

Great North Road **DISCOVERY TRAIL**

This trail follows the corridor of the first fully constructed road from Sydney to the Hunter Valley, through scenery that is much as it was in the 19th century. The Great North Road was built with convict labour between 1826 and 1836 and substantial sections of it still survive.

Highlights comprise the historic features along the way including the Old Coach Road and historic villages of St Albans, Wollombi and Broke, Finchley Lookout and Aboriginal engravings and the Macdonald Valley.

Description

From Wisemans Ferry follow the sealed Settlers Road 19km to the historic village of St Albans. Continuing up the scenic Macdonald Valley, the now unsealed Mogo Creek Road (may be closed after rain) passes the waterbird haven of St Albans Common (bring the binoculars) before climbing up the valley of Mogo Creek through tall blue gums.

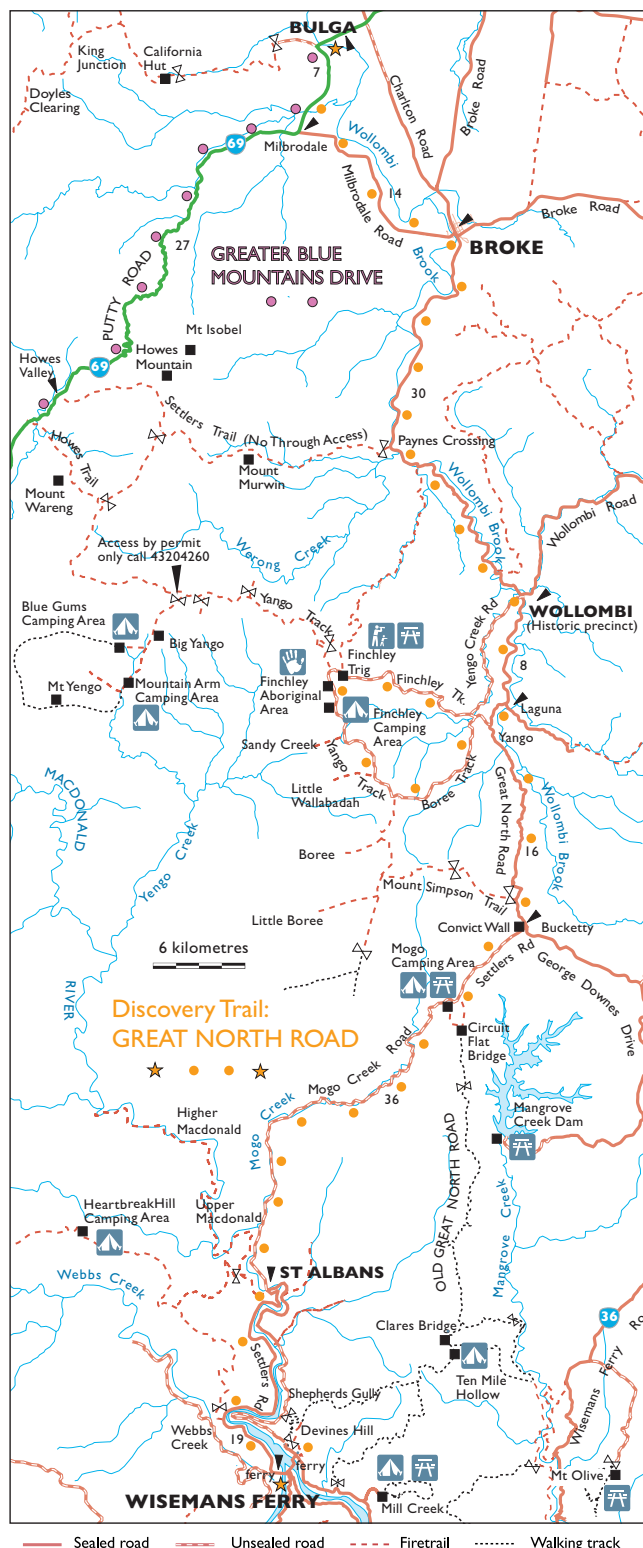
The pleasant Mogo Camping Area (walking tracks) is passed on the right, with glimpses towards Mount Yengo on the left, before the sealed George Downes Drive is reached, 36km from St Albans.

Turn left and follow George Downes Drive 16km to Laguna. But just before Laguna on the left is the Finchley turnoff into Yengo National Park. Although narrow, the circuit around the Finchley and Boree Tracks is quite negotiable by 2WD and not to be missed if at all possible.

Follow the signposts to the Finchley Trig lookout, then a little further on to Finchley Aboriginal Area. The trig gives a stunning panorama over the bushland of Yengo National Park. The engravings on the Finchley rock platform include animals, footprints and spirit figures. It's worth planning an overnight stop at the nearby campsite to fully appreciate this area. Back at Laguna, the Wollombi Road follows the meandering Wollombi Brook north to the historic Wollombi village.

Drive summary

- 165km (one way): 3hr drive (one way)
- Narrow sealed roads, unsealed roads (dry weather only).
- Start: Wisemans Ferry
- Finish: Bulga
- Alerts!: Winding, unsealed roads in variable condition. Suitable for experienced country drivers only.



You can easily spend from several hours to an overnight stay here, before driving 30km north through Paynes Crossing to Broke. Parts of this section are unsealed, with sections of old-style, post-and-rail fencing alongside.

The historic buildings of Broke are worth an extended break before turning left into Milbrodale Road which leads 14km

north-west to Milbrodale and the intersection with the Putty Road and the main Greater Blue Mountains Drive. Turn right towards Bulga and Singleton.

Great North Road **DISCOVERY TRAIL: an account of things to see and do along the**

The Great North Road discovery trail is a journey where modern travellers can immerse themselves in this rich history and the ambience of a landscape that remains much as it was, way back then. Skimming the eastern edge of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area, the route takes in a unique blend of natural and historical features and an Aboriginal landscape of mystical significance.

To reach Wisemans Ferry I followed the Hawkesbury Discovery Trail – a pleasant drive through mixed bushland and rural residential areas, with the Blue Mountains escarpment rising to the west. Just before the road drops to the Hawkesbury River I stopped for the impressive view from Hawkins Lookout. The river lay below, with the Macdonald River entering in the distance and the Webbs Creek ferry plying back and forth. The picnic facilities at the lookout include the first of many informative signs about the Great North Road.

Webbs Creek ferry leads to straightforward, sealed road access up the Macdonald Valley to St Albans. But if you want to check out some of the best surviving bits of the Great North Road, like I did, its best to take Wisemans Ferry across the river. Both ferries operate continuously 24/7, so there's usually only a short wait before you can drive on.

As the ferry glides over the tidal waters, it's easy to see why the ascent from the river onto the plateau was such a problem for the Great North Road planners. They took two attempts to find a reasonable route through the sandstone bluffs crowding the steep headland. Surveyor-General (and famed explorer) Sir Thomas Mitchell thought the original Finchs Line was too steep and perilous, and directed that a road be constructed up Devines Hill instead.

Both these routes are well preserved. A walk up either, on the trail of the convicts, reveals the amazing work that they achieved: buttresses, culverts, 12 metre high retaining walls, quarries and even Hangman's Rock! I just did a stroll to the top of Finchs Line, but the best option if you have more time is the nine kilometre circuit around both routes. These sections are part of the 16 km of the Great North Road that is largely intact and protected in Dharug National Park. Overnight bushwalkers and mountain bikers can follow a full 43 km of the Great North Road through to Mount Manning.

Finchs Line passes through lush, almost rainforest vegetation under the shelter of the south-facing cliff. When I was there huge green sprays of Gynea lilies and grass-trees contrasted with the white flowers of Christmas bush, grey myrtle and blueberry ash. When the old road takes a sharp bend

you can see the massive blocks that were man-handled into position to form the retaining walls. Then, as the road reaches the ridge-top, breathtaking views open out over the Hawkesbury River.

Once on this side of the Hawkesbury-Macdonald River confluence, the easiest way to St Albans is to continue up the Settlers Road. Part of it is unsealed, but there's more of that later anyway! At St Albans, the shady grounds of the historic pub are a welcome respite from hot weather, before meandering on up the beautiful valley on the gravel Mogo Creek Road.

The alluvial flats were green from recent rain, and bush-clad hills and rocky bluffs rose into a blue sky. St Albans Common is an area of floodplains and wetlands with a good population of waterbirds. Without trying too hard, I saw a pelican, black ducks and some other feathery creatures, so binoculars are recommended for keen birdwatchers.

Mogo Creek winds up into the hills and the road follows it, with large Sydney blue gums and vine-covered rocks crowding overhead. The wildlife must be plentiful, because signs warn not only of the usual kangaroos and wombats, but koalas and rock-wallabies too!

Yengo National Park's Mogo Camping Area is a good place to see some of the locals. When I rolled in, a swamp wallaby jumped away and blue wrens were hopping about on the grass. Mogo has a cooking shelter, information display, toilets and barbecues. It's a good base for exploring more of the Great North Road, but if you really want to get into the wilds of Yengo its best to continue on to Finchley.

Yango Creek Road leaves George Downes Drive some 15 km north of Bucketty. From there a 36 km circuit around the Boree, Yango and Finchley Tracks provides a neat introduction to this vast bushland area, with its gnarly yellow bloodwoods, colourful sandstone and views over distant ridge-tops. Although a four-wheel-drive vehicle is preferable, it is by no means essential if you're used to bumpy bush roads. Drivers do need to follow the map and signs carefully as there are many wrong turns to be made and areas of private land.

Finchley Trig itself is a surprise in this even-topped landscape, with perhaps the biggest panorama anywhere in the Greater Blue Mountains. Standing above all is the flat volcanic landmark of Mount Yengo, or Yango

as it is more properly pronounced by local Aboriginal people. The full view extends some 200 km, from the Mount Tomah-Mount Wilson ridges in the central Blue Mountains to the Mount Royal Range beyond the Hunter Valley. Volcanic peaks that lie on the far edge of the World Heritage Area mark the western horizon. Between lies the sandstone labyrinth that befuddled white pathfinders but nourished the Darkinjung and their neighbours for millennia.

I was lucky to arrive in the evening and witness a sunset thunderstorm moving over the land, silhouetting the dark mass of Yango, the sacred mountain. The elemental power and colour of the storm seemed to reflect the Aboriginal belief that Yango is the stepping-stone to the sky of the creation being Biamie.

I just had time before dark to drive to the nearby Finchley Camping Area, where the frogs in a small dam serenaded me to sleep. But I was up again early the next morning, keen to revisit the lookout at dawn. And even more important, the steep angle of light at either end of the day is the best for viewing the intriguing rock engravings at Finchley Aboriginal Area. The figures include animals, footprints and spirit figures. Informative signs explain that the engravings may represent a map of the landscape.

I was reluctant to leave this remarkable part of Yengo, but the winding road beckoned. Back on George Downes Drive, I turned north down the valley of Wollombi Creek. The hamlet of Wollombi is rightly famous for its historic buildings, cafes and galleries, and a range of accommodation is on offer in the area if camping is not your style. More luxury is just around the corner, because on the way to Broke the wineries become ever more frequent.

Finally, the Milbrodale Road leads out to the Putty Road, Bulga and the Greater Blue Mountains Drive. You can continue your journey into the Hunter Valley and around the top end of the World Heritage Area, or return to western Sydney in the historic footsteps of explorers Howe, Singleton and Miles (on the Putty Road).

