

ENGROSED IN A VALLEY

World Heritage Wilderness at Sydney's Back Door

Every afternoon thousands of motorists follow the M4 west across the Penrith plains towards a beckoning blue line of mountains. Crossing the Nepean River, the road climbs steeply up Lapstone monocline onto the 65km wide Blue Mountains Plateau.

Deeply cut by the sandstone walled valleys of numerous rivers and streams, the Plateau was a serious barrier to the western expansion of European settlement. Unused to the patterns of erosion common in sandstone country, early explorers tried to find a way through by the conventional method of following streams and rivers towards their sources. Inevitably, they were halted by narrow canyons and towering rock walls until Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson tried following ridges instead and in 1813 pioneered a feasible route.

Today's highway also follows the ridgeline, passing through towns named after the men who solved the riddle of the mountain crossing. It winds up and over the plateau's high point (1070m) near Blackheath and on towards Victoria Pass and the rich farmlands beyond. Sightseers flock to Katoomba where parking is at a premium and crowds fight their way past busking didgeridoo players to the safety rails of the lookouts. A cable car provides easy access into the damp, forested valley allowing tourists to stroll along a gentle bush track past old mine workings to the base of Katoomba Falls.

Most activities are centred on the southern side of the highway, with many well-known and easily accessed bush tracks affording views over the wide Jamison Valley towards Mt Solitary and beyond. On the northern side of the ridge, the Grose River has carved a narrower, more enclosed route. Less busy than the famed lookouts of Echo Point and the Three Sisters, Govett's Leap provides a glimpse into its secrets.

A Late Discovery

Although only a few kilometres from Blaxland's road over the mountains, Govett's Leap was unknown until a survey of the area was undertaken in 1835 by W.R. Govett. *"Two small swamps, commencing near Blackheath..., afford a continual supply of water, and then after their junction rush rapidly over the cliffs into the chasm"*, he reported.

In 1846 Col. Mundy visited the area with Governor Fitzroy. *"Picking our way with no little labour through the thick and dark forest, suddenly a bright expanse of sunlit air appeared through the close growing trees, and in the next instant we stood on a bare rock shelf looking into and over a magnificent basin scooped among the mountains. ...It is certainly one of the grandest freaks of nature I have seen in any country ...quite beyond the power of the pen or pencil to delineate."*

And in 1881 a party including the Prince (George) of Wales and Prince Albert took the side trip. *"Over the edge of one of the cliffs tumbles a cataract into the wooded gorge below. The strong body of water is unbroken at first as it falls over the Leap, but it is dissipated into spray and mist long before its waters can reach the bottom: for the face of the cliff in the horseshoe over which it falls goes down 800 feet (240m) sheer perpendicular, and the bottom of the valley is 1200 feet (366m) below that. The depth at which the water first strikes the rock from the edge is 520 feet (158m), and to the basin at the foot of the rock it is about 600 feet (183m)."*

Threats of Destruction

Along with admiration for the valley's scenic wonders, European discovery brought the threat of desecration by forestry and grazing. Myles Dunphy and the Mountain Trails Club first raised the concept of a Blue Mountains National Park in the early nineteen twenties and in 1931 Dunphy and the National Parks and Primitive Areas Council presented the Surveyor-General with a detailed, staged proposal. That same year some walkers discovered that two Bilpin farmers were

planning to log the Blue Gum Forest. A coalition of bushwalking groups got together to raise the considerable sum of 150 pounds and purchased the 16.2ha forest in 1932. They handed the land back to the Crown as a reserve. After twenty years of lobbying, the Blue Mountains National Park was eventually proclaimed in 1959 with additional land added to the park over the following 40 years. Final vindication for the conservation movement in the mountains came in November 2000 when the Blue Mountains National Park was one of seven parks and reserves west of Sydney afforded UNESCO World Heritage status.

Walking in the Grose

My first trip into the Grose was as a teenager with a church youth group. We negotiated the series of steep steel ladders down the dripping, mossy cliff face to the rocky pool at the base of Govetts Leap's delicate veil of falling water. Puffing back to the top we considered we'd done quite a tough walk. Now, 30 years and a couple of pairs of boots later, I know better.

There are several short but rewarding tracks to cliff top vantage points. An undulating trail across the Griffith Taylor Wall follows the cliff line past the point where Govetts Leap Brook "leaps" from the plateau into the abyss. Golden wattle colours the fore ground while shifting mists and cloud patterns enhance the valley views. Hat Hill Road provides access to other vantage points including the short rough climb to Hat Hill (1035m) for breezy 360 degree views and a well made trail down onto Pulpit Rock for an eagle's view of rainforest clad gullies and the eastern cliffline. Further along the road a sidetrack leads to Anvil Rock from whose summit the Upper Grose and the northern walls present a panorama in pastel tints as the sun beams through winter cloud like a spotlight moving down the valley and lyrebirds call enticingly from the forest far below. Nearby is a remarkable multihued wave of sandstone, patterned with intricate honeycomb weathering, although whether this was caused by wind erosion as the sign suggests is a matter of contention.

A variety of interconnecting tracks slip through cracks in the ochre cliffs to scramble down the steeply sloping forested skirts of the valley to the creeks and river that carved it. There are the popular routes from Govetts Leap via Rodriguez Pass to Junction Rock, Acacia Flat camp site and the Blue Gum Forest and the lovely track down Neats Glen following Greaves Creek through the Grand Canyon with its ferny grottos, deep, dark pools and dripping sandstone overhangs.

At Evans Lookout the ramparts of Fortress Hill seem impressively near. A track drops down through a forest of tall grey barked gums to join the ferny gully that leads to Greaves Creek and Beauchamp Falls, then on to Govetts Creek and its intersection with Govetts Leap Brook at Junction Rock. There is the less frequented route down the drier ravine of Victoria Falls to Burra Korain Flat and the rough, seemingly endless track to Blue Gum from the west - a walk redeemed in late spring by prolific displays of waratahs dotting the bush below Blackheath Walls before the hot, hard climb up Perrys Lookdown.

From the other side of the valley, Pierces Pass provides an easier descent following yet another ferny gully, then sidling down through open forest with wonderful views across to the mighty Blackheath Walls. A small campsite near the river makes a good base for excursions downstream to Blue Gum and beyond. This track was created by the two Bilpin farmers who planned to log the tall straight trunked blue gums before the bushwalkers stepped in. Nearby, a short easy trail leads to Rigby Hill for a grandstand view of the southern valley walls.

But the route I would rate above all of these is the Lockley Pylon Track. The walk is roughly 14km long, climbing 670m and takes 7 to 8 hours including breaks. Diary notes describe my first visit in June 2001.

"We had a lovely day for our walk last Sunday. We drove out along the Mt Hay Road (not recommended for 2WD vehicles in wet weather) from Leura, then walked to Lockley Pylon and down to the Grose River and Blue Gum Forest. The low scrubby heath land of Lycon Plateau provided unimpeded views for much of the route to the Pylon. To the east the faint outline of the city floated above a thin white line of early morning fog. To the northeast we looked down the

Lower Grose Valley towards the Penrith Plains. To the north the abrupt rose coloured walls of Mt Banks emerged from among the hazy overlapping spurs of the Upper Grose. To the west we looked into the horseshoe of Govetts Leap and along the line of the Grand Canyon. Simply stunning. The climb down (and later up...) Du Faur Head presented some challenges for those of us with shorter legs, but was not as difficult as some descriptions we had read suggested. We slithered down a steep dry trail to the sandy riverbank for lunch, having walked for 3 hours across and into a truly remarkable landscape within sight of a city of 3.8 million people and yet having seen no one. After lunch, some of our party crossed the river for the ten-minute trip to the Blue Gum Forest. The others began the slow climb out of the valley. It was hard work but rewarded by wonderful views as the low winter sun highlighted a rich variety of colours on the cliffs above and around us and honeyeaters darted between bushes of early wattle. We'll be back!"

Biography

Robyn Leeder is a Sydney based interior designer. Preferring foot travel for the opportunities it provides for absorbing landscapes and cultures in detail, Robyn has trekked in the UK, Nepal, New Zealand and France.

Maps

I can loan Wild topographic maps with tracings of the routes mentioned if you wish.

Photographs

Enclosed are some scanned photographs.

The slides do not scan particularly well. If you are interested in publishing my article, I will be happy to post the slides to you for consideration. All the photographs are my own.

My scanner can produce 1200dpi from prints if required.

Captions

- 1 **Beauchamp Falls, Greaves Creek** (slide)
- 2 **Neats Glen** (slide)
- 3 **Pulpit Rock, Govetts Leap Creek, the Lower Grose Valley and Mt Hay, from Govetts Leap** (slide)
- 4 **Mist rising past Mt Banks, from Evans Lookout** (slide)
- 5 **A watched pot (Marian Coppins on the Pierces Pass track)** (print)
- 6 **Dripping rock face, Grand Canyon** (slide)
- 7 **Crimson fronds, Greaves Creek** (slide)
- 8 **Grose River near Blue Gum Forest** (print)
- 9 **Grose River near Blue Gum Forest** (print)
- 10 **Walkers in the Blue Gum Forest** (print)
- 11 **“Wind Eroded Cave” near Anvil Rock** (slide)
- 12 **Winter Wattle** (slide)
- 13 **Into the abyss, Pulpit Rock** (slide)
- 14 **Shifting Light, Upper Grose Valley** (slide)
- 15 **Looking down the valley from Lockley Pylon** (slide)
- 16& 17 **Lockley Pylon Panorama** (slides)

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I will be overseas in September, but have left the slides & map out so that if you require them while I'm away they can be forwarded to you. Please email me at the Hotmail address or write to my home address (Attention: Wilf Leeder) if this should happen.