

Misty-eyed mountains

We find there's still plenty to see and do when mist envelops the jaw-dropping Blue Mountains

WORDS & PHOTOS BRIAR JENSEN

IT'S THE HEIGHT OF SUMMER and the Three Sisters have disappeared without a trace. If not for the signboard with a sketch of their jagged silhouettes, I'd have no idea they're actually standing just a few hundred metres in front of me. Together with Mount Solitary and the whole Jamison Valley, the vista is secreted behind an impenetrable wall of mist at Echo Point lookout.

The Blue Mountains might be within day-tripping distance of Sydney, but it pays to linger longer, increasing the likelihood of clear skies to take in the panoramas. The sun was ablaze at the start of our three-day sojourn while driving to our furthest point, Hartley Historic Village, site of one of the first settlements west of the Blue Mountains. The township grew up around the courthouse, built in 1837, and prospered as a staging post to

the Bathurst goldfields before it was bypassed by the Great Western Railway. Now the courthouse is one of a collection of well-preserved colonial sandstone buildings in the area.

A granite tor (named Kew-Y-Ahn by the local Aboriginal community) protrudes from the grassy hillside behind the village, a jumble of giant boulders with a powerful presence and commanding views. A paved path winds up to the tor, edged with sculptures by artist Ron Fitzpatrick, whose Talisman Gallery occupies an old corrugated iron woolshed across the paddock and is where I try my hand at blacksmithing.

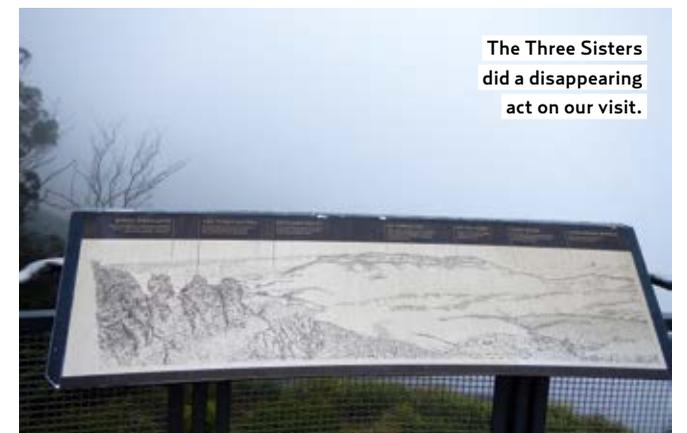
Ron's work spans fine jewellery, sheet-metal-framed mirrors and large iron-work garden sculptures, most with a Celtic or mediaeval bent. "I've had people come in and say, 'Hmm, that's

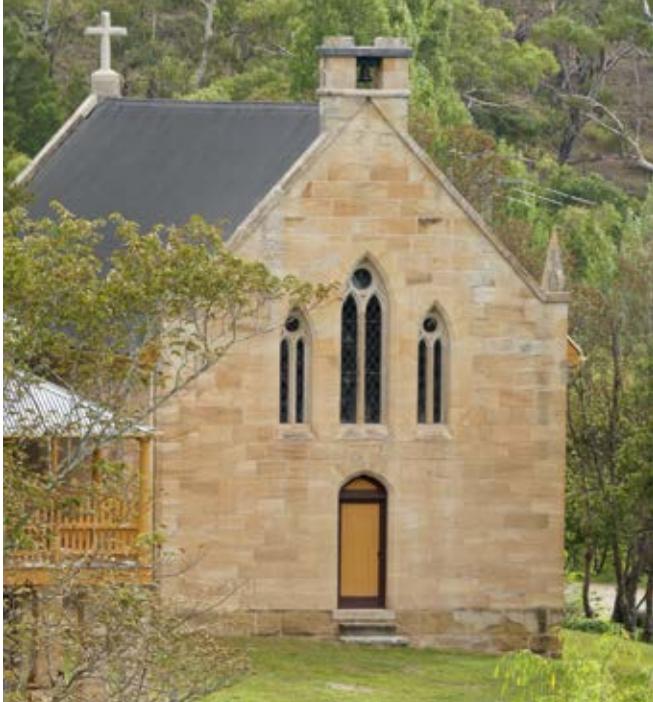
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very *Game of Thrones* or *Lord of the Rings*," says Ron.

He runs one-on-one beginner workshops, and I attempt to make a fireplace poker. Donning a leather apron and glove, I nervously place a metal rod into the hissing forge until it's red hot. Transferring it to the anvil, I hammer away and the shrill strikes echo around the shed. Slowly I get the hang of it - heating, hammering, curving and twisting the metal into a recognisable fireplace poker I'm immensely proud of.

The Three Sisters did a disappearing act on our visit.





(Clockwise from top left): Artist Ron Fitzpatrick ponders the meaning of life in his forge; St Bernard's Church at Hartley Historic Site; cruising backroads in a 1929 LaSalle Phaeton; Cat's Alley at the Hydro Majestic Hotel is the perfect setting for an afternoon tippie.



Heading back to Blackheath, I drive to the lookout at the end of Govetts Leap Road. Here chiselled sandstone cliffs tower over the densely forested Grose Valley. Like a baby 'sister', Pulpit Rock juts out from its surrounds, while Govetts Leap, otherwise known as Bridal Veil Falls ('leap' being an old Scottish word for waterfall), tumbles over the escarpment on the right. These are the expansive views the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area is famous for and, as it turns out, my only glimpse of them this trip.

Accommodation for the night is at nearby Parklands Country Garden & Lodges, located within an 11-hectare property of sprawling lawns and towering trees. Flowers tumble over each other around the main cottage and wisteria scrambles up pergolas. The lounge, with rolled-arm furniture, a timber-framed fireplace and elk-horn chandeliers, has a cosy English manor feel. French doors in the breakfast room bathe it in light and offer a calming view of clipped hedges around a reflection pool and down to a lily-covered lake.

Heads turn and people whistle and wave as we pause outside Lilianfels and cruise down Leura Mall

Cypress branches drip with rain the next morning. It's not conducive to Scenic World cable car views, so I head straight to my next accommodation in Medlow Bath at the famous Hydro Majestic Hotel. Its 16 distinctive white buildings stretch more than a kilometre along the ridgetop above Megalong Valley.

Joining a history tour, I learn that Sydney retail doyen Mark Foy financed its construction in 1904 as a lavish hydropathic sanatorium in the vein of the great spas of Europe. Perhaps as Sydney's first 'paddock to plate' restaurant, a farm in the valley provided fresh produce via a flying fox, which then returned scraps for pig food. However, the spa wasn't a roaring success and within a couple of years the property was reinvented as a luxury hotel, catering to Sydney's elite. Famous guests included soprano Dame Nellie Melba and Sherlock Holmes creator Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Fire destroyed a section of the hotel in 1922 and in 1942 it was requisitioned as a US military hospital for American casualties from WWII battles in the Coral Sea and South Pacific. Despite several renovations the hotel never reclaimed its former glory. But a \$30 million restoration completed in 2014 recreated Foy's grand palace. Original features include Arnold Zimmerman paintings, the casino dome prefabricated in Chicago, and the pressed metal ceiling in the ballroom. It's very retro-glam, making it an ideal location for Roaring Twenties themed events.

Mist and rain continue on our last day, adding a magical feel to the forest and power to the waterfalls

My favourite spaces are the lofty, elegant Casino Lobby and the oriental-inspired Cat's Alley - a cosy corridor of jewel-coloured sofas and mood table lamps that invites visitors to recline with a refreshing cocktail or warming whiskey to sip between whispered conversations.

High Tea at the Hydro seems appropriate, so I head to the Wintergarden Restaurant, where expansive curved windows frame a mist-swirled view of the valley. White cloths, velveteen chairs, art deco mirrors and a tinkling grand piano create an air of sophistication. Given the weather, I select the Eastern High Tea with warm dumplings, crab claws, and rice paper rolls, rounded out with a selection of rice cakes and sweet tarts.

Like a genteel guest of yesteryear, I step out of the hotel and into a vintage Cadillac, with spiffy white-walled tyres reminiscent of gentlemen's spats. The claret-coloured 1929 LaSalle Phaeton soft-top is one of three LaSalle's belonging to Blue Mountains Vintage Cadillacs, which offers mountain sightseeing tours. Owner Don Millar tells me the Phaeton belonged to his father who bought it second-hand in 1954. "As a kid I thought everybody had a Cadillac in the garage," he quips, passing me a blanket for my knees. "It's one of only 449 ever built and 175 made for export."

Despite the lack of windscreen wipers, it's obvious this was a luxury vehicle of its time, selling for the equivalent of \$2500 when a Model A Ford was \$300. Raindrops trace across gleaming chrome as we tootle up hills in top gear thanks to the V8 engine. It was also one of the first cars with a synchronised gearbox. This beauty is affectionately named after Don's mum, Flora, who learnt to drive in her. And I'm not the only one who thinks Flora looks fabulous. Heads turn and people whistle and wave as we pause outside Lilianfels and cruise down Leura Mall. Some even pull up beside us to offer compliments, all of which Don reciprocates with a toot, wave or a friendly chat.

Don is not only passionate about his fleet of LaSalle's, which includes a 1928 Coupe and 1929 Landau, but also his mountain home. At Wentworth Falls Lake he reveals Charles Darwin passed through here in 1836 as he travelled over the mountains with a guide en route to Bathurst. It's possible to follow in his footsteps along the Charles Darwin Track, which takes in his footsteps along the Charles Darwin Track, which takes in the early 1900s created the lake that was used to supply water for the steam trains.

We stretch our legs at Everglades Historic House & Gardens in Leura, a five-hectare property overlooking the Jamison Valley and owned by the National Trust. It's a typical grand-scale Blue Mountains garden from the 1930s and a tranquil combination of majestic European and native trees, lichen-encrusted stone walls and secret gardens, manicured grass and swathes of flowering shrubs. Everglades House, where volunteers operate a tea room, is a feast for lovers of art deco style, with decorative furniture and spectacularly tiled bathrooms.

Mist and rain continue on our last day, adding a magical feel to the forest and power to the waterfalls. However, I've

neglected to bring serious wet weather gear, so swap the hiking trails for the high street. I start in Katoomba's eclectic mix of the renovated and rundown, where op shops thrive beside antique stores and milliners. You can lose yourself for hours in musty, cavernous emporiums. I peek inside the ornate Carrington Hotel, opened in 1883, explore the street art precinct in Beverly Place (some of which is obscured by inconsiderately parked cars) and treat my inner child at The Gingerbread House cafe.

Leura, nicknamed the 'Mosman of the mountains', is more upmarket, with minimalist boutiques and sleek homewares stores. At Leura Fine Woodwork Gallery I caress contemporary sculptures crafted from lustrous Australian timbers. Josophan's Fine Chocolates is almost impossible to resist visiting and, on a recommendation, I head to Bygone Beautys Treasured Teapot Museum & Tearooms. It's billed as the world's largest private collection of tea paraphernalia and I try, but fail, to pick a favourite from the 5500 teapots on display from around the world. The minimal entrance fee is redeemable in their tea room, so I fuel up for the journey home with hearty homemade soup.

Descending from the mountain, microclimate drizzle evaporates into late-afternoon Sydney sunshine and my only worry is whether I'll get sufficient wear out of the glamorous (translation: expensive) summer raincoat I've just splurged on. 

For more information on the Blue Mountains or to plan a trip, head to visitnsw.com/destinations/blue-mountains



It's no Cadillac but the Blue Mountains Explorer makes sightseeing easy for visitors.

DON'T WANT TO DRIVE?

Catch a train from Central Station for the two-hour scenic trip to Katoomba station. Once there, hop aboard the Blue Mountains Explorer (explorerbus.com.au), a bright red double-decker bus that runs every 30 minutes past the key sights of Katoomba and Leura, including Scenic World. Stay on the bus for the full hour-long circuit or hop on and off all day between attractions. The local driver-guides are incredibly knowledgeable and friendly, ensuring you make the most of your visit. Alternatively, book a vintage Cadillac tour (bluemountainstvintagecadillacs.com.au) to meet you at the station, or continue to Medlow Bath station and walk across the road to the Hydro Majestic Hotel.

EXCLUSIVE MEMBER OFFER!

Thinking of a Blue Mountains escape? Then you won't want to miss this amazing offer for NRMA Members



Stay at the Hydro Majestic Hotel...

THE BLUE MOUNTAINS are perhaps at their most beautiful in the cooler months. Autumn leaves turn red and gold, mornings are misty and romantic, and you can relax in front of log fires at night. It's the perfect time to take in the magnificent scenery of the mountains, visit famous gardens, explore arts and crafts stores, and enjoy artisan food or fine dining in local restaurants and hotels.

To help you enjoy your own Blue Mountains escape, NRMA Blue and the Escarpment Group are offering Members some exclusive accommodation and dining benefits when you stay at either of three iconic Blue Mountains hotels: Lilianfels Blue Mountains Resort & Spa, the Hydro Majestic Hotel, and Parklands Country Garden & Lodges. Our special offer includes:

Accommodation

Stay a minimum 3 nights at Lilianfels, Parklands or Hydro Majestic and you'll receive a 30 per cent discount.

Dining

Book a three-course dinner for 2 adults at either the Wintergarden Restaurant at the Hydro Majestic OR Echoes Restaurant & Bar at Echo Point and receive a complimentary bottle of red or white house wine with your meal (available to both hotel and non-hotel guests).

Hotel bookings can be made either online or via phone. Make sure you use the password **NRMABlue19** to validate the offer and provide your NRMA Membership number.

Contact details

Lilianfels Blue Mountains Resort & Spa

(02) 4780 1200 | lilianfels.com.au

Parklands Country Garden & Lodges

(02) 4787 7211 | parklands.com.au

Hydro Majestic Hotel

(02) 4782 6885 | hydromajestic.com.au

Echos Restaurant

(02) 4782 1966 | echoeshotel.com.au



Parklands Country Garden & Lodges...



Or Lilianfels Blue Mountains Resort & Spa.

Conditions:

This special offer is for a standard room only, which includes the Lilianfels Deluxe room, Hydro Majestic Heritage room and Parklands Garden View or Loft rooms. The offer is subject to availability and valid for between March 1, 2019 and September 30, 2019. Bookings must be made on or before May 31, 2019. The special NRMA offer requires full prepayment, no date change or refund for cancellation. Use the password **NRMABlue19** to validate the offer and provide your NRMA Membership number.

BOTH OFFERS are also subject to availability and NRMA Members need to mention the NRMA offer and provide their NRMA Membership number at the time of booking.

NRMA Blue

Your Member benefits

Your Member benefits just got a whole lot faster. Thanks to NRMA Blue, you can now **save up to 20%** on your bill at over 3,500 restaurants across Australia*. From your morning coffee to dinner with family, you'll find new ways to save every day with the latest version of the **my nrma app**.

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over 3,500
locations

