



# Wollondilly **DISCOVERY TRAIL: an account of things to see and do along the trail**

Who would have thought that in this gentle, rolling countryside you could see some of the most remarkable landforms in the Greater Blue Mountains? But then the local geography is rather unusual, with the uplifted Blue Mountains escarpment rising on the west and the headwaters of the Nepean River draining northwards.

The Wollondilly Discovery Trail meanders off the main Greater Blue Mountains Drive through some beautiful countryside and places of special interest. Leaving the Hume Highway just north of Mittagong, Wilson Drive passes the villages of Colo Vale, Hill Top, Balmoral and Buxton to Thirlmere, mostly through bush with some open farmland.

The first natural attraction is Cave Creek, just past Hill Top in Bargo State Conservation Area. The name gives it away: the stream tunnels underground for more than a hundred metres, creating that rare phenomenon, a true sandstone cave - just like the more usual limestone caves.

When I was there, the National Parks and Wildlife Service were busily doing up the carpark and picnic area at the start of the 1.3 km walking track. The medium grade walk takes about an hour and a half return, traversing classic dry sandstone bushland with all its shapes and textures, then moister forest along the creek.

A short ladder gets you to where the creek enters the cave. The dark zone is best left to the underground experts, but you can check out both ends of the tunnel. The track continues downstream, above ground, and drops into a delightful glade of warm temperate rainforest with the lichen-dappled trunks of massive coachwoods rising out of the ferns. Then, slipping along beneath a small cliff, the track doubles back to the head of the gorge, where the creek trickles out of the cave in a small waterfall.

Driving on after this pleasant interlude, one arrives at the southern entrance to Thirlmere Lakes National Park, part of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area. The gravel W.E. Middleton Drive winds down through the bushland to the five lakes spread out like jewels along a shallow, meandering valley. The area was known to the Dharawal and Gundungurra people as Couridjah – a name now given to one of the larger lakes.

Picnic areas and a walking track around the three main lakes provide plenty of opportunities to enjoy the serene beauty, and the lakes are perfect for swimming, canoeing and birdwatching. At least 140 different birds have been seen here, including the Australasian Bittern, a

threatened species, and the endangered Japanese Snipe that every summer flies 9,000 kilometres from Japan to feed here.

These lakes are themselves special and mysterious – apart from being the only natural lakes in the world heritage area - as explained by on-site information signs. In the grand sweep of geological time, most lakes are just a short-lived blip, filled up with sediment in only a few million years.

But Thirlmere Lakes have somehow survived for 15 million years to become amongst the oldest of all lakes. This might be because there are no big streams carrying sediment in.

The lakes formed when earth movements tilted the land, causing water to pool in the low parts of the valley. The great length of time since then has allowed some strange organisms to evolve in isolation. A freshwater sponge, a mussel, some worms and microscopic animals are unique to Thirlmere Lakes.

The W.E. Middleton Drive exits the other end of the park near Thirlmere, where a complete change of pace awaits! The Thirlmere Rail Heritage Centre, open every day, is not just for train freaks – although they will love it. Most of the enthralling collection of 160 historic locomotives and carriages is under cover, a bonus on a wet day. You can get up into some of the engines and walk through the carriages, and there's a kiosk and picnic grounds. For more action, you can take a steam train ride on the first and third Sunday of the month March to November, or catch a vintage rail motor on Sundays in January.

From Thirlmere and its cafes, the discovery trail passes through the regional centre of Picton, a richly historic town with more galleries and cafes. The next leg to our last stop is a long one, through Oakdale and Nattai State Conservation Area bushland. But Burragarang Lookout is well worth the drive, and

rightly famous for its fabulous view over the waters of Lake Burragarang to the wild edges of Blue Mountains National Park.

The cliff-lined Burragarang Valley, with the Wollondilly River running through it, was a treasure of the Gundungurra homeland for thousands of years before white settlers stumbled in. They loved the valley too, as much for its beauty as for the rich farming land. Later, the spectacular valley became a Mecca for tourists and bushwalkers.

When Sydney was looking for a big new water supply, other qualities of the Burragarang Valley grew in importance. The narrow Warragamba Gorge, cut through the uplifted escarpment, was an ideal dam site, and the wide valley upstream offered a huge volume of storage. Warragamba Dam was completed in 1960. Residents were moved from the valley and a vast area of catchment closed off for protection - effectively conserving what would become the southern Colong sector of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area.

In these days of drought it looks like the tide has gone out on the lake, with a band of bare orange soil around the edge. Beyond, the cliffs and gum-covered plateaus are part of the Kanangra-Boyd Wilderness that spreads west as far as Jenolan Caves. Wilderness is the most highly protected type of conservation reserve under NSW law, and doubles as pristine water catchment.

The picnic area at Burragarang Lookout is a good spot for a refreshing cup of tea before wending your way homewards to Mittagong. If you want a slower, more picturesque alternative to the Hume Highway, you can follow Remembrance Drive from Picton.



Picnic area, Thirlmere Lakes NP

The **Greater Blue** Mountains Drive has been established by the regions which share the mountains as their own backyard working together to develop the drive in collaboration with the NSW Dept of Environment and Climate Change, Tourism NSW and Tourism Australia. Further development of the drive product has been enhanced by the ongoing involvement of Transurban. The establishment of the drive was proudly supported by the Australian Government and its business program delivery division, AusIndustry in a program proposed and developed by Blue Mountains Tourism Limited. © 2007

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