co-op. These aspects of the Mountains were instrumental in the city's being named a 'Cittaslow' – slow city - home of good, fresh, carefully prepared local food as well as a region valuing quality of life for all residents.