

Wolgan Valley **DISCOVERY TRAIL**

Following this Discovery Trail leads to a spectacular return drive down the mighty, cliff-bound Wolgan Valley to the historic Newnes industrial area in Wollemi National Park. Highlights along the way include Blackfellows Hand Rock and Wolgan Valley scenery.

Route Description

From Lidsdale, a small village north of Lithgow on the Castlereagh Highway (also The Tablelands Way and The Greater Blue Mountains Drive), take the sealed Wolgan Road on the right.

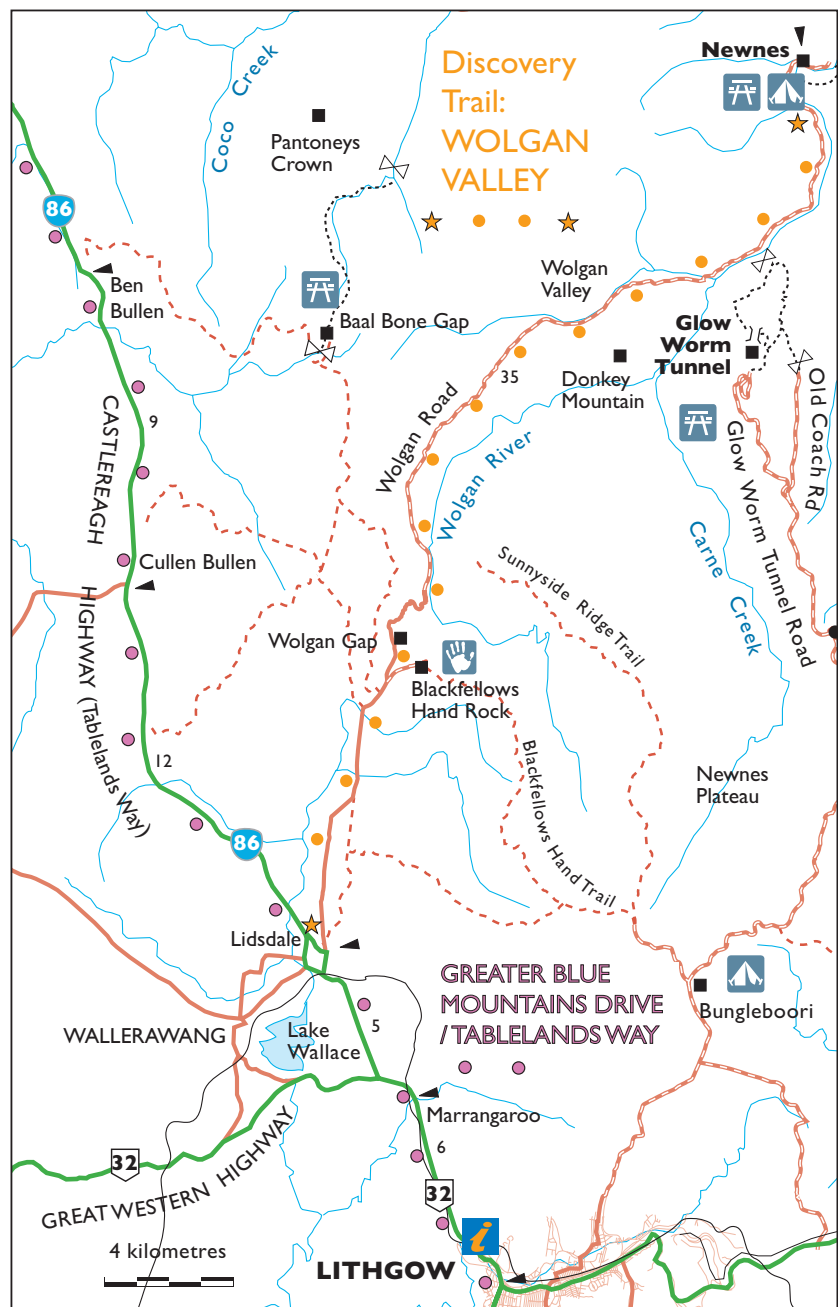
It travels through the valley of the upper Cocks River to Wolgan Gap and a very steep and winding descent into the Wolgan Valley. Just before the gap, a small unsealed road on the right leads one kilometre to a short walk to Blackfellows Hand Rock, where Aboriginal stencil art can be viewed. Continue on the road through the Wolgan Valley which is mostly unsealed with some sharp bends. Travellers are rewarded with the dramatic cliffines of Wollemi National Park rising beyond the farmland on both sides of the valley, capped with the intriguing shapes of 'pagoda' rocks. As the valley begins to narrow, a signposted track on the right is the start of a steep walk up to the old Newnes railway alignment, and along the railway to the Glow Worm Tunnel.

Continuing downstream, the valley walls and bush close in more, the Wolgan River runs beside the road, and you enter Wollemi National Park.

At 35km from Lidsdale, the historic village of Newnes is reached. The only obvious feature at first is the privately-owned Newnes Hotel, but in the surrounding bush the extensive ruins of the village and Commonwealth Oil Corporation's shale mining and refining operation await your exploration.

Drive summary

- 35km (one way),
- 1hr to drive (one way)
- Highway, narrow sealed roads, unsealed roads (dry weather only)
- Start: Lidsdale (on The Greater Blue Mountains Drive)
- Finish: Newnes
- Alerts!: Narrow, winding roads unsuitable for carvans. Wolgan Valley road is also unsuitable in wet conditions.



There is excellent camping on grassy flats beneath towering cliffs and a self-guided track leads you through the most interesting industrial ruins.

For the more adventurous, the steep and historic Pipeline Pass track links the valley with Glen Davis across the range, and downstream lies the Wollemi Wilderness.

Wolgan Valley DISCOVERY TRAIL: an account of things to see and do along the

It doesn't matter how many times I've driven into the Wolgan Valley, arriving at the cliff-edge still takes my breath away. One minute you're travelling over a gentle plateau backed by honeycomb rocks poking out of the trees, and then suddenly the land falls away into a stupendous cliff-bound basin.

I like to stop there at Wolgan Gap, get out of the car and see what's going on. Are the paddocks below green or brown? Is the river in boisterous flow or silent? Are there storm clouds gathering or streamers of mist curling through the valley after rain? Are the orange cliffs even more intense in the rich light of winter? Driving 'down the Wolgan' is always an adventure.

This might be one of the shortest of the 18 discovery trails attached to the Greater Blue Mountains Drive, but it just happens to be one of the most spectacular too. The tour is out-and-back because there's only one way into the 'lost world' of the Wolgan and the 'ghost town' of Newnes – the site of an intriguing experiment in the local industrial history.

The trip starts from the tiny village of Lidsdale on the Castlereagh Highway. If you've got half a day or more to spare while travelling the Greater Blue Mountains Drive towards Mudgee, then the Wolgan is a great place to spend it. And if you camp overnight at Newnes, you'll have more time to spend exploring the complex ruins of the abandoned oil shale industry, or doing some of the more energetic walks. Cyclists who are not daunted by the big hill will be rewarded with the fabulous scenery of the valley. They can start from the train at Lithgow or Wallerawang.

The valley is a similar shape to others in the central Blue Mountains that cut through the layers of Narrabeen Sandstone, like the Grose Valley near Blackheath and the Jamison Valley below Katoomba. The sandstone forms long lines of square-cut cliffs around the rim of the plateau, while layers of shale and other softer rocks – including coal and oil shale – shape the forested slopes below. The difference is that you don't have to walk down into the Wolgan!

From Wolgan Gap at the head of the valley you can see a lot of this landform. Hidden around to the right, the Wolgan River plunges off Newnes Plateau, cutting a narrow gorge and small waterfall through the cliffline while falling some 300 metres to the valley floor. The rest of the river's course is much more subdued, as it flows through the broad upper valley, then a narrower gorge system to join the Colo River in very remote wilderness, and ultimately into the tidal zone of the Hawkesbury River.

Much of the course is sandy, but there are tumbling rocky reaches too. Like all rivers it has many stories to tell.

Like the river, the road descends steeply off the escarpment before winding through the valley with the grassy paddocks of small farms on either side. Above stand the intricate sandstone battlements, shifting in colour from white and yellow through orange and red to brown and black, often capped with the domes and towers of the 'pagodas' that make the western escarpments of the Blue Mountains so unique. You'll want to be a gawking passenger along here, rather than the driver watching the road!

After passing the craggy mesa of Donkey Mountain, there's a chance to break the trip with a walk up to the old Newnes railway, and explore the Glow Worm Tunnel. Then the valley starts to close in. Forest hugs both sides of the road, which closely follows the now rocky river. Around one more bend the Newnes Hotel suddenly pops up.

The old pub is the last building standing from the mining era, dating from 1907, but was moved from the riverbank when the great flood of 1986 nearly washed it away. The hotel no longer carries a liquor licence, and operates as a kiosk on weekends. It features an interesting display on the history of Newnes.

The most intriguing photographs are the panoramas of the oil shale works, showing a vast, denuded, one-kilometre wide hillside crammed with massive brick installations and chimneys. The same view today shows a blanket of forest returning to subdue the crumbling remains.

Most of the industrial ruins and the old town area now lie within Wollemi National Park, which starts just past the pub. The industrial area is about a kilometre downstream, and can be explored with the help of a national park brochure and self-guiding route that takes in the main structures. With a four-wheel-drive you can cross the river and drive to the carpark, or it's a pleasant stroll on foot along the old railway formation.

The Commonwealth Oil Shale Corporation started the mining operation in 1906, with the first processing in 1911. Oil was extracted from the shale on-site and processed into various products including naphtha, paraffin and kerosene.

Since this was before the 'age of the automobile', motor spirit (petrol) was only a minor product.

The whole refining operation was gravity-based, with the raw material feeding from the top of the slope down through the processing and distilling plants. We can only imagine what abuses the Wolgan River must have suffered at the bottom-end of the process!

The big issue of transport was solved by building a remarkable 50 km railway into the valley. But other problems bedevilled Newnes, built as it was on hope and ambition, and more money than sense. The first shut-down happened as early as 1912 and despite several more attempts to make a go of it, the plant closed up for good around 1938 when Glen Davis took over. These other bits of the story can be explored on the Newnes Plateau and Dunns/Capertee discovery trails.

Today, the industrial workings are reduced to piles of bricks, rusting shells and crumbling walls, because much of the plant was demolished for scrap. One of the most appealing ruins is the double row of dome-shaped coke ovens. You can't help but marvel at the design and workmanship of the beautiful tapered brickwork.

With the only sounds being the pardalotes piping from the grey gums and the river gurgling below, it's hard to imagine the bustle and human energy that once filled this valley on the remote edge of the wilderness. Today nature is slowly reclaiming the ground it lost nearly a hundred years ago.

Apart from the ruins walk, there's a strenuous track over Pipeline Pass to Glen Davis in the adjoining Capertee Valley, following the route of the petrol pipeline. It's a solid day's walk there and back, or you can just go to the top of the pass for a fine view of the valley.

Any visit to the Wolgan deserves some time to properly appreciate the area. Limited accommodation (bookings suggested) is available at the hotel or pack your camping gear and stay awhile. The main national park campsite is spectacular – an open paddock by the river, with huge cliffs rising all around.

