

Wombeyan **DISCOVERY TRAIL**

There are two ways to get to Wombeyan Caves.

The first is to travel there via Goulburn, through Taralga. While this route has sections of dirt road leading into Wombeyan, the drive itself is relatively straightforward.

The second way is to follow the Wombeyan Discovery Trail across from Mittagong.

This option is a much more adventurous undertaking as is described here.

Drive summary

- 87km (one way), 3hr to drive (one way)
- Sealed roads, narrow gravel roads
- Start: Mittagong
- Finish: Richlands, on the Abercrombie Road (joins Tablelands Way and Greater Blue Mountains Drive)
- Alerts!: A very winding and remote mountain drive across the dramatic Wollondilly River valley from Mittagong to Richlands, through rural countryside and bushland. Tight bends with steep drops off the side of the road. Extreme care required. Suitable for experienced country drivers only.

Route Description

This Discovery Trail heads west from Mittagong, across the Hume Highway expressway and onto Wombeyan Caves Road. The road at first travels through plateau farmland then through a tunnel to reach Wollondilly Lookout.

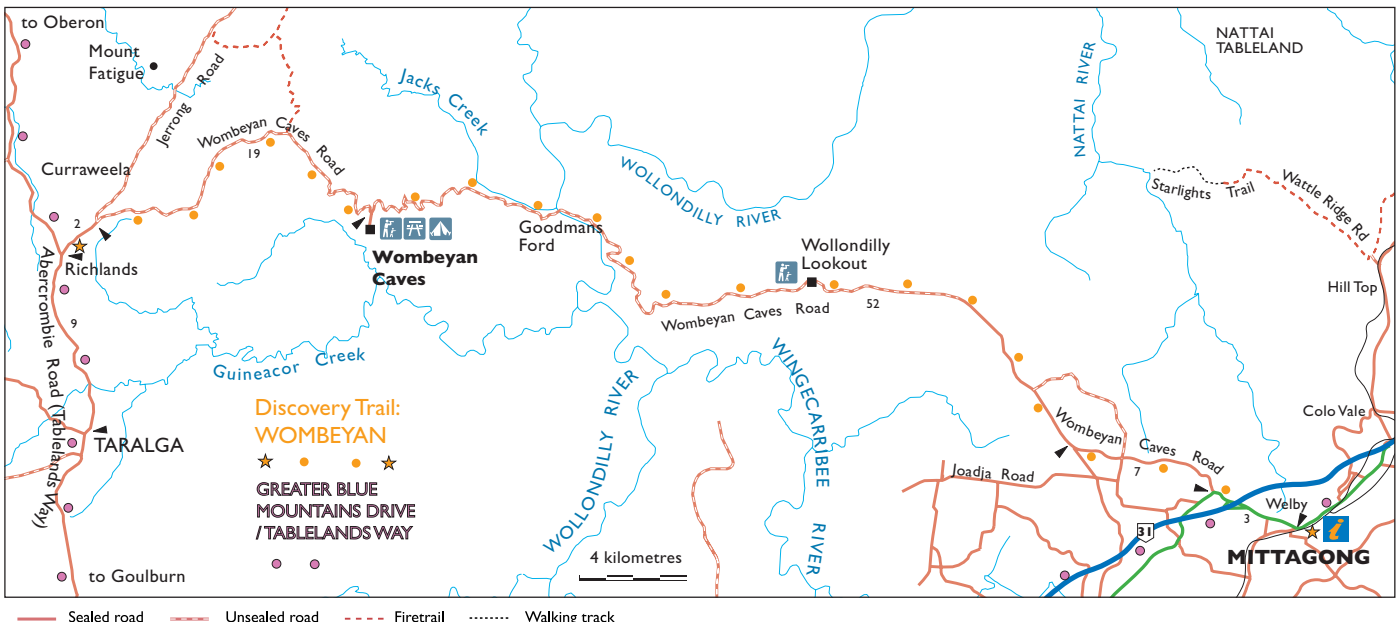
Take a break to enjoy views of the Wollondilly River valley before tackling the descent to the river. The road changes character dramatically as it winds around steep slopes into the gorge, with the bluff of Perpendicular Rock towering overhead.

Extreme care needs to be taken on the many tight bends that continue all the way past Wombeyan Caves. Always assume there is another vehicle coming the other way!

The road crosses the Wollondilly River at Goodmans Ford before gradually climbing up the steep terrain of the Jocks Creek valley

and down into the valley of Wombeyan Caves. At Wombeyan Caves you can camp or picnic in the spacious grounds or hire a cabin. Self-guided cave tours are available anytime, with guided tours scheduled regularly. There are also several interesting walking tracks and a kiosk (ph 02 4843 5976).

After enjoying Wombeyan Caves, follow the road west out of the valley and up onto the rolling countryside of the Central Tablelands. After 21km from the caves, you'll reach Richlands and the Abercrombie Road (which is followed by both the Tablelands Way and the main Greater Blue Mountains Drive). At Richlands you can turn left (south) to the historic village of Taralga (9km) or right (north) to continue on the Greater Blue Mountains Drive, across the Abercrombie River to Oberon.



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

As I swing the car carefully into another sweeping corner a rude sign pops up: SOUND HORN ON BENDS. This is no standard country road of wide-open straights and wind in your hair. But then if you reckon that variety is the spice of life you won't want to miss the Wombeyan Discovery Trail.

The main Greater Blue Mountains Drive travels quite a ways south around the rugged southern end of the World Heritage Area, so it can keep to main arterial roads that easily connect different regions. But the backroads are often more interesting, so instead of this long tableland sweep through Goulburn and Taralga, keen travellers can opt for the direct 'short cut' from Mittagong to Wombeyan Caves across the steep Wollondilly River valley. The route tucks in closely to the edge of the World Heritage Area with dramatic scenery.

With over 50 km of narrow and winding gravel road – picture the drive into Jenolan Caves without the backtop and steel guard-rails, and then multiply it by six – the Wombeyan discovery trail is not for nervous Nevilles or Nellies. Only experienced and careful country drivers should attempt for this adventure. A four-wheel-drive is not needed, but expect some bumps and mud or dust.

The drive at first is gentle enough. Heading westward off the old Hume Highway, the sealed road meanders over rolling, well-treed tableland for 22 km. When I was there it was raining, the paddocks were green and the countryside was looking lush and productive. The way is dotted with wineries, taking advantage of the ideal environment as well as passing connoisseurs.

The experience suddenly shifts down a few gears as the deep Wollondilly River gorge looms ahead. The road changes to gravel, enters sandstone bushland on the edge of Nattai National Park and dives under a narrow ridge through the famous Bullio Tunnel, hand-carved in 1899.

The tunnel leads to a less gentle world. Out the other side, the first 'sound your horn' sign appears, a cliff hangs over the road and the seemingly endless bends begin. Wollondilly Lookout appears on the right – a good place to catch your breath and take a look into the valley you'll soon be crossing. Five hundred metres below, the Wollondilly River runs northwards into Lake Burratorang, where it makes a big contribution to Sydney's water supply. To the east, sandstone cliffs of Nattai National Park's Wanganderry Tableland edge the rim of the valley, while in the north-west steep ridges rise from the river into Blue Mountains National Park.

Then there is a brief interlude as the route traverses more rural land to the main descent. From the brink of the gorge, the road ahead can be seen winding down across steep rocky slopes. Driving slowly, sounding my horn at every blind bend and keeping religiously to the left, I make the descent.

I remember that many years ago I used to drive through here regularly in my old Mazda Capella, travelling between the Central West and the South Coast. It was often at night, which has only one advantage - you can see other vehicles coming by their headlights. But you miss the scenery, with the semi-circular bluff of Perpendicular Rock towering above, the silver river below and interesting vegetation along the road.

There are actually a number of wider places where you can pull over quite safely to take in the view. This time I only met one other car, but on a fine weekend I'm sure it can be quite busy. It always pays to drive defensively and assume another vehicle is coming around every bend.

Crossing the Wollondilly River at Goodmans Ford provides a brief change of pace and maybe a spot for a cup of thermos tea. Then the road climbs up the long valley of Jocks Creek, winding in and out of numerous gullies with small cliffs sheltering patches of what botanists call 'dry' rainforest, before crossing a high saddle into Wombeyan Creek. As I climb higher, distant views wave in and out of sight as tendrils of mist swirl up the mountainsides. Then comes the highlight of the drive.

I'm often struck by the ambience of tourist caves – little valley sanctums of calm and genteel order, like friendly islands in a stormy sea of mountainous landscape. Jenolan, Abercrombie, Yarrangobilly: they all have their manicured grounds and historic buildings holding nature at bay. Wombeyan is the same, with its grassy flats of mature elms and comfortable facilities. In such a remote place it seems an unlikely juxtaposition – but a boon for travellers!

Wombeyan is an ideal place to break the journey, spend a night or two – camping or hiring one of the excellent cabins – and explore the magical underworld as well as the open-air attractions. Self-guided tours through the Figtree Cave can be done anytime – even in the middle of the night if you're not afraid of the dark!

Guided tours of other caves operate regularly. The kiosk/visitor centre can direct you to several fine walks through the limestone landscape, with its forests, creeks, canyons, sinkholes and natural arches.

Although not part of the World Heritage Area, Wombeyan Karst Conservation Reserve has its own special values. Underground is a richly decorated showroom for the karst processes that form caves. Cave sediments and bone deposits are a treasure trove for researchers studying changes in climate and ecosystems over thousands of years.

I found out that it was here that the Mountain Pygmy Possum, a rare mammal still surviving in the Australian Alps, was first recognised from its bones. Wombeyan also has the richest collection of cave-dwelling invertebrates in New South Wales, including 11 troglobites – those weirdest animals that live all their lives underground.

Of course you'll probably have trouble spotting some of those, but Wombeyan also has more than 70 bird species, grazing kangaroos and wombats and five types of cave bats – which might be seen fluttering around in the evening. All-in-all Wombeyan is a wonderful place.

Our journey is nearly over. The road winds out of the valley (what, again?) through beautiful forests to the rich basalt grazing country of the Central Tablelands, skimming the southern edge of Blue Mountains National Park on the way.

It turns bitumen and reaches the Abercrombie Road at Richlands, 21 km from Wombeyan. Here the trail rejoins the main Greater Blue Mountains Drive, as well as its overlapping sister drive The Tablelands Way. It feels like I'm back in civilisation after a sojourn in the wilds.

Hmm...which way to go? Will I turn right to Oberon, 93 km to the north, or should I nip back to the lovely historic village of Taralga for a refreshing break first? I turn the wheel to the left.

