



Merry & Bright

Audrey editor Carly Saillard is dreaming of a White Christmas so there's no better time to visit the Blue Mountains than during their Yulefest celebrations

Words by Carly Saillard

I'm a beach person at heart, happiest in the summer sun, but I love visiting the Blue Mountains in winter. You can rug up in warm woollen clothing and tramp about enjoying the crisp, fresh air before sitting beside a crackling fire at night with a warming drink. You might even get a flurry of snow, completing the vision of a northern hemisphere Christmas. And, thanks to a group of homesick Irish backpackers visiting the Mountain Heritage Hotel during a Blue Mountains winter some forty years ago inspiring owner Garry Crockett to host the inaugural Christmas in July, Yulefest has become a beloved event on the Blue Mountains calendar.

The Blue Mountains cover a million hectares of natural bushland; that means there are 140 kilometres of walking tracks, caving adventures, waterfalls, mountains and lookouts to explore. Plus there's historic Leura Mall, the sights of Katoomba, the Carrington Hotel, and dozens of cafes, restaurants, boutique shops, and events to discover. The Greater Blue Mountains Area was officially listed as a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 2000 and no wonder. With a list of potential walks that range from four kilometre circuits to multi-day hikes with canyoning, caving, and abseiling, there's something for everyone.

While I love a bit of nature, I also love an afternoon wine and cosy dinner so today I opt to take the Katoomba Falls Round Walk. A picturesque circuit that runs past Katoomba Falls through lush rainforest and several lookouts, this walk is perfect for beginner hikers. Well-maintained with dramatic views, I'm lucky to be visiting after recent rains – Katoomba Waterfall is flowing and there's a heartening scent of greenery permeating the air. Today I experience the traditional Blue Mountains milestone – the iconic Three Sisters rock formations are shrouded in mist and only barely visible.



I might even be imagining seeing their stately silhouettes. The Three Sisters watch over the land of the traditional country of the Darug, Gundungurra, Wiradjuri and Dharwal Aboriginal people. There are a number of Dreaming legends about how the rock formations came to be, from tales of love to those of battle and magic, all of which end with the sisters Meehni, Wimlah, and Gunnedoo turned into stone, waiting to return to their human form. Today, the said-to-be unsurpassed views of this renowned sandstone landmark is obscured by the very mist that makes my walk so mysterious as I explore spots like Juliet's Balcony and Witches Leap. I complete the circle, vow to return to visit Meehni, Wimlah and Gunnedoo, and continue on to my next inimitable Blue Mountains experience.

There are five-star hotels available that any traveller would luxuriate in, but a trip to the Blue Mountains offers so much history that it would be a waste not to experience the old-world elegance and charm of the Hydro Majestic Hotel. A stay at the Hydro Majestic has been on my bucket list ever since I heard its name. I knew not another thing about the place, but it sounded like a location out of a Wes Anderson film and I was certain I would love it. I was entirely correct. It's astonishingly odd, both in history and architecture. The Hydro property stretches more than a kilometre across an escarpment overlooking the vast Megalong Valley, comprised of multiple buildings built and decorated in unique styles. Built in 1904 by retailing magnate Mark Foy, the Hydro Majestic began its storied life as a sanatorium offering hydrotherapy in a number of forms, including a treatment I am delighted to find out was called the Vertical Douche. As it happened, it became clear that hydrotherapy and a cool mountaintop climate didn't necessarily appeal to the masses and the Hydro was converted into a hotel. The Hydro's history could fill a fascinating and entertaining book. From its lost art collection (the gallery building burned down in 1922), or the original well in the garden that has never been known to draw water, to being used as both a military hospital during WWII and as a secret romantic getaway for an astonishing number of Mr and Mrs Smiths during the 1950s. Australia's first Prime Minister, Sir Edmund Barton, even died here. The oddities and eccentricities are what makes this hotel truly magical; from the outside, guests have noticed windows that don't seem to correlate to any rooms inside, leading the owners to discover sealed off rooms they didn't even know existed. Refurbished and reconstructed multiple times, this property's rich history feels alive at your fingertips. It is, overall, the sort of place where it feels like you ought to dress for dinner, enjoy an aperitif in Cats Alley (a curious corridor filled with plush furniture and large paintings) beforehand, exchanging gossip and witticisms as guests promenade past. While the sun is starting its steady decline towards the horizon, I take a glass of wine to the balcony outside and watch the sunset during dusk's golden hour. Part of the allure of dining at the Wintergarden restaurant is how you're not only served a delicious dinner but a stunning panoramic vista of Megalong Valley and the mountains beyond. It's difficult to look away from the view, everchanging as the

sun travels across the sky. Meanwhile meals like Kangaroo Fillet, Crab Congee, and Pan Seared Duck Supreme are partnered with mouth-wateringly delicious wines. For dessert the Chocolate and Citrus Fruits come served under an eye-opening luxe golden dome not to be missed. I complete the evening with a Foy's Drink – a hearteningly delicious cocktail named after Mark Foy made of Talisker Whisky, Amaro Averna Italian liqueur, gin, egg white, and homemade cinnamon and vanilla syrup. Drink in hand, I set off to explore the halls of the Hydro Majestic at night. For my money, my favourite moment is taking my cocktail into the Salon du Thé. Once upon a time it was the billiards room where men discussed the business of the day and women weren't allowed to enter, left sitting outside in Cat's Alley. I take a seat at a booth, savour my whisky cocktail and smile at times past.

TRAVEL: The drive to Katoomba is about 90 minutes from the heart of Sydney. The express train from Central to Katoomba takes approximately 100 minutes.

STAY: *The Hydro Majestic* is one of Australia's most notable historic hotels, boasting a variety of rooms, bars and entertainment areas, and the Wintergarden restaurant – perfect for a winter escape. www.hydomajestic.com.au

The Carrington Hotel is a heritage-listed hotel offering the elegance, luxury and charm of yesteryear. With a variety of rooms and accommodation packages available, the Grand Old Lady of the Blue Mountains offers something for everyone. www.thecarrington.com.au

YULEFEST:

- ♦ The Winter Magic Festival celebrates the winter solstice on June 22, converting Katoomba Street into a performance art space filled with over 40 live music events, food and craft stalls, dance performances, art exhibits, culminating in a concert and a fireworks display.
- ♦ *The Hydro Majestic* hosts a number of decadent Yulefest events, including a degustation dinner and stunning opera performance led by Opera Australia, Oper Köln, and Opéra Comique & Théâtre du Châtelet tenor Brad Cooper. Later in the season, Mark Lizotte will perform in conjunction with a delicious dinner. Attending either of these events will be luxurious experiences not to be missed.
- ♦ Each Saturday night from 29th June to 3rd August 2019, *The Carrington Hotel* hosts a Yulefest dinner with carollers, entertainment, maybe even a visit from Santa.
- ♦ Visit where it all began at the *Hotel Mountain Heritage*. Their 5-course dinner with special guest entertainment is the original Yulefest experience and is hosted every Saturday in July.

MOSAIC

Piece together the Mosaic by placing the numbers 1 to 6 into each hexagonal tile so that where the tiles touch, the numbers are the same. No number is repeated in any tile.

