

Australia

Wild blue yonder: Australia's Blue Mountains

New South Wales's Blue Mountains offer peace and quiet - not to mention awe-inspiring landscape and magical places to stay

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Watch out for wallabies ... Woolshed Cabins, Blue Moutains, Australia. PR

I'm sitting on the pea-green seats of the train, gazing out into a world fast vanishing beneath a gauzy, shimmery mist. As we climb two hours west from Central Station, [Sydney](#), the mist cloaks the vast plateaus, it snakes through the dark forests and curls around the clifftops and canyons that comprise the Blue Mountains. I'm in search of the peace and quiet that attracts Sydneysiders year round to the one million hectares of New South Wales that are named after the blue haze of the eucalyptus oils. As the angry sky darkens and rain thunders down, I confess to feeling slightly fearful, as well as excited, at the prospect of staying alone in a secret eco cottage with acres between myself and the nearest human being.

I step out into Katoomba, the tourist hub of the Blue Mountains (with soggy tourists aplenty today), and it's as if I've stepped into some wonderland at the top of the Magic Faraway Tree. Even the facades of the dinky buildings are shrouded in mist. I shelter in a quaint little cake shop, and even it - and the chocolate fondant I scoff - are like something from a fairytale land.

"You read out the directions and I'll follow them," says the taxi driver I hail. "Please Note: There are no signs for the Woolshed Cabins until you actually arrive," I bellow.

"DO NOT TURN OFF INTO MEGALONG VALLEY!" scream the instructions. Whoops. Too late. But I'd advise anyone to do their best to get lost in the Blue Mountains. The mist clears to reveal the awesome landscape: vast, rugged cliffs, ferns, tall gum trees. Soon we get back on the muddy track. "Pass the Logan Brae Apple Orchard," I read out. Squelch, squelch, down the dirt track into the Kanimbla Valley ... bump, bump, bump over the cattle grid tar road ... and then we see it.

The cottage stands beside a wooden shearing shed isolated amidst acres of countryside. Marion the owner and I sip hot sweet tea on the verandah and she tells me about the mountains, before showing me round the property. In the lounge, the huge windows let in views of the afternoon light leaking over the chalky cliffs. In the loft bedroom, the triangular windows show distant forests.

"Don't go near the fences - they're electric. And don't walk in the fields over there," says Marion, pointing to the grass, which reaches taller than both of us, "as you might not come out again. Snakes!" Indeed, this area has some of the most lethal snakes in Oz. The information booklet in the cottage provides further warnings: "Not all horses are approachable and cattle are definitely NOT 'pattable'." As she leaves me, I almost run after her and beg her to stay, or to take me with her. But soon, I relax and discover what solitude in nature is all about.

Horses whinny and chomp in the fields. Peewees sing. Great yellow butterflies flutter past. I walk west from the cottage with the long wet grass tickling my legs, past tall gum trees and along the creek paddock, keeping an eye out for wallabies and kangaroos and wombat holes - and snakes! As I walk towards the blue hills of Oberon and the Jenolan Caves, I feel quite tiny. The sun begins to set, silhouetting the trees, night-time encroaches over the cliffs until the sky is on fire, although I spin round and it's still broad daylight behind me. It's little wonder that the Blue Mountains are a favourite haunt of artists.

Back in the cottage I stick on one of the cottage's CDs, the multi-volume Complete Classics, and delve into the basket of goodies left for me. The kitchen has a slab timber bench and Australian hardwoods, and soon I have sausages sizzling on the stove.

In the airy loft bedroom, I fall asleep to the rain pattering against the windows, the horses whinnying outside.