

Post



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Blue Mountains and Grey Koalas - April 6, 2025

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SUMMARY

Full day spent in the beautiful Blue Mountains outside of Sydney on a private tour. First stop was the Featherdale Wildlife Park, a great zoo of sorts for Australian animals and birds. Nice lunch in picturesque Leura and many stops for scenic views and short hikes. Visited Scenic World, a former mine site, where you ride a cable car and a very steep train down into the rainforest for some hiking. Got dropped off at a ferry stop for a boat trip down the Parramatta River back to town. - Karen

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DETAIL

Our tour today starts at 7:30 am, which may sound early, but we gained an hour last night. It's mid-Fall now and Australia goes off Daylight Savings Time. The tour starts early as we'll be gone for around ten hours. It's a two-hour drive just to get to the famous Blue Mountains.

First, due to the early hour, we need coffee. Australia—especially Sydney—is known for its big-time coffee culture, but we'll be damned if we can find anything open at 7:15 am. Then again, it is Sunday. We eventually find a quality hole-in-the-wall around the corner from our hotel entrance.

At the appointed hour, we meet Julian, our driver. He's late middle-aged, and from his slight accent, we gather he's not a native. He offers that he came over from Italy when he was ten in 1978. He asks that we don't do the math.

He narrates as he drives, gauging how much we've seen already. We learn local history and get suggestions on sites to see and restaurants to try. At one point, we drive through a very long tunnel. Apparently, these are fairly new and now quite common. The main rock here, as we've seen, is sandstone. The tunnel-drilling machines have no problem with it, and so these tunnels are bored right under the city, rivers, and residential areas. It's Sunday, so we're blessed with light traffic.

We see bars and talk about beers. Apparently, the beer XXXX is popular, reportedly because working Aussies don't know how to spell. We're told about the "6 o'clock swill." The pubs close at 6 pm—presumably so you'll go home. Patrons buy a number of beers and keep them at their feet to protect them from getting kicked over. As 6 o'clock approaches, they swill all their beer and head home. It may seem silly that the bars close at 6 pm, but perhaps even more strange is that many open at 5 am. Why? For those working the night shift. It's not fair that they can't stop off for a pint "after work," and so... bars open at 5 am.

Our first stop is Featherdale Sydney Wildlife Park. It used to be a chicken farm, but now it houses loads of local animals on display for our viewing pleasure. Julian says the place is a bit dated, but it does have lots of trees and therefore lots of shade. The place offers a little “passport” where kids can get rubber ink stamps for eight of the animals we’ll be seeing. Get all the stamps and you’ll get a gift. Karen and Tricia are all over that.

Julian gives us about two hours to get through the park. As we start off, little plastic cup of animal food in hand, we can’t imagine this taking two hours. In the end, given the sheer number of animal types, we use the whole time.

The first two animals we get up close and personal with are wallabies and rainbow lorikeets. The former we feed directly from our open hand. The lorikeets seem to have a pecking order and chastise one another for being in the wrong place or getting too close to a more dominant bird. Can’t we all just get along?

We get through the pelican enclosure fairly quickly, as they don't really engage. Next, though, are all the koalas. Now you're talking! For AU\$30, we can get a picture with Byron, a big, healthy specimen of a koala. He's perched in a "tree" at about shoulder level. Every few seconds, Byron's handler hands him another fresh green eucalyptus branch. Byron takes a nibble or two and then just throws it on the ground. And the game begins again.

We're mesmerized by Byron and watch him intently—much to the dismay of the photographer trying to take our picture. One or the other of us is always looking in the wrong direction while the photographer tries to get our attention. We're allowed to pet Byron but ONLY down on his lower backside. We keep forgetting and pet him farther up, and the handler reminds us yet again about the rules. These poor handlers—we're just enthralled. In no time it's over and a sufficiently good picture is taken. We get our set of different-sized prints (not unlike in grade school) and we're on our way.

We see an albino wallaby, dingoes, little penguins (that's their name, because, well, they're little). In the Tasmanian Devil pen, a small, furry black creature runs around and around, nonstop. We see a tapir, a kookaburra, a crocodile, emu, sheep, goats, lots of cockatoos, a wombat, a cassowary (like from Jurassic Park), and lots of kangaroos. We see young ones and old ones, golden ones and black ones. We don't see the type that look like they've been working out. Apparently, they're a pain in the arse to keep and get out of hand regularly.

The girls are happy they get all their stamps. They're now proud owners of small clip-on koalas. Woo-hoo! Eventually, it's time for us to stop acting like children and pile back into the van to continue our trip. Next stop: a walk to see Wentworth Falls in the Blue Mountains. The blue, we're told, comes from the eucalyptus oil hovering in the air. It's a walk to the falls—all downhill (except for the trip back). The Blue Mountains really are blue and quite handsome. The falls are worth it. You can walk to the base of the falls (we don't), but the tiny dots of people there give us a sense of scale.

In Leura, we stop for lunch. The old mining town transitions well into a fun tourist trap with tons of stores you can't help but poke your head into. Lunch is good, and before long we're off to our next stop, a short drive away. We do two cable cars and a cog rail to see where they used to mine coal. It's a Disney-esque experience—and if you're looking for any of the Asian or Indian tourists, they're here! On the first cable car, we can see forever, and we're told we're only seeing 1% of the Blue Mountains National Park.

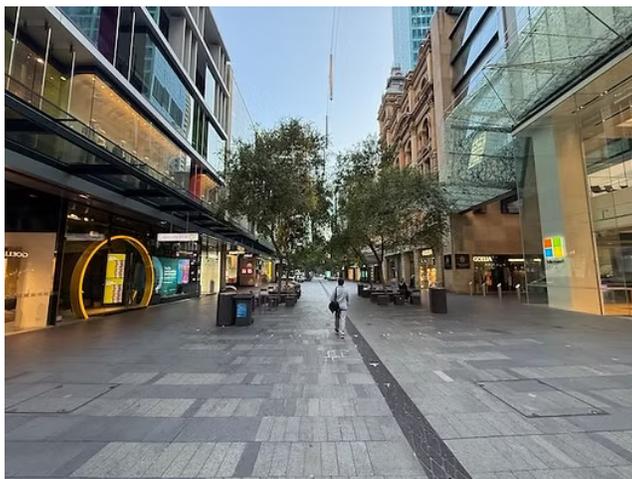
From the boardwalk (between modes of transportation), we walk under prehistoric-looking fern trees. On the cog rail car, we get to adjust our seats between something like "Wussy Scared Grandma" all the way to "Fearless Mountain Goat." We go for the latter and cling on for dear life as the car gets steeper and steeper.

When Sydney was young, the locals knew they'd not made it through the Blue Mountains—they're that expansive. After several abortive attempts, they finally broke down and asked the Aboriginal people for help, and the far end of the mountains is reached. There? Very fertile soil, coal, gold, and other valuable minerals. Yay, go team! Aussie, Aussie, Aussie [Oy, Oy, Oy!]

For us, we have one more waterfall and one last vista before heading back to Sydney. Nice and nice. Back closer to Sydney, we're dropped at a dock and catch a ferry back to the city center. The ride is gorgeous, and we can see why people like taking this mode of transportation so much. We glide by Cockatoo Island, stopping briefly. The place can't be more than an acre or two. Much of it is covered in big, uniform, drab-colored tents for camping. It's open to the public—inexpensive and (thanks to the ferry) a quick trip to downtown Sydney.

After a quick freshen-up and costume change in the room, we head out again. We're aiming for our dinner reservation a few blocks away at Grana, a fancy modern Italian place. Food's great, our short young Irish waiter's a hoot. And before long, we're once again in bed heading off to slumberland.

Photos



7:15 am on a Sunday and the street in front of our hotel (which here has turned into a pedestrian walkway) has a dearth of both pedestrians and open coffee shops.



With our Italian-born driver/guide Julian, holding our plastic cups of yummy animal food.



First encounter, a small, hungry, friendly wallaby.



Byron, the photogenic koala, munching on leaves. His handler tried (in vain) to teach us the only place you can touch Mr Byron.



Tricia was delighted to find a wallaby (?) in her color palette.



Penguins, specifically "Little Penguins". They equally could have been called "cute" or "numerous".



It was hard to get a good picture of the one Tasmanian Devil. He was incessantly running around his cage in circles. Too much caffeine.



A chonky wombat. His keeper, a male, was explaining how this male wombat warmed to the female keepers but truly disliked any male handlers.



The iconic Kookabura, ready for his close-up, Mr. DeMille.



So many Rainbow Lorikeets, and yes, there is a pecking order.



Thank you, no, I really do not want any insurance!



Lots of kangaroos. Cute? Hm, I wouldn't say cute.



An escapee from Jurassic Park? We're told these guys will gladly take a finger, if offered.



Kids at the park, thrilled with their rewards for having gotten all of the animal stamps in their passports.



Our first glimpses of the Blue Mountains. It's suspended eucalyptus oil that gives the mountains their blue tint.



Wentworth Waterfall. You can see little people at the top, hinting at their enormous size.



Tourists have been coming here for 100 or more years. It gets warm. They have no plumbing and so no water fountains. Instead they put some masonry work around a spring and voila, water!

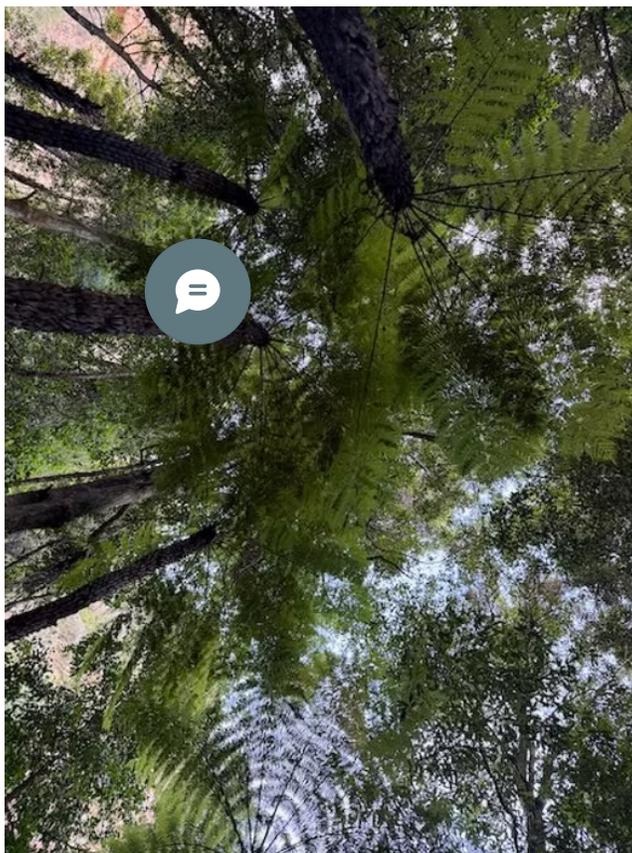


Our first of two cable cars to explore the area.



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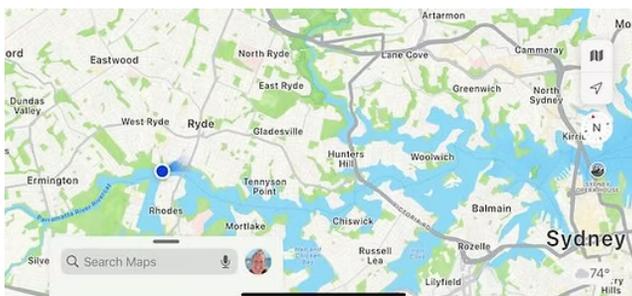
Shaded by ferns, perhaps how it was back in the days of the dinosaurs.



Our cog rail to get back up. Steep here but oh my, it gets even steeper in the middle.



One last view of the Blue Mountains.
They're striking. 95% eucalyptus, we're told.



On the ferry headed back to the CBD (Central Business District). Much beauty to be admired along the way. Many ferry stops at the various cute neighborhoods. Lucky city and lucky us.



Delicious dinner at Grana. More food coming and the plates were very clean by the time we were done.

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